

# moeran

Lyrta

**Rhapsody No 2**  
**Violin Concerto**  
**Rhapsody in F sharp**



John Georgiadis • John McCabe  
London Philharmonic Orchestra • Sir Adrian Boult  
London Symphony Orchestra • Vernon Handley  
New Philharmonia Orchestra • Nicholas Braithwaite

**E**rnest John Moeran (1894-1950), still the least-known significant English composer of his generation, composed in his prime three large-scale works with orchestra, a symphony (1937), a violin concerto (1942) and a cello concerto (1945); the violin concerto was first performed by Arthur Catterall and conducted by Sir Henry Wood at a Promenade Concert on 8 July 1942. Part of Moeran's neglect may perhaps be attributed to his derivative musical style. For instance, his songs are sometimes too imitative of those of his friend Peter Warlock or his teacher John Ireland; his symphony owes much to Bax, Sibelius and Walton; the violin concerto shows the strong harmonic influence of Delius.

Yet the positive individuality of Moeran's music, which grew in strength as he became older and is finally shorn of all props in the masterly cello concerto, overrides these derivations in nearly all his works. He is a composer with something to say and an unwavering judgment about the way in which it must be said.

Moeran's art is above all a lyrically nostalgic one - something in his Celtic ancestry determined this, perhaps, for he was half Irish. The cause was certainly intangible, which differentiates him from Elgar, hymning a fading empire. The nostalgic mood framing this concerto is primarily a response to the moods of nature, the first movement having been written on Valentia Island off County Kerry in the summer of 1938, and the last at Kenmare in the autumn of 1941. Edwin Evans, in an article on the work (*Musical Times* LXXXIV (1943), pp. 233-4), stated that 'in its concluding pages it reflects the calm experienced in Southern Ireland at this season, before the gales begin to burst in from the Atlantic.' He might have strengthened his assertion by turning to Moeran's song cycle of 1929, the *Seven Poems by James Joyce*, for the opening music of the last song is essentially the same as the sighing string phrase which opens both the concerto's final and, in a different shape, first movements. This phrase, which is never played by the violin in the first movement, runs through it like an inarticulate thought, recurring between major sections. In the last movement its more restless chromatic guise brings it closer to the Joyce song, whose text runs as follows:

Now, O now, in this brown land  
Where Love did so sweet music make  
We two shall wander, hand in hand,  
Forbearing for old friendship' sake  
Nor grieve because our love was gay  
Which now is ended in this way.

A rogue in red and yellow dress  
Is knocking, knocking at the tree;  
And all around our loneliness  
The wind is whistling merrily.  
The leaves—they do not sigh at all  
When the year takes them in the fall.

Now, O now, we hear no more  
The vilanelle and roundelay!  
Yet will we kiss, sweetheart, before  
We take sad leave at close of day.  
Grieve not, sweetheart, for anything—  
The year, the year is gathering.

The poem states that there is no cause for sadness in the passing of love, yet the exhortation to 'grieve not' is poignantly contradicted by the line 'We take sad leave at close of day.' Much of Joyce's Chamber Music, from which the poem comes, exploits this bittersweet mood, and Moeran's music, both in the song and in the concerto, expresses it perfectly. Even the throbbing off-beat rhythm at the words 'we hear no more' in the song finds an echo in the opening of the concerto's last movement. Yet the concerto's lullaby ending in D major (not the key, G, in which it began) suggests a calmer acceptance of things than is felt beneath the song - possibly some new understanding of his temperament is here achieved by the composer.

The work's Irish identity, even were it not for the Joyce connection, is far from subjective. Moeran's melodic first principles are those of Irish folk melody, and the whole concerto is ample refutation of Constant Lambert's complaint that the only thing you can do with a folk tune is to play it louder. He uses no ready-made folk tunes, but that is beside the point. He understands the melodic cells that inform Irish folk music, and recognizes that their recurrence in many different tunes has two vital advantages for him: first, it means that his concerto will find thematic unity by developing them intellectually from one theme to another, and second, the fact that they may be found as well in 'The Londonderry Air' and 'The Last Rose of Summer' as in the tunes from County Kerry which he himself collected (and published in 1950) ensures that the associations of Irishness in the concerto will prove virtually universal.

Moeran's musical structure is at times almost like a self-conscious analysis of these melodic shapes (for the clearest example of this see the cadenza linking the last two movements of the cello concerto). In the violin concerto he suddenly brings many of them together, as if for final explanation, in the symmetrical little eight-bar tune on the solo violin accompanied by harp chords (an obviously folksy touch) which abruptly emerges in the middle of the movement from its meditative and indefinite prelude. Its distinctive elements and their combinations may usefully be labelled by (lower-case) letters as the tune is described. It is in a modal D minor, and begins with a three-note upbeat (a) moving upwards by step (b). The upbeat leaps up a sixth (c, abc) on to the beat. The downbeat phrase, consisting of the notes D, C, A, G, E, D, is pentatonic - i.e. there is a gap of a minor third, here placed second, in the descent (d) (the subsequent gap is less significant). This is repeated sequentially in the next bar, only now the gap is placed later (e) - the notes are F, E, D, C, A, G, one of Moeran's favourite motives (see the cello concerto, first movement, second subject). The triplet rhythm with which this ends may also be enumerated (f). Two bars later there is a rhythmic on-beat 'snap' (g), followed by (ab) again, but this time only jumping up a third (h, abh). The final cadence uses a flat seventh (i) whose chord, G, E, C, is actually delineated by the melody (j, fj), before three rhythmically equal repeated notes (k) as the final tonic. These

repeated notes sometimes form the beginning rather than the end of a phrase; however, they are always rhythmically equal: the pattern of a note followed by two of half its value (l) found in (a) and in much of the first movement seems a separate archetype.

Recognizing these patterns makes an understanding of the form of Moeran's work, in which tonality plays a less persuasive role, greatly rewarding. This little tune is almost the key to the whole concerto, and certainly to what precedes it in the last movement, where somewhat sad chromatic distortions of a number of the cells have been wandering amorphously in search of resolution: for instance, (abh) is heard to span a diminished, not a perfect fifth in the solo violin's first notes, and two bars later it plays the first three notes of (d) but with a contraction, e.g. D, C sharp, A sharp (a far more oriental sound, much utilized by Vaughan Williams), (abh) achieves its final identity only after the tune which we have examined broadens into the tonic major; it appears as the haunting horn call heard three times in the final lullaby section. It can be easily noticed, too, that this same call opens the solo violin part of the first movement, and that all this movement's solo themes are based on upbeat patterns akin to (a) and (k). But the effect of such melodic transformations is most distinctive in the second movement, a rondo with three different (but recurring) episodes. Far from being melodically independent, all the themes except those of the introductory section grow out of the rondo tune, which is the one that is reminiscent of the march from Tchaikovsky's *Pathétique* Symphony. In particular, the notes A, B, C, A, D followed by the downward scale which occur in bars 5-6 of this tune become the second episode, itself later burlesqued when the scale turns into (d) by having its third note knocked out. The overall effect is that the movement becomes progressively inebriated with its own thematic material, until in the coda the themes flash in and out as if totally befuddled. Edwin Evans wrote that the movement expressed 'the spirit of the summer fairs of Kerry, and particularly of the famous Puck's Fair of Killorglin'.

The concerto must be seen in its wider context. The formal plan of two slow or moderate movements flanking a fast one had already been explored by Walton in his viola and violin concertos, and he had no doubt learnt it from Prokofiev's Violin

Concerto No. 1. All three composers make a point of considerable reminiscence of the first movement towards the end of the last. This formula inevitably stresses the nostalgic propensity of stringed instruments in concertos, but even without it Moeran's would take its place beside those other 20th-century string concertos which 'take sad leave at close of day': those by Elgar, Bridge, Walton, Delius and Berg.

STEPHEN BANFIELD

The **Second Rhapsody** was first performed at the Norwich Festival of 1924 but was subsequently (1941) revised and scored for a slightly smaller but still normal orchestra (including harp). It is characteristic of its period in that like other rhapsodies (e.g. Enesco's Rumanian and Stanford's Irish Rhapsodies) it attempts to use as its thematic material nationally inflected tunes. What this meant in practice was that it eliminated symphonic development - tunes being entities are recalcitrant to being broken up, extended and contra punctally worked, because, as Constant Lambert said in a witty half-truth, there is nothing much you can do with a tune when you have played it through except play it again louder. "Rhapsody" by its Greek derivation means a stitching together of tunes, and tunes, especially if they are folk-tunes or derived from folk-music, do enable a composer to write nationally flavoured works for orchestra. The English idiom in this Rhapsody was made familiar by Vaughan Williams, who to escape the cosmopolitan idiom that had dominated European music for half a century had turned to folk-song for release. The big tune in the centre of this Rhapsody (*andante, sostenuto*) however has an unmistakably Irish flavour, with its wide compass and twice repeated notes both within the tune and at the cadences. It is flanked on either side by quicker tunes and the rhapsodic character of the piece is further ensured by their rhythmic variety, changes of time signature and irregular metres, that preclude the squareness of more sophisticated songs and dances.

FRANK HOWES

Though less adventurous and wide-ranging in expression than the Rhapsody for piano & orchestra *Phantasm*, the **Rhapsody in F sharp** shares that work's ternary form with a slow middle section, and is in fact more compact in structure,

foregoing a slow introduction and evolving all its basic material from three themes which are themselves closely related. Two occur immediately, the first on low strings and wind, the second an answering piano phrase. These interact and grow for several pages before giving way after a long piano solo to the third on trumpets which quickly closes the section. The central episode, which is suffused with Moeran's characteristically touching lyricism, is again based on question and answer phrases between piano and orchestra which evolve and interact. As it closes Moeran rudely interrupts his dreaming to embark on a development of his opening themes, concentrating initially on the third subject which was quickly passed over at its first appearance. One important transformation of it yields a chorale-like augmentation on the wind which proves capable of combining with the original shape. There is no orthodox point of recapitulation, for when the opening returns, punched out in single notes by the piano, it is in the subdominant, and the subsequent review of the main themes including those of the middle section form part of a continuous flow of textural variations. The goal of this unfolding process is only reached in the brilliant coda.

ANTHONY PAYNE

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**E J MOERAN (1894-1950)**

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|----------|---|-----------------|
| <b>1</b> | <b>Rhapsody No. 2 (1924 rev.1941) *</b>                       | <b>(13'19")</b> |
|          | <b>Concerto for Violin and Orchestra (1941) **</b>            | <b>(34'54")</b> |
| <b>2</b> | <b>1st movement: Allegro moderato</b>                         | <b>(14'22")</b> |
| <b>3</b> | <b>2nd movement: Rondo: Vivace</b>                            | <b>(9'52")</b>  |
| <b>4</b> | <b>3rd movement: Lento</b>                                    | <b>(10'30")</b> |
| <b>5</b> | <b>Rhapsody in F sharp for Piano and Orchestra (1943) ***</b> | <b>(19'14")</b> |
|          |   | <b>(67'21")</b> |

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**Lyrta**

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