

**Chandos**

CHAN 8391



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**Arnold Bax** was born in the south London suburb of Streatham on 8 November 1883, and died in Cork, Eire, on 3 October 1953, just short of his 70th birthday. The facts of his life are now comparatively well known; he came from a comfortable middle-class background and during the impressionable years of his youth, his family lived at Ivy Bank, a mansion standing in some 3¼ acres in Hampstead. Bax enjoyed a charmed youth and young manhood, and having a private income (he never had to take a paid position) he was free to follow his enthusiasms as the mood took him. He studied at the Royal Academy of Music between 1900 and 1905 where his teachers were Frederick Corder for composition and Tobias Matthay for piano. Wonderfully talented as both pianist (he was celebrated for his remarkable powers as a sight-reader even of orchestral full scores) and as composer, he was never sufficiently self-disciplined to make a career as a performer, and took quite a long time in establishing himself as a composer.

As a young man Bax embraced the country of Ireland and the literary movement associated with the 'Celtic Twilight', and during his developing years he had time to write Yeatsian verse, short stories and four plays, using the pseudonym of 'Dermot O'Byrne'.

He soaked up influences, yet from the first his personality shone through in almost all his music. Wagner, Strauss, Elgar, the Russians, Debussy, and later Sibelius: he responded to them all and from these varied elements the catalyst of Irish folk music and dance enabled him to forge a highly personal, and instantly recognisable, musical style.

After writing music in all forms except opera and oratorio, Bax was knighted and made Master of the Musick; at the end of his life he wrote the incidental music for two then celebrated films, *Malta GC* and *Oliver Twist*, which became very popular, but in his last years he had virtually stopped composing.

Bax wrote chamber music almost from the first. While still a student two string quartets appeared (the slow movement of the second of them subsequently being orchestrated as the tone poem *Cathleen ni Hoolihan*)

while a piano trio with viola instead of cello (the instrumentation doubtless influenced by the viola player Lionel Tertis) was his first published instrumental work. In 1908 appeared a massive String Quintet — more a symphony for strings than a true chamber work — and just before the Great War he started the large scale Piano Quintet, which was often heard in the inter-war years. Later came a trio for flute, viola and harp, three numbered string quartets, the piano quartet, quintets with oboe and with harp, and a one-movement quintet for strings, two sextets (with cor-anglais and harp, and bassoon and harp, respectively) and one each for septet, octet and nonet. His last chamber work was a piano trio, (with which he celebrated the end of the Second World War), written for the pianist Harry Isaacs.

The three scores on this record immediately follow each other in the catalogue of Bax's chamber music, their composition spanning the four years at the close of the Great War, when Bax was launched on the musical scene as a big name, and when, in his late thirties, he was at the height of his powers.

### Piano Quartet

Apparently written during 1922 while Bax was orchestrating his First Symphony, this one movement work reflects — albeit on a much smaller scale — some of the problems Bax had with that stormy score. The opening of the Piano Quartet is grim and aggressive, a preoccupation contrasting strongly with the sad wistfulness and broad bardic tunefulness of the later ideas. Bax thus appears in the quartet to be torn between grim contemporary realities and an earlier more romantic existence. The main statement of the second subject against running semiquavers in the piano is strongly reminiscent of his more expansive earlier scores, the Piano Quintet and the first two Violin Sonatas. A clue to what Bax had in mind may be found in the title which he gave the work when he later orchestrated it for piano and chamber orchestra as *Saga Fragment*. What saga might be in the mind of a man who now found Eire, his land of heart's desire, at Civil War, one leaves to the listener to decide.

## Harp Quintet

Written about a year after the First Quartet, at the time of his first visit to Ireland since before the Great War, this striking score was not heard until February 1921. The harpist then was Gwendolen Mason (whose technique probably influenced Bax's treatment of the harp here, as Korchińska certainly did in his later works with harp) and the quartet, as in the First Quartet, was the Philharmonic, to whose violist, Raymond Jeremy, it is dedicated. The Quintet is in one movement, and of its two principal themes the first four notes of the first constitute a motif which recurs in the second. As in all his works with harp, the quality of the actual sound is important: a climax early in the piece, *Molto Vivace*, for tremolando string, for example, is reminiscent of the orchestra; in a later passage muted strings are contrasted softly with the tone colour of the harp, while the occasional use of harp harmonics adds to Bax's varied and colourful palette.

## String Quartet No 1 in G major

It is said that this uncomplicated score was Bax's response to criticisms that his music was becoming over-complex. In three movements it was written in the early spring of 1918 and first performed at the Aeolian Hall, London, by the Philharmonic Quartet on 7 June 1918. Publication followed in 1921 with a dedication to Elgar, and between the wars for a time it became the modern quartet most frequently played in the UK, and it was twice recorded on 78s.

The first movement's *Allegretto semplice* is genial and tuneful, possibly the parallel with the quartets of Dvořák most nearly evokes its sound. The general mood is joyful, though — as might be expected in a work written in the last year of the Great War — more reflective interludes keep breaking through.

The prevailing mood of the second movement, *Lento e molto espressivo*, is elegiac: with its muted middle section underlining the

feeling of a sorrowing threnody. In this movement we find a brief quotation from Elgar's Violin Concerto.

In the finale all three themes have an Irish flavour: two vigorous dancing ideas constitute the main span of the movement, but at its heart appears a gorgeously memorable 'Irish' tune. Bax only plays it twice, its transience underlining, perhaps, the deeper message of the slow movement. Bax claimed the tune was original; commentators have suggested various possibilities, and the present writer feels it may well have derived from the folk tune 'The Lament of Fanaid Grove' which was recorded as a cello encore by Bax's friend Beatrice Harrison. However, Aloys Fleischmann's contention that Bax has produced a composite tune drawn from various folksongs may well prove to be accurate.

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## English String Quartet

The new **English String Quartet** was born as a natural extension of the renowned Cummings String Trio. On several occasions the Trio was asked to take part in performances of quintets — with either piano or oboe or guitar — which also needed the participation of a second violin and which are normally in the repertoire of established String Quartets. The violinist John Trusler, a friend of the Trio and a very experienced player, was asked to join Diana Cummings, Luciano Iorio and Geoffrey Thomas on those occasions. The result was so successful that the four players started to include string quartets in their programmes, and eventually decided to continue working together as the English String Quartet. Many concerts have followed since, always with great success, and this is one of two first recordings now being issued by Chandos.



## John McCabe

Now in his early forties, John McCabe has an increasing international reputation as both composer and pianist. In the latter capacity, he is particularly well-known as an interpreter of Haydn's Piano Sonatas, which he has recorded, and of much contemporary music. He has composed works of all kinds, including two operas, two ballets, three symphonies, three piano concertos, two violin concertos, *The Chagall Windows* for orchestra, and the song cycle for soprano and orchestra *Notturmo ed Alba*.

His versatility was demonstrated in 1978 when, at the Royal Festival Hall in London, the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra gave the world premiere of his Third Symphony, following which McCabe appeared as soloist in Mozart's C minor Piano Concerto K491. His dual career has taken him to many countries, including six visits to the USA and two to Australia, and in 1981 he was the featured composer/pianist at the Hong Kong Arts Festival.

John McCabe was appointed Director of the London College of Music in 1983.

## Skaila Kanga

**Skaila Kanga** was born in Bombay, India, daughter of the eminent violinist Homi Kanga. She studied the harp with Tina Bonifacio and the piano at the Royal Academy of Music. She has numerous recording dates for films, television, radio and records to her credit and has two highly successful duos with the harmonica virtuoso Tommy Reilly and the oboist Malcolm Messiter. She has fulfilled engagements with all the London orchestras and appeared at many music festivals in Britain and abroad. She has also played with many chamber groups and is a member of the Nash Ensemble.

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# **ARNOLD BAX (1883~1953)**

**1 Piano Quartet (12:32)**  
In one movement — Allegro moderato

**2 Harp Quintet (15:30)**  
In one movement — Tempo moderato

**String Quartet No. 1 in G major (24:42)**  
**3** I — Allegretto semplice (8:49)  
**4** II — Lento e molto espressivo (9:06)  
**5** III — Allegro vivace (6:32)

**JOHN McCABE** *piano*

**SKAILA KANGA** *harp*

**ENGLISH STRING QUARTET:**

Diana Cummings *violin*, John Trusler *violin*

Luciano Iorio *viola*, Geoffrey Thomas *cello*

**DDD**

Recording Producers: Brian Couzens and Martin Compton. Sound Engineer: Ralph Couzens. Assisting Engineer: Bill Todd.

Recorded in the Church of St. George the Martyr, Bloomsbury, London, January 23–25 1983.

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