

Some thoughts on E.J. Moeran's *Theme and Variations* for piano (1920)
by John France

Amongst works celebrating their centenary in 2020, Moeran's *Theme and Variations* may seem like a relatively light-weight, unimportant anniversary. Yet this short piano piece marks a significant milestone in the composer's career. Here we have a subtle fusion of Moeran's English and Irish sensibilities as well as his growing technical command of formal and technical procedures. It is a work that is worthy of study as well as giving considerable pleasure and enjoyment.

In January 1919, Ernest John (E.J. Moeran) was demobilised from the Army. After a possible interlude as a teacher at Uppingham School and time spent in Ireland, he returned to the Royal College of Music. There he studied composition with John Ireland. The works that Moeran composed around this period included his extensive Piano Trio (1920), the song cycle *Ludlow Town* (1920) and his first recognised orchestral work, *In the Mountain Country: [A] Symphonic Impression* (1921). Geoffrey Self (1986) has written that from this point 'the main influences to be heard in his music were now in place: his teacher, his Irish and East Anglian heritages, and his love of rural England.'

Virtually every commentator on the *Theme and Variations* for piano implies that the theme 'seems instantly recognisable' yet hard to pin down. Eric Parkin (CD Liner Notes, 1994) suggests 'A Norfolk folksong, surely?' Self (1986) states that the 'theme could pass muster as one of the Norfolk folk-tunes he was shortly to collect and arrange' and publish in 1923. The short answer is that this theme is one of Moeran's own devising.



Figure 1

This is the longest of Moeran's piano works, lasting for nearly 14 minutes. The formal structure of the piece consists of the 'Andante' theme (Fig.1) followed by six variations and concluding with a long finale. The 'theme', echoing English (possibly Norfolk) folksong, is written with a largely Dorian mode melody centred on F. This means the Db in a F melodic minor scale is typically played as D natural. This theme has a 'diatonic, full chordal accompaniment' emphasising the folk-like simplicity of the tune. The melody is played in octaves between left and right hands.

The first variation is marked 'Poco piu moto' implying a little more movement. McNeil (1982) suggests that it is a 'moto perpetuo' but it also features some delicate arabesques shared between hands. This leads into an 'Allegro scherzando' which introduces parallel fourth and fifth chords and jagged harmonies. Rapidly changing time signatures and 'chattering semiquavers' add to this variation's vibrancy. The mood changes with an 'energetic march' which builds to a climax before dying away into the distance. This is characterised by filled octaves in the right hand supported by bare octave running quavers in the left hand. Variation 4 is much calmer and reflective: it should be played 'Allegretto sostenuto'. Moeran has introduced a flexible metrical system that juxtaposes 9/8 and 6/8 bars. The fifth variation, a 'Vivace', is intricate. Partly presented as a 'gigue' with triplets superimposed on 4/4 time it is balanced by minim chords played with 'una corda' (soft pedal).



Figure 2

The last variation (Fig.2) moves the focus of the music from Norfolk to Ireland. This is the emotional heart of the work and shows considerable depth of feeling. After a series of powerful and assertive chords this heartbreakingly beautiful music enters the finale. This complex 'allargando ma non troppo lento' is a ternary (three-part) song movement with an extended coda which is truly dramatic and virtuosic in effect. It presents a thesaurus of pianistic devices with some recollection of phrases from the foregoing variations.

The 'premiere' performance of *Theme and Variations* was given by Moeran during the 469th concert of the Oxford and Cambridge Musical Club held on 27 May 1920. One interesting aside is an entry into the Club's Suggestion Book that 'it should be possible for members to buy tobacco at the club' It is signed by the composer. Moeran had taken up pipe-smoking in his army days and continued until the end of his life. (Maxwell, 2014). The Club did not take him up on the proposition.

The first 'public' performance of the *Theme and Variations* was advertised in *The Times* on 10 October 1921. Miss Dorothea Vincent was billed to play the work at the Wigmore Hall on Friday 14 October at 3:15 pm. The concert included three Sonatas by Scarlatti, Beethoven's Piano Sonata No.27 in E minor, op.90 and Cyril Scott's massive 'Introduction and Fugue' from his Suite No.1 for piano, op.75 (1910) Reporting on the concert, the unsigned critic in *The Times* (15 October 1921) felt that:

'we did not quite make out Mr Moeran's music. It seemed as if it demanded the orchestra; for when the seven diatonic notes are sounded together it is obvious that some of them are substantive and intended, therefore, to be louder than others which are passing notes, and this distinction is easy for the orchestra, but difficult for fingers to make. Still, that the effect was a little 'muddy' did not seem to be any fault of the player; on the contrary, one was surprised that it came out as clearly as it did.'

The Daily Telegraph (15 October 1921) reported that 'by way of novelty, Miss Vincent gave us a *Theme and Variations in F minor* by E.J. Moeran, a composer with whose name the writer is unfamiliar.' The reviewer felt that:

'The theme itself is quite a good one for its purpose, and the elaborations evolved from it are fanciful enough, without ever becoming 'free' to the point of completely disguising their origin. The work is written in a modern harmonic idiom [and] was played with plenty of skill and sympathy by Miss Vincent.'

The *Theme and Variations* was published by Schott and Co. in 1923. In Volume 2 of the collected edition of Moeran's piano music (Thames Publishing, 1998) John Talbot explains that despite the composer's 'often-avowed dislike' of Robert Schumann's music, there is a definite nod towards the German composer's *Études Symphoniques*, op.13. This is more to do with mood and technique rather than duration. Another possible work impacting on Moeran's *Theme and Variations* is Gabriel Fauré's eponymous op.73. Neither does it take much imagination to hear the influence of Moeran's teacher John Ireland. In fact, the theme itself seems to echo the *Holy Boy* (1913). In the same year as the *Theme and Variations* were completed, Ireland composed his magisterial Piano Sonata and concluded his well-loved *Three London Pieces*: 'Chelsea Reach', 'Ragamuffin' and 'Soho Forenoons'.

R.J. McNeil (1982) understands that in this work, Moeran 'demonstrates a command of pianistic devices and effects throughout six variations and a virtuoso finale.' McNeil does point out that 'some

might think that the finale is weakened by a predominance of technical effects which do not seem to proceed naturally from the development of the theme.'

Geoffrey Self (1986) was not impressed with Moeran's *Theme and Variations*: he thinks that the theme, 'while of haunting beauty' offers too few opportunities for variation, which appear to him to be 'uneven in quality.' Again, Self considers that the finale is 'not entirely successful.' He does not give a reason, but it is possibly that the quality of the piano writing is sometimes less than convincing. He states that the third variation, the 'march' is 'uncouth in texture'. The only positive element of the piece for Self is the 5th variation with its alteration between 'violent declamatory octaves' and the quiet 'withdrawn chordal passages'. Here, there is a 'glimpse of Moeran's deeper self and...his latent power.'

Despite the misgivings of some critics both 'then and now', Moeran's *Theme and Variations* is an appealing work that provides the listener with considerable musical interest, highlighting a wide range of emotion and textures. There is both vivacity and reflection in these pages in what is a typically Moeran-esque composition, despite a few pianistically awkward moments. For me, this is music that speaks of the Norfolk and the Irish landscape without ever descending into 'Pastoral' or 'Irish' clichés.

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