

On the Highland Trail of Sir Arnold Bax

Chris Bye
Independent

A misty silhouette of the distant island of Rhum haunts the horizon before slipping away under the cloak of a frivolous sea-fret shrouding the Hebrides. This moody mystique once sparked the creativity of the prolific English composer, Sir Arnold Bax.

This Hebridean image is just one of many Atlantic seascapes that inspired Bax's magnificent music. I am hypnotised by the spectral scene as I stare from the window of the Station Hotel. This was one of Bax's favourite bolt-holes, where he could escape the intensity of a crowded London and replace it with the comparative quietude of this largely hidden bucolic idyll in Morar, Invernesshire.

One of the main motivating forces at the root of Bax's music, particularly in Symphonies Three to Five (composed between 1929 and '39) is the spectacular Western seaboard. The rugged but captivating Hebridean coastline—scene of many Celtic myths and legends—fascinated Bax.

Bax lodged, sometimes in solitude, but most times with Mary Gleaves (whom he first met in the late '20s) at the Station Hotel, Morar. He was always careful to secure the same room, where he worked intensively on scores with the help of an upright piano. The room also benefitted from a fireplace. A log fire would offer a welcome degree of warmth during Bax's occupancy, often in the freezing winter months. He wore a woolly overcoat for added protection from the notorious Scottish cold.

Bax's hideaway, the Station Hotel, now known as the Morar Hotel, can still be reached today by taking a four-hour rail journey – at times stupendously dramatic

and picturesque – from Glasgow through the Western Highlands. This was a route the composer travelled many times. The long railway journey would have stimulated a lot of his distinctive musical creativity as it clattered through the isolated mountain and moorland scenery of central Scotland. My quest to learn more about the connection between Bax and the Western Highlands takes me on this same journey.

Upon arrival at the hotel I am disappointed to find there is nothing to indicate that this once proud Victorian building was a crucible for one of its residents, Sir Arnold Bax, one of Britain's greatest composers. There is no signpost to indicate the way; no outside sign to memorialise this hotel as a crucial Bax work base. Inside, there is a fading photograph of the composer together with a few lines of biography, placed discreetly in a dark corner of a quaintly furnished lounge.

Arnold Bax's well-deserved knighthood (1937) and appointment as Master of the King's Music (1942) now seem, over the decades, to have lost their glitter. I recall the words of the late Vernon Handley, that Bax's gifts

are astonishing; he releases us into an entirely different world. He has given us something that is different from that of all other composers. That this is not recognised I find extraordinary.¹

Arriving at the Morar Hotel I declare my own unbridled enthusiasm for Sir Arnold Bax and his widely acknowledged genius. Immediately, I discover a sturdy ally in Stuart Sherwood, one of the hotel's co-owners. Our mutual admiration for Bax's music results in me being granted the honour of being accommodated in the very same guest room which was once the composer's workspace, enjoying the exact coastal scenery which is acknowledged as the inspiration behind the haunting mystique of his Third Symphony which was completed in 1929.

This Symphony is Bax's most performed and arguably, at least from a listener's point of view, his most approachable. It was dedicated to Sir Henry Wood and is gently optimistic in character, in sharp contrast to the caustic and sombre mood of its two predecessors.²

An engaging melody opens the work, featuring a bassoon solo which blends in with a moody clarinet answer. This introductory dialogue develops into a sweet theme throughout the woodwind section, almost as if the composer himself is taking his listener by the hand into a happier and more Utopian life. Following a dreamy slow movement, marked by muted horn and trumpet solos, an optimistic finale theme gives away into one of Bax's best known epilogues in which strings and woodwind fade blissfully away.

Could it be that this haunting and reflective music was conceived during Bax's long walks with Mary Gleaves, who was known to delight in indigenous mountain scenery and colourful wild flowers? We can only theorise. But it candidly shows how the composer had discovered fertile ground for further neoromantic compositions, such as his last five symphonies.

Bax's love of the sea and this rediscovered³ Western Highland rustic imagery emerges even stronger throughout the blustery Fourth Symphony (1930). An imposing first movement includes perky melodic lines for strings and woodwind, and the work concludes with assertive major chords stated by the brass section. It illustrates how the Western Highlands and its beautiful naturalistic environs surrounding Morar was a veritable gem of rediscovery for the composer.

The historic vista from this Morar hotel window and the rugged coastal scenery gives me a first-hand taste of those memorable Baxian days. They seem to wash away any disquiet I harbour for the meagre Bax memorabilia which initially I found of much disappointment. A becalmed Atlantic sea inlet sparkles in the lap of Morar's famous silver sands. And there, faintly on the horizon, I am enamoured to see a ghostly outline of the island of Rhum.

My mind conjures up vivid images of those winter months during which the composer sat at his piano, installed in this very room. My mind's ear can even hear the symphonic music that he penned. Yes, there is no doubt that Bax's enduring artistic spirit is indeed present. I can picture him in that thick overcoat shielding him

from that all-pervasive and penetrating winter cold. I can almost see and whiff those clouds of tobacco smoke, as he calmly puffs on his pipe, deep in musical thought.

Only a stone's throw from the hotel one can take in the rugged, panoramic views across the Western Highlands. After a steeply-stepped upward climb, I savour one of Bax's favourite vantage points. It is easy to find, clearly marked by the so-called *Morar Iron Cross*, erected by locals in 1899 to commemorate the opening of the local church. From here the long-distant views stretch for dozens of miles with a horizon of mountain peak outlines touching the bottom of wispy, grey-white clouds. The lochs and bleak moorlands are just visible in a mist-shrouded landscape.

My Bax pilgrimage had started in Glasgow, crawling along in a diesel-chugging train slowly grinding its way westwards towards Morar, eventually terminating at the small coastal fishing town of Mallaig. This is an isolated railway line which, as it snakes its way along, reveals some astonishing treasures, vividly described in the informative guidebook *Mountain, Moor and Loch*, as

...the line [which] threads its course along a maze of stupendous crags, traverses the great Moor of Rannoch through a country that combines loch, moor and glen, and a phalanx of other mountains which culminate with the mighty Ben Nevis.

Hours seem to fly by as the slow train trundles through what feels like an almost alien, timeless land, overseen by formidable mountainsides rising from heather-rutted moorland and the glint of mirror-glassed lochs along the Iron Road to the Isles.

Successive panoramic views from my humble window-seat transform into what is for me a magic lantern as the rhythmic clatter as the train squeals on, through dramatic scenery which takes me well under the skin of some colourful Bax works. Celebrated tone poems such as *The Tale the Pine Trees Knew* (1931) trigger

instantly irresistible analogies; the music sparks vivid sound-pictures in my mind. This certainly is for me a once-in-a-lifetime journey of enlightenment, revealing exactly why Bax revelled in his self-confession of being ‘a brazen romantic’.

Meanwhile, the straining locomotive gasps through the clean, crisp air as it heaves its way up hills and glen sides and then clatters rapidly downwards into lush valleys. Bax’s unmistakably impressionistic orchestration continues to fill my ears. The call of mellow horns, trombones and trumpets and the tell-tale tingle of tambourines and celesta fill my head. There is an other-worldly, almost childlike feeling of remoteness as a section of the line runs through *Rannoch Moor* which cannot be reached by car. ‘Yes, that means it’s uncontaminated by vehicle engines,’ chuckles the train guard through a crackly speaker.

An alluring hypnosis seizes both my visual and aural senses. I am besieged by Baxian sounds. ‘Trains only!’ I think, excitedly. That means no smoky internal combustion engines ‘round here!’

I am enraptured by this fairy-tale scene; just like Bax must have been when he conceived the serene symphonic Lento which graces his wonderful Third Symphony.

I recall the composer also found inspiration in this kind of rugged, bleak scenery as reflected in the play *The Land of Heart’s Desire* (1894) by his literary hero W. B. Yeats:

Come fairies, take me out of this dull world, for I would like to ride with you upon the wind and dance upon the mountains like a flame.

We chug onwards through moorlands that are occasionally brought to life by flocks of sheep. These sleepy scenes seem to enshrine the calmness expressed by Bax in such a masterly manner during those serene epilogues which herald the finales of his Third, Fifth, Sixth, and Seventh Symphonies with such satisfying conclusions.

The peace and tranquillity of this journey is broken suddenly by another intrusive announcement, ‘This stretch of line had to be floated on bleak moorland and again, cannot be reached by road vehicles,’ it crackles out. The train rolls on regardless,

as it splutters and jerks its way through an early-spring landscape on the very cusp of new life. The scenery is punctuated by lined armies of dark green conifers. Later it reveals regiments of deciduous trees with silver birches common in the foreground. Bax's vivid tone poem, Spring Fire (1913), inevitably comes to mind.

The train rumbles to reveal tiny rural stations that trumpet their own claims to fame. Distinctive places such as Corrour appear. It is known for being the station with the highest altitude in Britain and at a slow speed affords a good mountainous view. All the splendour and happiness of the Fourth Symphony's first movement rings out loudly here. An inspiring view celebrated by a vivacious Allegro Moderato is conjured up by my mind's ear.

A keen sense of Bax memories continue to be triggered by the dramatic scenery blissfully rolling by. I can hear those sumptuous symphonic brass passages of the ebullient Fifth Symphony (1931-2), inspired by this landscape. I can clearly hear and see how this part of the world intoxicated Bax's creative mind so completely that his music overwhelms me.

Morar comes into sight signalling the end of the line for me. The white walls of the Morar Hotel, the veritable Scottish shrine to Sir Arnold Bax, shine out in the defiant evening sunlight. A wonderful catch-all quote by Lewis Foreman, Bax's biographer, puts this Western Highland pilgrimage in perfect context when he writes:

In the Sixth Symphony, which many consider to be his finest [symphony] and which is certainly the climax of music written by Bax in the 1930s, he returns to the theme of *The Tale the Pine Trees Knew* (an earlier tone poem) in a thrillingly successful essay in relentless nature music. ... In this symphony we are in the far north ... Morar, where it was written in the winter of 1933. This is a more primeval, primitive vision than that in any of his earlier symphonies.

In an ironic way, Arnold Bax anticipated the unfair stigma of lack of recognition when he wrote a letter in the last year of his life to Lady Jessie Wood, widow of Sir Henry, claiming to be neglected by the BBC and ultimately 'weary of the profession in general'.

Were these words merely the ramblings of an embittered old man? They were certainly out of character for a normally passive Arnold Bax, but whether you accept his condemnation or not, the sad fact is that over the past two decades, broadcasts of Bax's work have been a rarity throughout the UK.

A look at the BBC Proms archives make interesting reading. Figures show that during the composer's lifetime there were 22 performances at the Proms of his Symphonies and 62 performances of his relatively lesser works. After the composer's death in October 1953 up until the present day that number has dwindled to the performance of two Symphonies and 27 relatively lesser works.⁴ In the light of these figures, British music enthusiasts are bound to ask whether Bax compositions been unfairly neglected.

Sir Arnold Bax's overall impact on British classical music is encapsulated best in the words of a former British Music Society chairman, the late John McCabe. The composer and pianist remarked that Bax 'deserves a more permanent place in the repertoire ... [Bax was] a composer of great integrity, with a distinctive style.'

There is no doubt that many Bax enthusiasts would also fervently agree. Concert organisers, recording companies and broadcasters of events like the annual BBC Proms, should in future lend a friendlier ear to the dramatic and engaging music of Sir Arnold Bax, whose many artistic achievements during his career warrant a rediscovery and a greater effort to restore his music squarely into the concert scene.⁵

Christopher Harwood Bye is a freelance journalist and writer. He is an alumnus of the Creative Writing programme at Leeds University, and has established himself as one of Britain's finest writers—in 1980, he was awarded the British Press Award for Investigative Journalism, and in the following year was awarded the British Witness Box Award for Crime Writing. From 1987 till 1998 he served as Editor and Director of the Yorkshire Post Newspapers; during his tenure the publication won the Linotype Design Awards Provincial Newspaper of the Year (1993). Bye is also a member of the British Society of Editors.

References

- Foreman, Lewis. *Bax: A Composer and his Times*. London: Scolar, 1983.
- Foreman, Lewis ed. *Farewell My Youth and other writings by Arnold Bax*. London: Scolar, 1992.
- Unknown Author. *Mountain Moor & Loch*. London: Sir Joseph Causton & Sons, 1894.
- Yeats, W. B. *The Land of Heart's Desire*. London: Jennings, 2008.

¹ Jacket Notes Sir Arnold Bax The Symphonies, (cond. Vernon Handley) Chandos 10122

² The first two symphonies were written under the tortuous stress of two significant events in his life: a divorce, and the tragic death of his friend, Padraig Pearse, who had been involved in the Irish revolution of 1916.

³ Bax's first experience in the Western Scottish Highlands was during a family holiday in 1902. Twenty-seven years later, at the completion of his Third Symphony, the very same powerful childhood images of mountain, moor and glen were destined to fire an irrepressible musical talent.

⁴ www.bbc.co.uk/proms

⁵ Readers who are interested in pursuing further research on Arnold Bax are encouraged to access the following URL: www.arnoldbax.com