

# She Moved Through the Fair

*tone poem for string orchestra based on a traditional Irish folk song*

by **Douglas Mears**

## Instrumentation

Violin 1, 2, 3, 4  
Viola I, II  
Cello I, II  
Contrabass

## Notes

The lyrics of the traditional Irish folk song “She Moved Through the Fair” can be traced to an ancient ballad from Donegal titled “Once I had a true love.” The melody dates back to the Middle Ages. Over the centuries, there have been numerous variations of this beloved folk song, including the addition of new verses and the rewriting of old ones. The version most widely known today was written in 1909 by the Irish author Padraic Colum (1881-1972) and published that same year in Herbert Hughes’ collection “Irish Country Songs.”

With its poignant melody, “She Moved Through the Fair” tells the heartbreaking love story of a young man and the beautiful woman he hopes to marry. The first verse opens with the young maiden assuring her suitor that her parents won’t slight him or mind his lack of wealth. She then departs, reminding him that it will not be long until their wedding day. The young man is transfixed as he watches her move through the fair. She has beauty, grace, and elegance, gliding along as the “swans in the evening move over the lake.” The wedding theme continues in the third verse, though it takes a tragic turn. The townspeople reveal, “No two were e’er wed. But one had a sorrow that never was said.” In a flashback, the young man smiles as he watches his beloved pass, unaware that he will never see her again. We are not told what happened to her, though one night the young man dreams that she returns. Coming close to him, she repeats her vow: “It will not be long, love, till our wedding day.”

Some adaptations of this continuously evolving folk song suggest that the young woman died and that her spirit visits her beloved, promising their reunion in the afterlife. However, with the many different versions that exist, and without additional verses that could complete the story, the song’s full meaning remains cryptic. Perhaps this mystery is the key to the song’s enduring popularity—along with its hauntingly, beautiful melody.

My love said to me,  
“My mother won’t mind,  
And my father won’t slight you  
For your lack of kind.”  
Then she stepped away from me,  
And this she did say,  
“It will not be long, love,  
Till our wedding day.”

She stepped away from me  
And she moved through the fair,  
And fondly I watched her  
Move here and move there.  
She went her way homeward  
With one star awake,  
As the swans in the evening  
Move over the lake.

The people were saying  
No two were e’er wed.  
But one had a sorrow  
That never was said.  
And I smiled as she passed  
With her goods and her gear.  
And that was the last  
That I saw of my dear.

I dreamt it last night  
That my true love came in.  
So softly she entered  
Her feet made no din.  
She came close beside me  
And this she did say,  
“It will not be long, love,  
Till our wedding day.”