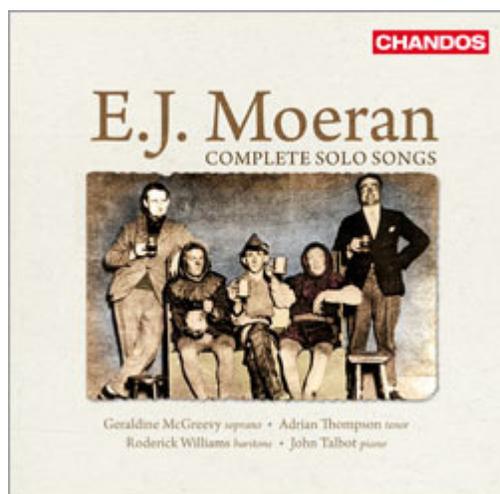


E. J. MOERAN: Complete Solo Songs. Geraldine McGreevy (sop), Adrian Thompson (ten), Roderick Williams (bar), John Talbot (pno). Chandos CHAN 10596 (2-CD set).



This handsome double CD collects the complete solo songs of Ernest John ('Jack' to his friends) Moeran (1894-1950), settings which range from Shakespeare and Marlowe, to Dorothy L. Sayers and James Joyce. This amounts to a substantial 58 songs (tracks varying in length between 0.46 and 4.10, though the majority average 1.30), five song cycles, and includes 17 première recordings. The notes, by the splendid accompanist John Talbot, present a concise account of Moeran's development as a song composer. In fact Moeran's earliest surviving song, *North Sea Ground* (words by Cicely Fox Smith) of 1915 was only discovered in 2000 and was not available for recording; the earliest song on the discs thus dates from the following year, and is the first of many settings of A.E. Housman. *When I came last to Ludlow* is set in A minor, and has uniform atmosphere, largely due to a deliberately restricted harmonic range, mainly using chords i, V and flattened VII. Moeran uses simple substitutions, such as replacing G with Eb, and has a poignant *terce de Picardie* ending. A single example of 'word-painting' is the whole-tone material on the first appearance of the words 'moonlight pale'.

The song was originally the second of *Four Songs from 'A Shropshire Lad'* (1916). The fourth, *Far in a western Brookland*, is given here in its rewritten 1925 version, when it was paired instead with a new song, *Tis Time, I think, by Wenlock Town*. That song is different kettle of fish to the other two, mainly occasioned by the composer's obvious technical development in the intervening years. Besides more enterprising piano writing, and a wider range and more assured handling in the vocal part, the obvious new feature is the inclusion of sliding chromatic harmony which one associates with other, better-known composers of the time: Delius, Grainger, or Scott, or more particularly Moeran's sometime flatmate and boozing buddy Peter Warlock (they collaborated on the song *Maltworms* [i.e. lovers of malt liquor!] and are featured drinking together in two brochure photographs). The overall effect is an outstanding effusive setting, full of poignant regret. There are further harmonic advancements in *Loveliest of trees*, written six years later – in fact taken out of context (and minus the voice part) certain passages could easily

pass for the jazz of the period: if you listen to the introduction, interlude and coda (omitting the closing chords) (0.01-07, 0.27-31, 1.22-1.33), you'll hear what I mean.<sup>1</sup>

The cycle of four Housman songs entitled *Ludlow Town* was premièred in 1924. Each of the poems is concerned with death in some form, and besides displaying the characteristics noted above, one finds here piano writing of much greater complexity, and a sweeping romanticism, especially in the abandoned left-hand arpeggios of the second song. The final song recalls the deaths of *The Lads in their hundreds* in the service of Queen Victoria's army. Although the poem was written in 1896, it took on an especial significance in World War I. Moeran's straightforward setting, the least emotional in the cycle, avoids sentimentality and lets the words speak for themselves rather than colouring with specific harmonies (cf. the hauntingly beautiful setting of the similarly expressed sentiments of Masfield's *Twilight*). This makes up all of Moeran's settings of Housman, all taken from *A Shropshire Lad*, and all for baritone.

At differing times Moeran set three of *Pomes Penyeach* by James Joyce (whom he knew personally), all for soprano. The brief *Rosefrail* (1929) has a simple 'folky' accompaniment. The longer *Tilly* (1931) was included in *The Joyce Book*, a prestigious limited-edition volume containing all 13 poems from the original collection, each set by a different composer. Moeran sets the poem much in the manner of a dramatic ballad. The most individual is his final song, *Rahoon* (1946), a setting of the poem Joyce wrote when he and his wife visited the grave of her former lover. Its disturbed, discordant introduction giving way to sliding harmony is certainly appropriate, therefore, but whilst I'd concur with Talbot's characterization of it as 'depressive', I wouldn't describe it as a 'masterpiece', nor as his 'possibly greatest song'.

To my mind Moeran hits his stride much more effectively in the earlier *Seven Poems by James Joyce* (1929) for baritone, taken from *Chamber Music*. Whether this is because the setting of the cycle produced a concentration in the composer's work, or whether for some reason he identified more strongly with these words, is unknown. As Chandos were unable to reach an agreement with Joyce's estate, the words are not reproduced in the brochure. No matter, they are not needed: Roderick Williams delivers with exemplary clarity and diction. The first song is a folksy, Delian, even jazzy miniature. The second and third are forthright, almost bawdy. The next two, slow, songs are outstanding in this collection. *The Pleasant Valley* is again folk-like (cf. the FS *The Water is Wide*), haunting and touching without being innovative. *The Donnellycarney* uses simple word-painting devices to depict the exquisite pleasure of a first kiss ... left 'lingering'. Like the first song, the sixth, *Rain has Fallen*, is an expertly fashioned miniature, evocative without making any attempt to depict rain. The last song perfectly captures love ended, complete with a hushed coda. If one had to summarize this, perhaps the finest cycle on the disc, it would be true to say that although the settings don't attempt anything startlingly original and sound very much of their time, when music-making is done this well one doesn't necessarily regret the lack of a 'pioneering spirit'. The poems are beautifully set; with music that adds to rather than detracts, and speaks with simple directness ... why seek for more?

Another poet Moeran often returned to and knew personally was Seamus O'Sullivan. The *Six Poems of Seamus O'Sullivan* for soprano provides good examples of two different approaches to song writing found elsewhere on the disc. At one extreme he writes songs in

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<sup>1</sup> However, no mention is made of songs 1 and 3 from the original set of *Four Songs from 'A Shropshire Lad'*: one wonders whether they are also presented here in some (not indicated) reworked version, or not included because of a simple lack of artistic merit? Whilst one can well see the necessity of not including every version of every song, Moeran's final setting of Housman's *Oh fair enough are sky and plain* is presented in three versions with only paper-thin differences, mainly confined to the piano part. This is all the stranger, given that Moeran himself expressed a preference for the third version.

which everything seems to be subservient to the text: for instance the second song, *The Poplars*. Aside from the opening and closing verses, the central three verses (hauntingly attractive though they are) seem waylaid by momentary details which impinge on the overall sense of momentum/purpose. At the other extreme there are songs which present a more 'straightforward' musical trajectory. The first song, *Evening*, is a lovely natural setting using an arpeggiated piano accompaniment throughout (almost in the manner of a prelude) but with rich and sometimes surprising harmonies to underline certain vocal motifs. But there are any number of approaches in between. *Lullaby*, the fifth song, is similar in approach to second, yet seems to link its 'momentary details' together with greater cohesion. Funnily enough the outstanding song of this set, *A Cottager*, is a largely strophic setting with the last line of each of the three verses being treated as a kind of refrain. Moeran nevertheless finds the scope to colour individual words or phrases with exotic harmonies. Perhaps the best example is the line 'Winter and Summer and Autumn and Spring'. Whilst it would be ridiculous to suggest Moeran captures the atmosphere of each season in a single chord, nevertheless each season is matched to its own special harmony, loaded with a significance which cannot be measured by mere clock duration.

If what I've written so far gives the impression that the songs generally inhabit the same atmosphere whether setting Housman or Joyce, broadly speaking, that would be true. But that shouldn't be taken to suggest Moeran was a 'one-horse' composer. Another string to his bow is the inclusion of a selection of humorous songs. *Can't you dance the Polka* presents nothing original either, the opposite in fact. It could, I suppose, be called pastiche: four-square march-style, and best music-hall cockney accent. The murderous *Mrs Dyer the baby Farmer* is a raucous Victorian music-hall ballad (collected by Warlock), worthy of a comedy routine with its deliberately stilted waltz accompaniment from piano. Obviously more suited to the ad-libbing audience participation of live performance (approximated here by the Weybridge Male Voice Choir) than close study, these and other songs are nevertheless worthy inclusions, beautifully hammed up by Roderick Williams and crew, which one may want to play occasionally.

In many ways Moeran is at his best in single poem settings, whether in something which makes a complete overall statement like *The Merry month of May* for tenor (words by Thomas Dekker) or presents a sketch which leaves the listener wanting more, like *Mantle of Blue* for baritone (words by Padraic Colum). Several of these individual songs are real gems. In the first two verses of *In Youth is pleasure* for tenor (words by Robert Wever), the protagonist dreams he is with his lover. In the third and final verse Moeran manages to conjure joyous abandon for what still might be, with pathos for the unrequited love. In *Invitation in Autumn* for tenor (Seamus O'Sullivan again) a glorious piano introduction is adapted as the backdrop for a seasonal mediation, the first part of which concludes by comparing the image of melted frost with the constellations. The material slows to form a coda as the opening sentiments are repeated, but as if a lifetime of experience has occurred between whites.

I'll conclude with two songs (both for tenor) from many others worthy of mention. In *Rosaline* Moeran's setting naturally complements Thomas Lodge's unforced rhyme scheme. The gloriously over-the-top conclusion is just about brought to heel at the last moment (although, as is noticeable elsewhere, the tessitura seems uncomfortably high in some of the tenor writing). *The Monk's Fancy*, to words by Henry Hope, is an unusually austere, unsettled setting, and could almost be an epitaph for Moeran himself. The poem describes an old monk listening and dreaming by a beach who 'thought that the waves were singing ... he set the tale in the great book gleaming with beautiful colours and letters of gold'.

Tim Mottershead