



Chamber Music

The bulk of Moeran's chamber music dates from the earliest part of his compositional output - whilst still at school he busied himself with three string quartets and a sonata for cello and piano which is said to have lasted nearly an hour! None of this music survived its composer's desire to suppress his juvenilia.

In the categorisation of his music, there is an obvious overlap between chamber music and solo music in the shape of the sonatas, and I have decided against reanalysing work from different perspectives for the time being, so some of what you read here you'll also find in the solo music section.

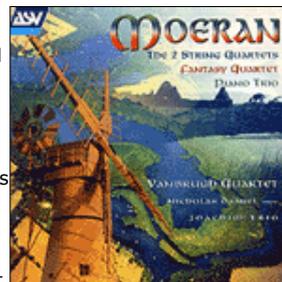
Trios



Moeran wrote two Trios just over a decade apart. The first, his Piano Trio, dates from his student days in 1920, though he carried on working at it for a further five years after the premiere, during which time it was largely rewritten. Perhaps a little rough around the edges, it remains one of my favourite works. The String Trio of 1931 has been described as 'the first masterpiece of his mature style' - a pivotal work which was to lead directly to the resumption and eventual triumph of the Symphony in G minor.

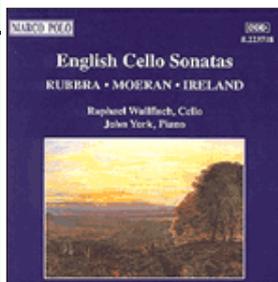
Quartets

Moeran wrote two String Quartets, the "first" in 1921, No 1 in A minor is delightful if perhaps reminiscent of Ravel's quartet. The 'second', No 2 in E flat, turned up in Moeran's papers following his death and was published in 1956. A publisher's note on the score suggested it was probably an early work, which has perhaps been too readily accepted as the evidence for this is at best slim. By contrast, a powerful argument can be made for at least part of the work being quite late, even as late as 1949. It was my first introduction to Moeran's music and remains a work I like to come back to over and over again.



A definite late work is the Fantasy Quartet for Oboe and Strings. This interesting combination was suggested by the virtuoso oboist Leon Goossens in the spring of 1946, which within a few months had become a fourteen minute one movement success - a letter in August 1946 stated with pride "Leon only wanted to alter one phrasing mark in the whole quartet".

Sonatas



Moeran's three sonatas often seem to explore areas untouched by his other works. The better known of the three, those for Violin and Piano and for Cello and Piano both offer a starkness of voice not often apparent in Moeran's other work. Of great interest to historians and true Moeran nuts is the Sonata for Two Violins. Written largely from his hospital bed, this work comes from a vital time as he attempted to turn from the Delius-influenced harmonies of the 1920s and find a new voice. Despite receiving good reviews on its debut, the work has, more than any other, been the subject of neglect. In an attempt to rectify this, I have been able to track down a copy of the score and commission a world première recording of this fifteen minute piece, [now available on the site.](#)

Finally we come to the Cello Prelude - a short piece for Cello and Piano Moeran wrote for Peers Coetmore in late 1943 as a first work specifically for the instrument. To quote Geoffrey Self, "It is a retrogressive piece, doomed to a humble place in grade examination lists." Well it's not as bad as all that, really!

trios

- [Piano Trio \(1920-5\) R6](#)
- [String Trio \(1931\) R59](#)

quartets

- [String Quartet No 1 \(1921\) R11](#)
- [String Quartet No 2 \(?\) R98](#)
- [Fantasy Quartet for Oboe and Strings \(1946\) R90](#)

sonatas

- [Violin Sonata \(1923\) R15](#)
- [Sonata for Two Violins \(1930\) R53](#)
- [Cello Sonata \(1947\) R92](#)
- [Prelude for Cello and Piano \(1943\) R80](#)

= Full Page Available

- audio
- biography
- chronology
- forum
- mailing list
- music: chamber
- music: orchestral
- music: solo
- music: vocal
- people & links
- site map
- what's new
- writing
- home page



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music: chamber

Piano Trio (1920-25)  
R6

### Published

OUP, 1925

Allegro  
Lento Molto  
Allegro Vivace  
Allegro

"Youth celebrates its new  
found strength with  
unrestrained joy"

### Recordings

[Joachim Piano Trio](#)  
(1998, CD ★★★★★)

### Reviews

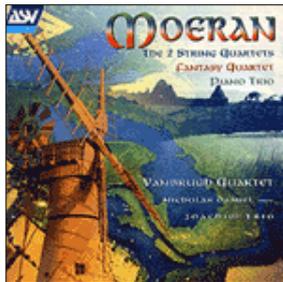
[Gramophone Magazine  
Review](#)

### Further Writing

### Audio

[At Moeran.com](#)

[home page](#)



Notes by Barry Marsh

It is on the strength of his larger scale works, the Symphony, the two concertos and the Sinfonietta, that the reputation of E J Moeran will be assured. However, much of the chamber music is also of high quality. It was a medium in which he always felt at ease, having gained 'inside knowledge' as a 16 year old violin player in his own quartet at school.

By the time he came to enter the Royal College of Music two years later Moeran could claim intimate knowledge of all the Haydn quartets, as well as having composed no less than three of his own. Study with Stanford was to be interrupted by military service in the 1914-18 war, so it was not until February 1920 that Moeran was able to return to serious composition.

First sketches for the Piano Trio date from this time, followed by a first performance at the Wigmore Hall in November 1921. By the time of its second performance there on 13th June 1925 it had been largely rewritten. If the style is reminiscent of his teacher John Ireland, Moeran's Trio is full of an exuberance firmly set in its intention to announce the arrival of a new voice on the English musical scene.

Youth celebrates its new found strength with unrestrained joy; Moeran gives us but one chance to share his optimism which, by 1930, would have become more restrained, and from bitter experience, more introverted and reflective.



music: chamber

String Trio (1931)  
R59

Published

Augener, 1936

Allegretto giovale  
Adagio  
Molto vivace - Lento sostenuto  
Andante grazioso - Presto

"a work of consummate technical mastery...the first masterpiece of his mature style"

Recordings

Maggini Quartet  
(1997, CD ★★★★★)

"I have started a String Trio and if I can keep it up I hope the purgative effect of this kind of writing may prove permanently salutary...It is an excellent discipline in trying to break away from the mush of Delius-like chords...Perhaps some good has come of being abed and unable to keep running to the keyboard for every bar"

Moeran, Letter to Peter Warlock, 1930

Reviews

Further Writing

Audio

home page



After the three riotous years house-sharing with Warlock in [Eynsford](#) between 1925 and 1928, during which time Moeran's musical output almost completely dried up (by 1926 he was considering giving up music completely), Moeran started to pick up the pieces of his compositional career. His early prolific work rate was never to be quite matched again, but with such a long time away from writing, he began to reconsider his style and aspirations.

When in September 1929 a motoring accident left him with a long convalescence in bed in Ipswich, Moeran first began to write music straight from the head, rather than at the keyboard. With time on his hands, a rash of new material started to appear - [The Seven Poems of James Joyce](#), Six

Suffolk Folksongs and the [Magnificat and Nunc Dimitis](#) among them.

Far more important, though, was the [Sonata for Two Violins](#) of 1930, a fifteen-minute three-movement work which is the immediate precursor to the String Trio, itself described by Geoffrey Self as "a work of consummate technical mastery...the first masterpiece of his mature style". The Sonata explores a new, leaner style of polyphonic writing, in an apparent bid to be rid of the Delian "mush". If, as Self suggests, the Sonata is "interesting", the Trio is "a masterpiece revelling in the freedom bestowed by newly acquired technical skills."

The opening movement is largely a lively, lyrical one, making brilliant use of the 7/8 meter Moeran holds to throughout. Yet inside this there is a dark heart, a section of bitter, disturbed writing over a cello ostinato, which, though it passes quickly, suggests more to come.

The second movement is a bleak Adagio of unrelenting sorrow. Whether this was in any way a response to the terribly-felt loss of Warlock in December 1930 is hard to determine, but surely if it was an emotional response to any one event the suspicion must fall there.

The third movement, a grim fugal scherzo, has a relentless energy running throughout it, a brutal, at times almost mechanistic drive only occasionally leavened by moments of light, before slowing and transforming into a bridge section leading directly to the final movement.

The opening of the final movement, a gently reflective Andante, recalls immediately the lyricism of the first movement - indeed Self finds elements of very free variation linking the two. There still seems to be a shadow of regret falling over the harmonies, until finally the music bursts into a wild, Presto jig, which whirls itself into a concluding flourish.

It seems almost too easy to cast this piece as something of an elegy to Warlock, and perhaps it is, though the opening quote proves Moeran was already working on it before Warlock's death. Yet as the first work to be completed post-Warlock, and coming so soon after the two great friends had spent more than five years in close and regular contact, it would not be surprising for Moeran to respond to finding the life of such a great talent, and such a close friend, being snuffed out apparently by his own hand. Moeran wrote later about Warlock's bouts of bleak depression - is the dark mood of the central movements here an attempt to explore musically what his friend had been through mentally? If so, does this leave the finale as a kind of drunken danse macabre, a celebration of Warlockian black humour?



music: chamber

Published

Chester, 1923

Recordings

[Maggini Quartet](#)  
(1997, CD ★★★★★)

[Vanbrugh Quartet](#)  
(1998, CD ★★★★★)

Reviews

[Musical Times, Feb 1923](#)

Further Writing

Audio

[1 - from Amazon](#)  
[2 - from Amazon](#)  
[At Moeran.com](#)

home page

String Quartet No 1  
in A Minor (1921)  
R11

Allegro  
Andante con moto  
Rondo

...lyrical, modal folk-like  
melodies weaving  
effortlessly through the  
instrumental writing...



Moeran's first String Quartet in A minor, completed while he was still studying under John Ireland at the RCM, was an early indication that here was a composer of great promise. In fact, Moeran had already composed several string quartets whilst at Uppingham School - these were all destroyed by the composer - and had some experience of playing within a quartet, so it is not entirely surprising to see him making quite a success of this piece.

Geoffrey Self tells us that, in the RCM of the early twenties, the dominant traditionalist school of thought at the RCM held up the Brahmsian model of String Quartet writing, while only a minority explored more recent developments. Of these two positions, however, the young Moeran took the latter route and looked for his inspiration primarily to Ravel. In fact there are several moments within Moeran's quartet where one is quite strikingly reminded of Ravel's own Quartet in F, particularly in the cross-rhythms and pizzicato writing of the final movement, and it does seem brave, if not naive, for Moeran to have programmed the two works together in his Wigmore Hall concerts of 1923.

Much of Moeran's output of the 1920s shows the strong influence of Ireland and Delius, but these two are less obvious in the Quartet, with its pared-down textures and harmonies. A casual comparison of the underlying melodies used in this and the undated Second String Quartet do suggest quite a marked difference in origin, with the latter having a far more Irish feel. The First String Quartet does share a folk-like feeling, but this work seems far more rooted in the English folk music which Moeran was collecting at the time. The occasional drifting towards elements of dance-like rhythmic textures in the final movement seem to lack the characteristic lightness of his most 'Irish' writing. This fleetness of foot was to emerge later - indeed one recording of recent years apparently implied that the musicians had not even considered the possibility of dance rhythms in this work, so leaden was their interpretation. Perhaps they chose a (somewhat lumbering) steam train as their rhythmical inspiration - that is certainly a possible alternative image generated by this movement, and also crops up earlier in the work.

The First String Quartet is a delightful listen, its lyrical, modal folk-like melodies weaving effortlessly through the instrumental writing, and in the two available recent recordings, possesses a lightness of spirit in its rhythm. It is fun to pit the first against the second quartets and try to deduce which actually came first, but I would personally hesitate to suggest one work is intrinsically better than the other.



music: chamber

String Quartet No. 2 in E Flat  
(date?)  
R98

### Published

Novello, 1956

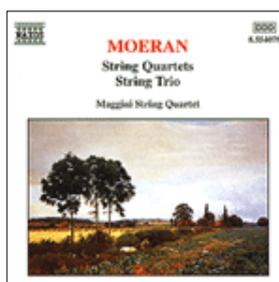
Allegro moderato  
Lento

"Moeran in relaxed mood  
and telling us how to enjoy  
ourselves"

### Recordings

[Vanbrugh Quartet](#)  
(1998, CD ★★★★★)

[Maggini Quartet](#)  
(1997, CD ★★★★★☆)



There is considerable dispute about whether or not this delightful piece is Moeran's 2nd String Quartet, or actually predates the first. Geoffrey Self devotes an appendix in his book to arguing the later date, while Barry Marsh here offers a similar conclusion.

However, Rhoderick McNeill (below) offers a powerful argument for the original conclusion, that it is in fact an early work. Of the two recordings, Naxos avoid the numbering issue, while ASV call it number 2, while their sleeve notes plump for the 'early date' theory.

With this in mind I intend to stick with calling this the Second String Quartet, even though it may predate the

[First](#).

### Reviews

Notes by Barry Marsh

### Further Writing

The manuscript of this quartet was found among Moeran's papers in 1950. It is undated, but by the nature of its style, in Geoffrey Self's observation, "simple, innocent and childlike", dismissed by some commentators as an early work. Yet the two movements share similarity of form with the 1946 [Fantasy Quartet](#).

### Audio

[At Moeran.com](#)  
[At Amazon.co.uk](#)

It is now thought that this work came to be written in order to offset certain tensions that were beginning to arise in the composer's life from 1947 onwards. The desire to make great music together with his wife Peers Coetmore had produced the stark individuality of the [Cello Sonata](#), but it had also turned composing into an obligation. The Second Quartet is, by contrast, Moeran in relaxed mood and telling us how to enjoy ourselves - inconsistently at times, perhaps, but never worth our neglect. here is accessible music, honest, direct, and written by a man who, as a sting player himself, was often happiest in this medium, and at peace in his beloved Ireland.

A Celtic atmosphere pervades the second movement in particular, where echoes of Kerry songs, both serene and lively, call to mind similar passages from the [Second Symphony](#) - also in E flat - on which Moeran was working at the time of his death.

home page

Dating The Work - An Alternative View

By Rhoderick McNeill,  
University of Southern Queensland, Australia

In my thesis entitled "A Critical Study of the Life and Works of E.J.Moeran" (University of Melbourne 1982), I argued for an early date for this quartet - in fact I placed it roughly in the period **1918-20**. As I was living and working in Indonesia for 10 years between 1985-95 I did not get hold of Geoffrey Self's book until the early 90s. Personally, I cannot agree with Self's conclusion about the date of the E flat quartet.

Here are some reasons:

1. An early article introducing Moeran's music ('Newcomers - E.J. Moeran', The Chesterian, No.36, 1923, p.124) mentions three string quartets predating the published [String Quartet in A Minor](#), and two Violin Sonatas predating the [Sonata](#) of 1922, as well as hinting at other chamber works. In the same article Moeran is said to consider them worthless and to have withheld them from public performance. Another reference to these chamber works was made in the program notes for the 1924 Norwich Triennial Festival, at which the premiere of Moeran's [Rhapsody No.2](#) was given. This is a clear indication that Moeran had given significant time to the medium. It makes sense that, as a young composer, Moeran would publish the one he considered the strongest, namely the A minor. As a composer whose style was rapidly developing between 1920-24, it is not surprising that he would hold back a work in a simpler style, given the limited chances one has as an emerging composer for publication.

2. The harmonic idiom of the work is essentially triadic - the use of ninths, elevenths and thirteenthths which one finds in Moeran's work from the [First Rhapsody](#) and Violin Sonata onwards is largely absent. However, it is also not as complex harmonically as either [In the Mountain Country](#) (which bears an Irish sub-title on the MS score in the Victorian College of the Arts collection, incidentally cf. Point 4 below) or the A minor quartet of 1921, which are not as dissonant, in turn as the works of 1922 and 23. Generally, I see a link harmonically with the idiom of the three early [piano pieces](#) (ie. At a Horse Fair). Although Moeran often included diatonic sections in his later works (ie second subject group of the [G minor symphony](#) first movement, first episode

in the Rondo of [Violin Concerto](#) and slow movement of the [Cello Concerto](#)), these were almost never sustained for long periods, let alone a whole work. The E flat quartet shows little of Moeran's tendency towards more linear counterpoint which we find post 1929 ([Sonata for Two Violins](#), [String Trio](#)) or the bitonal episodes which occur in his later works. Nor yet do we hear strong echoes of Delius. Rather, I hear connections with Vaughan Williams's pre-1914 style. Take for instance the opening three part writing of 'Is my team ploughing' from On Wenlock Edge and compare with that ghostly Andante section (figure 29) in the E flat quartet, second movement.

3. The Fantasy form of the second movement, incorporating elements of slow movement, scherzo and coda, was especially popular during the second decade of the 20th century - ie works of Bridge, Ireland, Vaughan Williams and Howells. Sure, there are later works using this form - by Britten, and, of course, Moeran. However, in the Moeran case, the 1946 style seems quite different to the E flat quartet.

4. Moeran had already spent time in Ireland towards the end of his military service. One of his sketch books in the Victorian College of the Arts collection includes a folk tune collected in Western Ireland in 1919, replete with the repeated three note figure which ends the beautiful main melody of the slow section in the E flat quartet, 2nd movement. As well, Moeran found a number of variants of Irish tunes in Norfolk (E.J. Moeran: 'Some Folksinging of Today', English Folk Dance and Song Society Journal, Vol.5, No.3, 1948. This could explain the Irish feel to the second movement.



music: chamber

### Published

Chester, 1946

### Recordings

[Leon Goossens,](#)  
[Carter Trio](#)

(1947 broadcast, CD  
★★★★☆)

[Nicholas Daniel,](#)  
[Vanbrugh Qt](#)

(1998, CD ★★★★★)

[Sarah Francis/English](#)  
[String Qt](#)

(1984, CD ★★★★★)

### Reviews

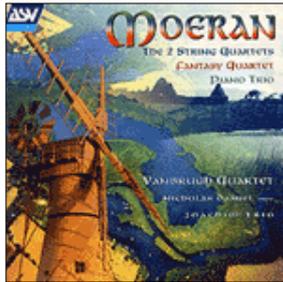
### Further Writing

### Audio

[Goossens at Amazon](#)

home page

Fantasy Quartet  
for Oboe and Strings (1946)  
R90



Notes by Barry Marsh

By 1946 Moeran had achieved a considerable reputation. With three major works behind him - a symphony and two concertos - he now resumed work on a second symphony for John Barbirolli. There were other projects in gestation; first sketches for "Leon's oboe piece" - a request from Leon Goossens - were made in March, but just as soon laid aside.

A visit to old haunts in Norfolk in early May seems to have rekindled Moeran's interest. "I have now decided that the work will be a Quartet... I think I am getting the shape of it. Anyhow, I want the weekend to let the general atmosphere soak in" he wrote to his wife. To Dick Jobson at Radnor he wrote: "I board and lodge in this little pub overlooking Rockland Broad... in the evening I go out rowing on these 'Lonely Waters'... this reedy neighbourhood seems to suggest oboe music". Norfolk had been Moeran's childhood home; the opening idea immediately recalls the style of the A minor String Quartet composed there in 1921.

The whole work is cast in the form of a fantasy, a single movement evolving from one melodic shape, although there are two clearly defined sections coloured by snatches of Norfolk folksong. "Sunshine over rural England" was how The Times critic applauded it at the first performance by Leon Goossens and the Carter String Trio on December 8th 1946.

"I board and lodge in this little pub overlooking Rockland Broad... in the evening I go out rowing on these 'Lonely Waters'... this reedy neighbourhood seems to suggest oboe music"



music: chamber

Violin Sonata (1923)  
R15

### Published

Allegro non troppo  
Lento  
Vivace e molto ritmico

Chester 1923

### Recordings

[Scotts/Talbot](#)

(1984, CD ★★★★★)

### Reviews

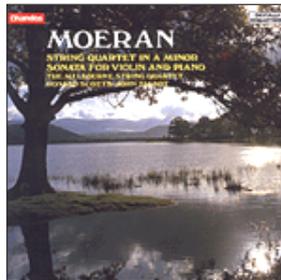
[Musical Times, Feb 1923](#)

### Further Writing

### Audio

[At Moeran.com](#)

home page



Moeran's Sonata for Violin and Piano premiered at the same concert at London's Wigmore Hall as the [First String Quartet](#), written in 1921, and of the two seemed to get the better reception, the reviewer in the Musical Times commenting~ "the Allegro of the Sonata shows a great advance, for its impetuosity is not hampered by technical obligations, although these are met as consciously as we have a right to expect in a modern sonata"

Geoffrey Self describes the work as having "a thrusting passion", and goes on to suggest that, were it not for the influence of Peter Warlock, this work may well point the direction in which Moeran's music would have headed. The music certainly is thrusting and passionate, and displays a level of dissonance greater than much of his output. At first hearing one might find it hard to recognise as a work by Moeran, until a few chinks of typical lyricism find their way out, moments of vaguely folk-like music. But easy-listening it ain't.

There's an intense brooding surrounding the first movement, in its relentless minor key augmented by broad Ireland-esque chromatic piano accompaniment. This is leavened by the second subject somewhat - providing those chinks of daylight - before finally ending in a whirling frenzy up towards a quite unexpected major chord.

The brooding is intensified in the slow second movement, though again Moeran uses a contrasting second subject, this time with a pronounced Aeolian mode accent to bring relief from the dissonant chromaticism that runs through most of the material. A characteristic of much of Moeran's music throughout his life is a section of wonderfully bright, lyrical music, radiant with warm sunlight, suddenly having a shadow cast over it and turning dark, even bitter. This seems to be operating in reverse in this piece. The moments of light are brief, and bring the dark, rugged edges of the majority of the music into a kind of relief.

The final movement, a "complex and energetic rondo" (Self) launches itself with great vigour. Elsewhere in Moeran's work a theme in 9/8 time might be expected to rapidly evolve into some kind of jig; the tone here is jagged. Self suggests an inspiration in [Stravinsky's](#) Rite of Spring, and in the pounding rhythms of the final movement this comparison seems more than justified. The harmonies too are among the harshest Moeran ever wrote, leading a reviewer in 1924 to plead: "must we really have ninths and ninths all the way...?".

At around eighteen minutes the Violin Sonata is not a long work, and is perhaps unfairly neglected. Self cites it as Moeran's first real masterpiece, the culmination of his student days, a piece apart from his other early work. As both a violinist and pianist, perhaps it's to be expected that Moeran would be able to write well for the combination, and it's a real pity he was apparently never inspired to try his hand at a second such work.

It seems hard to come by recordings of it, though the 1982 Chandos recording by Donald Scotts and John Talbot (CHAN 8465) is worth tracking down. Be warned, however - if you've heard the two more recent recordings of the First String Quartet that accompany the Sonata on this disc you may well be disappointed with the somewhat lumpen rendition given here by the Melbourne Quartet.

The moments of light are brief, and bring the dark, rugged edges of the majority of the music into a kind of relief...



## music: chamber

### Published

Boosey & Hawkes, 1937

### Recordings

### Reviews

### Further Writing

### Audio

[At Moeran.com](#)

[home page](#)

## Sonata for Two Violins (1930) R53

Allegro non troppo  
Presto  
Passacaglia



The elusive score

Moeran's Sonata for Two Violins, written in 1930, is probably the most elusive of his officially published works, yet for the Moeran scholar or historian, it potentially holds the key to his mature compositional style and success. The work has somehow escaped the interest of the record companies, and until very recently potential performers faced great difficulty in finding a score from which to play.

While it is difficult to date precisely a number of works Moeran wrote at the end of the 1920's and start of the 1930's, which does seem clear is that the two chamber works he produced at this time marked the beginning of a new direction for Moeran, and a deliberate attempt to put behind him his Delian roots. In November 1930 he wrote to [Peter Warlock](#):

"...It is an excellent discipline in trying to break away from the much of Delius-like chords, which I have been obsessed with on every occasion I have attempted to compose during the last two years. Perhaps some good has come of being abed and unable to keep running to the keyboard for every bar."

This is doubly telling: Moeran not only wanted to change his style, but a bad injury kept him in his bed for quite some time, and he was for the first time composing straight from his head to the page. The results in the Sonata for Two Violins and the [String Trio](#) are perhaps two of the starkest pieces Moeran ever wrote. I have written elsewhere that I view the String Trio in its final form as an elegy to Warlock. The Sonata for Two Violins predates Warlock's death, and seems to lack some of the despair evident in the Trio.

This apparent of lack emotional weight, exacerbated by the fact that Moeran writes no slow movement, is perhaps also reinforced by the constraints of the instrumentation. It is a highly unusual pairing for this style of music - Geoffrey Self comments "It is the choice of passacaglia for the last movement which perhaps tells us most about Moeran's intention, for this is an 'academic' form, and a searching test of compositional skill."

I would go one stage further - trying to write in a recognisably Moeran-like style with the exceptionally limited tonal resources of two violins is in itself a 'searching test of compositional skill'. It is a test which Moeran passes admirably, though not without creating quite a tricky work for the players. There is no room for error and no easy ride for either performer, for each part is treated as equal and each note is vital to holding the piece together - and there quite literally aren't enough notes available to create an 'mush of Delius-like chords'.

The first movement opens with a jaunty and highly memorable major key folk-like tune, tossed between the two players and developed with a very recognisable Moeran voice. There is much use of echoing between the two players, and they pass through a variety of keys with the material. The movement is written in Sonata form, though the second subject is far harder to discern, as everything appears to grow organically out of the opening. There are typically Moeran moments where the clouds appear to form over the sunny feel, and the mood changes quickly and dramatically more than once.

The second movement is a tricky Presto which Self describes as a Scherzo. Well, perhaps, but it lacks the true Scherzo lightness he was to employ in his [Symphony](#). This movement is, if anything, the dark heart of the work, with the two instruments frequently working harmonically against each other, taking a mournful folk-like melody and skewering it on a series of vicious stabbing pizzicato chords, their atonality only resolving with a surprising major chord ending.

hear the first extract from  
an historical world  
premiere recording

### MP3 Audio

Anonymous premiere recording of the Sonata for Two Violins in high quality digital stereo. Note that the final movement is incomplete in this recording:

[Allegro non troppo](#)  
[Presto](#)  
[Passacaglia](#)



[See also full page item](#)

The Passacaglia is superficially quite attractive, its difficulty in playing and timing masked by the apparent ease with which the two parts hold together after the brittleness of the preceding movement. But, as Geoffrey Self writes, "In the last movement of the Sonata...the part-writing seems to be without pattern - even aimless on occasion." With the benefit of a recording, of sorts, one can perhaps try and unravel where Moeran is coming from in this movement. He does manage to create a flatness of texture for much of the first half of the movement, the two melodies weaving apparently unstoppably around each other. Yet again we begin with a very folk-like modal minor melody, but one from which the life seems to have been stripped.

As the melody develops and wraps around itself the effect starts to get quite claustrophobic, and the harmony starts to mutate, until suddenly strange pizzicato chords break the cycle. The mood turns increasingly dark until... my recording breaks down and stops! And for the rest of the piece? Well the score suggest more dramatics and more changes, but I hesitate to provide further comment before having the chance to hear a full recording of the movement - watch this space!



Moeran in the late 1920's



music: chamber

Sonata for Cello and Piano (1947)  
R92

Published

Novello, 1948

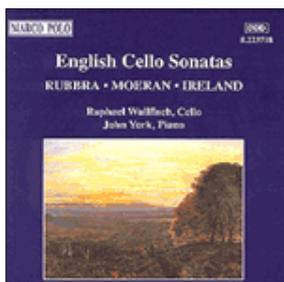
Tempo Moderato  
Adagio  
Allegro

"If nothing else of Moeran had survived, we would know from this Sonata that he was among the finest composers of his time"

Recordings

[Raphael Wallfisch & John Yorke](#)  
(1994, CD ★★★★★)

Peers Coetmore & Eric Parkin  
Lyrita SRCS 42  
(1972, LP ★★★★★)



"I have just spent all day yesterday on cello sonata proofs. You know I don't usually boast, but coming back to it, going through it note by note, and looking at it impartially, I honestly think it is a masterpiece. I can't think how I ever managed to write it."

Moeran, in a letter to Peers, Kenmare 1948

Reviews

[Musical Times \(1949\)](#)

If one is to go along with the prevailing view that the Moeran's Serenade in G of 1948 is the first indication of his final decline, an opinion which is weakened when the work is considered in its original full form rather than the abbreviated published score, then without a doubt the Cello Sonata of 1947 is Moeran's final masterpiece. As the quote above shows, even the ever-modest composer felt rightfully proud of his work, though naturally his self-deprecation comes through.

Further Writing

This Sonata follows the Cello Concerto and, before that, the Prelude, in the trilogy of works Moeran wrote for his new wife, the cellist Peers Coetmore. There may have been any number of reasons why the marriage itself was not a success, but as a trigger for the Concerto and Sonata, lovers of Moeran's music can only be glad that, having 'given my word as a gentleman', Jack went through with the marriage and then put all his creative efforts into creating music for his new wife.

Audio

[At Moeran.com: Excerpt](#)

[At Amazon: 1st movt](#)  
[2nd movt](#)

Moeran had written to Peers in 1943: "There are wonderful things we could do together in creating music, not only concertos and orchestral work, but chamber music." It is difficult to precisely track the development of the Sonata and Concerto. With a number of commissions to complete, Moeran had knocked out a short and somewhat undistinguished Prelude for Cello and Piano in 1943, as a 'keepsake' while she toured abroad. It seemed initially that his next work for Peers, following the completion of the Sinfonietta would be the Cello Sonata, and work apparently started on this in February 1944, but then he turned to the Concerto, which was finished by the following year.

Geoffrey Self's analysis in his book "The Music of E J Moeran" suggests similarities in the musical ideas in the first movements of both major cello works indicate some sort of joint conception. Indeed, he identifies a melodic 'cell' idea common not only to these two works, but also used in both the Symphony and the Violin Concerto. Self goes on to say: "It is now possible to see that this melodic cell is one which Moeran had been toying with for most of his creative life." Self goes into great detail, and certainly his close analysis is highly recommended to students of this work and of Moeran generally - I shall not attempt to paraphrase him here!

home page

What is worth lifting word for word from Self's book, however, is his conclusion:

The Sonata for Piano and Cello is the ultimate prize at the end of Moeran's long journey and apprenticeship, absorbing and rejecting and eventually crystallising a language and technique fit to express the deeply personal thought of what he knew to be his masterpiece. The concentration of thought is such that it would be difficult to find a redundant sound; whatever criticisms may be sustained of other works, whether of technique or of derivation, they fall to the ground here. If nothing else of Moeran had survived, we would know from this Sonata that he was among the finest composers of his time.

This fulsome praise echoes the reception the Sonata received on its completion - in the Musical Times of December 1949, A.H. wrote: "Every piece of this work is genuinely impassioned, and one cannot find a point at which the interest flags or the material belongs to a miniature conception...since Delius's Cello Sonata, there seems to have been no better work in the romantic and rhapsodic style that so well suits the cello."



music: chamber

Prelude  
for Cello and Piano (1943)  
R80

### Published

Novello, 1944

### Recordings

Peers Coetmore  
& Eric Parkin,  
Lyrita SRCS 42  
(1972, LP ★★★★★)

### Reviews

### Further Writing

### Audio

[At Moeran.com](#)

home page



Moeran and Peers in the  
mid-1940s

The Prelude for Cello and Piano suffers an unfairly bad reputation. I have myself helped to malign it in my original commentary, below. Alas this was written on the back of hearing the only commercially released recording of this piece, as played by Peers Coetmore in 1972, at the very end of her career.

So when I heard another, more recent rendition of the piece, played as an encore on a BBC Radio 3 live broadcast a few months ago, I realised I ought to at least review my thoughts.

Clearly the Prelude stands outside the normal path of Moeran's musical development. In no way is this a piece which points the way for the Concerto or Sonata which were to follow it. There is little in it, harmonically or melodically, which might not have been written 100 years earlier.

So with this in mind, one should perhaps concentrate on the music outside of an historical context. Perhaps I'm a sucker for a soaring melody and a tender moment, but the more I've heard this played the more I've come to like it as a romantic miniature.

It is most easy to criticise the piano's rather straightforward chords, but given that one is concentrating on the cello this is not too bad. There are a few Moeran fingerprints on it, but again it's a piece that really stands to one side of his repertoire. When it's badly played it's not worth listening to (see below). When it's well played it's charming!

### Original commentary

I've finally heard a rather creaky recording of the Prelude for Cello and Piano made by its dedicatee, Peers Coetmore, towards the end of her life, and featured in the fourth programme of Radio Three's [Composer of the Week](#) series for broadcast in December, 2000. I'm afraid to say I have to agree with other commentators who have dismissed it as a piece "of little distinction".

Moeran had first met the young cellist Peers Coetmore back in 1930, while visiting his friend, the painter Augustus John. It was not until 1943, when she gave a concert attended by Moeran in Leominster, that he became enchanted by the woman he would later marry. The union, though not in itself successful, was to lead to two undeniable masterpieces in the [Sonata](#) and [Concerto](#) for Cello, but with Peers constantly touring and heavily involved in war entertainments work, Moeran dashed off the short Prelude as a kind of keepsake for her.

Peers premiered the work in Alexandria, but since then it has seen little public performance, though it does serve a useful purpose as an examination list piece. While the Cello melody is reasonably promising, and might have been worked into something more satisfying over time, the plodding chords of the piano accompaniment stretched over nearly five minutes of music are eminently dull. Whether this is indicative of other Moeran first drafts is impossible to say - after all he was a composer who worked over and over at a piece before he was completely satisfied with it. Yet there seems little magic to be conjured out of this music for greater ends.

If only the music had been inspiring enough to those young cello students to invite them to explore Moeran's later writing for the instrument...

...he became enchanted by  
the woman he would later  
marry...



Piano Trio (1920-25) R6  
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The Piano Trio has been recorded but once, and I can only imagine that this took quite a bit of detective work as Geoffrey Self suggested in his book that scores were particularly hard to come by - especially from the publisher! This is a shame as this really is a remarkable piece of music, a real must-have for anyone interested in Moeran's chamber music output.

ASV CD CDDCA1045  
Joachim Trio  
Published February 1999

We finish with the Piano Trio, Moeran's grandest chamber work, first heard in 1921 (the A minor Quartet dates from the same year) but extensively revised for publication four years later. Cast in four movements, it is less distinctive than its companions (there are plentiful echoes of John Ireland, with whom Moeran was studying privately - and Ravel's Piano Trio can be heard loud and clear in the Scherzo), yet in its heady lyrical flow the piece has much in common with such contemporaneous offerings as the Violin Sonata and the orchestral In the Mountain Country and the First Rhapsody. The Joachim Trio give a thoughtful, beautifully prepared rendering, and although Cantamen's rival world premiere account on British Music Society is scarcely less passionate or accomplished than this newcomer, it is by no means as sympathetically captured by the microphones.

In summary, an enterprising, beautifully engineered and uncommonly generous anthology - and a release, I fancy, already destined for inclusion in my 'Critics' Choice' come the year's end.

AA

...Moeran's grandest chamber work...

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#### Wigmore Hall Concert Review

Mr E J Moeran's ambition did not quite go to the length of giving a one-man's show, for his concert at Wigmore Hall on January 15th concluded with the Ravel Quartet, but it was obviously given for the purpose of introducing two important works from his pen - a [String Quartet in A](#) and a [Violin Sonata in E minor](#).

The former is the earlier of the two, and its chief merits are concentrated in a vigorous and sparkling final Rondo. Its opening subject suffers a little from the fact that its principal subject was apparently chosen more with a view to the mission it had to fill than for its intrinsic attractiveness.

In this respect the Allegro of the Sonata shows a great advance, for its impetuosity is not hampered by technical obligations, although these are met as consciously as we have a right to expect in a modern sonata. In short, this movement falls into line, as the other did not, with the general spontaneity of Mr Moeran's work.

This quality is perhaps more pronounced in the slow movements of both works, though it is naturally less assertive in the lyrical mood. Where it leaps up to meet the listener is in the two final movements, the Rondo which has been referred to above, and the concluding section of the Sonata.

Mr Moeran, who has been working with John Ireland, inclines, like many other composers of today, to rely on the pentatonic scale for the fashioning of his thematic material. It is this that gives it the flavour which is conventionally recognised as Celtic, although a film now showing proves it to be Tibetan. In his case it has been hailed as Irish, and non can object. The flavour itself is good, but we cannot entirely overlook the circumstance that with the pentatonic scale it is next to impossible to go wrong. The composer's treatment is, however, remarkably interesting.

The performers were Miss Harriet Cohen (who played with much charm a group of not very weighty pianoforte pieces before tackling the Sonata, in which she was joined by Desiré Defauw) and the Allied String Quartet, of which Mr. Defauw is leader. Both the concerted pieces were given with that assurance which denotes careful preparation and sympathetic interest. Hence the interpretation was excellent.

E.E.  
Musical Times  
February 1923

The flavour itself is good, but we cannot entirely overlook the circumstance that with the pentatonic scale it is next to impossible to go wrong...

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from Musical Times, December 1949

Sonatas and concertos for the cello are few, for it takes a composer of experience and imagination to accompany the cello with piano or orchestra in such a way that the soloist shall have a clear-sounding part and genuine interplay with an accompaniment that does not betray reliance on a few types of texture or too frequent accommodation to an assertive partner.

Moeran's experience and imagination need no demonstration, and his new Sonata for Cello and piano quite hides any difficulties he may have had in surmounting the demands mentioned. It is indeed one of his finest works - finer, perhaps, than more ambitious works, such as the G minor Symphony - for there is in each of its three movements that consistency of form and quality which a rhapsodic composer can hope to achieve only in his full maturity.

With such a composer the melodic line takes precedence, and his themes must grow to climax organically; not for him the modern habit of nagging a few little figures into the twitching semblance of contrapuntal vitality, for counterpoint is more than imitative rhythms, and rhythms more than units of metre.

Every piece of this work is genuinely impassioned, and one cannot find a point at which the interest flags or the material belongs to a miniature conception. Indeed, since Delius's Cello Sonata, there seems to have been no better work in the romantic and rhapsodic style that so well suits the cello, for the style of Rubbra's splendid sonata does not invite comparison with Moeran's.

A.H.

Every piece of this work is genuinely impassioned, and one cannot find a point at which the interest flags...



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