

## *SYMPOSIUM RECORDS CD 1201*

### E. J. MOERAN – Historic Live Performances

ALBERT SAMMONS was born on 23rd February 1886. He was taught by his father up to the age of thirteen, his parent being a good amateur musician who also took Albert to concerts, which thrilled him. Beyond this tuition, he was self-taught. He was keen on sport - boxing, cricket, wrestling, golf and football, and remained so all his life, but all the time he was also practising hard on the violin. At school he joined the band, and was top of his class in general subjects.

His first professional engagement came in 1898 at the Earl's Court Exhibition, where he led a band of twelve, playing popular classics, which gave him experience of sight-reading.

Sammons left school in 1898 and joined a small band at the Leicester Square Hotel. Later he was offered an engagement at the Gaiety Restaurant where he was heard by Ivan Caryll, conductor and composer of musical comedy. Sammons also played in so-called "Hungarian bands" which were all the fashion at the time. Players were obliged to wear uniforms to disguise their British nationality and were not allowed to speak English. Only foreigners were considered to be musical in those days!

In 1906 Sammons gave his first performance of the Mendelssohn Concerto.

He was married in 1907, and also in that year met Maggie Ponsonby, daughter of a Lady-in-Waiting to the Queen, who became an influential friend to the couple. He then became involved in playing at noblemen's houses and was a member of the King's Band at Windsor Castle.

In 1908 Sammons was playing at the Waldorf Hotel when Thomas Beecham came in to dine. Albert played the Mendelssohn Concerto at breakneck speed to impress the famous guest, for which he received a card saying: "Splendid, but the tempo is so-and-so. Beecham." In the event Beecham immediately engaged Sammons for his orchestra and within days he became leader and remained so for five years.

In 1913 he played the Saint-Saëns Concerto, King George and Queen Mary being present. The composer insisted on a great ovation for Sammons. Albert then became the leader of the famous London String Quartet, founded in 1910. He also led the orchestra for Covent Garden during Diaghilev's season, and he went to Germany with Beecham.

1914 was the key year for Sammons when he first performed the Elgar Concerto under Safonoff and became famous overnight, receiving engagements from all over the country. Indeed, Kreisler once remarked, "Why do you ask me to come over to play the Elgar Concerto when you have Albert Sammons?"

Sammons was much involved in Beecham's early championship of Delius, recalling the astonished looks of the players at this new music, and Beecham saying, "Don't be alarmed, gentlemen, this will be a lullaby in twenty years' time!" He was present on 26th May 1935 at Delius' burial in Limpsfield churchyard.

In 1931 I had become Albert Sammon's son-in-law, and this relationship, I think, enabled me later to persuade him to play the Moeran Concerto, although he was about to give up concerto playing.

Although Albert had a large repertoire he is chiefly remembered for his wonderful performances of the Elgar and Delius Concertos, the latter being dedicated to him. He was awarded the C.B.E. in 1944 and gave his final performance, the Elgar, in 1946. For the next eleven years until his death he suffered from Parkinson's disease. On December 7th 1954 a Testimonial Concert took place at the Albert Hall, and after his death a memorial service was given on 1st October 1957 at the church of Saint Sepulchre, Holborn.

Albert Sammons was a genius much loved by fellow musicians and public alike, not least by his pupils at the Royal College of Music where he was a professor for many years and known for his modesty and kindness. In his prime he had no rival in Britain and few elsewhere, indeed, had he called himself Alberto Sammonovsky and toured the world he would quickly have become an international artist, second to none. Such fame did not interest him, but the people of his own country loved him for what he was - wholly British in feeling and artistry.

The recording on this Compact Disc is the only one in existence and is a fitting tribute to a great composer and to a great violinist.

ERNEST JOHN MOERAN was born at Isleworth, Middlesex in 1894. His father was Irish whilst his mother came from Norfolk. Much of Moeran's musical language stems from this dual ancestry, which was bound to produce an exciting flavour.

Before the 1914-18 war he studied under Stanford at the Royal College of Music, but in 1914 he enlisted as a motor-cycle despatch rider and was gravely wounded in the head. A metal plate was inserted in his skull, the effects of which were to dog him for the rest of his life.

After the war he studied with John Ireland, and also lived for two years with his friend Peter Warlock.

He began by writing songs and piano miniatures until, in 1937, he emerged as a major composer with the Symphony in G Minor.

Jack Moeran was a thorough countryman and loathed city life. Without the inspiration of Nature he was a lost spirit and found composition impossible.

I knew Jack well for the last seven years of his life, which I have written about in a book called *Lonely Waters - The Diary of a Friendship with E.J.Moeran*. I always found him to be a gentle, humble and companionable man, and I am proud to have known him as a friend. I describe how I first became infatuated by Arthur Catterall's performance of the Violin Concerto at a Prom. in 1942. I immediately thought how my father-in-law, Albert Sammons, would wring the utmost from this moving music.

Albert was staying with us at our house in Bucks. and whilst on a walk through the glorious beech woods that stood around our valley I asked him, "Do you know any of E.J.Moeran's music, Albert?" He replied, "I've heard of him, but can't say I know any of his music." "Well," I replied, "he has written a superb Violin Concerto which is right up your street. I'm absolutely sure it's for you, and you alone. Do please try it over." This he agreed to do.

Meanwhile, Barbirolli was keen to do the Concerto with Albert, for he also considered he was the one and only violinist for that work. Max Rostal was playing it up north, but Jack's dogged determination to procure Sammons clearly showed how he wanted the work to sound - that quality that only this artist brought to the Delius, for example.

Albert came to stay with us for a few days and Geoffrey Tankard, a gifted amateur pianist, joined him in exploring the work. It soon became obvious why Jack was so keen to have this fine player as the interpreter of his concerto, for there was a sweep of phrase and sweetness of tone so vital to a rhapsodic piece of this nature of which this artist knew the instinctive secret.

On March 12th 1945 Jack wrote to me enthusing about "A lovely evening I spent with Albert Sammons. He already plays my Concerto marvellously.... When the time comes for him to perform it with orchestra we shall hear such a rendering as it has never yet had."

In the event, Albert played the Concerto on August 28th 1945 to an enthusiastic audience. How thrilled Jack was can be seen from this letter:

My dear Albert,

Now that what I had so long looked forward to, namely to hear my Concerto played by yourself, has in fact happened, please let me thank you from the bottom of my heart for your superb playing, the poetry which seems to be instinctive in your conception of it, and which I have always felt, I am now assured that you are the only one to play it.

Yours with the utmost gratitude and admiration,

Jack

Albert's second and last performance of the Concerto occurred on April 28th, in Norwich. Sir Adrian Boult conducted the B.B.C. orchestra and the concert was broadcast. This is the performance on this Compact Disc.

It remains for me to add that over the following months I moved Heaven and Earth to get H.M.V. or Decca to record a performance with Sammons and Barbirolli - all to no avail. Tragically it was not long before Sammons was forced to give up concert playing due to the onset of Parkinson's disease.

The Violin Concerto, surely one of the most beautiful in the British musical canon, was conceived by Moeran in his beloved County Kerry in 1937, immediately after his Symphony in G minor. He set out to write an Irish work, redolent of the wonderful scenery around Kenmare in south west Kerry, where he frequently stayed for inspiration. Indeed, much of his finest work came from that environment.

Of the Concerto's three movements, the first is in Sonata form, nostalgic in feeling; the second, a Rondo, depicting the bustle of the Irish County Fair at Kilorglin, which Jack loved; whilst the third movement is a deeply-felt Lento of much originality and heartbreaking beauty.

The *Fantasy Quartet* for oboe and strings was a commission from that prince of oboe players, Leon Goossens, in 1946. It is in one movement with clearly defined

sections, and for once it has no Irish element for it was written in Norfolk, another area for which Moeran had a deep love. Naturally, the piece is dedicated to Goossens.

The Serenade in G, written after the Cello Concerto, proved to be Moeran's last large-scale composition. In 1948 we lent Jack and his wife our house in Bucks, while we went on a fortnight's holiday in Sussex. On our return I noticed some manuscript propped up on the piano which was headed "Serenade in G". Thus some of this work was composed in our house.

It is a light-hearted pastiche of English Baroque, but the tunes are his own; there is a backward glance at Peter Warlock's *Capriol Suite*, but with its own wayward charm. The "Air" is in Moeran's most beautiful vein.

I went with Moeran to Novello's to discuss publication. Mr Brooks, the director, said, "The work is too long, Jack. You must omit two movements" and so two movements, an Intermezzo and a Forlana, were not included when the score came to be published. The recording on this Compact Disc is of the first performance, at a Prom. Concert on 2nd, September 1948 under Basil Cameron. It has the added distinction of containing the Intermezzo and the Forlana.

Lionel Hill ©1991

Violin Concerto - Novello & Co. Ltd.

Fantasie Quartet - Chester Music Ltd.

Serenade in G - Novello & Co. Ltd.

except Movements 2 and 6 - by kind agreement of Mr. M. Walter Knott

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