



Ernest John MOERAN (1894-1950)

Complete Solo Songs (58)

Full contents listing at end of review

Geraldine McGreevy (soprano); Adrian Thompson (tenor); Roderick Williams (baritone); John Talbot (piano)

rec. Menuhin Hall, Yehudi Menuhin School, Stoke d'Abernon, Cobham, Surrey, 8-9, 11 September 2008, 20, 22 January 2009, 8, 14, 16 April 2009. DDD

CHANDOS CHAN 10596 (2) [50:07 + 68:30]

It's clear throughout this collection that the three singers and pianist in this enterprise are totally involved in the music of this expressive 'poet' of song. Moeran is demanding of his performers and these four do not fail him for an instant.

With his considerable research into Moeran and his skill as a pianist and accompanist, it is unlikely that a more persuasive advocate of these songs could be found than John Talbot. His devotion to the music, evident in his published edition of them, added to the singers' innate experience and total involvement, has produced performances of great character and beauty.

The dual side of man's nature that we are reminded of so often is very apparent in the broadly two styles of song we find in this collection, a characteristic we also find in the songs of Moeran's great friend, Peter Warlock, and indeed in many other composers.

Moeran's musical traits include subtle chromatic harmony, graceful melodic lines and an array of descriptive piano metaphors: all these combine to create songs of high distinction and originality. The collection contains some 58 songs and it would be tedious to dwell on each one. Fortunately there are definable groups that ease the reviewer's task.

The first four songs cover a range of moods from the delicacy of Robert Bridges' two poems of spring to the familiar lullaby, *O Men from the Fields*, of Padraic Colum and a John Masefield poem which, as so often with him, refers to 'travel' and which Moeran suggests in his rhythm. Many composers have set the Colum poem; some treat it as a simple lullaby, others inflect it with the possible death of the child – Moeran chooses the former and, surely, more apt reading.

Housman often attracts composers of Moeran's era, though others' too. The next four songs draw on that vein of nostalgic melancholy that

informs so many of his poems. Even in the last, *The Lads in their Hundreds* the lively compound rhythm - is any other possible with these words? - cannot dispel the poignancy of the final lines.

After the rich, warm beauty of Roderick Williams' voice, in these first songs one is equally captivated by the radiance of Geraldine McGreevy. And what enchanting songs she brings to the charm of Dorothy Sayers' *The Bean Flower* and Doreen Wallace's *Impromptu in March*, both new to this reviewer. The almost 'jazzy' rhythms in the latter reveal Moeran's feeling for his age.

Another change of voice with our third singer, the tenor, Adrian Thompson, whose great support for British song is well-known. Serene recollection of youth and the joy of spring inform his next two contributions, Wever's *In Youth is Pleasure* and Dekker's *The Merry Month of May*.

Both Thompson and McGreevy have so far given us only two songs each but they will appear more extensively later. But now Roderick Williams returns on the theme of 'death': the first in Yeats' *A Dream of Death*, a deeply disturbing lament, and then Shakespeare's *Come Away Death*, a sop to Duke Orsino's assumed lovesick melancholy by his jester, Feste. Moeran makes an impressive distinction between them.

And now a totally different side of Moeran's nature is revealed. With his friend, Philip Heseltine, Moeran would often visit local hostelrys and shared in convivial evenings. These are strikingly pictured in the next four songs, one of which, *Maltworms*, is a collaboration by the two 'companions'. With the support of the Weybridge Male Voice Choir in three of them, Roderick Williams and John Talbot pull no punches in portraying the drunken fun of these occasions. Williams' Cockney accent is totally convincing and one wonders whether Talbot would not have even gone over to his 'other (Winifred Atwell) piano' if one had been available! This 'break' in the generally concert-hall atmosphere is quite remarkable and brings a smile of recognition to those folk who, like their ancestors from the time of Good Queen Bess to Queen Vic, have enjoyed a 'night out at the local'.

Decorum is restored in a return to more familiar ground, the Seven Songs from James Joyce's *Chamber Music*, which of all Moeran's songs are perhaps the most frequently performed. This particular interpretation is deeply considered and both artists imbue the group with convincing variety. From the haunting serenity of *Strings in the Earth and Air*, through the delights of *The Merry Green Wood* and *Bright Cap*, the gentle coolness of *The Pleasant Valley*, the drip of raindrops in *Rain Has Fallen*, the unalloyed joy of *Donneycarney* to the utter sorrow of *Now O Now*, the changing moods are tellingly captured: at the end we are left truly 'at rest'.

The second disc contains two of the finest of all Moeran's songs and if I start with them it is for their ineffable quality. I single out *Diaphenia* (Chettle or Constable?) and *The Passionate Shepherd* (Marlowe). Adrian Thompson cherishes both, clearly recognising their distinction in the British repertoire of song. Even Dominic Argento's striking version of the former cannot yield place to Moeran's version. Whether Warlock wrote a better setting of *The Passionate Shepherd* than his friend's I would not say but at least in one respect it scores: the piano accompaniment. Unlike Warlock, Moeran was a skilful pianist, and his accompaniments stand up to close scrutiny by executants. Many of them are not technically easy for the average performer but in John Talbot's elegant delivery, their complexities are not made apparent.

The disc starts with another set of Housman's poems sung by Roderick Williams. Outstanding in this set is the sombreness of much of the writing,

a reflection of Housman's pessimistic outlook. There is nostalgia too in the reminiscent poet-traveller, harking back to his Midlands homeland in *Far in a Western Brookland*. The warmer colours of *Loveliest of Trees* emerge to reveal Moeran's personal affinity with this poet. The three versions of *Oh fair enough* are clearly included for completeness and present listeners with a chance to make their own preference.

Thompson returns with five songs, mainly from earlier history with the exception of *Day of Palms* by Symons, maybe better known in the setting by John Ireland. Moeran is not given much to the use of melisma in his melodic lines - it seemed not generally popular with composers of this era - but there are examples in Champion's *Weep You No More*, another poem which has been set by many others. Moeran's setting is quite lovely.

Joy abounds in the setting of Shakespeare's *When daffodils begin to peer* as it does too in Nichols' *Blue-eyed Spring* with its charmingly quirky five-beat rhythm movement. One notices this too in the later *Rosaline* where Adrian Thompson is at his exquisite best.

There follows a group of three more Joyce settings. Geraldine McGreevy sings this delicate trio from *Pomes Penyeach*. In them Joyce revels in words; Moeran, likewise, especially in his piano writing, revels in music for music's sake.

In his next group of *Four English Lyrics*, Adrian Thompson adds to *The Passionate Shepherd* (see above) settings of *Cherry Ripe*, *The Willow Song* and *The Constant Lover*. In all the debt British songwriters owe to the late 16th and early 17th century poets is apparent and Moeran is very much at home with their verse.

The set of *Four Shakespeare Songs* which Geraldine McGreevy next sings is again quite familiar territory. Of all the songs in the collection, they represent Moeran perhaps at his most widely appealing; not only because all the poems are so familiar to us, but because he has found interpretations of them which so thoroughly and truthfully project the poet's simple, direct and timeless utterances. Geraldine McGreevy sings them all with delightful appeal and will surely win over all who love British song at its supreme best.

In his last group, Adrian Thompson, as well as *Diaphenia* and *Rosaline*, already discussed, sings two songs by Hope and O'Sullivan. *The Monk's Fancy*, is one of the more modern songs in this collection. It is a charming fancy of an old monk, dreaming beside the sea-shore. Seamus O'Sullivan's *Invitation in Autumn* is a pleasing pastoral against the rich chromatic tapestry drawn from Moeran's pen.

Geraldine McGreevy's conclusion to this absorbing collection comprises the six settings of Seamus O'Sullivan. Moeran's love of Ireland drew him naturally enough to this poet. Moeran's later, simpler accompaniments, eschewing earlier, richer textures allows the poet's country imagery to make its direct appeal to our imagination. To single out one of them is difficult but *The Cottager*, for me, has a heartfelt tranquillity that seeps into my bones.

Of all the song recitals I have reviewed, this proved for me the most elusive - a word that constantly recurred to me. Many songs reveal their secrets quite easily, but Moeran's profound sensitivity to words induces expressions of a personal and intimate nature that, except in the rumbustious examples and others with a delight in Spring or other aspects of nature, demand great concentration from the listener. But the rewards are many and lasting. The presentation is to be applauded for its clarity, period picture on the cover, and inclusion of all the words except those of Joyce which could not be successfully negotiated. (They are however, all available on the Internet.) Very warm greetings to this

most welcome addition to the storehouse of British song.

Brian Blyth Daubney

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Detailed Contents listing for songs:-

Ernest John MOERAN (1894-1950)

Complete Solo Songs

CHANDOS CHAN 10596 (2)

CD 1 [50:07]

- 1 Spring goeth all in white† (Robert Seymour Bridges) 1:21
- 2 When June is come† (Robert Seymour Bridges) 1:11
- 3 Mantle of Blue† (Padraic Colum) 1:56
- 4 Twilight† (John Edward Masefield) 1:48
- Ludlow Town† (Alfred Edward Housman)
- 5 1 When smoke stood up from Ludlow* 3:42
- 6 2 Farewell to barn and stack and tree 2:37
- 7 3 Say, lad, have you things to do? 1:28
- 8 4 The lads in their hundreds 1:51
- Two Songs‡ 00:00
- 9 1 The Bean Flower (Dorothy Leigh Sayers) 2:03
- 10 2 Impromptu in March (Doreen A.E. Wallace) 1:10
- 11 In Youth Is Pleasure§ (Robert Wever) 2:20
- 12 The Merry Month of May§ (Thomas Dekker) 2:01
- 13 A Dream of Death† (William Butler Yeats) 3:06
- 14 Come Away, Death† (William Shakespeare) 2:17
- 15 Troll the Bowl† (Thomas Dekker)
1:23
- 16 Can't You Dance the Polka!† (Sea shanty, author anonymous) 1:23
- Members of Weybridge Male Voice Choir
- 17 Mrs Dyer, the Baby Farmer† (Victorian crime ballad, author anonymous) 4:01
- Members of Weybridge Male Voice Choir
- 18 Maltworms† (Attributed to William Stevenson) 2:19

Members of Weybridge Male Voice Choir

Seven Poems by James Joyce† 00:00

19 1 Strings in the earth and air 1:39

20 2 The Merry Green Wood 1:11

21 3 Bright cap 0:46

22 4 The Pleasant Valley 1:25

23 5 Donnycarney 1:23

24 6 Rain has fallen 1:47

25 7 Now, O now, in this brown land 3:59

CD 2 [68:30]

1 When I came last to Ludlow*† 1:17

2 'Tis time, I think, by Wenlock town† 1:31

3 Far in a western brookland*† 2:30

4 Loveliest of trees*† 1:41

5 Oh fair enough are sky and plain (first version)*† 2:22

6 Oh fair enough are sky and plain (second version)† 2:25

7 Oh fair enough are sky and plain (third version)† 2:46

(Alfred Edward Housman)

8 Weep you no more§ (Sixteenth century, author anonymous) 2:15

9 The Sweet o' the Year*§ (William Shakespeare) 0:58

10 The Day of Palms§ (Arthur William Symons) 3:18

11 Blue-eyed Spring§ (Robert Nichols) 1:13

12 Rosefrail*‡ 1:18

13 Tilly‡ 2:26

14 Ragoon*‡ (James Joyce) 3:04

Four English Lyrics§

15 1 Cherry Ripe (Thomas Campion) 1:54

16 2 Willow Song (Francis Beaumont and John Fletcher) 1:30

17 3 The Constant Lover (William Browne) 1:32

18 4 The Passionate Shepherd (Christopher Marlowe) 3:15

Four Shakespeare Songs‡

19 1 The Lover and his Lass 1:37

20 2 Where the bee sucks 1:28

21 3 When daisies pied 1:16

22 4 When icicles hang by the wall 1:12

23 Diaphenia*§ (Henry Chettle or Henry Constable) 2:11

24 Rosaline§ (Thomas Lodge) 3:25

25 The Monk's Fancy§ (Henry .J. Hope) 2:14

26 Invitation in Autumn§ (Seumas O'Sullivan) 4:10

27 If There Be Any Gods‡ (Seumas O'Sullivan) 1:19

Six Poems of Seumas O'Sullivan*‡

28 1 Evening 1:59

29 2 The Poplars 2:13

30 3 A Cottager 2:02

31 4 The Dustman 1:04

32 5 Lullaby 2:29

33 6 The Herdsman 2:36

Geraldine McGreevy soprano‡

Adrian Thompson tenor§

Roderick Williams baritone†

John Talbot piano

24-bit / 96 kHz band

premiere recordings (except*)