



MOERAN

In the Mountain Country

Rhapsodies

Overture for a Masque

Benjamin Frith, Piano

Ulster Orchestra • JoAnn Falletta

Ernest John Moeran (1894-1950): Overture for a Masque · In the Mountain Country First Rhapsody · Second Rhapsody · Rhapsody in F sharp major

Of Anglo-Irish descent, Ernest John Moeran was brought up in Norfolk and the scenery and folk-music of Ireland and Norfolk were a lasting influence on him. Studies at the Royal College of Music were interrupted by the 1914-1918 War, in which he served on the Western Front, sustaining serious head injuries that affected him physically and mentally for the rest of his life. After the war he resumed a passion for collecting folk-songs and began to study privately with the composer John Ireland. Also at this time he developed a close friendship with Philip Heseltine, who wrote music under the name of Peter Warlock. Both men were strongly attracted to Delius's compositions which, together with those of Bax and Sibelius, had a significant impact on Moeran's own output.

As a composer Moeran was a late developer. He tackled most of traditional musical forms with the notable exceptions of opera and cantata but, despite the early promise of such works as the central *Elegy* from his three piano pieces entitled *Fancies* (1922), he did not achieve widespread critical and public success until the late 1930s with his *Symphony in G minor*. In the wake of this achievement he produced a series of major pieces, including the *Violin Concerto*, the *Cello Concerto*, the *Sinfonietta* and the *Cello Sonata*. In 1945 he married the Irish cellist Peers Coetmore. Their union was unsuccessful, exacerbated by his constant drinking and her enforced absences due to extensive touring. Moeran's final years, spent in Ireland, were dogged by ill-health. On a stormy night in December 1950 a witness saw him fall from the pier at Kenmare and, on his recovery from the water, he was found to be dead, apparently from a cerebral haemorrhage following a heart attack.

This programme consists of Moeran's sole published overture and four Rhapsodies, three named examples and one unaccredited prototype, which are rhapsodic in content rather than form, their melodic exuberance contained within taut and concise structures. Inventive scoring and formal mastery are distinguishing features of all five works presented here.

Overture for a Masque was written in the Welsh Marches during the winter of 1943-1944 to a commission by Walter Legge, then working for the Entertainments National Service Association (ENSA), for a spirited ten-minute piece to be performed at concerts for the troops during World War Two. Consequently Moeran's intention in this work is primarily to entertain: in a letter to Peers Coetmore the composer expressed the belief that he had made it 'snappy and exciting' for his intended audience. The relationship of this energetic overture to a masque is not obvious, its structure being closer to that of a pageant or sequence of themes, nearly all of which stem from the opening fanfare-like flourish. Written to order as a diverting curtain-raiser, it fulfils its brief with dash and style, driven by syncopated rhythms. Yet Moeran also finds room for a moment of introspective poetry in the lyrical, folk-like episode which occurs just before the music gathers strength for the grand peroration.

Believed to be Moeran's first orchestral work, the tone-poem *In the Mountain Country* was designated by the composer a *Symphonic Impression*. Dedicated to the Irish conductor and composer Sir Hamilton Harty, it was given its première in November 1921 at the Royal College of Music, while Moeran was still a student there. Though the work sounds like a collection of folk-songs – a 'rhapsody' in all but name – the material is all original. There are three sections, in which a fast and energetic centrepiece is encased by two more measured paragraphs. Elements introduced at the outset, a clarinet melody leading into a lilting theme for strings, are later developed in the central section. Though this work dates from the beginning of the composer's career, it is still entirely characteristic, suggesting that he found his own authentic musical voice at an early stage in his creative development.

Dedicated to Moeran's teacher, John Ireland, the *First Rhapsody* also belongs to the composer's student years and was first performed at a Patron's Fund Concert at the RCM in 1922. Even though it postdates *In the*

Mountain Country by just one year, it is noticeably a more sophisticated work melodically, structurally and in terms of orchestration. Containing most of the work's main material, a serene, ruminative slow introduction features muted strings laced with woodwind phrases interrupted by a busy, heavily accented figure on wind and lower strings. These two contrasting ideas are developed throughout the piece in a sequence of variations which includes a languid, pastoral-sounding interlude. After a grand climax, the evocative opening woodwind calls over hushed strings return and the piece fades back into the nebulous, otherworldly region from where it emerged. Though a reviewer writing in *The Musical Times* in August 1925 described it as being based on folk-tunes, no such pre-existing melodies have ever been identified so it may be assumed that, once again, the material is all original.

Rhapsody No. 2 was commissioned by and first performed at the 1924 Norfolk and Norwich Centenary Festival. In 1941 Moeran rescored it for slightly reduced orchestral forces. Less intricate in its formal scheme than its predecessor, and not as subtly scored, the *Second Rhapsody* is nonetheless an attractive work. It is most notable for a profusion of melodies derived from both Norfolk and Ireland. A jaunty opening theme has strong associations with a Norfolk folk-tune, whilst several jig-like ideas and the broad melody at the heart of the work are all unmistakably Irish in character. After this lyrical central interlude, a livelier vein is recaptured as the initial material is reworked. Following a slight broadening of tempo for a final, fragmented reminiscence of the opening theme, this direct and straightforward work is brought to a fittingly trenchant conclusion with a couple of emphatic chords for full orchestra.

Uniquely among his series of pieces in the medium, Moeran's *Third Rhapsody*, in F sharp major, takes the form of a concertante piece for piano and orchestra. This

scoring was the result of a suggestion, made some years earlier, from Arnold Bax that Moeran should write a work for Harriet Cohen to play. Cohen, the dedicatee, gave the first performance, with the BBC Symphony Orchestra under Sir Adrian Boult, at a Promenade Concert at London's Royal Albert Hall in August 1943. Later it was successfully championed by the pianist Iris Loveridge, whose interpretation of the solo part Moeran preferred, writing to Lionel Hill on 23rd September 1944 that she had 'made a new work of it'. Cast in one movement divided into three main sections, the *Third Rhapsody* is unashamedly popular in style, with an appealing tunefulness doubtless intended to cheer up wartime audiences. The omission of an introductory paragraph is the first indication that this is one of the composer's most tightly-knit works, its basic material derived from three inter-related themes. The outer sections have the character of a lively waltz, whilst the central episode conveys a nostalgic, introspective mood typical of Moeran. All three principal ideas are developed and varied throughout the course of the piece which ends in a brilliant coda surely designed to rouse a Prom audience to cheers. Though the solo part is written with a substantial degree of virtuosity and the work contains several cadenza-like opportunities for pianistic display, the orchestra is by no means entirely subjugated and is rewarded with numerous instances of solo writing for various instruments. A great success from the outset, the *Third Rhapsody* was performed on several occasions in its first few years. Reviewing the first performance, *The Times'* critic concluded, presciently, that, "The new work will win him [Moeran] respect from the general public, and something more from those who like their music unemphatic in manner, thoughtful by nature, and lyrical in expression."

Paul Conway

Benjamin Frith



Photo: Anthony Hurren

Benjamin Frith was encouraged by his teacher, Dame Fanny Waterman, to pursue a musical career after winning the Dudley National Concerto Competition aged fourteen. Since then he has been a first prizewinner in the Rubinstein Piano Masters Competition where he was also awarded the special prize for chamber music, and was awarded top prize in the Busoni International Piano Competition. With acclaim for his American and Edinburgh Festival débuts, he established himself as an international concert artist, and has given recitals and concerto performances throughout Europe, Northern America, India, Kazakhstan and the Far East. He has appeared with many of the world's finest orchestras including the Berlin Symphony, Israel Philharmonic, Warsaw Philharmonic, Hallé, the BBC orchestras, City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra, Northern Sinfonia, and the Royal Philharmonic, and with such conductors as Zubin Mehta, Antoni Wit, Tamás Vásáry, Stanisław Skrowaczewski, Matthias Bamert, Moshe Atzmon, Gianandrea Noseda and Sir Mark Elder. His diverse repertoire ranges from Scarlatti to James Macmillan and includes over fifty concertos, and much praise has been bestowed on his recordings. Frith's enjoyment of chamber music has been fulfilled through his performances and recordings as pianist in the Gould Piano Trio and the formation of his own Piano Quartet.

Ulster Orchestra



Photo: Harrison Photography

Ulster Orchestra's mission is to enrich life through music and since its beginnings in 1966, it has brought people from all backgrounds and walks of life through an exciting and diverse musical journey. Northern Ireland's only professional symphony orchestra performs in front of more than 100,000 people every year averaging eighty to ninety performances, including more than forty main season concerts, lunch-time concerts, BBC invitation concerts and performances at venues across Great Britain. JoAnn Falletta is the first woman and the first American in the rôle of Principal Conductor and was appointed in May 2011. The Hungarian-born violinist, Tamás Kocsis, leads the Orchestra. For many decades the Ulster Orchestra has been an integral part of the local community, and continues to expand its education and outreach activities each year. It is grateful for the significant support of its principal funder, the Arts Council of Northern Ireland, the BBC, Belfast City Council, and that of various corporate and philanthropic funders.

JoAnn Falletta



Photo: Mark Dellas

JoAnn Falletta serves as Music Director of the Buffalo Philharmonic and Virginia Symphony in the United States and Principal Conductor of the Ulster Orchestra in Northern Ireland. She has guest conducted over a hundred orchestras in North America, and many of the most prominent orchestras in Europe, Asia, South America and Africa and is the Principal Guest Conductor of the Phoenix Symphony and Brevard Music Center of North Carolina. Recipient of the Seaver/National Endowment for the Arts Conductors Award, winner of the Stokowski Competition, and the Toscanini, Ditson and Bruno Walter conducting awards, Falletta has also received eleven ASCAP awards and serves on the U.S. National Council on the Arts. A champion of American music, she has presented over five hundred works by American composers including 110 world premières. Her Naxos recordings include the double GRAMMY® Award-winning disc of works by John Corigliano (8.559331) and GRAMMY® nominated discs of works by Tyberg, Dohnányi, Fuchs, Schubert, Respighi, Gershwin, Hailstork and Holst.

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Ernest John Moeran's *Rhapsodies* occupy a significant place among his orchestral compositions. Each is marked by melodic exuberance, inventive scoring and formal mastery. Moeran's gift for imbuing his music with folkloric tunes that are actually his own is especially evident in the *First Rhapsody* and in his first orchestral work, *In the Mountain Country*. First performed in 1943, the *Rhapsody in F sharp major* for piano and orchestra is unashamedly popular in style, with an appealing tunefulness.

Ernest John
MOERAN
(1894-1950)



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| 1 | Overture for a Masque (1944) | 9:27 |
| 2 | In the Mountain Country (1921) | 6:24 |
| 3 | Rhapsody No. 1 in F major (1922) | 11:26 |
| 4 | Rhapsody No. 2 in E major (1924/41) | 12:17 |
| 5 | Rhapsody in F sharp major (1943)* | 17:32 |

Benjamin Frith, Piano*

Ulster Orchestra • JoAnn Falletta

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