

WILLIAM WALTER BEATON MOONIE

by Dr. David C.F. Wright

There is a danger that Edinburgh composer, William Walter Beaton Moonie, will only be remembered, if remembered at all, by his many works based on Scottish melodies, but he wrote three operas, a piano concerto, a symphony, an organ sonata, a piano trio, a piano quintet and many songs.

A CD of some of his piano music and songs is now available from Nymet Music of Credition. Please see [CD Review 16](#) on this site.

He was born prematurely at a Station Master's House in Stobo, Peebleshire while the family were on holiday. His father, James A. Moonie was a musical teacher in Edinburgh who married Clementina Greenaway who was a secretary in Edinburgh. He founded what was to become known as Mr. Moonie's Choir in 1896 which choir brightened the city of Edinburgh. He had three brothers, John, James and Charles and a sister Esme. None had any musical ability as such, but James helped his brother with the choir.

William was born on 29 May 1883 and, as a boy, enjoyed seeing Paderewski and Patti perform in his home city before stepping out into the gas-lit George Street for a horse drawn cab. W.B., as he was known to his family and many friends, achieved his Bachelor of Music in Edinburgh in 1902 having studied with professor Niecks and winning a Bucher scholarship to study in Frankfurt from 1905 with Professor Iwann Knorr (1853–1916) whose other pupils included Pfitzner, Toch and the English composers Roger Quilter, Cyril Scott, Balfour Gardiner and Norman O'Neill, known as the Frankfurt group. William's other teachers in Germany were Uzielli for piano and Rehberg. Moonie returned to Scotland in 1908 and began to teach at Daniel Stewart School, where had been a pupil himself. He also undertook some further study with Tovey and it was Tovey who put on the first professional performances of Moonie's work. One of Moonie's most popular works, *Springtime on Tweed*, is a tone poem written in honour of the Stobo district where he was born. W.B. said of Tovey that he was a remarkable musical genius whom Scotland did not really appreciate. Moonie had a teaching appointment at the Edinburgh Provincial training College at Moray House. During the war Moonie served with the Cameronians in a non-combative role. In 1919 he had a teaching appointment at George Herriott School and later at Watson's College and then Queen Street Ladies's College. On the death of his father in 1923, W.B. took over his father's choir with performances of *Messiah*, *Judas Macabbaeus*, Coleridge Taylor's *Hiawatha*, Verdi's *Requiem* and Franck's *Beatitudes* and many other works including masses set in Latin. He also conducted the Edinburgh Catholic Choir for ten years which included performances in the Usher hall. The Second World War took a toll on choir membership and in 1948 he had to abandon his choir. In 1945 he was awarded a doctorate in music from Edinburgh, and, from 1948, taught music at Dean College and this was probably singing as it was a training school for nurses.

He met and was known by many other musicians including Francis George Scott, Ian Whyte and Erik Chisholm, who was a very generous, large-hearted and modest man. It was he who was the driving force behind the production of Moonie's opera *the Weird of Colbar* in 1937. It was a labour of love for W B taking about ten years to compose. Chisholm said to Moonie on one occasion, "If you want to make your name, don't attempt it in Scotland. Work abroad first, then you'll be accepted as a success." In 1930 a radio station in Toronto broadcast his *Deeside Suite* although it was originally called a symphony.

As well as a musician, William Moonie was a voracious reader with a tremendous memory and had never considered anything but a musical career. When he was only seven he has composed a *Denner March* to accompany the family coming to the dinner table.

He married Janet Glegg in 1924 who was born in 1896. She was a very beautiful woman and an artist of great talent who exhibited her watercolours frequently at the Royal Scottish Academy. They had two children Alan Graham born 23 May 1925, who died in August 2008, and Annot Lyle, born 20 June 1929, who married William Lighthart, who was also a music teacher and an organist in Hawick. He died in 1969.

Moonie did not have any political or religious views. He was not a smoker and only a moderate drinker. He was not a sporty type, although he enjoyed golf and hill walking. He loved the music of Chopin and the works of Anton Bruckner for their spiritual grandeur.

As we have seen, throughout his life, W.B. was a teacher of singing and piano, both privately and in schools, an organist and choirmaster. He was the organist at the Grange Parish Church, now known as Marchmont St Giles. He was always in demand as a after-dinner speaker particularly on Burns' night.

He was also appointed as a music examiner for the London College in 1945 which took him south of the border to many English locations.

Moonie's ancestors came from County Cork in Ireland and his grandfather was known as the Bandmaster of County Cork. William had an Irish sense of humour and he would cause people to double up with laughter at his incredible wit. He was very popular among people but he did envy the success of other composers like Cedric Thorpe Davie when all his efforts to promote his own work were not very successful and his strong letters did not help. Incidentally, in Ireland the surname would have been spelt Mooney but the Scots way is Moonie.

He composed a lot of music and his Perthshire Echoes is possibly his most well-known and admired piece. There are versions of this suite for piano, wind septet and for orchestra.

His orchestral overture Lord Of the Isles shows an excellent command of the orchestra and is a very attractive piece on the same level as Hamish MacCunn's Land of the Mountain and the Flood of 1897.

He made many arrangements of Scottish songs with excellent harmonies and wrote some exquisite original songs including a setting of Pittendriech MacGillivray's O Come with Me published by Bruce, Clements & Co in Edinburgh in 1923, and Songs of the Caravan to words by W.F. Paul published in 1927. In 1928 he set the Highland Rallying Song, Pibroch of Donuil Dhu, to words by Sir Walter Scott for voice and orchestra. The piano reduction of the orchestral part calls for a fine pianist.

There is no doubt that he was admired and loved in Scotland for his fine musicianship. He could have taken Chisholm's advice and gone abroad and made his name, but he was true to Scotland and served his country as well as anyone could.

He was adverse to contemporary music and commented that there was no music in rock'n'roll and that music must have melody, such as is found in Tchaikovsky, Brahms and Rimsky Korsakov. Of English composers of his day, W.B. preferred Delius.

He had his first stroke in 1959 which resulted in losing the use of his left arm and hand.

He died on 8 December 1961, and his widow died in February 1977.

Charles O'Brien's obituary referred to W.B. excelling as a composer of originality and imagination.

List of works

Piano

Reverie (1910)

Coquette (1921)

Arabesque (1923)

Perthshire Echoes (1924)

An Iorram (Rowing song) arrangement

Highland Sketch book: Country of Caberfeidh and The Land of the Stag

Dances of the Ghillies (also for piano duet)

Elegy
Pavane
The Fiery Cross
Five Romantic Sketches from a Scottish Chap-book
The Goblin' Ha from a Scottish Chap-book 2
Improvisation no 1 on Fhear a Bhata
In a quiet strath
The kind gallows of Crieth from Scottish Chap-book
Song of Speyside, 10 picturesque Scottish pieces
Suite no. 2
Two tone pictures: Twilight on the water and Fireside Story
Variations on La Belle Française
Humoreske
Two pianos
Fantasy March on a melody by General Reid
Leery-light-the lamps
Overture Innisgal arrangement
Scottish-fantasia
Tarantella
Ballet from Pan, An Idyll
Organ
Sonata no 2 in D minor
Six voluntaries
Chorale and Allegro
Piano trio
Air from Stratherick (1928)
Piano Trio in D
Piano quintet
Piano Quintet no. 1 (missing)
Piano Quintet no. 2
Reverie
Violin and piano
Highland Suite no. 1 (1921)
Burns Suite no. 1
Capriccietto
Song of the Gloaming, also for cello and piano and piano trio
Suite of three Highland melodies
Danse de rhapsodie
Moto perpetuo
Scottish Dances
Cello and piano
Rhapsody (Concertstuck)
Scherzo
Mixed choir
Balo, my boy
Braes of Balquidder
Busk ye, busk ye
Silent, oh Moyle
Stewart's College Song (1924)
There was ald was born in Kyle
Ye banks and braes
Cadil gu lo
Te Deum with organ

Song of Rowland (missing)
O come to me the auld Scotch sangs
Woodland Scene
Lezzie
Serenade
Lords of the Main for four voices and piano

Two voices
Bonnie Banks of Loch Lomond

Male voices
A wet sheet and a flowing sea

Solo voice
O come with me (1923)
A shepherd's love (1926)
Bonnie Lesley (1927)
The Gypsy Man (1927)
The Gypsy Girl (1927)
Pibroch of Donuil Dhu (1928)
Scottish Song sets 1 and 2 (1928–1930)
Eilean a'Cheo
Proud Maisie
Reverie, also arranged for piano and for piano quintet
Sing, O my heart
The Woodlands
At Dawn of May
All else above
Song of the west wind
The Rose Tree
Chansonette
Glide gentle streams
Six love lyrics
Nora's vow
The Pool of Columelle
Edward, Edward
Jack O'Hazeldean
When the kye comes home

Chorus and orchestra
Caledonia, a patriotic ode (1910)
Glenara
The ship, a choral epilogue (1931)
Two short ballads (1933)
Masque: William Dunbar

Opera
Campbell of Kilmohr
The Weird of Colbar
Lucy Ashton (unfinished)

Voice and orchestra
Allen-a Dale, version also with piano accompaniment
King James's serenade voice with string orchestra

Orchestra
Alcestis, incidental music
Innigael incidental music (probably missing)
Land of Heather suite
Prelude and Fugue for string orchestra

Film score The man behind the 45
Piano Concerto
Variations on a Scottish Melody Op 4 for string orchestra
Cromer Suite
Overture: Lord of the Isles
Deeside Suite (formerly Symphony)
O gin my love for string orchestra
Riders of the Sea
1745, A Concert Overture
Symphony in A flat
Springtime on Tweed
Burns Suite (probably lost)
Four Highland Airs
Highland Division, grand march
Perthshire Echoes
Wind septet
Perthshire Echoes
Folk songs
48 Scottish folk song arrangements

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