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ARNOLD BAX: Quintet for Oboe and String Quartet

Born in a London suburb on 8 November 1883, Arnold Bax died in Cork, Eire, on 3 October 1953. Coming from a comfortable middle-class background, and having a private income (he never had to take a paid position) he was always free to follow his enthusiasms as the mood took him. After studying at the Royal Academy of Music with Frederick Corder (composition) and Tobias Matthay (piano), he fell in love with the country, legends and people of Ireland and embraced the literary movement associated with the 'Celtic Twilight' and wrote Yeatsian verse, short stories and four plays using the pseudonym of 'Dermot O'Byrne'. The folkmusic of Ireland was important too, though only rarely did he allow himself the luxury of using an actual folksong.

The Oboe Quintet immediately followed Bax's orchestration of his First Symphony. The autumn of 1922 was a very busy one for Bax: not only did the symphony take him until 8 October (for a première in December) but he was also involved in a host of other performances with all the practical problems these would involve. Almost as a relaxation, it seems, he wrote this quintet for Leon Goossens, the manuscript of the first movement being dated '1 Nov 1922' and the whole work 'Xmas 1922'.

The Quintet is in three movements. The outer ones are quick, the first prefaced by a rhapsodic *Tempo molto moderato*, while the finale is a wild Irish dance. In that last movement comes a mysterious *Piu Lento* interlude in which all the strings are muted, with an effect reminiscent of similar passages in his orchestral scores. The texture is often surprisingly rich, suggesting the orchestra may not have been far from Bax's mind (and, in fact, Sir John Barbirolli did play the work as a concerto for oboe and string orchestra). The slow movement is an atmospheric *Lento espressivo*, starting with a 40-bar passage for the strings alone. Here and elsewhere appear tunes which sound folk-inflected, but are apparently original. Does Bax allude to an actual folksong in the finale when what sounds like the opening theme of the slow movement of Brahms's Fourth Symphony makes a brief, vigorous, appearance? (An idea, too, that appears in Stanford's Irish Symphony). One other fascinating feature of the work is the extended *ad lib* cadenza-like interludes in which the oboe plays unaccompanied or against a quiet sustained string chord.

The Quintet was first performed at one of those society concerts that were held in West End hotels between the wars, in this case a Mrs Adele Maddison Chamber Concert at the Hyde Park Hotel where it was played on 11 May 1924 by its dedicatee, Leon Goossens, and the then newly-founded Kutcher Quartet

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HOLST:
Air and Variations for Oboe and String Quartet (1896)
Three Pieces for Oboe and String Quartet Op. 2 (1896, revised 1910)

Nearly all of Holst's chamber music was composed before he was thirty. Only two works date from his maturity, and one of them, the Phantasy String Quartet of 1916, was withdrawn soon after its first performance (it has been revised for string orchestra by Imogen Holst as 'Fantasia on Hampshire Folksongs'). The other is the *Terzetto* for flute, oboe and viola, composed in 1925, and Holst had doubts about that work as well, saying that it would 'probably be either chamber music or waste paper'. Fortunately it turned out to be the former: but it is clear that chamber music was not a natural medium for Holst.

A number of early works, however, are worth a second look, including several very early pieces for strings, the *Wind Quintet* of 1903, and, of course, the music recorded here for the first time, whose history is rather a curious one.

In 1896 Holst composed a set of 'Fantasiestücke' (Fantasy Pieces), Opus 2, for oboe and string quartet. He was twenty two, and still a student at the Royal College of Music, but the fact that he gave the work an opus number is evidence that he was beginning to have confidence in his abilities as a composer. But it is not clear that the work was ever performed in this form, and the only existing manuscript is fragmentary: it consists of a movement headed 'Air and Variations' and only half a bar of a 'Tempo di Marcia'.

In 1910 Holst revised the work, and it became 'Three Pieces for Oboe and String Quartet': the first performance took place in 1911, but it has only been played a

handful of times since. He did not use the 'Air and Variations', but began with a March (whose opening is identical to the half-bar fragment), following it with a Minuet and Scherzo. These are almost certainly reworkings of the earlier 'Fantasiestücke', but there is no way of knowing: the non-autograph manuscript is, however, still designated Opus 2, and Holst added '1896 revised 1910' on the title page.

The discarded movement (there may of course have been others) is certainly worth rescuing, not least because of its unusual form: beginning with a placid *Andante*, the variations become increasingly faster until they reach *Allegro molto*. It is included here as a separate movement, though it may be thought of as an introduction to the 'Three Pieces'.

The 'March' falls into three sections: the first rather perky, with the oboe playing mainly in its low register, then what seems to be a trio section at double speed. But the return of the march is combined in doubled note values with the trio, so that it is developed rather than merely recapitulated. The 'Minuet' too is most unconventional in shape, bearing hardly any relationship to the classical model. The third piece, on the other hand, is a straightforward Scherzo and Trio, yet it too breaks away from the mould. Whereas the first two pieces (and the 'Air and Variations') were all in G major, only the Trio is in the relative E minor, while the Scherzo begins ambiguously, to end in an uncompromising A minor.

There are hardly any signs of the mature composer in these pieces, apart from the craftsmanship which he evidently learned early on. But nor are they derivative: even at this stage in his career Holst was an individual.

COLIN MATTHEWS

E. J. MOERAN:
Fantasy Quartet for Oboe and Strings

Ernest John Moeran was born on 31 December 1894 and died on his 56th birthday. The son of an Anglican clergyman of Irish extraction, he grew up on the Norfolk coast and always remained a countryman. He was the last of the generation of folksong collector-composers that included Vaughan Williams and Percy Grainger. Moeran's use of folksong allied with the impressionism of Debussy and Ravel was considered 'modern' in the early 1920s; yet these stylistic elements plus the examples of the music of Vaughan Williams, Sibelius and Bax, were welded by him into an art that transcends stylistic models with a strongly personal voice.

Moeran studied with Stanford before the Great War and with John Ireland after it, and collected his first folksongs in 1915 while his regiment was stationed in Norfolk. Later, in France, some shrapnel lodged in Moeran's head, and this may have been responsible for his later instability. Until 1925 his music developed strongly, and he produced several notable scores in quick succession. Then he shared Philip Heseltine's cottage at Aynsford for three years, and was introduced to a life dominated by the pub, which exacerbated his depressive personality: his war wound meant that alcohol quickly left him incapable. Composition began to be more difficult, his Symphony in G minor taking over ten years, and his Second Symphony was never brought to completion.

Moeran loved Ireland and spent much time there, particularly in the 1930s, and some thought of him as an Irish composer. Irish folksong was important, and he collected his first examples while still in the army in 1918. He was surprised to notice the resemblance between the folksongs he knew from Norfolk and some of those he found in Ireland. Irish dance rhythms too, are never far away in his music.

Moeran wrote a number of delightful chamber works, including a Violin Sonata, a String Trio and a Piano Trio, and two String Quartets. The one movement *Fantasy Quartet* on this record was written during 1946 at Rockland St Mary, Norfolk, and reflects his delight in the countryside of his boyhood. One commentator has traced snatches of two Norfolk folk tunes in it — *Seventeen Come Sunday*, and *The Pretty Ploughboy* — but the tunes themselves are never heard in full. Moeran was a great railways enthusiast and it has been suggested that one sequence in the G minor Symphony was a portrayal of a train; could it be that in this

chamber work the railway rhythms in the middle and towards the end perhaps suggest some Norfolk 'local' of forty years ago?

Also dedicated to the oboist Leon Goossens, the quartet was first performed by him with the Carter String Trio, at one of the post war New London Concerts, on December 8 1946, at the Cambridge Theatre, London.

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GORDON JACOB:
Quartet for Oboe and Strings

Gordon Jacob was born on 5 July 1895 and died, aged 88, on 8 June 1984. He served in the Great War before going to the Royal College of Music to study with Stanford and Howells, and subsequently taught several generations of British composers during a forty year career at the RCM. His students there included Malcolm Arnold, Imogen Holst, Anthony Hopkins and Elizabeth Maconchy.

As a composer he has tended to be valued for his versatility in producing works for a large variety of instrumental forces, and for any occasion, including music for Itma and for Noël Coward's ballet *London Morning*. He also made orchestrations for a number of other ballets and wrote music for films. However, Jacob's 'big' works — including two symphonies, two viola concerti and a violin concerto, have not been sufficiently differentiated from his voluminous *gebrauchsmusik* for him to receive his proper due: in producing urbane and eminently playable music for any conceivable instrument and occasion, we may find that a number of ostensibly occasional works merit a more serious assessment.

The Oboe Quartet, in four short movements, was also written for Leon Goossens. Dating from 1938 it was published in 1940. After the mellifluous opening *Allegro moderato*, a very soft held chord in the strings leads into the headlong Scherzo, a movement characterised by the alternation of 12/8 and 6/8, and by the opening fugato, introduced by the capering violin which is joined by the other strings in turn. The singing *Andante semplice* slow movement eschews profundities, while the short neoclassical Rondo finale is reminiscent of Holst in its shifting stresses and vigorous tunefulness.

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SARAH FRANCIS:

Sarah Francis won a scholarship to the Royal College of Music, and a Boise Travelling Scholarship to Paris. She made her first concerto appearance at the Royal Festival Hall at the age of 18 and has broadcast for the BBC since she was 19 in both recitals and concerto performances including the Proms.

She has played throughout the United Kingdom, making several appearances at the Aldeburgh and Cheltenham International Festivals. Many composers have written works for her. She has also played and broadcast in Germany, Holland, Scandinavia and Switzerland.

Her previous recordings include Mozart's oboe quartet, Britten's *Metamorphoses* and *Phantasy Quartet* and, with the London Symphony Orchestra, Gordon Crosse's oboe concerto 'Ariadne' which was written for her. She has also recorded all the Boccherini oboe Quintets. Sarah Francis is a professor at the Royal College of Music and director of the London Harpsichord Ensemble.

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, who 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.

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ARNOLD BAX
(1883–1953)

Quintet for Oboe and String Quartet (18:06)

- 1 I — Tempo molto moderato —
Allegro moderato 5:55
- 2 II — Lento espressivo 7:31
- 3 III — Allegro giocoso 4:28

GUSTAV HOLST
(1874–1934)

4 Air and Variations for Oboe and String Quartet (3:02)

Three Pieces for Oboe and String Quartet

- 5 I — March 3:29
- 6 II — Minuet 5:10
- 7 III — Scherzo 3:49

E.J. MOERAN
(1894–1950)

8 Fantasy Quartet for Oboe and Strings
In one movement — Allegro moderato
(12:30)

GORDON JACOB
(1895–1984)

Quartet for Oboe and Strings (22:15)

- 9 I — Allegro moderato 7:00
- 10 II — Scherzo: Allegro molto 3:34
- 11 III — Andante semplice 7:08
- 12 IV — Rondo: Allegro molto 4:17

TT = 68:49

DDD

SARAH FRANCIS *oboe*
ENGLISH STRING QUARTET:
Diana Cummings violin, John Trusler violin
Luciano Iorio viola, Geoffrey Thomas cello