



## Arnold BAX (1883–1953): Piano Quintet in G minor

## Frank BRIDGE (1879–1940): Piano Quintet in D minor

Arnold Bax was a major creative force in British composition during the inter-war years. He was prolific in most genres (apart from opera), but the backbone of his achievement was a cycle of seven symphonies spanning the years 1922 to 1939, as well as a series of colourful tone poems such as *The Garden of Fand* (1913-16) and *Tintagel* (1917-19). After his death it was largely the latter work which kept his name alive in the concert hall. Bax's music is overtly late-Romantic in character, a blend of lush chromaticism, broad melodies and brilliant orchestral sonorities, a skill that he learnt, in particular, from the late-nineteenth-century Russian nationalists, as well as Strauss and Debussy. The major formative influence on him, however, was not musical, rather it was through a country – Ireland – and the poetry of W.B. Yeats, that he found himself. From his late teens Ireland was his spiritual home, its landscape, folklore and literature his prime inspiration. He was knighted in 1937 and in 1942 was appointed Master of the King's Musick. Bax also possessed considerable literary talents; as a young man he published poetry under the pseudonym Dermot O'Byrne, and he wrote a fascinating autobiography *Farewell, My Youth* (1943).

The *Piano Quintet*, one of the first works of Bax's maturity, was composed during 1914-15, and dedicated to Bax's friend, the critic Edwin Evans. Its première was given privately on 19th December 1917 by Harriet Cohen and the English String Quartet. The first public performance was on 12th May 1920 with Fanny Davies and the Bohemian Quartet. With its conception on a grand, expansive scale, its cyclic use of thematic material in the first and third movements, and the adoption of an epilogue at the end of the work, the *Quintet* may be deemed a precursor of the symphonies that were to follow. In addition the influence of Celtic music is fully absorbed by Bax for the first time here, and the work's myriad musical material is subjected to a constant process of evolution as he exploits all manner of harmonic and instrumental colours to superb effect.

The overall character of the first movement is

passionate and tempestuous, created around three principal ideas: a yearning theme introduced by the cello over rippling piano figuration; a crisp rhythmic theme played by the piano with the hint of a dance, and by contrast to the prevailing mood, a tranquil Celtic melody, also presented by the piano marked 'singing softly'. Both the piano writing and the surging chromatic climaxes are redolent of sea images, suggestive of the tone poems *The Garden of Fand* and *Tintagel* that followed hard on the heels of the *Quintet*. In a movement of luxuriant invention, a highlight is an eerie passage with muted strings indicated to be played 'like a chant'.

Just one bar of emphatic string pizzicato chords ushers in the main idea of the slow movement, a 'cool and clear' song without words of lyrical melancholic beauty, again clearly of Celtic roots. It is contrasted by 'cold and unemotional' chorale-like passages for the strings, accompanied by an obsessive rhythm on the piano which hints at an affinity with the second idea of the opening movement, as well as a nonchalant fragment of a folksong-like melody on the viola. During the climactic section in the middle of the movement, the piano figuration evokes images of waves as above the strings soar with the song.

The finale is impressive in the manner in which Bax uses the same three main ideas of the first movement to create a wholly different mood. It commences with an introductory section where, over a wash of piano texture marked 'vague', the opening two themes of the first movement return, the cello theme now on violin and viola, and the persistent rhythmic idea again on piano. After a gradual crescendo as the music gets faster, the latter is transformed into an ebullient heady dance. Later the third theme from the first movement is heard 'singing plaintively' on the cello over an extended piano pedal-point and the obsessive rhythm. The tempo of the Introduction returns to usher in the Epilogue in which the first theme is transformed yet again, and others are reviewed as this work of powerful musical imagination and emotional force reaches its conclusion.

Frank Bridge was a composition pupil of Stanford at the Royal College of Music where he also studied violin. Apart from composing, his career embraced playing the viola in string quartets, conducting and teaching, although his sole composition pupil was Britten. Perhaps no other British composer of the first half of the twentieth century undertook such a stylistic journey in his music. His early works, such as the *Phantasy Piano Trio* (1907), and the orchestral suite *The Sea* (1910-11), follow in the late-Romantic tradition bearing kinship with Brahms and Fauré; subsequently, in the orchestral tone poem *Summer* (1914), for instance, Bridge comes close to the nature music of Delius. After the First World War, however, his music became intense and chromatic as in the Scriabinesque *Piano Sonata* (1921-4). The radical language of the sonata was pursued in his chamber works of the 1920s so that in the *Third String Quartet* (1926) Bridge rubs shoulders with early works of the Second Viennese School. Also in this decade belong two orchestral masterpieces, *Enter Spring* (1927) and *Oration* (1930). Finding little favour with public or critics alike, his late work, for example the *Fourth String Quartet* (1934-8), languished and it was not until the 1970s that Bridge's legacy began to be reassessed.

The *Piano Quintet* belongs to Bridge's first creative period. Initially it was conceived in four movements composed during 1904-5; in this form it received its first private performance on 28th May 1907 played by Harold Samuel and a quartet including Bridge himself. The first public performance took place on 14th June when Thomas Dunhill was the pianist with the Erinson Quartet. Bridge was dissatisfied with aspects of the work, however, and withdrew it; he radically revised it in 1912 when he virtually rewrote the first movement although keeping its thematic ideas, recomposed the finale's development section, as well as shortening the movement, lightened the piano textures throughout, and, most importantly, compressed the two middle movements into one. This last aspect reflected what Bridge had learnt through composing works for the Cobbett Prize, which had been established by the chamber music enthusiast Walter Wilson Cobbett as a means of encouraging composers to revive the English

seventeenth-century instrumental 'fantasy' or 'phantasy' form in which several unrelated, but varied sections, formed the basis for an extended work. Bridge won the first prize twice and subsequently adopted 'fantasy' techniques in several compositions. The première of this revised version was on 29th May 1912 with Harold Samuel and the English String Quartet.

The brief, slow introduction to the first movement, in which the principal theme is prefigured, is typical of Bridge, as is the grace note decoration within the theme itself which surges aspiringly upwards on the viola, accompanied by a writhing, chromatic semiquaver figure for the piano. The second main idea, heard first on the piano, has the decorous charm of Edwardian parlour music. During the development section much is made of contrasting passages – one where the music seems suspended, as if floating above pedal points, the other where the main theme continues its forward momentum by leaps and bounds. A return to the slow introductory music forms the coda.

The second movement opens with a noble melody played softly by the strings. It is taken up by the piano, then all the instruments. A scampering, elfin scherzo, with a rather Mendelssohnian theme, forms the central section although there is no contrasting trio. As the initial tempo returns the cello brings back the main theme accompanied by solemn piano chords; gradually with the entry of the full forces the music swells to a heartfelt climax.

The serenity achieved at the end of the slow movement is shattered by a pithy, forceful gesture exchanged between piano and strings that plunges the finale into music of drama and energy. An expressive, wistful theme played by the viola attempts to offer solace, but the tension is only temporarily assuaged in the development section with a tranquil melody played by the piano. Towards the end the work comes full circle with the return of the first movement's main themes in reverse order before a final burst of energy brings the *Quintet* to a barnstorming conclusion.

**Andrew Burn**

## Ashley Wass



Described by *Gramophone* Magazine as possessing ‘the enviable gift to turn almost anything he plays into pure gold’, Ashley Wass is the only British pianist to have won First Prize at the London International Piano Competition and is also a former BBC New Generation Artist. He is Naxos’s first ever exclusively contracted solo artist, and his recent surveys of piano music by Bridge and Bax have been heralded as ‘unmissable’ and ‘the yardstick against which all future recordings will be judged’. He has given performances at most of the major venues in Britain, including the Royal Albert Hall as part of the BBC Proms, and also appeared in a gala concert at Buckingham Palace to mark the Queen’s Golden Jubilee. Concerto performances have included collaborations with Sir Simon Rattle and the City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra, the London Mozart Players, Philharmonia, Bournemouth Symphony and all the BBC orchestras. Ashley Wass is also much in demand as a chamber musician and has toured the United States and Europe with violinist Sarah Chang, appearing at venues such as Philadelphia’s Kimmel Center and Carnegie Hall in New York. He is Artistic Director of the Lincolnshire International Chamber Music Festival.

*Photo: Sussie Ahlberg*

## The Tippett Quartet

**John Mills and Jeremy Isaac, Violins • Julia O’Riordan, Viola • Bozidar Vukotic, Cello**

The Tippett Quartet is one of Britain’s leading string quartets, committed to combining mainstream repertoire with contemporary works, and have been described as “bold and innovative ... extraordinary technical accomplishment with flair and a bright communicative spark” (The Times). Their interpretations are stylistically varied, informed by the breadth of their repertoire and it is their clarity of execution and total commitment in their performances that has led to collaborations with artists such as Lawrence Power, David Owen Norris, Melvyn Tan, Ashley Wass and Craig Ogden. The quartet has premiered works by composers including John Adams, Cecilia Ore, Simon Holt, Robert Walker, Howard Goodall and Stephen Dodgson. The quartet’s impressive and diverse catalogue of recordings have not only topped the classical charts but also entered the pop charts. The Tippett Quartet was formed in 1998, the year in which they made their Wigmore Hall debut. They have since performed at the BBC Proms, Cheltenham Festival, Three Choirs Festival, Chichester Festivities, Dartington International Summer School, Presteigne Festival and Lincolnshire International Chamber Music Festival. They have also performed at King’s Place, Purcell Room, Queen Elizabeth Hall, Bridgewater Hall, The Sage, Gateshead and regularly return to Wigmore Hall. They frequently appear on BBC Radio 3 and have broadcast live performances on Radio Novi Sad, Serbia and Sveriges Radio (Swedish National Radio).



*Photo: Benjamin Ealovega*

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