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Author(s): Edwin Evans

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MARCH 1, 1919.

MODERN BRITISH COMPOSERS.

BY EDWIN EVANS.

II.—ARNOLD BAX.

Among the younger British composers Arnold Bax occupies a somewhat isolated position. In the first place he suffers, perhaps more than any other composer of equal standing, from the disadvantage of being inadequately represented by his published works. He is a copious composer of important orchestral and chamber music, none of which is at present accessible in print except an early Trio for pianoforte, violin, and viola, which has ceased to be characteristic of his writing. The dozen or so of pianoforte pieces and a number of songs which are available are worthy of his pen, but fail to give the true measure of his constructive capacity, which far transcends the limits of these small works, attractive though they be. Although the English publishers have been singularly lacking in enterprise, the burden of blame must in this instance not be entirely placed upon their shoulders. Arnold Bax is of a retiring disposition, not in the least disposed to press his works on unwilling recipients, and he has suffered the fate of those who passively await recognition. It has come to him now, and with the return of normal conditions in the publishing world, it is probable that many of his most important works will come to light.

Another reason for his tardy acceptance is the apparent complexity of his works. As a student he possessed an extraordinary proficiency which made light of every difficulty, and when music like Debussy's 'Nocturnes' and Strauss's 'Heldenleben' were new, he played them to his friends from the score at sight. He could read anything. Such a thing as complexity did not exist for him, and he was unable to realise its existence in his own works when performers complained of their difficulty. As a matter of fact he was right in this matter, for the complexity of his writing, even in those early days when it was most *touffu*, was more apparent than real. His early proficiency tempted him to excessive elaborations, but the structure itself was simple. His music was, however, always subtle, and largely dependent upon the interpretation of nuance, for which adequate rehearsal is indispensable. That is, unfortunately, in this country a costly honour reserved for Strauss or Scriabin, and seldom accorded to a native composer until his name has become a household word. More than once a work by Arnold Bax has been announced and indefinitely postponed at the eleventh hour because the customary 'run-through' revealed that it needed looking at more than once. Hence performances of his orchestral works, except perhaps of the ten year old Festival Overture, have seldom if ever

been adequate, and they show no tendency to increase as his reputation advances; whereas his chamber music, which is no less difficult, is making steady headway in our concert-rooms. At the moment of writing there have been recent performances of the 'Irish Elegy' and the String Quartet in G, and one is announced of the Pianoforte Quintet. Bax himself is almost reprehensibly passive in the matter, but there is a genial freemasonry among players of chamber music against which his reserve is less armed than against the pontifical patronage of conductors.

The seeming complexity of Bax's early works was in a large measure due to his love for harmonic decoration, which sometimes threatened to obscure the clarity of his design. In modern music one is constantly called upon to make a distinction between those who think in chromatics and those with whom chromatics are an accessory. In Bax's music they are an accessory, and if they seem at the first glance to occupy the foreground, this superficial impression is due in large part to the shortcomings of our musical notation, which is at best a cumbersome medium for modern musical thought. As a matter of fact, stripped of all decorative accretions and left harmonically unadorned, some of his most difficult writing resolves itself into the most innocent of diatonic progressions. Moreover, far from indulging in restless modulation, he has the peculiarity of remaining in one key longer than most of his contemporaries.

It is probably from this love for chromatic decoration that arose the legend of his Wagnerism, for since 'Tristan' there have been many musicians who cannot listen to four ascending semitones without detecting an affinity with the Bayreuth tradition. In his early works there were traces of the influence which we may call Richardian, for composers of Bax's generation receive it more frequently through the intermediary of Richard Strauss than direct from Wagner himself. It is, for instance, visible in the published Trio for violin, viola, and pianoforte, which is frequently played, precisely because it is published. That work, is, however, as already stated, no longer characteristic, and the warm harmonic texture of those which followed can only be attributed to it on the plea that Wagner too loved a warm harmonic texture. This legend of supposed Wagnerism became obtrusively insistent when the tone-poem 'Christmas Eve on the Mountains' made its appearance in 1912. Even if there were any truth in the accusation in respect of this particular composition, there were certainly other elements in it, but there is a tendency among musicians to approach a new British work with the possibly subconscious intention to discover only the elements that recall something else. It may be that the inadequately rehearsed performances prevent the definite emergence of anything but the more or less familiar, and that these passages alone make any salient impression on the receptive faculty. But there is also a deplorable tendency to expect our music, with no modern national traditions, to leap parentless from the void. It is forgotten that artistic

origins are obvious in all the greatest works of art, and that Wagner could not have been himself had he not been fathered by Beethoven, and the latter by Haydn.

Moreover, from 1913 or thereabouts a distinct change has come over Bax's writing. The harmony has become more incidental to the polyphonic interest, and the composer has become more of a 'horizontalist,' as Romain Rolland would say. In addition the harmonic flavour of his most recent works is becoming more rugged and even colder. There are in fact signs that the luxuriant growth of his early period may gradually subside into a dispassionate austerity, though that again may be no more than a phase in the evolution of a very remarkable composer.

A subsidiary feature of his writing, which may be a contributory cause of its apparent complexity, is his intense dislike of repetition. There is no prominent modern composer more immune from the prevailing habit of saying everything twice, especially when it happens to be contained in two bars. If he finds it necessary to repeat, it will always be with some harmonic modification, and these alterations necessarily give the page a complicated aspect, though the actual music may be in reality as simple as any ever written. Nevertheless there has been a visible process of simplification both in the actual *écriture musicale*, and in the curbing of the remarkable inventive fecundity which is given free play in his larger chamber works.

Arnold Bax was born in London in 1883, and entered the Royal Academy of Music in 1900, where he studied under Frederick Corder. His earliest compositions date from 1903, and include, besides the Trio which has already been referred to, 'A Celtic Song-Cycle,' both compositions being published. At an early age he came under the influence of the Neo-Celtic movement, and he has taken an absorbing interest in everything appertaining to Ireland—folk-lore, literature, music, and the glamour of the wonderful Atlantic coast. The Celtic influence is plainly visible in all his musical work, which has frequently been described as the equivalent in music to the poetry of W. B. Yeats. Its special quality is a paradoxical blend of musical thought which, however evanescent its expression, is as definite as it is concise, with a sense of mystic beauty that demands a continuous softening of outlines. The word 'atmosphere' has fallen into disrepute through being so constantly associated with nebulous writing, but here it will serve. As

with most artists who have come under the fascination of the 'Celtic fringe,' Arnold Bax's musical thought is in its essence so lucid that it loses nothing by being placed in an atmosphere which would reduce ill-defined ideas to a state of solution. He can afford the luxury of surrounding it with mystic vapours because they do not obscure it, and because his sense of beauty is so keen that he can express it by hyperbole when it suits him, though his method is generally more direct. In the end his inventiveness can always be relied upon to bring to the point of his pen whatever may be necessary to counterbalance the Celtic mirage. The sense of atmospheric beauty and the inventiveness are, in fact, compensating qualities in his work. Where one tends to fuse and to decentralise, the other is always at hand to supply new elements of cohesion. It is a curious beauty, eminently sane, and yet tinged with a certain wistfulness wherein resides at once its charm and its paradoxical nature, for to be wistful and at the same time robust is a combination of qualities that falls to few. In his larger works it enables him to allow his ideas to become fluid with the full confidence that they will not lose their plastic shape, and in smaller compositions, such as his pianoforte pieces, it gives him an unusual degree of liberty in dealing with the background before which the musical idea is presented in motion. It is from this freedom in the background that the apparent difficulty of his music arose, but it is impossible not to notice that it has constantly tended to diminish.

With the exception of the 'Festival Overture,' composed in 1909, practically all his orchestral works have the Irish tinge, which assumes a 'nationalist' aspect in the fantasy 'In the Faery Hills,' the scene of which is laid in a remote part of Kerry. The middle section is suggested by a passage from W. B. Yeats's 'Wanderings of Oisín,' which tells how this human bard sings in the presence of the faery host a 'Song of Human Joy,' which is found by these immortals to be the saddest thing in the world. One of them, weeping, seizes the harp from Oisín's hands, and flings it into a deep pool, there to rest for all time. When this demon of sadness is laid, the endless revel of the Ever-young begins anew. The general mood of the music is suggested by the sombreness of the dusky mountain side, and its activities depict the hosting of the 'Sidhe,' as the Irish faery people are called.

The two quotations which follow are very characteristic of Bax's style of this period :

(a.)

'IN THE FAERY HILLS.'

Ex. 1. *Allegro vivace.*

(a)

Violin Solo.

Celesta.

Harp.

Fl.

Clar.

Fag. sustain.

Three staves of musical notation. The top staff is a treble clef with a key signature of one flat. The middle and bottom staves are bass clefs. The music consists of eighth and sixteenth notes, with some rests. The bottom staff ends with an '&c.' symbol.

(b.) 'IN THE FAERY HILLS.'

Orchestral score for 'IN THE FAERY HILLS.' It consists of five staves. The top staff is for Flute (Fl.). The second staff is for Arpa (Arpa) and Fag. (Fag.). The third staff is for Str. (Strings) and Celli. (Celli.). The fourth staff is for Fl. (Flute) and Arpa. (Arpa.). The fifth staff is for Viola and Fag. (Fag.). The score includes dynamic markings such as *pp*, *ppp*, and *morendo rit.*. It also includes the instruction '&c.' at the end of the fifth staff.

much more so than the Concert Overture, which is of a completely different character. It reveals the festive spirit in a riotous mood, but without realism. As a piece of musical revelry it has made many friends.

'Christmas Eve in the Mountains,' to which reference has already been made, is another work with an Irish flavour. The motive of this tone-poem occurred to the composer while wandering one frosty evening in the beautiful and legended Glen-na-Smol, in County Dublin.

Then followed a set of four orchestral pieces completed in 1912 and entitled respectively 'Pensive Twilight,' 'Dance in the Sun,' 'In the Hills of Home,' and 'The Dance of Wild Iravel.' These were first performed at the orchestral concerts given by F. B. Ellis in 1914, which were also the occasion of introducing Vaughan Williams's 'London' Symphony, and other notable works.

Bax thereupon seems to have turned to Swinburne, for the 'Nympholept' of 1912, which has not yet been performed, is almost a musical

counterpart of the poem of the same name. It is an impression of a summer day in the forest, seen from a very pagan point of view. His next important work was a Symphony in four connected sections entitled 'Spring Fire.' It is an attempt to depict the first uprush and impulse of Spring in the woods, and though deriving primarily from Nature itself, the formal scheme of the composition was influenced in a large measure by the beautiful first chorus in 'Atalanta in Calydon' ('When the hounds of spring are on winter's traces'). Indeed, the exuberant and pagan qualities of much of the earlier writings of Swinburne colour the musical content of the fantasy throughout.

'The Garden of Fand' is inspired by the legend of the enchanted islands off the Atlantic shore, and penetrates more deeply into the West of Ireland mood than 'In the Faery Hills.' It is full of sea-atmosphere and of the colours of the oldest 'iomrama' or magic sea stories of Ireland. A quotation is given here:

(a.) 'THE GARDEN OF FAND.'

Ex. 2. Musical score for 'THE GARDEN OF FAND.' It consists of two systems of staves. The first system has a treble clef and a bass clef. The second system also has a treble clef and a bass clef. The score includes dynamic markings such as *poco. f*, *rocking gently.*, *p*, *mf*, *dim.*, and *pp &c.*

'Tintagel' is also a sea piece, connected with the Arthurian legends.

(To be continued.)