

BAX

Piano Sonatas Nos. 1 and 2 Dream in Exile • Nereid

Ashley Wass



Arnold Bax (1883-1953): Piano Works • 1 Piano Sonatas Nos. 1 and 2 • Dream in Exile • Nereid

Arnold Bax was one of a group of talented young pianist-composers who emerged from London's Royal Academy of Music in the years immediately after 1900. They included York Bowen, Benjamin Dale and Paul Corder, all pupils of Tobias Matthay for piano and Frederick Corder for composition. At much the same time the pianists Myra Hess, Irene Scharrer, and a little later Harriet Cohen were all Matthay pupils, and of course they played Bax's music. While Bax took many years to make a career, his contemporary York Bowen was an immediate hit both as pianist and composer and appeared at Queen's Hall in his own music while still a student. Yet Bowen's orchestral music is now largely forgotten while Bax is widely known.

Bax wrote in almost all conventional forms excluding opera (though he unsuccessfully attempted opera more than once). With seven symphonies, concertos, many orchestral works including the familiar tone poem *Tintagel*, choral music, many chamber works, songs and piano music his would eventually be a large output and between the wars at least he was certainly seen as a major figure, a stature rewarded by a knighthood in the Coronation Honours List in 1937. Against his better judgement he became the Master of the King's Musick in 1942 after the death of Walford Davies.

Bax's early life was dominated by the keyboard and in his twenties he appeared in concerts playing his own music. Though not a regular concert pianist such was his pianism that he tended to be called on when others failed. Thus in February 1909 he accompanied Debussy songs in the composer's presence, and in January 1914 did the same for Schoenberg's songs when the booked pianist withdrew at the last minute.

But after the First World War he played in public increasingly rarely, although he did make two recordings, of Delius's *First Violin Sonata* and his own *Viola Sonata* in May and June 1929. The fire in Bax's romantic pianism is evident in both, with his generous phrasing and left hand articulation, and while Delius is reported as finding Bax's playing too forceful for his music, we might feel it gives it some fibre.

Bax's solo piano music consists of four big-boned sonatas written between 1910 and 1934, and a couple of dozen highly characteristic shorter pieces many of them technically in the shadow of Debussy or Scriabin. There was also the original version, a sonata, of what in 1922 became his *First Symphony*, and a dozen or so alternative versions of orchestral works, and short late piano pieces unpublished in his lifetime.

The shorter piano pieces were mainly written between 1915 and 1920 and include impressionistic miniatures such as *The Princess's Rose Garden*, *Apple-Blossom Time* and *A Romance*. Bax's well-known liaison with the pianist Harriet Cohen started in 1915 and many of his short piano pieces were dedicated to her. Indeed this resulted in rivalry between Harriet ('Tanya' to her circle) and Myra Hess in the playing of Bax's piano music. Yet Harriet Cohen had small hands and this later caused her to avoid the heavier demands of concertos by Brahms and Rachmaninov. Curiously, Bax's writing, particularly in his works for piano and orchestra, are seemingly oblivious of her problems, Bax not limiting his expression by his champion's difficulties.

Much of Bax's early music must have arisen from improvisation at the piano, an approach that led him to invent harmony which, used in a colouristic way, must

then have sounded startlingly modern. His inspiration was the new piano music of the Russians, especially Scriabin, and his habit, in the days before recording or broadcasting, of playing recent orchestral scores at the piano, often as a duet with his friend the pianist Arthur Alexander, was a powerful influence. They played through Glazunov's symphonies in this way, indulging in all manner of pianistic 'in jokes' with each other – friends said they should go on the halls as 'Bax and Frontz'. Bax's preoccupation with the piano led him to write many songs whose headlong accompaniments, complex and virtuosic, tell us a lot about Bax the pianist in his early twenties.

Bax's early years were closely associated with Ireland where he spent much time in the far west absorbing both the musical and literary atmosphere. Here he developed his literary alter ego Dermot O'Byrne, publishing poetry, short stories and plays. The Easter Rising in Dublin in 1916, though viewed by Bax from England, came as a personal blow and is reflected in various scores of the time. Bax's shorter pieces were not all sunlit idylls, and in such darker scores as the piano pieces *Winter Waters* and *What the Minstrel Told Us* it seems probable that there may be some programmatic elements from this time. This is a sensibility reflected in our programme in *Dream in Exile* and the *Second Sonata*.

Bax's romantic *First Piano Sonata in F sharp minor* was written in the Ukraine in the early summer of 1910 during a romantic adventure which he describes in his autobiography. In a turbulent Lisztian single movement it was first played by Myra Hess as *Romantic Tone-Poem* in April 1911, and then varied and extended until, renamed *Sonata*, it was played by Harriet Cohen at one of her earliest recitals in June 1920 and again by her when revised for publication in 1921.

In this 'Russian' sonata, colouristic effects abound, particularly at the bottom of the keyboard. The dark-hued images that Bax conjures certainly appear to have been written with some other palette in mind than the black and white of the piano. The characteristics of the music that strike one immediately are its passion and its onward sweep, developing the material organically into a large-scale structure. In this work Bax does not offer us musical picture postcards as he does in the short, Russian-oriented, *May Night in the Ukraine* which he wrote in 1912 and dedicated to his female companions in Russia 'Olga and Natalie'. The 'broad and triumphant' coda is punctuated by a vivid pianistic impression of the wild pealing of Russian cathedral bells, the bells that Bax heard as he first arrived in St Petersburg. Frank Merrick has suggested that 'the bells in Bax's coda may well have been inspired by those of the Cathedral of St Isaac . . . I was there for a fortnight in that very year . . . and had hardly reached my room in an hotel when those wonderful bells did their remarkable performance, twice in close succession. Bax does not use the actual motif with which the tiny bells began and ended, but what he has written has several points which lead me to think that it was from the bells of this very Cathedral that he was helped to plan his superb ending to the sonata.'

The *Second Sonata*, still in one movement, is much grimmer in character, though also epic in treatment and is dated 19th July 1919. Bax does not give us a specific programme, but we might well assume it to be related to the First World War, or more likely, again the tragedy of the Easter Rising, which is hinted at in the folk-like second subject of the first section. The sonata was first performed by Bax's friend Arthur Alexander in November that year, though on the manuscript Harriet Cohen has written a dedication to herself and when the revised version appeared in June 1920 she

was the pianist. In a letter to Tilly Fleischmann Bax admitted the Sonata was 'concerned with the warring forces of light and darkness'.

The sonata, which plays continuously, broadly subsumes elements of three movements with two new themes in the middle section and the motif of the long threatening introduction to the sonata returning to mark the third. Here, material from the previous two sections are juxtaposed and the work ends with the motif from the introduction now in the major, all passion spent.

The journey from the ominous, foreboding introduction with its distinctive motif (perhaps a 'fate' motif) through the heroic first subject, marked 'Brazen and glitteringly' to the contrasted folk-like second theme, first introduced very quietly, gives the music an enormous emotional span. Bax launches his middle section with a typical lyrical reverie marked to be played '*very still and concentrated*' but in the space of four minutes his tune is itself found to be heroic, setting the literal return of the sonata's opening into striking contrast.

By this time we have thoroughly convinced ourselves that Bax's epic score must reflect the composer's autobiographical response to the recently ended war or the Easter Rising, or both. Bax reviews his themes in his third section, a movement of conspicuous drama and contrast. Then the tune from the slow movement returns to be played '*very simply*', and suddenly one begins to wonder if he is more than hinting at the opening phrase of his song *Roundel*, at Chaucer's words 'Your ey-en two wol slay me sodenly'. Is Bax, who had only recently left his wife and family for Harriet Cohen, writing a quite different sort of musical autobiography? Or rather, is he celebrating the human condition out of his own experience. The sonata ends as the 'fate' motif from

the introduction returns, briefly threatens, but soon becomes a distant muttering, as the light and Bax's vision slowly fades.

Written in February 1916, *Dream in Exile: Intermezzo* is dedicated to Bax's piano teacher Tobias Matthay, and was first championed by Myra Hess. The manuscript has Bax's first thoughts for the title, *Capriccio* and *Intermezzo*, deleted, the title we know it by appearing on the printed score in 1918. The piece was written less than two months before the Easter Rising in Dublin in which many of his Irish friends were killed. It seems probable that in retrospect, for him it became another of those elegiac Irish memorial pieces which he wrote at this time, Bax dreaming of his land of hearts content before the catharsis.

The knock-about *Burlesque* first appeared in 1920 and may well have been written the same year. Without dedication when it was first published, Bax later inscribed it to the pianist Iso Elinson, a Second World War neighbour, when it was reissued in 1945. In 1920 it was his first work to be issued by his publisher Murdoch and Murdoch. With its succession of unequal phrases and rapidly shifting harmony it is surely a response to what Bax had heard at the Russian Ballet, which he had worshipped before the war and which had returned to London late in 1918.

Dated 24th March 1916, *Nereid* is one of the several piano pieces Bax dedicated to Harriet Cohen. First given the title *Ideala* it acquired its present title as Bax revised it into the published version which appeared in 1919. Harriet Cohen played it in her recital at the Wigmore Hall in June 1920, and this was probably its first performance. Later she published an extended account of interpreting the piece in her book *Music's Handmaid*, remarking 'Bax has often told me that he considers his music to be directly derived from nature. When he wrote this piece . . . he had vaguely

in mind some sort of water nymph of Greek mythological times.’ In a newspaper interview Bax himself described it as ‘nothing but tone colour – changing effects of tone’.

In January 1915, at a tea party at the Corders, the nineteen-year-old Harriet Cohen appeared wearing as a decoration a single daffodil, and Bax wrote almost overnight the piano piece *To a Maiden with a Daffodil*; he was smitten! Over the next week two more pieces for her followed, the last being the pastiche Russian

vignette *In a Vodka Shop*, dated 22nd January 1915. It illustrates, however, Bax’s problem trying to keep his rival lady piano-champions happy, for Myra Hess gave the first performance at London’s Grafton Galleries on 29th April 1915, and as a consequence the printed score bears a dedication to her.

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Ashley Wass



The young British pianist, Ashley Wass, is recognised as one of the rising stars of his generation. Only the second British pianist in twenty years to reach the finals of the Leeds Piano Competition (in 2000), he was the first British pianist ever to win the top prize at the World Piano Competition in 1997. He appeared in the 'Rising Stars' series at the 2001 Ravinia Festival and his promise has been further acknowledged by the BBC, who selected him to be a New Generations Artist over two seasons. Ashley Wass studied at Chethams Music School and won a scholarship to the Royal Academy of Music to study with Christopher Elton and Hamish Milne. He was made an Associate of the Royal Academy in 2002. In 2000/1 he was a participant at the Marlboro Music Festival, playing chamber music with musicians such as Mitsuko Uchida, Richard Goode and David Soyer. He has given recitals at most of the major British concert halls including the Wigmore Hall, Queen Elizabeth Hall, Purcell Room, Bridgewater Hall and St David's Hall. His concerto performances have included Beethoven and Brahms with the Philharmonia, Mendelssohn with the Orchestre National de Lille and Mozart with the Vienna Chamber Orchestra at the Vienna Konzerthaus and the Brucknerhaus in Linz. He has also worked with Sir Simon Rattle and the City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra, the London Mozart Players, the BBC Scottish Symphony Orchestra and the BBC Philharmonic. He recorded Poulenc's *Piano Concerto* with the BBC Concert Orchestra and Beethoven's *Third Piano Concerto* with the BBC Philharmonic and Vassily Sinaisky, featured as a *BBC Music Magazine* cover CD. He appeared in a gala concert at Buckingham Palace to mark the Golden Jubilee of Queen Elizabeth II, a performance broadcast live to millions of viewers around the world, and in 2002 opened the Hong Kong Philharmonic's concert season with Beethoven's *First Piano Concerto*. His career continues with numerous recitals throughout Britain, and recital débuts in Cuba, Sweden and Israel. Ashley Wass made his début recording in 1999 with an acclaimed solo recital disc of works by César Franck for Naxos (8.554484). He is also much in demand as a chamber musician and has already collaborated with some of the leading artists of his generation. In 2003 he formed the Denali Trio with violinist Jesse Mills and cellist Sarah Carter, the artists having previously collaborated at the Marlboro and Ravinia Festivals in the United States. Their début tour of Britain in February 2004 was an outstanding success, winning enthusiastic reviews and resulting in a host of other invitations on both sides of the Atlantic.



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8.557439

Playing Time
74:27

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Although best known for his symphonic poems such as *Tintagel*, Bax also wrote prolifically for the piano. His early life was dominated by the keyboard and in his twenties he appeared in concerts playing his own music and that of famous European contemporaries. On this first volume of the complete piano works, two epic sonatas are combined with impressionistic miniatures. The *First Sonata*, a turbulent Lisztian single movement abounding in colouristic effects, particularly at the bottom of the keyboard, was inspired by the new piano music of the Russians, particularly that of Scriabin. The foreboding *Second Sonata* was described by the composer himself as ‘concerned with the warring forces of light and darkness’, perhaps an autobiographical response to the recently ended war or the Easter Rising or both.

Arnold
BAX
(1883-1953)

Piano Works • 1

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|---|--|-------|
| 1 | Piano Sonata No. 1 in F sharp minor (1910) | 22:28 |
| 2 | Piano Sonata No. 2 (1919) | 27:57 |
| 3 | Dream in Exile: Intermezzo (1916) | 11:50 |
| 4 | Burlesque (1920) | 3:02 |
| 5 | Nereid (1919) | 4:45 |
| 6 | In a Vodka Shop (1915) | 3:59 |

Ashley Wass

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