

New

Moeran**Complete Solo Folksong Arrangements.**

Six Folksongs from Norfolk¹³. Six Suffolk Folksongs - Nutting Time^b; Blackberry Fold^b; Cupid's Garden¹³; Father and Daughter³; The Isle of Cloy³; A Seaman's Life^b. Songs from County Kerry³. Gaol Song^{bc}. High Germany^b. The Jolly Carter^{bc}. The Little Mermaid^b. The North Sea Ground^b. Parson and Clerk^b. The Sailor and Young Nancy^{bc}. ^aAdrian Thompson (tenor); ^bMarcus Farnsworth (baritone); John Talbot (piano) with ^cmembers of Weybridge Male Voice Choir/Christine Best. **British Music Society BMS438CD** (full price, 1 hour 6 minutes). English texts available to download from Website www.britishmusicsociety.co.uk LJ **Producer** John Talbot. **Engineer** Paul Arden-Taylor. **Dates** ^bMay 20th and 27th and ^aOctober 6th, 2010.

Comparison:

Six Folksongs from Norfolk - The Shooting of his Dear:
Langridge, Bonnell (Naxos) 8.557220-21

Roughly contemporaneous with the activities of Bartok and Kodaly in Hungary, Romania and elsewhere, the upsurge of interest in local music traditions in Britain made arguably less impact on the wider scene. Though it grieves me to say so, Vaughan Williams and Hoist are still not household names in Vienna, Berlin or Paris. Is that because they are too local, too steeped in native idioms, too closely linked to the folk music revival? Maybe so: though I think the problem is more one of perception than of fact. It is almost dangerous to know that Vaughan Williams collected over 800 folk-songs, as one starts to hear them whether present or not. A further obstacle is the standard image of the folk singer himself, and maybe of the collector too: a probably slightly insalubrious farm labourer or road mender, in an equally insalubrious pub in Norfolk or Suffolk, say, perhaps getting on in years, quavery of voice, dubious of intonation, performing to a tweed-jacketed antiquarian from London. Recordings and photographs sometimes serve to confirm the impression. Add a touch of fol-de-rol and the damage is done. (Actually, here, only *Parson and Clerk* and *Gaol Song* have that kind of refrain, and one of the Irish songs.)

All the same, you should get hold of this outstanding disc. It is not far short of a revelation. Never mind that you have to dig deep into the BMS website to find the full texts. You do not need them, as every word sung here by Marcus Farnsworth and Adrian Thompson is crystal-clear. Both singers - the baritone has the lion's share - are a pleasure to listen to: even in tone, injecting just enough variety into the usually strophic settings to dispel any threat of tedium. John Talbot is a wholly sympathetic accompanist, and the recording, made in the auditorium of the Menuhin School, is first-rate. The resulting disc has a touch of alchemy about it, for what it presents is, of course, not so much folk-song, as art-song. It is none the worse for that: the better, even.

What Moeran does — and it is high time I brought him into the picture - is indeed not only to transform a couple of dozen originals into something worthy of the concert platform but also to blur the boundary between tradition and something almost original. Reminders are probably unnecessary that Moeran was later to translate 'Lonely Waters' into an extended and delicate miniature, and incorporate 'The Shooting of his Dear' (the fifth song of *Six Folksongs from Norfolk*) magically into the slow movement of what is surely his masterpiece, the G minor Symphony (though the Cello Concerto comes close). Their melodies as encountered here are simply exquisite, but there are many other hidden gems, such as 'Nutting Time', or the sad yet happy tale in 'Blackberry Fold', or the unvarnished melancholy of 'The Dawning of the Day' (*Songs from County Kerry*). True enough, many of the usual folk themes recur: catching a girl or losing her, sailors and the sea, fishing and its dangers, parting and loss: perhaps that was inevitable since Moeran's preferred collecting grounds were the Eastern coastal counties of England, and his second home in County Kerry. So do not be surprised at the sadness of quite a lot of what results.

The lack of texts is more than compensated for by a 14-page booklet article (including detailed bibliography) by Roy Palmer that goes deep into Moeran's involvement with folk-song — he collected over 80, apparently. Half a dozen evocative photographs are buttressed in support. There is also a comprehensive separate note by Ian Maxwell on one song, *The North Sea Ground*, that is possibly an original composition, though it sits entirely comfortably in this context. Three of the numbers require a unison male voice choir in support: the Weybridge Choir sounds enthusiastic.

It is, of course, Moeran's piano accompaniments that are the vital added ingredient: they add variety, interest, colour, even a little drama if required, but they always stay within the bounds of moderation. I turned to another version of one of the songs here, 'The Shooting of his Dear', the one made by another great composer and folk arranger (though not I think a collector, as Moeran was): Benjamin Britten. Even at a livelier tempo, the song is still recognizably the same, but Britten's accompaniment, written with Julian Bream in mind, not so much supports the singer as underlines the emotional content of the song, leaving the singer to go his own way, as the verses unfold. Britten modernizes it into a miniature drama, in an idiom and in a way of which Moeran might well not have approved. All the same, Moeran's own treatments are of more than passing interest and this beautiful collection is a fine way to encounter them.

Piers Burton-Page