THE SYMPHONIES OF ARNOLD BAX

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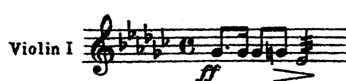
The literary "Dermot O'Byrne" was evoked by Arnold Bax to convey necessary aspects of his personality that found better expression in letters than in music. O'Byrne represents one side of an apparent duality in Bax' nature, that Irish-sympathetic second self, forcibly brought into existence by the artistic conditions prevailing on his first visit to that country into which he had been spiritually baptized by Yeats. He had gone first to Ireland as a youth of nineteen, in a state of considerable spiritual excitement, and it is scarcely to be wondered at that the exaggerated romantic realism of Irish cultural and political affairs exercised a strong influence on him. It is significant that the districts to which he ultimately gravitated were those on the fretted seaboard of Kerry and of Donegal—to places like Glencolumcille. An avowedly "brazen romantic", Bax reacted sharply to the more extreme moods of Nature, and the blend of pantheistic Nature worship and mysticism in his temperament, the outcome of factors too numerous to detail here, gave him a deep insight into the forbidding beauty of the wilder moods of Nature.

We do well to realise that the epithet "Celtic", applied as it so often is, indiscriminately, to Bax' work is, to say the least, misleading. In 1910, Bax undertook a journey to Russia which was to prove of vital importance. That he went first to Ireland and carved for himself, solely by his literary ability, a place amongst the intelligentsia of Dublin, was a significant factor in his development—but no more so than the exciting, if outwardly fruitless, chase to Russia in pursuit of beauty in more human form (see Farewell my Youth, page 63, et seq.). In his early music, two strong influencing elements are apparent—the poetry of Yeats, and the dark spirit of the North, in the personage of Russia. It may be that there is some kinship between the two, for the colourful traditions of the Slav peasantry are not far removed from the decorative Western-Orientalism of the Celtic peoples.

His early music records these two influences vividly. In the tone poems, Christmas Eve in the Mountains, Cathleen ni Houlihan and In the Faery Hills, it is the shadow of Yeats which is uppermost. Yet, in two of his most important early works, the blazing piano Quintet, with its curiously oriental opening figure, and the massive first piano Sonata (in the finale of which, written ten years later, the composer records a colourful impression of his first visit to St. Petersburg during the Easter Festival, "Bells thundered and jangled from every church, with its crosses and cupolas awry"), we are conscious of something that transcends this, of something deeper, more significant, and in view of his later work, more lasting. With The Garden of Fand in 1916 Bax finally came to terms with the Celt in him and gave it its full expression, acknowledging in the score that the music was not a portrayal of the legend upon which it is based, but an original and subtle synthesis of the Celtic tale and the impressions that this story evoked within himself.

Embarking almost by chance upon his career as a symphonist in 1921[1] he proceeded to record, with the utmost clarity, the fruits of the impressions made by the Russian visit of 1910, and the true significance of his sojourning in Western Eire. It was this influence, underlined by subsequent visits to Norway, Iceland, and Finland—the dark sombre power of the North, elemental, barbaric, and full of strong contrasts—that flowered in full and riotous bloom in the seven symphonies. These thousand-odd pages constitute a great chart of Bax' spiritual wanderings, and express almost every facet of his character, including the Celtic, which however is subordinated to a stronger force that at once raises its head in the powerful opening of the first Symphony:



This finds its ultimate fulfilment in the fifth Symphony, in some of the most expressive pages ever penned in British music:

The neglect of the symphonic works 'has temporarily deprived Bax of his true position in music, and has prevented an accurate assessment being made of his ultimate creative worth. Here in the symphonies is the reason for the mystical and demonic music of the second Sonata for piano; here is the motive power underlying Winter Legends, a composition strongly related to the last three symphonies and equally symphonic in conception.

It is significant that it took three essays in symphonic form to resolve in part the emotional conflict evident in the first, perhaps excusing in some measure the blatantly ignorant comment that "when you have heard one you have heard them all". The terrifying urgency of the First broke new ground in 1922 (although Sibelius had written five by that date), yet the conflict was personal. The bleak fury of the final march leaves problems unsolved[2]. The Second withdrawn and introspective[3] carries the battle into darker regions from which it emerges, after some stormy crises, in the epilogue of the Third, with a poignant triumph that seems to suggest that the beauty of which he is in quest is not altogether attainable. The metaphor of storm is not ill-advised and in the brooding peace of this epilogue there is a calm that is not born of the resolution of these stresses. It carries the violent outbursts of the first two symphonies to its final climax, and the lurid sunset after storm achieved in the Epilogue is the night before the grey and gusty freshness of the following morning's opening of the Fourth. But there is tension still unresolved, and the massive quiet of the final pages is not calculated to ease the spell.

The great points of the Third, its remote beauty, its pioneer sense of orchestral colour, driving ostinato passages, its dark saga-like ancestry, its unassailable architectural correctness (in spite of ill-considered criticism), its epilogic consummation not only summing up the material, but also putting into proper perspective the deep portent of the preceding eight movements— all these are developed in the last three works. Continuity between Third and Fifth is more in evidence in the Winter Legends score than in the extrovert fourth Symphony. But in the Fifth we come face to face with a mind of unexceptionable power that has, to our national shame, lingered long unrecognized about the confines of our musical establishment. Here is the fragrant flower of 1910. It was not only the dedication of the Fifth that drew words of praise from Sibelius, nor the fragmentary Sibelian character of the material. Nor was it only the obvious spiritual kinship Bax had found with the Finnish Titan in the happy hunting grounds of the Kalevala. The Fifth is a work of immense personal achievement and displays a complete freedom from insular thought, while remaining wholly and understandably a work by a British composer. The expressive music alternates between a profound and melancholy contemplation and a blazing triumph. This former mood, asserting its supremacy in the epilogue is not retrospective. The ultimate peak has not been reached. The whole of the symphonic output to that date looks forward to the finale of the Sixth, pages which mark off, irrevocably, the seventh Symphony as distinct and separate.

In many ways the Sixth has been the most misunderstood of all Bax' symphonies. It has been described as the ascendancy of the musician over the poet; but, although the work displays a tighter structure and a more rigid economy in the development of the material, the depth of feeling is intense.

The days before the composer took up residence at Storrington in Sussex were in a sense the final peak of his musical achievement, and the outbreak of war in 1939, and the move to Storrington shortly thereafter, marked a dividing line his work and indeed in his life. It is as if the artist ceased his public message, realising with a prophetic eye the consequences for him of the out break of conflict, and that communication between himself and the public was to be irreparably destroyed. The music composed subsequently to the seventh Symphony resembles the private jottings of an artist intent on self communication. The extreme reticence and intimate discourse of the Concertante for piano (left hand), and the Concertante for three solo instruments are couched in different language from the symphonies, and bear little relation to the undercurrent of contemporary public affairs. The composer had virtually retired ("like a grocer", as he expressed it) into a private world untroubled by the approaching Nemesis.

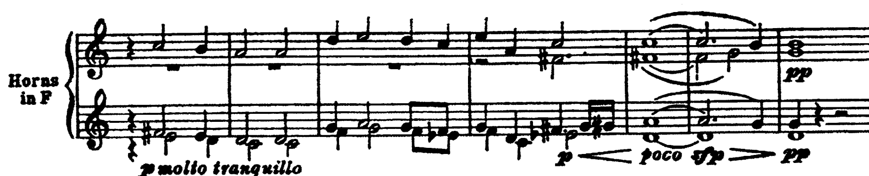
The Sixth, written as early as 1934, approaches the apex of his symphonic career, the peak from which the composer looked back over his entire output—and from the closing bars of the epilogue, I might conjecture over the entire period of musical activity in Britain, of the generation to which he belonged.

The Symphony opens with a cold severity that asks much of the listener. The urgency of the pounding ostinato carries all before it throughout the entire first movement. The principal motif appears at once in woodwind and horns, bleak and remote. Hammerlike figures drive the music to a deliberate and intense climax which, after a pause, introduces the principal subject and ostinato figure in diminution. Ceaseless variation in place of development leads to the dark-hued entry of the second subject whose semi-lyrical character does little to dispel the severity of the movement. The second movement is in strong contrast. Here the prevailing note is one of poignant nostalgia. An intensely romantic falling figure:

Whose triadic summons and Grieg-like harmonies beckon the second subject, forms a coda to the initial figure of the movement. A forlorn trumpet states the second motif, seized upon in less gloomy vein by oboe as it is expanded to frame the variants of the first subject which follow. A curious slow-march pattern like the beat of never ending time underlies a resigned and surrendered first subject as the music fades.

The curious triptychal pattern of the last movement is less important in performance than on paper. The whole movement stems from the first two patterns to emerge, the second gaining a full and imposing ascendancy as the work progresses. Into the resumption of the hectic and strenuous scherzo material Bax weaves the strands of a colossal triumph. The ascendancy of the second figure of the introduction is underlined with tremendous force in a brilliantly orchestrated passage. This is the culminating point of all Bax' symphonic reasoning.

The transition from this peak to the shadow and sunset of the Epilogue, a majestic mirror of the process already undergone in the similar patterns of the Third, is something unparalleled in English music—indeed in anything before Schoenberg and the advent of a new musical language. A falling figure of unbearable sweetness in trumpets sets the stage for the final statement of the last movement's opening clarinet theme, now wreathed in mysterious light, and as the tremendous sunset fades, the horns with unutterable poignancy voice their final plea:



The seventh Symphony, completed at Morar in January, 1939, is in no way retrospective or elegiac and is totally unlike its predecessors in content. There is a tense expectancy about the first movement which bursts forth in passages of vigorous, almost youthful exuberance, the vigour of which is unimpaired by the more lyrical material of the second subject and the sombre beauty of the second movement, whose "Legendary Mood" is far removed from the Celticism of his early days. An introductory Allegro, which states the material from which the following pages are derived, precedes the final Theme and Variations. For the theme itself we are totally unprepared by Bax' previous work, and its gracious solemn lines take on something of a significance:

The theme and the introductory material are closely interwoven and after a sprightly Vivace the

Symphony moves into the final epilogue. Unlike previous epilogic material this contains no hint of that characteristic wistful reverie, but is full of serenity and a calm acceptance, sounding a note of final achievement, with the theme in its epilogic form, an ostinato-like figure on solo clarinet. All is peace—a peace that takes the composer beyond this world into the regions to which music of all the arts is the easiest door of access.

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1 The first movement of the first Symphony was not conceived as symphony, but its symphonic character was recognized and urged upon him by his lifelong champion and exponent Harriet Cohen.

2 Nevi1le Cardus of the first Manchester performance writes that it seemed not so much composed, as "erected out of some amorphous basic material".

3 "Catastrophic and oppressive" were the composer's own words.

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NOTE by David C F Wright
Colin Scott-Sutherland and Richard Noble are the experts on Bax. When I was interviewing Aloys Fleischmann (1910-1992) who lived in County Cork he spoke of Bax's visits to their home and told me great details. Bax was a great friend of Fleischmann senior (1880-1964). Aloys and Noble both wrote me pages of A4 listing mistakes in a book about Bax which necessitated Colin and Richard writing articles to correct mistakes in this Bax biography.