

The Life and Works of

Arnold Bax

(1883-1953)

by Graham Parlett

The purpose of this monograph is to provide an introduction to the life and work of a composer whose music is currently enjoying a considerable revival of interest. It presupposes no technical knowledge of music on the part of the reader and is intended for the enthusiastic music-lover who may have acquired some of the recent recordings of Bax's works and is keen to learn more about the composer. The main section is a general account of Bax's life and music, and this is followed by descriptive commentaries on seven of his works, one from each of the main genres to which he contributed, most of which are currently available in good recordings. The catalogue of works, which follows, is the most comprehensive yet published.

Arnold Bax's reputation has fluctuated over the years between the extremes of adulation and contempt. In his student days he was known principally for his astonishing gifts as a pianist, but by the outbreak of the First World War he had produced a substantial amount of music and had established himself as one of the most gifted composers of his generation. In 1922 his principal publisher organized a concert devoted entirely to his music which won widespread acclaim, and a similar reaction greeted the first performance soon afterwards of his *Symphony in E♭*, the first of the seven symphonies which form the backbone of his prolific output. Bax's reputation was certainly at its peak during the inter-war years, and with the deaths of Elgar, Holst and Delius in 1934 he and Vaughan Williams were undoubtedly regarded as the two most eminent living British composers; indeed, after a performance of his Third Symphony in Wiesbaden, a German music critic acclaimed Bax as 'the head of the modern English school', although most musical people in England itself would probably have agreed with Sir Adrian Boult in awarding the palm to Vaughan Williams. Official recognition of his work came in 1937 with the conferment of a knighthood, and in 1942 he was appointed Master of the King's Music. Sir Henry Wood referred to Bax as 'a really great composer'; Sibelius called him 'one of the great men of our time' and (according to Harriet Cohen) 'my son in music'; and the conductor and composer Julius Harrison even went so far as to publish the startling opinion that Bax was 'possibly one of the most original composers the world has ever seen'.

By the mid-1940s, however, with the rise to maturity of younger men such as Walton and Britten, the outbreak of a new generation of hostile music critics, and the decline of his own creative powers, Bax's reputation had slumped, and at the time of his death he was looked upon in some quarters as an old fogey whose significance had been grossly inflated by the reactionary views of his contemporaries, by whom the outstanding achievements of more radical composers, such as Bartok, Schoenberg and Stravinsky, were regarded with suspicion or bafflement: 'Bax's music', pronounced one critic, 'is not worth the paper it's written on'. Could this be the same composer admired by Sibelius and eulogized by Julius Harrison? Or was Bax's entire working life really spent in the creation of waste paper?

Today, when the 'brazen romanticism' which Bax professed is no longer as unfashionable as it was during his last years, there are still many people influential in British musical life for whom his work (and that of most other early twentieth-century British composers) is an anathema. The reason for this hostile attitude is not clear: perhaps it is merely disdain for a group of composers who tended to write in conservative styles and a lingering suspicion that they had somehow delayed appreciation of the important developments which had been taking place in Europe (and in this connection it is curious to reflect on the fact that Bax and his complete musical opposite, Anton Webern, were born within a few weeks of each other). Nevertheless, most unprejudiced music-lovers would probably agree with Charles Ives's dictum that there is no contradiction in professing equal admiration for musical opposites and that different kinds of music can peacefully coexist. But even among Bax's many admirers there are considerable differences of opinion as to his true worth. Some maintain that he wrote a handful of masterpieces which should be kept in the permanent repertoire and a good many inferior works which should be silently buried; others feel that even the minor scores contain much that is of real value and welcome the growing availability of recordings. Some hold that Bax's best music is to be found among his chamber works; others consider his mastery of the orchestra to be his strongest suit. Whatever one's feelings on the matter, the mere fact that a composer can provoke such extreme differences of opinion suggests that his music must have at least a vital spark of individuality, and the growing number of Bax's admirers suggests that his distinctive brand of vigorous and unsentimental romanticism will continue to maintain its place in the world's music.

Nobody writing about Bax can fail to be indebted to the most prolific of Baxographers, Lewis Foreman, and in particular to his *Arnold Bax: A Composer and his Times* (Scolar Press, 1983; second edition 1988), to which the reader is referred for further information. I am also grateful to Colin Scott-Sutherland, Bax's first biographer, for details of some unpublished manuscripts, and to John Cresswell of

the Streatham Society for permission to mention his newly discovered facts about the composer's birthplace. Mention should also be made here of Bax's autobiographical volume, *Farewell, My Youth* (Longmans, Green and Co., 1943), from which passages are liberally quoted in the following pages. At the time of writing, a new, illustrated edition of this delightful book is in the course of preparation. I shall be very please to hear from anyone who can offer amendments or additions to the catalogue of works.

Graham Parlett

BIOGRAPHICAL SURVEY (1883-1953)

Origins

The Bax family is of Flemish origin. The earliest records of their presence in England can be traced back to the sixteenth century, when they were among the earliest adherents to Quakerism, and by the middle of the seventeenth century they had become wealthy land-owners in the Capel and Ockley district of Surrey. By the middle of the nineteenth century this prosperity had increased when the composer's grandfather, Daniel, and his brother Edward started dealing in mackintosh waterproofs and later opened a factory with showrooms in Orchard Street and several shops in Oxford Street.

Arnold Edward Trevor Bax was born at 8.30 a.m. on Thursday 8th November 1883 at Heath Villas, Angles Road, Streatham, which was then still part of Surrey. He was the eldest child of Alfred Ridley Bax (1844-1918), a wealthy, non-practising barrister with antiquarian and genealogical interests, and Charlotte Ellen Lea (1860-1940), the daughter of a Congregationalist minister. Three other children were born over the next four years: Aubrey Vernon (1884-1895), Clifford Lea (1886-1962), who was to become a distinguished poet, playwright, biographer and essayist, and Evelyn Mabelle Ellen (1887-1984).

The Bax family lived at several addresses in South London before moving in 1896 to the north London suburb of Hampstead, where they occupied an enormous house called Ivy Bank, which boasted three lawns and an orchard. Here Arnold spent some of the happiest days of his youth. The children were tutored privately, and during their leisure hours he and Clifford, together with the gardeners, indulged in endless games of cricket, of which both brothers were life-long devotees. And it was while recovering from sunstroke brought on by over-exposure at the wicket that Arnold completed his very first composition, 'a sonata of course, no less!', although according to his sister's later account he had previously written a song called *Butterflies all white*. There was certainly no long-standing musical tradition in the Bax family. Arnold's interest was probably stimulated by his uncle, the Socialist

writer Ernest Belfort Bax, who had studied music at the Leipzig Conservatory, and by his father, an avid concert-goer whose affluence enabled him to own a private choral society. Alfred Bax must have actively encouraged his son from an early age since the composer later claimed that he was unable to recall ‘the long-lost day when I was unable to play the piano -inaccurately. It seems that I could always read printed music at the piano-stool with the same unthinking ease with which a man reads a book’.

This unusual facility at the keyboard, further improved by assiduous playing of Beethoven symphonies in piano reduction, resulted in his becoming the accompanist of his father’s choral society at the age of twelve. It also meant that he had been exposed to a variety of musical styles from an early age, and this was further encouraged by the fact that his father had retained every analytical programme from the beginning of his concert-going activities: ‘I used to spend hours over these volumes’, recalled Bax, ‘amusing myself by improvising absurd symphonies and overtures from the musical excerpts’. From this it may be inferred that Bax’s knowledge of the standard repertoire was extensive, though it is curious to discover that at the very end of his life he claimed that he had never once heard an actual performance of Handel’s *Messiah* and was entirely ignorant of Mendelssohn’s *Elijah*.

Formal piano lessons must presumably have been inflicted upon Bax from early childhood, but the first mention of tuition in his autobiography dates from 1896, when he took piano and violin lessons from an Italian ex-bandmaster named Signor Masi. (The violin lessons were evidently of no lasting value since in a letter dating from about 1952 Bax commented that he could no more conduct an orchestra than play a stringed instrument.) Hitherto his knowledge of the concert hall had been confined to occasional visits to the Crystal Palace Concerts and his acquaintance with chamber music was based on even rarer excursions to the ‘Saturday Pops’ at St. James’s Hall. In contrast, the artistic atmosphere of *fin de siècle* Hampstead was considerably more conducive to the stimulation of his musical inclinations. The ease with which he continued to pour forth piano music prompted his father to take professional advice, and so a consultation with the distinguished organist and composer Sir Frederick Bridge was arranged: ‘It was rather like an interview with a Harley Street specialist’, recalled Bax. “Do you assure me, Sir Frederick, that my son has really this musical taint in his system?” “I fear that I cannot hide from you, sir, that such is indeed the case. That will be three guineas, thank you, and mind the step.”. Alfred Bax was delighted to learn from Bridge that, in his opinion, his son’s compositions were superior to his own at the same age, and the upshot was that in the autumn of 1898 the fourteen-year old composer entered the Hampstead Conservatoire.

Early works

Bax's earliest surviving works are to be found in two exercise books, one in the Bax Memorial Room at Cork, the other – entitled *Clavierstücke* in the British Library. The Cork volume contains a number of piano pieces, including a *Sonata, op.1*, as well as Bax's first attempt at an orchestral work: the piano score of a *Symphonische Dichtung* based on the *Rubáiyát* of Omar Khayyám. The titles of the *Clavierstücke* volume – minuet, scherzi, mazurkas, nocturne, Hungarian Dances, and so forth – all bear witness to the strong classical foundation on which his music was based and naturally reflect the range of his sight-reading activities with their reminiscences of Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven, Schubert, Chopin and Liszt. The most mature of the pieces is undoubtedly the *Nocturne in B*. The influence of Chopin is obvious, though one passage is remarkably similar to part of John Field's *Nocturne No.7 in A*." Nevertheless, from a study of these juvenilia it is not difficult to reach the conclusion that in comparison with such a figure as Korngold (not to mention Mozart) Bax was a late developer.

Wagner

At the Hampstead Conservatoire, Bax studied composition with Dr Arthur Greenish, and it was at this time that he bought the vocal score of *Tristan and Isolde*, only to discover that his teacher knew virtually nothing about Wagner. 'For a dozen years of my youth', he later wrote, 'I wallowed in [Wagner's] music to the almost total exclusion... of any other'. He would play the Wagnerian epics for hours on end at the piano and it is inevitable that his own music at this period should have become saturated with the idiom.

During his two years at the Hampstead Conservatoire, Bax received little encouragement for his youthful enthusiasm, but on entering the Royal Academy of Music in September 1900 he encountered a completely different attitude. His composition teacher, Frederick Corder, was an ardent Wagnerian and the first to translate his libretti into English (albeit with sometimes hilarious results), while the Principal, Sir Alexander Mackenzie, had known Liszt personally and introduced many of his works into his concert programmes. The championship of these two composers, as is often pointed out, was in sharp contrast with the teachings of Parry and Stanford at the Royal College of Music, a dichotomy amongst British musicians which was to have repercussions for more than fifty years. The comparatively bohemian atmosphere at the RAM actively encouraged further exploration and the distinctive features of Liszt and Wagner were inevitably absorbed into Bax's developing style. This can be seen in two works which were written during his first term under Corder, a *Fantasia for two pianos* and a *March* for solo piano written in

memory of Tchaikovsky, in which there is a quotation from the *1812 Overture*. Bax's first attempt at a choral work also dates from his first year at the RAM: a setting of *Tegnér's Drapa* (Longfellow), although only the first page survives. The prelude is heavily indebted to Wagner, as befits the setting of a poem dealing with the death of Wotan's son Balder at the hands of Loge.

Tegnér's Drapa was immediately followed by a *Love-Song* for orchestra, complete in piano score, in which the influence of Wagner's *Tristan* is clearly discernible. But there are clear indications in this work that Bax was beginning to think in orchestral terms rather than merely dressing up a basically pianistic conception in orchestral clothing. Apart from a few songs, the only other surviving works from 1901 are an *Intermezzo* for clarinet and piano, a Piano Trio and a one-movement *Sonata in G minor* for violin and piano, of which the last is by far the most accomplished.

Strauss

'In 1902 the music of Richard Strauss poured into this country in full flood', wrote Bax, 'And what a to-do there was. Each work to arrive proved more breath-taking and controversial than the last. Wagner had made music the language of passion, and now in Richard the Second neurosis became vocal'. In Bax's case the influence of Strauss's music was to some extent prevented from taking full effect by the fact that it was during the same year (1902) that he first discovered his Celtic affiliations (see below), with the result that any harmful consequences of wallowing in 'perverse progressions' and 'titillating wrong notes' (as he put it) were counterbalanced by a conscious striving after the melodic and harmonic characteristics of Irish folk music. Indeed many of the works written by Bax during the first decade of the century exhibit an uneasy balance between these two distinct musical influences.

Nevertheless, there are certainly several works dating from this period in which the influence of Strauss is discernible, such as *A Song of War and Victory*, which may have been prompted by the battle music in *Ein Heldenleben*. (It is interesting to note that a theme from this early work was later used in the march *London Pageant* of 1937.) Another score with Straussian echoes is the unorchestrated *Symphony in F*, the intermezzo from which is actually based on a passage by Strauss's favourite librettist, Hugo von Hofmannsthal.

The influence of Strauss on Bax more mature works is negligible, and in many cases the Straussian echoes which do occur are to be found in contexts which suggests that they are deliberate parodies. The *Overture to a Picaresque Comedy* is certainly written in jocular Straussian vein, and a similar effect is found in the overture *Rogue's Comedy* - even the titles recall the roguish *Till Eulenspiegel* - parts of which sound suspiciously like pastiche. (And it is surely not coincidence that both these

comedy overtures include a rattle in the orchestration, an instrument which Bax uses nowhere else but which is employed in a manner distinctly reminiscent of *Till* (bars 137-9). That most of these late Straussian echoes occur in light-hearted music is interesting in view of Bax's confession that he had a very weak sense of musical humour.

Celtic

Bax's encounter with Yeats's poem *The Wanderings of Oisín* in 1902, during his second year at the RAM, proved to be a turning point in his life: 'In a moment the Celt within me stood revealed', he later wrote. In a radio talk broadcast in 1949, Bax went on to explain exactly what this experience had meant to him: 'Thereupon I instantly became a sort of honorary Irishman... A famous Irish poet [George Russell] once said to me: "Arnold, you have a completely gaelicized mind"... I think I may claim in all modesty that I was the first to translate the hidden Ireland into musical terms. And all this I owed in the first place to Yeats... All the days of my life I bless his name.'. We thus have Bax's own admission that the strong Celtic element which overtly appears in much of his early music (and occasionally in later works too) derives ultimately from a literary source. Soon after this profound revelation he visited Ireland and immersed himself in the history, mythology, topography, language and general culture of his adopted country. Bax's preoccupation with the poetry of Yeats was to continue through his life, and he often declared that it meant more to him than 'all the music of the centuries'.

The reverence in which Bax held Yeats prompted him to try his hand at poetry himself and he continued to write poems, short stories and plays, mostly upon Irish themes, for many years to come. After his first visit to Ireland in 1902, Bax used to spend several months of each year exploring the country, especially the north-west coast, and he soon discovered the remote village of Glencolumcille in Donegal, which became almost a second home. The emotional effect which scenes of natural beauty, especially seascapes, had on Bax was overwhelming. This trait can be traced back to early childhood and a visit to Arundel Park in about 1889, when Bax was reduced to tears by the visual splendour of a sunset and the realization of its ephemerality, and it certainly had a very influential effect on his music: 'Nearly all my earlier work is pure and almost impersonal nature music', he once said, and in the early part of his career it was the landscapes and seascapes of Western Eire which influenced the content and manner of his most characteristic work. Nevertheless, it is clear that despite its seminal influence Bax regarded the Irish phase in his development as transitory: '*The Garden of Fand*', he said, '... is the last of my Irish works. Why do critics, when I write craggy, northern works... talk of a Celtic twilight? This enrages me'. And in a later outburst on the same subject he writes: 'The Celtic Twilight is all

bunk derived by English journalists from the spurious Ossian and the title of an early work by Yeats. Primitive Celtic colours are bright and jewelled'. It is interesting to compare this statement with the following by the Welsh composer William Mathias: 'Rite and magic, jewelled colours, the spirit of play, haunting wistfulness, lyrical warmth and ardour, and (above all) rhythmic vitality - these are all qualities associated with Celtic art and tradition'; and, it may be added, they are all qualities to be found in Bax's most personal works. However important the literary and spiritual aspects of Celticism were to his development, it is obvious that in purely musical terms the sudden change which manifested itself in his works from 1902 onwards was to a large extent precipitated by a close acquaintance with Irish folk music: 'Under this domination', wrote, Bax, '... I rid myself of the sway of Wagner and Strauss and began to write Irishly, using figures of a definitely Celtic curve, an idiom which in the end was so much second nature to me that many works of mine have been called Irish or Celtic when I supposed them to be purely personal to the British composer Arnold Bax'.

Although his efforts in collecting folksongs are not even remotely comparable with those of Holst and Vaughan Williams or Kodály and Bartók, Bax's had a sufficient grasp of Irish Gaelic to take down the words and music of folksongs in Donegal and to embark with a friend on a translation of Synge's *The Shadow of the Glen* into Irish under the gaelicized name 'Ardghil Bacsa'. Unlike many of his contemporaries, however, Bax very rarely incorporated actual folk tunes into his own works, and although he was a life-long admirer of Vaughan Williams he never had much enthusiasm for other members of what is sometimes known as the 'cowpat school' of English composers.

During his apprentice years at the RAM, Bax achieved some successes. In 1904 he won the Charles Lucas Medal for composition with his first completed orchestral work, a set of *Variations*, in which the influence of Grieg and Dvorak can be heard, although it may well have been prompted by the *Enigma Variations*. (Bax greatly admired Elgar and the two composers first met in 1902.) One of the most amusing episodes in *Farewell, my Youth* concerns the rehearsal of this work at the Royal College of Music, with Bax turning up at the last moment and being horrified to discover from Stanford that he was expected to conduct it himself: 'But I have never conducted in my life', stammered Bax. 'Never mind that', retorted the ruthless Stanford, 'You've got to begin some time, my bhoy. Go on with ye'. The upshot of this humiliating fiasco was that the work was rejected for public performance and Bax vowed never to conduct again. At least one of his student orchestral works, however, did achieve a performance at Queen's Hall. This was *A Connemara Revel*, which Mackenzie conducted in 1905; but after a second performance in Bournemouth (with

the title changed to *An Irish Overture*) the score and parts were mislaid and the only clue to its nature comes from the programme note, which mentions the fact that one of the themes used was *Emer's Farewell*, better known nowadays as *The Londonderry Air*.

Another orchestral work, completed in July 1905, was *Cathaleen-ni-Hoolihan*, Bax's first tone poem, based on a poem by Yeats. It was an orchestrated version of the slow movement of a Quartet in E and contains several indications of the composer's more mature works; in fact the theme of the slower episode in the middle was later used in *Into the Twilight* (1908). For some reason the work seems never to have been performed during Bax's lifetime and it was only played for the first time in 1970, seventeen years after the composer's death. Another work dating from this period is *A Celtic Song Cycle*, the earliest of Bax's scores to be published. These songs are all settings of poems by 'Fiona Macleod' (the literary pseudonym of William Sharp), whom Bax knew and whose work attracted him to a considerable degree judging from the large number of settings he made.

Travel

Bax eventually left the RAM in July 1905. Compared with some of his fellow students, such as York Bowen and Benjamin Dale, he had achieved little as a composer, and his reputation as a musician was largely based on his outstanding abilities as a pianist. He had acted as accompanist at student performances of operas by Gluck, Mascagni and Weber and was famous for being able to read even the most complex orchestral works (such as Strauss's *Ein Heldenleben*) at sight on the piano. On leaving the RAM, Bax's independent means enabled him to indulge in whatever took his fancy without the necessity of having to earn a living, and so in the spring of 1906 he wandered off to Dresden in Saxony, where he indulged in an orgy of opera-going. He saw productions of works by Wagner and Rubinstein, Kienzl and Lortzing, but the most influential event was the first production of Strauss's scandalous new opera *Salome*, which made a profound impression on the youthful Bax. It was also at this time that he first became acquainted with the symphonies of Mahler (whom he admired) and Bruckner (whom he found tedious). The following January Bax returned to Dresden, where he busied himself in completing the vocal score of his first serious attempt at a choral work (*Fatherland*) and tinkering with the piano score of his *Symphony in F*, which was destined to remain unorchestrated. But before long Bax had become involved with Dorothy Pyman (the 'tall, calm-eyed Scandinavian girl' of *Farewell, my Youth*) with whom he impulsively fled Dresden. Bax eventually returned to England in the summer of 1907 and, fresh from his recent operatic experiences, he settled down to writing a five-act play based on the legend of Deirdre with the intention of turning it into an opera. The play was completed on 30th November 1907, but Bax's

plans for the music did not progress well, and all that survive are three piano sketches, two of which were eventually orchestrated by the composer as the tone poems *Into the Twilight* and *Rosc-catha*. The reason for Bax's failure to complete an opera - and he made at least one other attempt - was stated in his radio talk of 1949, in which he claimed to have no particular gift for the genre and pointed out that, apart from Benjamin Britten, English composers were unsuited to it. Bax's next large-scale work was a *Quintet in G*, which was performed in July 1908. One of the themes in its first movement was later used as the main tune of his delightful little piano piece *A Hill Tune*, and he obviously thought well enough of the slow movement to revise it for publication in 1922 as the *Lyrical Interlude*, dedicated to Vaughan Williams. It was at about this time that Bax conceived the idea of writing a trilogy of tone poems with the collective title *Eire*. Parts I and III already existed in piano score, having been conceived (as mentioned above) as orchestral passages in his projected opera *Deirdre*. The first of these, which had been intended as the prelude to the opera, was *Into the Twilight* (after a poem by Yeats). The opening theme, played over a timpani roll by two clarinets, also occurs in the prelude to scene V and was probably intended as Deirdre's motif in the opera. It also occurs at the words 'And the gloom divine is all around' in the choral work *Enchanted Summer* of 1910, and this suggests that it was somehow associated in Bax's mind with the notion of sadness, reminding us that Deirdre's most common epithet is 'of the sorrows'. *Into the Twilight* is full of the most felicitous orchestral touches, with the attractive, Irish-sounding themes wrapped up in richly embroidered orchestral dress and with the trombones and tuba reserved for only a few bars at the climax. The second part of the *Eire* trilogy, *In the Faery Hills*, is a lithesome scherzo with a slow middle section. It is based on an episode from Yeats's *The Wanderings of Oisín* in which the bard is wrapt away by the faery host and forced to sing a song of human joy, which sounds so depressing to the immortal *sidhe* that they fling away his harp and return to their revels. The faery horn call which opens the work appears to have been borrowed from Elgar's *Grania and Diarmid*.

The third part of the *Eire* trilogy is *Rosc-catha* (the Irish Gaelic for 'battle hymn'). In contrast with the other two movements, this is a vigorous, forthright march, which in the original operatic sketches was entitled *The Gathering of the Chiefs*. It depicts a procession of swaggering Irish chieftains and their retinue as they enter the hall of the king and shows Bax's orchestration at its most brazen.

It was during 1909 too that Bax's services as an accompanist were once again in demand, this time at gatherings of the Music Club organized by Alfred Kalisch at which the works of distinguished foreign composers were introduced to London. Bax was often contacted at the eleventh hour to accompany singers when the pianist

originally engaged had failed to learn the music in time. His ability to read music at sight stood him in good stead, though he was somewhat irked that he was never once offered a fee. Nevertheless, Bax usually enjoyed the social gaffes which were perpetrated on these occasions and was able to meet such eminent composers as Debussy, d'Indy, Sibelius and, on a later occasion, Schoenberg, whose early, romantic works he admired. Of these four composers it was Sibelius who, as we shall see, was to have the most influence on Bax's own music.

Russia

In the autumn of 1909 Bax met and fell in love with a Ukrainian girl called Natalia Skarginska [*Bax gives her surname as 'Skarginski', the masculine form; if she was Ukrainian, the feminine form would be 'Skarginska' ('Skarginskaya' in Russian).*] and when she suddenly left England to make her way home, Bax, who was in Ireland at the time, impulsively rushed to be at her side, leaving his sister Evelyn stranded in Connemara without a penny to her name. Bax's account of this romantic episode in Russia and the Ukraine is one of the highlights of *Farewell, my Youth*, although he uses pseudonyms for Natalia and her friend, Olga Antonietti, referring to them as 'Loubya Korolenko' and 'Fiammetta'. Arriving at the Russian frontier the three companions made their way by train to St. Petersburg, arriving by chance on the evening of Easter Day: 'Bells thundered and jangled from every church', wrote Bax, and this experience can clearly be heard in the final pages of his First Piano Sonata, which he wrote in the following summer.

Among the highlights of his stay was a visit to the Russian Imperial Ballet, which had a profound effect on him, and on his return to Ireland he embarked upon his most ambitious project to date, a full-length ballet called *Tamara*, based on a Ukrainian folktale. The original title was altered to *King Kojata* when he discovered that a performance of Balakirev's *Tamara* was to be introduced to London by Diaghilev. However, Bax never orchestrated the score, and its dedicatee, 'the marvellous dancer Tamara Karsavina', never even heard about the work until several years after Bax's death. His efforts were not entirely wasted, however, since he quarried material from the score for use in other works, including another ballet, *From Dusk till Dawn*, *The Truth about the Russian Dancers* and the *Four Pieces* for flute and piano. Other works completed this year include the original version of the First Violin Sonata (dedicated to Natalia) and his longest work for chorus and orchestra, *Enchanted Summer*, a setting of part of Shelley's *Prometheus Unbound*. The choral work is one of Bax's most opulent scores, the vocal writing very taxing and orchestral in feeling, and there are important parts towards the end for two solo sopranos. The influence of Russian music on Bax's style is an important one. It is true that occasional Russian inflections can be detected in some of his earlier music, such the last movement of

the *Symphony in F*, and he was obviously well acquainted with the symphonies of Tchaikovsky and Glazunov, but there is no doubt that his visit to Russia in 1910 had exerted a powerful influence on his music. Indeed, he wrote several works in which he appears to have been deliberately imitating the Russian nationalist composers, such as Balakirev, Borodin and Rimsky-Korsakov: the piano pieces *Gopak*, *Nocturne (May-night in the Ukraine)* and *In a Vodka Shop*, for example, and Bax was amused to discover many years later that the last-named piece had been indignantly attacked by a Soviet critic as an alcoholic slur on Russian life.

After visiting St. Petersburg and Moscow, Bax and his companions made their way to Natalia's family estate in the Ukraine itself, where he was able to engage in creative work, both musical and literary. But his affair with the object of his desire proved very disappointing to him; she did not reciprocate his feelings and became engaged to another man. Bax stayed for the betrothal party and then impulsively proposed to Olga Antonietti, who also rejected him. 'I returned to England', he later, wrote, 'bruised in spirit, but with a strong sense of relief, a strange satisfaction that one episode in my life had been rounded off, irrevocably finished'.

Marriage

Scarcely had he returned when Bax himself became engaged to Elsa Luisa Sobrino (known as Elsitá), the daughter of a Spanish concert pianist and the German singer Elsa Schmidt. They soon married and spent their honeymoon in Connemara during April 1911. They then decided to settle down in a rented house on the outskirts of Dublin, and it was here that Bax wrote *Tamara* and the first version of the *Festival Overture*, a rumbustious piece which begins in a manner reminiscent of Dvorak's *Carnival Overture*, though there is a more substantial middle section which could almost have come from one of Bax's tone poems. In January 1912 Elsa gave birth to a son, Dermot Colum (d.1976), and exactly one year later, to the very day, she had a daughter, who was christened Maeve Astrid (d.1987). The most important work dating from 1912 is *Christmas Eve on the Mountains*, the first performance of which is described in some detail in *Farewell, my Youth*, although literary licence has altered some of the facts. Based on a Roman Catholic plainchant (the *Credo*) which also occurs in Strauss's *Also sprach Zarathustra*, the work is an evocation of 'the sharp light of frosty stars and an ecstasy of peace falling for one night of the year upon the troubled Irish hills, haunted by the inhuman *sidhe* and by clinging memories of the tragedy of eight hundred years'. Bax later revised the work and it is this version which has been recorded.

In March of 1913 Bax went for a holiday in the Mediterranean with his brother Clifford and the composers Balfour Gardiner and Gustav Holst, an event which is

recalled in detail in Clifford's book *Inland Far*. The most important works completed that year were *Spring Fire* (discussed below) and the *Four Orchestral Pieces*, together with a draft of *The Garden of Fand*.

Early in the following year Bax and his wife left Rathgar and moved to a house at Marlow in Buckinghamshire, not far from where his brother and his first wife were then living. It was at about this time that Bax made the acquaintance of Francis Bevis Ellis, a member of the De Walden family, who was an amateur musician. On the demise of Balfour Gardiner's series of concerts, at which several of Bax's orchestral works were played, Ellis decided to mount his own season of concerts starting in March at which Bax's *Festival Overture* and *Four Orchestral Pieces* were performed. A later concert also included the *Three Songs* for soprano and orchestra and the first performance of Vaughan Williams's *London Symphony*, and it was about this time that the two composers became firm friends.

At the beginning of 1913 Bax had first met the young pianist Harriet Cohen (1895-1967) and by the summer of that year it is clear that he had fallen in love with what he described as 'that fantastic volatile and delightful creature'. A few months later we find several newly-written piano pieces dedicated to her, usually under her pet name of 'Tania', and it was for her that Bax was eventually to desert his wife and children. Harriet was certainly a most beautiful woman in her youth, and although his passion for her was to cool during the 1920s, there can be no doubt that she continued to exercise a considerable influence on his life and music for many years afterwards. She became the foremost champion of his piano music, including several major scores, such as the *Symphonic Variations* and *Winter Legends*, as well as four piano sonatas, all of which (apart from the Fourth Sonata) were dedicated to her. One curious feature of this arrangement - often remarked upon - is the fact that Harriet had rather small hands which were unable to stretch an octave, and yet Bax, with his phenomenal piano technique, consistently wrote virtuoso music for her to play which demanded a very wide stretch. In the summer of 1914 Bax was occupied with his longest chamber work, the *Piano Quintet*, which was not completed until April of the following year. This powerful three-movement work, which was much admired by such diverse figures as Vaughan Williams, Henry Wood, Frank Bridge and Zoltán Kodály, is undoubtedly one of Bax's most important chamber works and provides an impressive compendium of the various elements which make up his distinctive musical language.

War and the Easter Rising

At the outbreak of the Great War in August 1914 Bax was staying in Balfour Gardiner's cottage at Ashampstead. Although the world tragedy which ensued

inevitably cast a deep shadow over his busy but comparatively independent lifestyle, Bax played little part in it. He was rejected for military service on medical grounds and thus avoided the fate of many friends and acquaintances such as George Butterworth, Ernest Farrar, Frederick Kelly, Edward Thomas and Bevis Ellis who were soon to be so cruelly slaughtered. Bax was shattered by the events of the war, but an even heavier blow was to fall on Easter Day, 1916, when Pádraig Pearse (whom he had met only once) declared the formation of an Irish Republic on the steps of the Dublin Post Office and was later shot. Bax was devastated by these events and wrote a fine poem called *A Dublin Ballad*, which was so uncomplimentary to the British Government that it was immediately banned by the Censor in Ireland. Apart from the poem Bax wrote two pieces of music commemorating the Easter Rising both with the title *In Memoriam*. One is for cor anglais, harp and string quartet and was first played in March 1918, but the other (dedicated specifically to the memory of Pearse) survives only as a piano score with many indications of the intended orchestration.¹ Bax often (though not always) delayed writing out a full score of orchestral works which he had sketched, sometimes several years earlier, until there was a prospect of performance, and in the case of *In Memoriam* he must soon have realised that the climate of opinion in England at the time would not have permitted performance of a work in honour of a recently executed Irish rebel. Although the piece was never completed, Bax, like most composers, was loath to waste a good tune and the broad melody which begins after the short introduction incongruously appeared thirty-two years later in the finale of his music for the film of *Oliver Twist*.

During the latter part of 1916 Bax was occupied with his large-scale *Symphonic Variations* for piano and orchestra, which he was writing for Harriet Cohen, although the score was not completed until the end of 1918. (A note in the manuscript towards the end of the sixth variation reads: 'Maroon announces signing of armistice'.) The work is divided into two parts, roughly equal in length, with a theme and eight variations and lasts about forty-five minutes. The theme itself has been compared to Grieg's *Sarabande* from the *Holberg Suite*, and Bax's resourcefulness in the writing of the variations is most impressive. Each has a separate title at its head: Youth, Nocturne, Strife, The Temple, Play, Intermezzo and Finale. The 'Strife' movement is one of Bax's most exhilarating, and its closing pages culminate in a thrilling display of pent-up energy being released. In contrast, the Play movement is a delightful little scherzo - Bax at his lightest - and the finale (obviously influenced by the ending of Glazunov's Seventh Symphony) is a fitting culmination to one of his best achievements.

Another important work which was completed in 1916 is *The Garden of Fand*, a tone poem based on an Irish legend which is printed in full as a preface to the published score. Fand is the daughter of Manannan, the sea-god, and her garden is the sea itself. The tale tells how the hero Cú Chulainn is washed ashore on Fand's magic island and is seduced by the goddess. The tremendous climax towards the end represents the little ship being overwhelmed by a huge wave.

During the summer and autumn of 1917 Bax sketched two of his most evocative tone poems. *Summer Music* (originally entitled *Idyll*) is a sensitive evocation of 'a windless June midday somewhere in southern England' and was finally orchestrated in 1920 and published (in a revised form) in 1932 with a dedication to Delius. The other piece, *Tintagel*, was written after Bax and Harriet Cohen had spent an idyllic holiday in Cornwall - their first together after the composer had left his wife in March 1918. *Tintagel* is a splendid piece of tone painting evoking the castle-crowned cliffs on 'a sunny but not windless summer day' and has always been Bax's most often performed orchestral work. It was first played at Bournemouth in 1921, and after the concert Bax was delighted to be congratulated by the former principal of the RAM, Sir Alexander Mackenzie: 'He has always detested my music hitherto, I fancy!', commented Bax.

In June 1918 Bax's father died, an event which, together with the break-up of his marriage, must have cast a pall of gloom over the Bax household. But in the midst of these problems the composer managed to write one of his happiest and most immediately attractive scores, the *First String Quartet*, dedicated to Elgar. The work has been compared to Dvořák for its felicitous melodic material, and its finale, with its beautiful 'Irish' tune, made it one of the most popular of British string quartets for many years.

Having left his wife for good, Bax now settled in Swiss Cottage, at 155 Fellows Road (now demolished), where he was to remain until the Second World War. It is a curious fact that despite his private means Bax never lived in a house which he actually owned himself. He seems to have been always a restless nomad and was usually oblivious to his domestic surroundings.

Over the next two years Bax was much occupied with the ballet and theatre. During the war he had written two ballet scores, although one of them, *The Frogskin* has completely disappeared. The other, *From Dusk till Dawn*, was written for a charity matinée organized by Mrs Christopher Lowther, later Lady George Cholmondley, who was also responsible for commissioning Elgar's *The Sanguine Fan*. The score is not one of Bax's best and he borrowed much of its material from his unfinished ballet *Tamara*. (There is an amusing allusion towards the end to Mendelssohn's *Wedding*

March.) During the 1919 season of Diaghilev's Russian Ballets, Bax was commissioned, at the instigation of his friend the music critic Edwin Evans, to orchestrate two pieces by Liadov for the ballet *Children's Tales*, and he was also asked to orchestrate his own piano pieces *Gopak* and *In a Vodka Shop* as 'symphonic interludes' to be played between ballets.

The early 1920s

In 1920, Tamara Karsavina, to whom *Tamara* had been dedicated without her knowledge, became involved in a play by James Barrie called *The Truth about the Russian Dancers*, in which the principal character is a ballerina who can only communicate by dancing. For this rather strange confection Bax wrote a lively and colourful forty-five-minute score very much in the style of the Russian nationalist composers.

It was at about this time that Bax became more interested in writing choral music, of which the only previous examples from his pen had been *Fatherland* (1907) and *Enchanted Summer* (1910). In 1920 he wrote *Of a Rose I sing*, a setting for chorus with harp, cello and double bass of a fifteenth-century poem. But the most impressive of the choral works and one of his finest scores altogether is *Mater Ora Filium*, a setting of an anonymous carol from a manuscript at Balliol College, Oxford, in which Bax's contrapuntal dexterity is revealed in one of the greatest unaccompanied choral works of the 20th century.

During the 1920s the size of Bax's prolific output decreased somewhat but includes several fine works. The *Viola Sonata*, for example, is a splendid score in three movements in which Bax manages to capture the soul of the viola in a way few other composers have done. Later in 1921 Bax completed the score of a *Piano Sonata in E flat*, but when he played it through to his friends Harriet Cohen and Arthur Alexander they both expressed the opinion that what he had written was not merely a sonata but a symphony. Bax concurred with this view and set about orchestrating the outer movements more or less as they stood; but for some reason - perhaps because of its noticeably more pianistic style - he was dissatisfied with the slow middle movement and replaced it with the dark, powerful movement which we now know. The full score was finished in October, and in December 1922 Bax's *First Symphony* burst upon an unsuspecting Queen's Hall audience. Without wishing to provoke comparisons of quality, there is no doubt that the symphony had much the same effect on Bax's admirers as Vaughan Williams's *Fourth Symphony* had on his, although in both cases we can now see that the features which so leapt out at audiences of the time existed in embryonic form in earlier pieces.

Three works dominate Bax's output for 1923: the *Cello Sonata*, a three-movement work which somehow fails to convince and is certainly not a patch on the *Viola Sonata*, and two works for chorus and orchestra, *To the Name above Every Name* and *St. Patrick's Breastplate*. The former received precisely one performance, at the 1923 Three Choirs Festival, and was then left unperformed until 1983, when the BBC broadcast it. It is very much a festival piece, extrovert, powerful and superbly written for its forces. The thematic material at a first hearing often sounds curiously un-Baxian but closer acquaintance reveals that the work could have been written by nobody else. The other festival work, *St. Patrick's Breastplate*, is a setting of an ancient Gaelic hymn in an English translation (probably by Bax) and with its invocation of the elements and a vigorous, forthright paean in praise of Ireland it presumably represents Bax's reaction to the founding of the Irish Free State in December 1921.

Much of Bax's time in 1924 was spent in travelling. He met Delius in Rapallo during January and February, and during April he visited Monaco, Naples, Sicily, Turkey and the Greek Islands. In June he went to Prague for a performance of his symphony at an ISCM concert, and it was here that he met the distinguished Czech composer Janáček. Later during the summer he went to Spitzbergen and Salzburg. Not surprisingly, Bax's musical output for this year was the smallest since he had started composing, and all that were completed were two songs with words by Herbert Trench. However, Bax had been far from idle during the rest of the year and on 10th October he completed the piano score of his *Second Symphony* (discussed below).

Bax's relationship with Harriet Cohen had by this time deteriorated and this is reflected in the symphony: 'I was going through absolute hell when I wrote it', he later remarked, and he characterised the music as having 'a kind of oppressive catastrophic mood'. Another angst-ridden work, the *Second String Quartet*, dates from February 1925, and in contrast with its easy-going predecessor is a tough score full of the more dissonant harmonies which also colour the symphony, though it ends in a mood of jocular high spirits.

In November Harriet's rapidly worsening tuberculosis necessitated her going to Switzerland where she was accompanied by a very gloomy Bax. In Geneva the composer managed to do some work on his symphony and also orchestrated *Cortège*, a six-minute march dominated by the brass and possibly an externalisation of Bax's increasing anger and frustration during a very difficult time: 'My imagination feels like a dry-sucked lemon', he wrote to his brother, Clifford. After completing the *Second Symphony* in March 1926, Bax spent some time with Philip Heseltine (the composer 'Peter Warlock') and his drinking companions at Eynsford in Kent, where he wrote his attractive and tuneful *Romantic Overture*. This was followed by the

superb choral work *Walsingham* (discussed below) and later in the year by the *Third Piano Sonata*.

Sibelius

During the mid-1920s two major influences on Bax began to exert themselves, the first purely musical, the second of a more personal nature. Bax had first come across Sibelius at a meeting of the Music Club in 1909, at which some of the Finnish composer's smaller works had been performed, and although he was not to have personal contact again until 1932, he had already become one of Sibelius's growing band of admirers in England. The first performance in this country of *Tapiola* had literally reduced him to tears, and he was mightily impressed by the enigmatic *Fourth Symphony*. Bax had always been spiritually drawn towards the northern lands and this reawakening within him coincided with a growing interest not only in the Scandinavian countries but also in Scotland. During the 1920s and early '30s Bax produced several scores in which the spiritual influence of the north and the specific musical influence of Sibelius became intertwined. The two *Northern Ballads* are good examples. The first was sketched in 1927 but not orchestrated until 1931. Based on a strife-ridden episode in Scottish history (the Jacobite Rebellion of 1745) this is a powerful work similar in vein to the earlier *Rosc-catha* and *Cortège* but with a more mature creative force behind it. The *Second Northern Ballad*, which was completed in 1934, is one of Bax's very best works, a score of seemingly enormous latent power.

Another work which is often bracketed with the two *Northern Ballads* is the fine *Prelude for a Solemn Occasion* (although the recent practice of tagging it *Northern Ballad No.3*' - a title not used by Bax - seems to be based on a misinterpretation of the facts²). This was sketched at the same time as the first Ballad but was not orchestrated until February 1933. It is not known whether the work was written for any particular 'solemn occasion' but the fact that it was never performed during Bax's lifetime suggests that it was not, and although it is dubious practice to refer to it by a name which Bax himself did not use it must be conceded that the title is not really appropriate. The opening is certainly gloomy, but as the work progresses the music becomes increasingly jubilant and the closing pages, with an organ at full throttle, are powerfully impressive.

Important works dating from the late 1920s include the *Overture, Elegy and Rondo*, in which Bax makes his nearest approach to the neo-classicism of Stravinsky, the *Sonata for two pianos* (discussed below), and, above all, the *Third Symphony*. This has always been the most frequently performed of Bax's symphonies and was the first to be recorded (by Barbirolli and the Hallé Orchestra). The first movement has been criticised for the long, slow section which takes up a disproportionate amount

of time, but the music itself is so breathtakingly beautiful that no Baxophile would be willing to sacrifice it for the sake of greater cogency in the musical argument.

Bax first met the young Mary Gleaves at a dinner in the Haymarket Hotel which had been organised by William Grant Oliver, a friend who also happened to be his dentist; but it was not until the following year that the two began seeing each other regularly. Their relationship gradually deepened, and for the remaining twenty-six years of Bax's life she was to be his closest companion, although their relationship was to be known only to a comparatively few people.

The 1930s

During the early and mid-1930s Bax's life settled into a fairly routine pattern. He tended to do much of his creative work in London, interspersed with foreign travel, and would then spend the winter months in Morar orchestrating what he had written during the previous months or revising older works. Wrapped in a heavy overcoat he could often be found sitting in his freezing room in the Station Hotel hard at work. He was usually accompanied on these expeditions by Mary Gleaves, who would read to him while he worked, as his mother had done before. In view of their close relationship for so many years, it is a curious fact that Harriet Cohen had no inkling of Mary's existence until 1948. Bax's next large-scale work after the *Third Symphony* of 1929 was a 'sinfonia concertante' for piano and orchestra called *Winter Legends* (discussed below). At one stage Bax was considering calling the work his *Symphony No.4* but this title was soon given to another work which he had begun sketching a few months after completing the concertante. The symphony was completed in February of 1931 and is in striking contrast with its three predecessors, being much more extrovert, with more use of primary orchestral colours. The scoring includes an organ and six horns in place of Bax's usual four. The *Fourth* is sometimes regarded as his least successful symphony. [Bax himself referred to it as his 'least interesting' symphony. -DP] What commentators usually mean by this is that it does not address itself to such weighty matters as the others; but it contains some thrilling moments and has a better claim on the repertoire than many inferior works by other composers. The comparatively lean and muscular style of the *Fourth Symphony* spilled over into several other orchestral works written during the following years. The *First Northern Ballad* has already been mentioned, and another work in similar vein, *The Tale the Pine-Trees Knew*, contains much of the symphony's clear textures combined with the imaginative fantasy of Bax's earlier tone poems. This work was completed in December 1931 and was followed only three months later by the *Fifth Symphony*, which was dedicated to Sibelius, whom Bax was to meet again in the following year. The experience of writing the extravert Fourth clearly had a beneficial effect on Bax's music, and the *Fifth Symphony* returns to the

preoccupations of the first three but with a renewed power and strength. The long introductory section is superb, and if it is possible to wonder whether the ensuing *allegro* might have been more concisely argued, the sheer beauty of the slower episodes banishes such thoughts.

Bax's next work was the *Symphonic Phantasy*, which dates from May 1932. For some reason he had doubts about the score and never released it for performance or publication. He later used to refer to it as his *Sinfonietta*, and in the early 1950s he gave the manuscript to Christopher Whelen, who was then Assistant Conductor of the Bournemouth Symphony Orchestra; but at the composer's request the work was not performed and only received its world premiere in 1983, as part of the BBC's Bax centenary celebrations. In three interlinked movements, the slow second movement is by far the best, with its restrained beauty, while the finale is an unusual example of Bax writing a lengthy fast movement with no slow section. Another large-scale work dating from 1932 is the *Cello Concerto*, written for the Spanish cellist Caspar Cassado. Unfortunately its first performance was not well received and Bax was greatly disappointed that it never entered the repertoire. In the hands of an inferior cellist the work can certainly sound lacklustre, but Raphael Wallfisch's recording reveals that when played with passionate intensity it can come off to great effect. The combination of a solo cello with orchestra is a difficult one to balance so that the soloist is not swamped, but Cassado was amazed to discover during rehearsals how easily he could make himself heard above Bax's skilful orchestral writing. During the spring of the following year Bax went on an extended tour of France, Venice, Yugoslavia and Greece and it is not surprising, therefore, to find that after revising his early *Scherzo* and orchestrating the *Prelude for a Solemn Occasion* he seems to have done no work until the autumn, when he composed the delightful *Sonatina* for cello and piano, dedicated to Pablo Casals. During the following winter Bax paid his annual visit to Morar, where in January he completed the *Second Northern Ballad*. He also made orchestral arrangements of three songs (of which only *A Lyke Wake* is extant) and revised his early choral work *Fatherland*. Two chamber works, the *Clarinet Sonata* and the *Octet*, followed in June and October respectively, and a further orchestral song, *Eternity*, was completed in November. But by far the most important score dating from 1934 is the *Sixth Symphony*, which is considered by many admirers to be his greatest. Like the *Fifth Symphony*, this work begins with a slow introduction, which Bax himself preferred to be taken at a broader pace than in either of the two commercial recordings made so far. The first movement is by far the most concise of any of the movements in Bax's symphonies, while the slow movement that follows makes use of the so-called 'Scotch snap' rhythm, which occurs comparatively rarely in his music and is presumably a consequence of its

having been conceived on the coast of Morar, opposite the islands of Rhum, Eigg and Muck. The finale is unique in Bax's symphonic cycle in that it opens quietly (with an unaccompanied clarinet) and then launches into a scherzo with a formal trio. During the course of the scherzo's development there occurs a quotation from the main theme of Sibelius's *Tapiola*. Eventually the movement builds up to a tremendous climax, capped by the 'liturgical' theme (Bax's own definition) which was heard quietly near the start of the movement, and then recedes into an epilogue of unearthly beauty. The work was originally dedicated to the Polish composer Karol Szymanowski, whom Bax had met a few years previously, but the published score bears a dedication to Sir Adrian Boult

In 1935 Bax received an honorary doctorate from Durham University, but the only work which can definitely be ascribed to this year is *The Morning Watch*, which he was commissioned to write for the Three Choirs Festival. Writing to Vaughan Williams in December, Bax complained of being unable to concentrate on composition, but this creative block must have lifted a few weeks later with the appearance of his high-spirited *Rogue's Comedy* overture, an uninhibited romp in which the cares of the previous year seem to have been dispelled at a stroke. This effervescent mood spilled over into his next work, the *Threnody and Scherzo* for bassoon, harp and string sextet, which, after an elegiac first movement, displays Bax in his most jovial vein. In April he made an arrangement for septet of his flute and harp *Sonatina* (1928), and by the end of September he had completed his *Third String Quartet*, which manages to combine some of the ebullience of the First with the toughness of the Second. Finally, in October, came the *Overture to Adventure*, a swashbuckling score more akin in some ways to the *Northern Ballads* than to the other overtures. In the spring of 1937 Bax was holidaying in Ireland when he received an official-looking envelope in his mail which turned out to be an offer of a knighthood in the forthcoming coronation honours list. He was reluctant to accept at first, thinking that such an honour would entail him in unwelcome publicity and social upheaval, but he was eventually persuaded by his Irish friends to accept. The revival of his creative powers in 1936, however, seems to have been short-lived and only two works were written in 1937: the orchestral march *London Pageant* (at the end of which he wrote 'Finished thank God!'), and a pianistic curiosity, the *Sonata in B flat* ('Salzburg'), which appears at first sight to be a transcription of an anonymous eighteenth-century work but which on further examination turns out to be a pastiche, though it is not known why he decided to embark on such a piece. One of the themes from the second movement of this sonata is also to be found in the slow movement of the Violin Concerto, which Bax started sketching in 1937. This score was completed in February of the following year and the manuscript bears a

dedication to Jascha Heifetz, though this is omitted from the published violin/piano reduction, and there is no evidence that Heifetz ever saw the work, much less performed it. Bax evidently had reservations about the concerto at first, since he only released it for performance five years later. Unlike the Cello Concerto, however, the work was favourably received and, much to Bax's annoyance, was played quite frequently over the next few years at the expense of his more important symphonies and concertos. It has been suggested that in its 'light romanticism' the work resembles Mendelssohn's concerto - Bax himself said that it reminded him of the nineteenth-century Swiss composer Raff - and another writer referred to its slow movement as being almost Mozartean, a comment which was nearer the mark than he thought in view of its relationship with the 'Salzburg' Sonata.

The Second World War

In January 1939 Bax completed the last of his seven symphonies, only a few days after the death of his beloved Yeats. The work is usually described as being more relaxed than its predecessors and it certainly has about it a mood of optimism which rarely occurs in the other symphonies apart from the Fourth. The first movement has been described as a seascape, but the actual orchestral writing is a far cry from the impressionistic sea music of *Tintagel* and *The Garden of Fand*. The slow movement was intended by Bax to represent a languorous summer day, and it contains a middle section marked 'in legendary mood'. For the finale, Bax reverts initially to his most ceremonial vein, but the theme and variations which follow have a warmth and tenderness to them which reveal the composer's essentially romantic nature. The epilogue with which the work concludes is less elaborate than in some of the previous symphonies and it attains a tranquillity which even Bax had rarely surpassed. In June Bax finished his only work for unaccompanied cello, the *Rhapsodic Ballad*, written for Beatrice Harrison, although she apparently never played it. He was also commissioned to write a work for string orchestra, but in a letter to Edwin Evans he begged to be released from the undertaking, complaining that the 'perpetual political tension' was scarcely conducive to creative work. He had been trying to 'perpetrate a small concerto for Tania [Harriet Cohen]' but had found it a difficult task. On 3rd September the 'political tension;' erupted into war and for nearly three years Bax composed nothing. During the same month he wrote: 'For several years I have had no joy in my work'; and a few months later: 'All these fearful events are very distracting. I cannot adapt myself very well to these conditions. I have written nothing at all since August'. A similar message was received by Sir Adrian Boult: 'I have heard practically no music at all since the war began, and like almost every composer have been unable to do any creative work at all'. And this, dating from January 1942: 'I am very deep in a dump at the moment,

and never did I wear so melancholy a hat! I am sick of being idle, but feel no impulse towards any sort of creation'. Shortly after the outbreak of war he went to live in the village of Storrington in Sussex, close to Mary Gleaves as well as his composer friends John Ireland and Cecil Gray. In November 1940 his mother died, at the age of eighty, and another link with the days of his youth had gone. During 1940 and 1941 Bax appears to have composed nothing, the first years since the age of twelve that he had produced no music. Instead, during the early part of 1940, he spent his time in Morar writing his autobiographical volume, *Farewell, my Youth*. Although he was not yet sixty it seemed that Bax's creative life was at an end. He had begun to drink more heavily and his dislike of the aging process became more pronounced. But early in 1942, following the death the previous year of Sir Walford Davies, Bax was unexpectedly appointed Master of the King's Music, a court post dating from the reign of Charles I of which the duties seem to have varied according to the personalities of the appointee and the reigning monarch. (The spelling 'Musick', incidentally, although preferred by Bax's successor, Sir Arthur Bliss, and often written, has no authority according to the Lord Chamberlain's Office.) Of Bax's sixteen predecessors in the post only William Boyce and Elgar are at all well known today. Bax's appointment came as a surprise at the time, and it should be remembered that Vaughan Williams had already turned the job down when Elgar had died. Several more socially acceptable musicians were not at all pleased, and although it is unlikely that many people would have remembered his anti-British stand during the Easter Rising, many would have agreed with Wilfred Mellers that his appointment was 'both surprising and perverse'. In retrospect it can be seen that with such flamboyantly ceremonial scores as *Paeon* and *London Pageant* under his belt the choice of Bax for the post was eminently suitable from a musical point of view, although on a more personal basis it was perhaps less so. Bax was not by nature one who enjoyed the limelight and he obviously found the writing of works to commission tiresome. Soon after his appointment Bax found that his services were required in connection with a documentary film being made about the George Cross island of Malta, and by September 1942 he had completed the twenty-five minute orchestral score, about which he later remarked: 'I didn't know exactly what they wanted so I just wrote the sort of music I like', a phrase which admirably sums up the prevailing mood of his later works. Over the next few years Bax was kept busy producing a stream of works, none of which can be favourably compared with his earlier scores, written when, as he put it, he was 'on fire creatively', but which are, to quote a recent music critic, 'thoroughly pleasant to hear'. The suggestion often made that after his appointment Bax wrote very little is nonsense; the quality of these late works may be variable but in number they equal his output during the previous decade. The *Legend-Sonata* for cello and piano (1943) and the *Piano Trio in*

B flat (1946) were his last chamber works and contain much attractive writing, the finale of the trio being of interest in that it is mostly written in the unusual time signature of 5/8. In 1943 Bax was commissioned by ENSA (the wartime entertainment body) to write a lively overture, called *Work in Progress*, which is one of his most successful works in this vein, and in 1944 he produced his last tone poem, *A Legend*, which characteristically tells of 'mountain landscapes, wild weather, wind-swept castles, shadowy battles and finally triumph in a barbaric setting', to quote the composer. A critic after the first performance was rather less poetic, referring to it as 'an old Bax-o'-tricks'. There were two collaborations with John Masefield, the Poet Laureate. The first was *To Russia*, written for a function at the Royal Albert hall in honour of the Red Army. Very much a *pièce d'occasion* the work has only been played once so far since its first performance. The other work written with Masefield was a pageant-play which had been commissioned to celebrate the sexcentenary of the founding of the Order of the Garter, but although Bax more or less finished the work in sketch form the project fell through because of lack of funds and the score was never orchestrated.

Final years

In 1947 Bax received an honorary degree from the National University of Ireland, an event which greatly pleased him since he felt that he could now very nearly consider himself to be 'a naturalised ``'. Later in the year, he had to produce two fanfares for the wedding of Princess Elizabeth and attended the ceremony in Westminster Abbey, where he had what he called 'quite a good profile view of the whole affair'. It was also at about this time that he was 'inveigled, not to say bullied' into writing another film score, for David Lean's production of *Oliver Twist*, for which he wrote some of his liveliest music. It was during the recording of the music for this film that Harriet Cohen, for whom Bax had specially written passages for piano, discovered that his wife had died the previous year. She had long wanted to marry Bax but had been prevented from doing so because he had created the impression that his wife was a Roman Catholic (which she was not) and would not divorce him. Bax, however, valued his freedom too highly and firmly refused. Later the same year he was commissioned to write a 'triple' *Concertante* for cor anglais, clarinet, horn and orchestra for a concert in memory of Sir Henry Wood. This was completed on New Year's Day 1949 and first performed at a Promenade Concert a few months later. The work is unusual in form: it begins with an Elegy for cor anglais and small orchestra in which a solo violin quotes a theme from George Moore's *She is far from the land*. Next comes a lively scherzo for the solo clarinet, and then a slow movement for the horn. The finale, in which the full orchestra plays for the first time, is a lively rondo, with guest appearances by the three soloists. Shortly after finishing the *Concertante*

Bax was hard at work on another concerted work, which he called originally a *Concerto for orchestra with piano (left hand)*, though it was later retitled *Concertante for piano (left hand) and orchestra*. The work was written for Harriet Cohen after she had injured her right hand and is not one of Bax's most successful. The piano writing is unadventurous, even taking into account the limitations of one hand, and the thematic material comparatively undistinguished. However, even so unsympathetic a critic as Donald Mitchell recognised that it was a 'gallant gesture' to a temporarily disabled fellow artist. A less ambitious work dating from 1949 is the *Fauré Variations* for harp and string orchestra: a set of five variations based on the name of Gabriel Fauré, of which the third movement is in the form of a polka, the only one Bax ever wrote.

Bax's few remaining years were spent quietly in Storrington, with occasional visits to London and Eire. The portly, ruddy-faced figure who stares grimly from so many photographs taken in the 1940s contrasts sadly with the slim youth that he once was, but the increasing reliance on whisky had taken its toll. He declined to write an overture for the Festival of Britain in 1951 but managed to compose two brief fanfares for a wireless programme on the history of show business. He was also lured back to the world of film music and wrote an attractive and lively score for the short British Transport Film documentary *Journey into History*. On 15th February 1952 he attended the funeral of George VI in Windsor, sitting in the organ loft with William Harris, who played his organ arrangement of the 'Ruins' section from *Malta, G.C.* as a funeral march. On 29th November 1952 Bax completed his last orchestral work, a march for the coronation of Elizabeth II, which was to take place in the following June, although even for this he had recourse to earlier material and used the same trio tune that he had earlier used in *Malta, G.C.* and the *Victory March* of 1945.

Finally, in the winter of 1952 Bax was among ten composers and ten poets commissioned to write a part song to be sung on the eve of the coronation. The words were written by his brother, Clifford, who like Arnold had all but abandoned creative work, and the completed manuscript - Bax's last work - was belatedly delivered on 21st February 1953. At about the same time he was asked to write incidental music for an Old Vic production of Shakespeare's *Henry VIII*, but he unhesitatingly declined, and although in conversation Bax still spoke vaguely of composing an eighth symphony, it was clearly too late. 'I do not write much these days,' he remarked, 'being comfortably off and lazy', and claimed that he had retired 'like a grocer'. It has been suggested that Bax was a victim not so much of age as of *the age*, and it is true that for many he represented an out-moded aesthetic ideal; or, as John Ireland more bluntly remarked to him, 'You know, Arnold, there's no room in

this world for a couple of romantic old sods like us'. Be that as it may, there is no denying that physical disabilities such as gout and a weak heart, aggravated by his dependence on alcohol, made the sustained creative effort of composing a much harder chore for him at nearly seventy than it would have been when he was younger. Bax was awarded the KCVO in the coronation honours list, and in September he travelled to Dublin to act as an examiner at the National University of Ireland. On 29th September he attended a concert of his works, which ended with *The Garden of Fand*, and a few days later he returned to Cork, where the following day he again acted as examiner. His last piece of 'creative' work was the draft of a speech in honour of Sir John Barbirolli. On the afternoon of 3rd October Bax was taken to the Old Head of Kinsale on the coast south of Cork. Back in the city he complained of feeling unwell and was driven back to the home of Professor Aloys Fleischmann with whom he was staying. A doctor was summoned but it was too late, and within a few hours he had passed away. The cause of death was given as a pulmonary embolism. On 6th October Bax was interred in St. Finbarr's Cemetery in Cork.

Addendum

'Alas!', wrote Sophocles, 'How swiftly the reputation of a dead man is forgotten'; and Clifford Bax, writing about John Ruskin in 1908, noted that 'In the ten years that follow the death of a prominent man his achievements undergo the severest of criticism. People imagine that the works he left must somehow have lost a portion at least of their original life'. The works of Arnold Bax were not entirely forgotten during the decade following his death, but performances and recordings were certainly few and far between. The BBC broadcast all of the symphonies during 1956-7, but the advent of an unsympathetic regime in 1960 meant that this valuable outlet for his music became more restricted than before. A further blow fell on 6th May 1964, when a disastrous fire at Chappell's (Bax's principal publisher) destroyed their stocks of his printed music, most of which has never been reissued.

The composer Anthony Payne has drawn attention to the existence of musical subcultures which are not reflected in live concert performances but exist almost exclusively in recordings, and the contrast between the enterprise of a few recording companies and the timidity of concert promoters is certainly startling. Throughout the 1960s and '70s the Baxian flag was kept flying mainly through the efforts of Richard Itter of Lyrita, and since the early 1980s Brian Couzens of Chandos has been steadily issuing a wide range of Bax's music, including several works which had never been performed before. In the forefront of this revival have been the conductors Vernon Handley and Bryden Thomson, both of them devoted and skilful exponents of 20th-century British music. A further fillip to the revival was the

comprehensive series of works broadcast by the BBC during 1983, in which it was possible to view the full range of Bax's achievement, and at the present time his music is more accessible and better appreciated than at any previous period. Whether there will ever be a revival to compare with the extraordinary Mahler boom is another matter, but there can be no doubt that Bax will always have a devoted following. The best of his scores really do have something individual to say to us, and they say it in terms which are uncompromisingly powerful and deeply moving.

ENDNOTES

¹ But see <http://qpol.qub.ac.uk/remembering-pearse-music-arnold-baxs-memorial/>: 'In the 1990s, the full score was discovered in a publisher's basement. The work was premiered and recorded in England in 1998 by the BBC Philharmonic Orchestra under Vernon Handley. During the recording, the concert pianist Margaret Fingerhut heard the sweeping melody that lies at the heart of the piece. Unaware that Bax had said that everything Pearse had done was rooted in love for Ireland, she said 'It sounds like a love-song'.'

² The short score of the *Prelude* was completed on 26th October 1927 and is headed 'III' and paginated from 31 to 42. It was thus clearly intended as the third movement of a larger work, not the third in a series. The short score that became the *First Northern Ballad* is untitled, unpaginated and dated 'Nov 1927' (i.e. *after* 'III'), which suggests that it was not conceived as part of the larger work, and the fact that the orchestral version is entitled *A Northern Ballad* suggests that at the time of its completion (1931) Bax had not planned to write any others. Furthermore, since the *Prelude* (1933) was completed *before* the *Second Northern Ballad* (1934) it seems illogical to refer to it as a *Third Northern Ballad*'.

Graham Parlett, undated (between 1988 and 1994)

Edited 2021 by David Parlett