Edgar BAINTON: Sonata for viola and piano

Today Edgar Bainton is known principally for his famous anthem 'And I Saw A New Heaven', originally published in 1928, but during the first thirty years of the twentieth century, London’s musical scene was influenced by a strong current of modernism from mainland Europe leading to the cult popularity of a small number of European composers. This seems to have encouraged homeland composers to look increasingly inwards on their own cultural heritage in order to help articulate a musical identity. Thus, inspiration or musical material often came from ancient literature or legend, early music sources or from folk-song collections and it is notable that the three major works on this disk resort in varying degrees to folk-song or its stylistic emulation for thematic direction. Of course, tonality and nationalist traits in music need not indicate conservatism, and it is a shame that the perception of these composers (and many of their con-temporaries) has suffered with respect to a more fashion-able and radical mainstream. Nevertheless, the divergence of style and tonal flavour between (and within) these works is a refreshing indication of the creative instinct and originality of their composers - neither yielding to the avant-garde, nor stifling an authentic voice.

Edgar Bainton was born in Coventry, where his father was a Congregational minister. He won a music scholarship to King Henry VIII Grammar School at eleven, and at sixteen won a place at the Royal College of Music, later studying composition with Sir Charles Villiers Stanford and winning the Chopin and Tagore Medals for outstanding achievement. After many years teaching in Newcastle-upon-Tyne (from 1901 to 1934) Bainton and his family emigrated to Australia in order to take up his appointment as Director of the New South Wales Conservatorium, Sydney. He remained in Australia until his death in 1956, by which time he was regarded as an Australian composer and his music and name in the United Kingdom were virtually forgotten. His output includes three symphonies, two operas, various other orchestral works (including a Concerto Fantasia for Piano) and many songs and part-songs.

Bainton's Viola Sonata was composed in Newcastle-upon-Tyne between 27th June and 15th September 1922, and in her biography of her father Remembered on Waking Helen Bainton records that Lionel Tertis, the great viola-player and supporter of new works for the instrument, came to Newcastle to try over the work with the composer. Sadly, Tertis did not take up the sonata and it lay unperformed until Helen herself played it with her father for an Australian Radio prog-ramme called 'The Composer Performs' on 12th October, 1942, at this time Helen was a viola-player in the Sydney Symphony Orchestra. The sonata then remained unper-formed until its British premiere in Birmingham in May 1949, given by Martin Outram (viola) and Michael Jones (piano).

The three movements are written in progressive tonality: E–A–D minor, and a very intense mood is created right from the beginning, part autumnal, part elegiac (as in the Finale), and possibly reminiscent of the composer’s war-time experiences as a civilian prisoner-of-war at Ruhden in Germany from 1914-18. The first movement, although in two sharps (i.e. B minor), is very strongly centred on E minor and the piano part is demanding with highly flexible and fast-moving textures and harmonies, whilst the viola part is dominated by what Helen Bainton called its "song-like quality". The second subject (in C minor) is deeply eloquent and full of yearning and appears in various guises throughout the entire work. Interestingly, Bainton, unlike so many of his contemporaries, makes little or no use of folksong-like material in his other works, and yet the un-accompanied viola melody at the beginning of the second movement could almost be a traditional folk-tune. The reason for this will become apparent later in the Finale. The second movement also ingeniously combines both slow-movement and scherzo simultaneously by the use of crossing bar lines against a piano part played at double speed, a most original innovation. The Finale is deeply powerful in its mood – millitaristic, as in the piano opening, and poignant in the viola’s return of the first movement second subject. After a more energetic section marked Allegro con fuoco, the folk-like theme from the beginning of the second movement returns, but now in A flat minor in 2/2 time, floating above a muted, but still millitaristic piano part in 9/8 time. We then realise that the folk-theme of rural youth has become the First World War soldier whose dismembered spirit floats above the battlefield – a master-stroke of great originality and power. The movement ends with a return of the Allegro con fuoco and a Coda in D major of triumphant and jubilant optimism.

Theodore HOLLAND: Suite in D

Theodore Holland is another of a large swathe of lamentably under-appreciated British composers. He was educated at Westminster School before moving to the Royal Academy of Music, where, like Bantock, York Bowen and Benjamin Dale, he studied with Frederick Corder. His ambitions as a composer were sufficient to lead him further afield, to study with Joachim at the Musikhochschule in Berlin. Nevertheless, Holland’s earlier output was dominated by lighter strains, and it was theatre that best suited his idiosyncratic and colourful style. (His most popular work was a Suite extracted from the music for a children’s play on Santa Claus). Eventually, Holland’s skills as a serious composer were acknowledged through his appointment in 1927 as Professor of Harmony and Counterpoint at the Royal Academy of Music, where he would remain until the end of his life.

Amongst his students was Iris du Pré, mother of the cellist, Ellingham Marshes, for viola and orchestra, was given its premiere at the Promenade Concerts on 15th August 1940 and broadcast by the BBC in April 1941. In the Suite in D (1938) the development of musical ideas is almost kaleidoscopic, but Holland writes sparingly for the piano allowing exchanges between the instruments to be delivered with clarity and punctuated with ingenuity. The strained language at the opening of the first movement (Allegro vigouroso) gives way to a simpler, lyrical second theme that is shared and imitated between viola and piano. The intense spirit of the second movement (Romance) exploits the low-tenor timbres of the viola before an elevation of the theme leads to the second subject which is both mysterious and uneasy by comparison. The final movement (Finale) evokes the spirit of the danse macabre in the use of ostinato figurations and accented double stopping. Rhythmic
urGENCY IN THE BASS LINE DRIVES THE MUSIC THROUGH A SLOWER SECOND SECTION BEFORE THE REPETITION OF THE MAIN THEME. THE DEMONIC STRAINS OF THE Recapitulated first theme are soon transformed from minor to major with a glorious rising theme in D, before a virtuosic coda brings the work to a dramatic conclusion. Holland’s theatrical approach is visual and psycho- 

York BOWEN: Piece for viola

Composer and pianist Edwin York Bowen is well known for his interest in the viola and his association with Tertis, who was invariably in mind when the composer put ink to paper. This short Piece (composed in 1960), shortly before the composer’s death, is an ardent song of hope. It remains in D, before a virtuosic coda brings the work to a dramatic conclusion. Holland’s theatrical approach is visual and psycho-

Granville BANTOCK: Sonata for viola and piano

Sir Granville Bantock was born in London, studying at the Royal Academy of Music from 1889 to 1893, but much of his musical career was focussed in Birmingham where he took a leading rile in the formation of the City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra, was Principal at the Birmingham and Midland Institute (Birmingham Conservatoire) and in 1908, succeeded Edward Elgar as Peyton Professor of Music at Birmingham University.

Bantock’s musical output reflected his profuse and esoteric tastes, drawing on literary themes and musical material from across the globe. His output includes significant compositions on American, Arabic, Cypriot, Greek, Russian and particularly Oriental models and his fascination with the latter led to a thorough immersion in Oriental artfacts, literature and even cross-racial dressing. His eclectic tastes also led to works based on biblical, Shakespearean, and mythical folk subject matter. But it was the Celtic influences in his life (his father was Scottish) to which he most commonly turned in his compositions and this homage was explored further through literary publications and folk-song collections.

In many ways Bantock’s Sonata for Viola and Piano (1919) is typical amongst his oeuvre, long, rhapsodic, deeply romantic, and bursting with borrowed and original musical material. There seems at first sight to be no obvious explanation for the title of the work Colleen. Some deeper logical in the exploration of extremes of tessitura, melodic contour, dynamic, and the juxtaposition of harmonic richness with hollow textures or emotional austerity. It is in this spirit that elements of pastiche seem to be innocently procured as no more than a distinctive nod in the direction of this or that composer, imbued in the service of musical cornucopia.

‘Colleen’ probing, however, leads to an integrated and musical explanation. The second theme of the third movement (marked poco allegro sostenuto) bears a striking resemblance to the song The pretty girl milking her cow – a traditional Irish Air elsewhere known as The valley lay smiling. This was included in Bunting’s collection The Ancient Music of Ireland (1916), where it was set to the Irish Air known as Calin Dhas Cruite Na Mbo. Bantock was clearly struck by the theme as he deemed it sufficiently worthy to include as one of only four Irish items in his collection of 100 Folk Songs of all Nations (1911) and again in his collection The Songs of Ireland (1905), where it is entitled Colleen Dhas Croithe Na M6. Whilst Bantock’s involvement in the compilation and re-use of folk-song was perhaps a typical reflection of his fascination in every musical arena, elsewhere British folk-song was gamering a renewed and widespread appreciation at this time, and Bantock was by no means unique in cross-fertilizing folk-themes in classical guise. Percy Grainger, for example, had composed his own version of Colleen Dhas in 1904.

The theme Colleen Dhas is used in broken segments, rhythmically augmented and somewhat wistful and reflective in character. The pervading drama and bulk of the material for this movement, however, stems from a contrasting Irish theme – a Jig known as Helvic Head (elsewhere Walk out of it Hogan, or Kelvin Head), to which Bantock rigorously adheres. This jig appears in O’Farrell’s Pocket Companion for the Irish or Union Pipes of 1806 (pages 28-29) along with Colleen Dhas (page 19) and it is tempting to think that it was from just such a collection that Bantock gathered his musical material. Indeed it is perhaps the similarity between the melodic contours of each theme that caused Bantock to draw these together. Both of these tunes remain popular in traditional performance circles to this day.

Bantock’s panoptic approach to composition means that these traditional themes emerge out of a broader thematic framework. Indeed, one four-note theme (first stated in bars 2 to 3) remains central throughout the work, recalled by Bantock with almost obsessive vigour. This powerful theme – at once hopeful and doleful in expressivity through its rising and falling melodic contour – is an exact imitation of the Marschallin’s theme La Bichette from Richard Strauss’s Der Rosenkavalier (1911). The opera was in vogue at this time, having been brought to England by Bantock’s friend Thomas Beecham in 1913, and receiving repeat performances the following year. Indeed, if Bantock did not attend the early British performances, it is tempting to imagine that the work would have been introduced directly to him during the intervening years by Thomas Beecham, perhaps whilst the composer assisted Beecham in establishing his New Birmingham Orchestra in 1917.

The opening movement of the Sonata (Allegro con anima) is large in scale with a slavish adherence to this single theme (La Bichette), exploring countless harmonic and textural possibilities or inversions and manipulations. Bantock is particularly fond of the rhythmic displacement of his material, stretching it through different metrical guises. In the second movement (Maestoso sostenuto, rubato), the contour of the main theme is advanced through melodic ‘filling-in’ and inversion of the first three notes which leads to the establishment of new motivic material. Unusually, the movement carries the time signature 5/4 and the spirit is at once more pensive and unstable. Following a lively introduction by the piano in 6/8, the third movement (Vivace) begins with a statement of Helvic Head alternated between viola and piano. A solo transition stutters towards the key of D minor for the first statement of the Colleen Dhas theme in 3/4. The distorted strains of La Bichette soon return before the opening theme is adapted to a slower 3/4 (Con fuoco e molto rubato) evoking the spirit of a shanty. This idea heralds the joining of both traditional themes played together for the first time. As the motivic integration increases, Bantock once again draws on his central theme La Bichette played in counterpoint with Helvic Head, before a final coda (Presto) and a final unadulterated statement of La Bichette brings the work to a rousing conclusion.

Notes by Christian Wilson
Except those on Edgar Bainton by Michael Jones
The four English composers represented on this disc were all born within a generation, and were inspired by the pioneering violist Lionel Tertis. Bainton’s 1922 Viola Sonata veers restlessly between autumnal song and militaristic intensity, possibly influenced by his wartime experiences. Theodore Holland’s Suite in D is a theatrical, wide-ranging work full of ingenious themes, whilst York Bowen’s Piece for Viola is brief but ardent. Bantock’s Viola Sonata, by contrast, is a large-scale, powerful and rhapsodic statement full of profuse lyricism and romantic feeling.