



1894-1950

From **The Listener**, July
3rd, 1942

Moeran and the English Tradition

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The first performance of Moeran's Violin Concerto will be broadcast
on July 8 at 8.0 p.m. (Home Service)

THE second phase of what we might call 'the English revival' in composition kept very closely to its own lines of development. The Russian ballet might reveal new exotic charms, [Stravinsky](#) could thunder his practical theories of aural values across a world willing for novelty. Schönberg from another angle of approach could attract attention for the very unattractiveness of his intellectual sounds. But the still young - at least not more than partially adult - spirit of English musical composition was affected by two quiet separate elements - English folk-song, and what is called too vaguely 'old music'.

There is room for a study in detail of how English movements in music have nearly always followed, and neither kept pace with nor anticipated, the literary movements of the country. For example, into this second phase we are discussing, there came a new Wordsworthism: a spirit of nature that is not in the least naturalistic. It is a form of musical contemplation from the soil upwards: the peaceful growth of the plant is philosophically as important as its flower, and indeed it might be said that English music has not been content, not even sometimes willing, to pluck the flowers and make them into a

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lover's garland. There has been a neglect of the very thing which by his mastery of it made Stravinsky successful: effect. For effect is (dare I say?) effective and so successful, catching, compelling. To read the scores of Cowen and Mackenzie, [Stanford](#) and [Parry](#), alongside the scores of [Warlock](#), [Vaughan Williams](#), and [Butterworth](#), is to read two groups of completely different prose styles. The later group shows no more sincerity of intention, but it shows a far greater critical sense of musical values, and of the absolute truth of the musical phrases it writes down. From phrase-making in a conventional manner we proceed to the delicate management of a pithy and flexible language. The English musical tongue has become a real national medium again; but from its very truthfulness it is not compelling. And, in the state of apathy towards native-born music which has been our musical heritage since Purcell, this music, lacking compulsion, has no chance of attack, adopting a defensive, almost entrenched position, while frequently the international battle has moved its centre to another front. The result is for the English composer disastrous: his virtues are not noticed, his existence not believed in. He is hard put to it to get a hearing, much less a living, and as Alan Bush points out in the current issue of *The Author*, the English composer is the last person recognised by the English concert-goer.

I do not for one moment accept this popular neglect as a slur on English composition. I have my own beliefs, but they do not permit me such perspective of eye as will tell me whether the forty years of this century will live or not. I am convinced that musically, for England, they are years of splendid composing: and I am equally convinced that a majority of those who do not think so have not taken the trouble to know the music which they decry.

Moeran's music has the firm, growing attractiveness of a tree. It is not difficult to neglect its existence for it does not command one's attention. The fault is not the composer's, for it is there, this music. The reference books say that Moeran's music is indebted to folk-tunes. Perhaps: but far less than Grieg's, or Falla's, or Dvorák's, whose local colour we extol. And as an actual fact, to what extent? There is the pentatonic scale, a scale without semitones. Moeran's harmony is in general based upon the tone, as [Walton's](#) finds its characteristic flavour from the semitone. Thus Moeran's dissonances are of mellow sound than Walton's; his harmonic scheme never deviates far from the pentatonic scale - he startles us by richness rather than surprise of sound. The English folk-idiom has persisted more in song

than in dance, and the older instruments of the dance have not survived in their original shape - the rebeck is now the violin and the tabor is a charming archaistic revival. Moeran's music is therefore infected by song rather than by instrumental music. I personally perceived an advantage here. Years ago I pointed out that the viola part of 'Flos Campi' by Vaughan Williams is vocal, whereas the voice part in Hindemith's 'Marienlehen' derives from the viola. The opening of the second movement of Moeran's String Quartet is a song: it speaks from within, as song must. Not paradoxically, it may be said that to discover how small an extent Moeran's idiom is influenced by folk-song, the best way is to examine closely his folk-song arrangements: in particular 'The Little Milk-maid' and 'Down By The Riverside'. Here, with reverence, he makes the songs his own: they do not absorb him. And, in his original works, there is more trace of Irish influence than English in the dialect.

Moeran's output is not very large. There are three outstanding chamber works of the early 1920's - a [String Quartet](#), a [Violin Sonata](#), and a [Pianoforte Trio](#). The first two have moments of great noisiness, of a passionate and even violent statement. The Piano Trio comes from the time when Moeran was a prolific and continuous writer, of a flow that dried up as he matured: it represents in its published form a very reduced version of the original conception. The String Quartet does not fade in beauty by one shade of colour. The slow movement is as beautiful as ever, inspired by pure musicality of conception, expressed in a medium of lyrical style and precision of phrase very like that of the verses of [A. E. Housman](#). The Violin Sonata is more rugged: it opens with what appears to be an epigram and turns out to be a dramatic speech: and in its last movement there is a variety of rhythmic excitements which are almost too much for the slender instrumental forces. Then Moeran gives us a number of lovely songs, where, for example in 'Come Away, Death', he shows that, though his technique is not creative but based on a traditional language, he has a precise and delicate ear for original sound and for exact registration. Perhaps his most perfect song is ' 'Tis time, I think, by Wenlock Town'. In a more dramatic way, the four James Joyce songs are of outstanding interest: they epitomise this philosophic attitude towards musical expression. Moeran is not a miniature painter: but he excels in swift development of big ideas in a small time-space.

The contemplative Moeran, the composer who dreams his music irrespective of life's conditions,

dreams it for long periods and writes it with 'emotion remembered in tranquillity', is seen again in the [String Trio](#) and the [Duo](#) for two violins. This management of stringed instruments dates from Moeran's schooldays at Uppingham. He revels in these difficult mediums: but he is nowhere trying to startle us with them. Yet the technical skill is such that one is agog to hear how he will treat the solo part in a violin concerto. Of the orchestral pieces, I like best the quiet, tender '[Thomas Whythorne's Shadow](#)'. The [Symphony](#) has been played too seldom for me to know it: there is always in it, as there is in all Moeran's music, a purely musical, touching quality which defies analysis. It has the human tenderness of the country people, and a sense of the long endurance of the countryside. I have not assimilated it as a symphony: on another performance, I hope I should. And later there came two groups of part-songs, in longish cycles, 'Songs of Springtime' and 'Phyllida and Corydon'. They have a strange individuality: there is a personal flavour about them. I have often wished to get to know them by conducting them, which would be the way of finding out their worth.

As English as this land, Moeran's music has, as Hadow said of Schumann, the power to make its hearers go on dreaming after the music has stopped. The nostalgic quality is healthy. It must be sought before it reveals itself. It does not display its charms in the limelight of the day. It is neither topical or fashionable. It does not shout. I would not call it masterly, certainly not masterful. But its singing quality is undeniable, something to treasure.