

ARNOLD BAX

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IF, as so many critics maintain, classification is of the devil then Arnold Bax is to be congratulated upon his escape. Of all contemporary British composers he is the most difficult correctly to classify. He corresponds to none of the labels which pass as current coin today. He is neither an impressionist, nor an expressionist, neither a revolutionary, nor that still more subversive apparition, a neo-classicist. Atonality, polytonality and linear counterpoint may all be met with in his later works and doubtless quarter-tones would be there also if he felt that he needed them, but none of these technical seasonings mean anything in his still comparatively young life beyond their use as seasoning the fare he has to offer us. Some say he is not a modernist—whatever that may mean—but he certainly is no conservative, nor is he a traditionalist except in the praiseworthy sense in which every heir to the *materia musica* of his predecessors and in fact every artist is under obligation to the material in which he works. Those critics who must classify at all costs have discovered that there is only one label that fits him: romantic; and that fits him because, in one way or another, it fits every artist with the love of beauty in his soul. That the term should in our day have acquired frumpish associations is a mere verbal accident that reflects not upon romance but upon ourselves. As everyone knows, none can be so ascetic as the reformed libertine. Having wallowed in the *mauvais lieux* of romance, music is at present affecting a kind of virtuous abstemiousness. It is as if the obese gentleman whose excesses have driven him to “take the waters” prided himself upon his Spartan way of life. Moreover it is rarely genuine. Catch even those German Savonarolas unawares, and you will find them in ecstasy before a clump of *myosotis palustris* though they may indignantly protest that it is

only its line and color that interest them. The Schoenberg of the *Wind Quartet* is also the Schoenberg of *Verklaerte Nacht*.

But there is one quality which Bax possesses in abundance, and which in our world of atonality and jazz is so rare that its possession in itself is romantic. And it is this quality which has caused the label to stick. It is the musical equivalent of the lyrical impulse in poetry, the attribute which causes utterance to take spontaneously beautiful forms, irrespective of all else. In the true lyric poet the sentiment and the expression are so closely linked as to be practically identical. He does not express in the ordinary sense. He feels, and therefore he sings. And if he is of the elect his song will have all its euphony without the intervention of the craftsman, whose task has as much to do with this initial beauty as the frame-maker's with the picture. Bax has, in a rare measure, this innate quality. His thoughts may be unequal, but even in the most debatable of them there lurks always this element of lyrical beauty, to the rich vein of which is due the fluency and abundance which has at times been ascribed to technical facility. While so many modern musicians are racking themselves with constructive energy, this one oozes music through his pores because there is so much of it within him that he can scarcely contain it.

The greater part of his output proceeds from this lyrical impulse. He has had his epic moments, but even then the bard, rather than the hero, becomes the central figure. He has also had moments of mere assertive vigor, which are less admirable, for they seem to belie his true nature. He appears then to be saying "Well, if they want this cave-man stuff, they can have it." But these are rare, and probably due to a certain, perhaps subconscious, reaction against his wide acceptance as a tone-poet whose manner is elusive and wistful, and whose poetic fantasy dwells habitually upon themes of the most dream-like delicacy. There have also been moments of disillusion, perhaps even of bitterness, which may have troubled the limpidity of the stream, but always it has flowed on with generous abundance.

Bax's relations with the "Celtic fringe" have been described so often that it seems unnecessary to dwell upon them. They have affected his music in three distinct ways: Irish legends

have stirred his imagination, the Irish landscape has left its impress upon his moods, and Irish song has helped to shape his melody. The three influences are not always associated, even in music the incentive to which is rooted in Ireland. Sometimes one is paramount, sometimes another, and in many compositions none of them is prominent. But there can be no doubt that all three have contributed to the fashioning of the characteristic style by which we know Bax's music.

Nor is it necessary to dwell upon his technical methods. Form he interprets not necessarily as geometrical symmetry, but as shape, and his works are always shapely. Their dimensions are governed by the fecundity of their material. If it is fertile he is reluctant to stem its flow. If it is itself concise and self-contained he is equally reluctant to expand it. Thus the *Pianoforte Quintet* is lengthy, and yet hardly contains the full deployment of all that flows from its material, and the *Pianoforte Quartet* is short because the dramatic mood it expresses is impulsive, not to say explosive. Bax has never consciously "developed" a work to meet the frame.

His texture was at first over-elaborate. That stage has long since been left behind. Its warp and woof have not changed as much as might be expected after a quarter of a century of active composition, but the pattern now stands out with a clarity that was lacking in some of the earlier works. Generally speaking its structure is diatonic, the chromaticism being almost entirely external decoration to which Bax is the more addicted that he has evolved a decorative style peculiarly suited to his purpose. Its basis is harmonic variation, and its vehicle a constant change of figuration. Even to the eye the effect is so characteristic that almost any page of Bax's music can be recognized apart from its context. He has invented a kind of arabesque that is as the flourish of a man's signature.



Bax is now in his forty-fourth year, and although some of his works remain in manuscript, his published compositions form a

lengthy list. This includes several orchestral scores, of which the *E♭ Symphony* is the most important, though scarcely the one that corresponds with the foregoing remarks, for it differs markedly from his more familiar works such as *The Garden of Fand* or *Tintagel*. These have more than a fair chance of winning popularity with an audience of average keenness, which might easily feel disconcerted, if not actually repelled, by the sombre fierceness of the symphony. For all that, the symphony remains his greatest orchestral work; prospective popularity is no criterion of musical values. With it should be ranked the nature-poem, *November Woods*, another work that does not woo the listener's ear but has qualities which lie much deeper than the winsome charm of *The Garden of Fand*. *Tintagel* has never been a favorite of mine. Somehow it has always struck me as being less personal than any of the other works named. *In the Faery Hills* is an earlier composition, dating from 1909, with a very attractive subject taken from W. B. Yeats' *Wanderings of Oisín*. It is a fairy revel, visited by a bard who sings to the fairies a *Song of Human Joy* which they pronounce to be the saddest thing in the world. We all know that human jollity can be the dullest, but we are apt to express our feelings less poetically. One can imagine how the theme appealed to Bax, and it has brought out his most characteristic qualities.

Naturally it is in the orchestral part of his output that most remains unpublished. Of his chamber music practically everything is available. An early *Trio* for violin, viola and piano may safely be ignored as unrepresentative, and of an early *String Quintet* only a *Lyrical Interlude* has been retained. The *First Violin Sonata* forms a link with this early period, for it originated as far back as 1910. Both this and the *Second Violin Sonata*, which dates from the first year of the war, underwent about 1920 a revision so complete that whole movements of the original versions disappeared in the process. The *Pianoforte Quintet* of 1915 may be said to sum up an entire chapter of Bax's chamber music. It stands high, both as an achievement and as a record, and although the composer's style has ripened further, and now shows a firmer discipline, it still remains one of his most important works.

The recent period opens with the first *String Quartet*, an engaging work of less weighty purport, with a lyrical vein of Celtic tinge that makes for melodiousness. Except in one or two instances the phase it opens is characterized by conciseness in form and transparency in texture, of which it is an admirable example. In the final *Rondo* occurs a theme which has often been mistaken for an Irish folksong. The following year (1919) produced a *Quintet* in one movement for harp and strings. After an interval occupied with other works, one of which was a *Fantasy* for viola and orchestra, the series of chamber works is resumed in 1922 with a *Sonata* for viola and piano, the most remarkable of his four sonatas for stringed instruments with piano. To the same year belongs the short and vigorous *Pianoforte Quartet*. It may have some psychological import that in both works there occurs the indication *féroce*. Next follows the *Cello Sonata*, a work of entirely different character, revealing much beauty of a sensuous kind that was absent from the preceding works, but not so well controlled as to length and discursiveness. That same year produced another chamber work which has qualities similar to those of the *String Quartet*, and shares the same attractiveness. It is a *Quintet* for oboe and strings. Since then the second *String Quartet* has had a public performance, some time after its completion in 1925.

His piano music, consisting of two sonatas, each in one movement, and about two dozen pieces, is now comparatively well-known. It may be a personal idiosyncrasy, but I have always felt that there was more of the true Bax in the smaller pieces, and particularly in those of the lyrical (nocturne-with-arabesques) type, with which might be included one of a different, but still song-like character, the ballad of *What the Minstrel Told Us*. Bax is also one of the finest and most sensitive song-writers setting the English language. In earlier days he was sometimes guilty of overloading his accompaniments but nothing could be more exquisitely finished than the two recent sets of *Irish Songs*.

Finally Bax suddenly blossomed forth, quite unexpectedly, in 1920 as a writer of choral music. Not since very early days had he been attracted to this medium, but when he returned to it he produced a masterpiece, the carol, *Mater Ora Filium*, for unac-

accompanied double choir, a work presenting some difficulty in performance—an Englishman may be forgiven for saying that it requires the indigenous choral efficiency,—but never failing to make a deep impression. This was followed by some other choral compositions of equal merit but less complexity.

At present Bax seems to have reached a kind of halt. The second *String Quartet* is his only recent sign of life, though one hears vaguely of the existence of another *Symphony*. It is not the first time that he has thus withdrawn himself to reflect upon those problems of direction which beset an artistic conscience perhaps more urgently in maturity than at any earlier parting of the ways. And he is not a man who makes decisions lightly.

AUTHOR'S NOTE:—I have confined myself here largely to published works, but there is one outside this category which I must mention—the *Symphonic Variations for Piano and Orchestra*. Composed in 1916, they were played first in 1921, and several times since, by Miss Harriet Cohen for whom the rights of performance are at present reserved. This series of tone poems I regard as one of Bax's finest works. Whether or not it was his intention to be autobiographical, they give the fullest revelation of the composer, and have an inner significance of deep interest.