

"Enchanted Summer" (Bax and Balfour Gardiner)

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*A thing born of wood-witcheries
Happed delicately in flowers, with hair
Blown wide, and amber bosom bare.*

*(Nympholept) Dermot O'Byrne:
Love Poems of a Musician (Cecil Palmer, 1923, p.12)*

In the first days of October 1953 Arnold Bax, in life a confessedly 'brazen romantic', stood on the Old Head of Kinsale in Co Cork looking out over an enchanted Atlantic (the Celtic Sea) burnished to beaten gold by the westering sun. Within a few hours he was dead. The last music he had heard was his own *The Garden of Fand* with its tale of inhuman revelry and enchantment.

The sheer symbolism of this cannot be ignored. "The Celt within" that, in his own words, had 'stood revealed' in him in that first youthful encounter with Yeats's *The Wandering of Oisín* proved a force that both dominated and powered his creative work — from the early cycle of Irish Tone Poems (*Into the Twilight, Rose Catha* and *In the Faery Hills*) to the closing of the Sixth Symphony.

The 'three strains' of Irish mythology ^[1] are undeniably present in Bax's music — in his use of harp and celesta colour, the pulsing rhythms, and the misty *divisi* strings penetrated by shafts of bold colour — and it is not hard to believe that the Celtic element exercised some psychic influence on him. ^[2] It seems here particularly poignant that, as Lewis Foreman suggests ^[3], the few bars of celesta music (*molto tranquillo* 13 bars after L) preceding the song of Fand could be construed as evoking the music of the silver branch, with its three golden apples, the legendary passport to the otherworld, with which Manannan, god of sea and father of Fand, seduced King Cormac, drawing him into that journey.

This siren song, the longing for the isles of Hy Brasil, had, from that first encounter with Yeats, drawn Bax with a powerful force that in the end could not be resisted. The focus of this force is the sea, which Bax himself realized and against which he was warned by AE (George

Russell).^[4] Throughout the writings of Dermot O'Byrne the sea is pre-dominant — and in the music, the "immense slowly surging wave" of Bax's programme note in the score of *Fand* is surely demonstrated in the orgasmic pattern of interlocked tritones that appear in the Fourth Symphony (first movement, fig.3 F A B D). And it is this Celtic element that has perhaps overly characterized Bax's music in ears only casually acquainted with his work.

This however is far from being all of Bax. Another side is glimpsed in Vaughan Williams's obituary tribute^[5]: "*Arnold Bax, like Shelley, seemed to have something of the faun in his nature. One almost expected to see the pointed ears when he took his hat off. This reflected itself in his music.*" Other forces were at work in those early decades of the twentieth century, characterized in English music (in which the music of RVW was generally considered as the accepted face of English nationalism) by a kind of post-Elgar late-romanticism. Nationalism, however diluted by influences from abroad, was evident, not in a musical folk-culture of country songs and morris dances, but more in an awareness of a heritage both in Nature and in Literature — particularly Swinburne, Shelley, Keats and the later Georgian poets, in all of whom Bax was well read. The mysticism and Anglican spirituality underwent, at least in Bax, a kind of sea-change to a vibrant pantheism.

In 1910 Bax was twenty-seven, perhaps not yet regretting the few years of ageing since the 'golden age' of twenty-two^[6], and he was not slow to assimilate the new experiences such as the Impressionists, the Russian Ballet and the succès de scandale of *Le Sacre* in Paris. He had met Balfour Gardiner in 1906 and had become part of the circle of young composers to whom Gardiner played not only host but a 'veritable Mycenaes'^[7]. A wealthy man, Gardiner conceived in those heady years of 1912-1913 a series of choral/orchestral concerts that were to be a showcase for the work of these young men — Bax, Grainger, Scott, Quilter, Austin, O'Neill, Dale — even Delius, and Gardiner himself. With his phenomenal sight-reading powers Bax, as well as airing his own compositions, participated in playing over the others' scores for mutual comment and criticism.

Somewhere around 1910 Bax had begun a substantial choral work, significantly taking for text lines from Shelley's *Prometheus Unbound* — a poet whose language sparkled with colour — choosing the pantheistic hymn in which "the voluptuous nightingales/are awake through all the broad noon-day" — an enchanted mood — and where, in the priapic shadows, "sounds overflow the listener's brain/so sweet the joy is almost pain". It seems that this expression in some way epitomized the work of many of these young composers, and this work, entitled *Enchanted Summer*, was chosen to open the first series of these concerts — concerts

which Stephen Lloyd has described as "blowing much welcome fresh air into English concert life."^[9]

Enchanted Summer for chorus (used at first as semichoruses of spirits), two sopranos and orchestra is roughly in three sections, opening with slow swaying chords descriptive of the wave-like motion of the summer forest — and pre-echoing the opening music of *Spring Fire* (1913), *Nympholept* (1913-1915) and the piano piece *Red Autumn*. In his programme note Bax seeks "to combine the impressionistic manner with a melodic scheme freer in scope than that commonly used in choral writing, yet of a definite cantabile character" — the poetry being "inherent with a quality of ecstasy ...[which] required a mingling of two elements of music usually divorced from one another." This ecstatic melody, both recitative and aria, runs throughout the work, evolving into moments of passion, yet tinged with a resigned melancholy :

The image displays a page of a musical score for a chorus. It features three systems of music. The first system includes a vocal line with the lyrics "Or aught save where some cloud of dew," and a piano accompaniment marked "senza cresc." and "p molto tranquillo". The second system includes a vocal line with the lyrics "Drift-ing a-long the earth creep-ing breeze Be-tween the" and a piano accompaniment marked "un poco crescendo". The third system includes a vocal line with the lyrics "Be -" and a piano accompaniment marked "un poco crescendo" and "f ma tranquillo". The score is written in G major and 4/4 time, with a key signature of one sharp (F#) and a common time signature of 4.

There are in the score many points of contact with Balfour Gardiner, whose *April* (chorus and orchestra) — first performed in December 1913 but sketched in June 1911 — Bax would have known, as Gardiner too would have known *Enchanted Summer* from its early stirrings. Bax's setting of Shelley's words "and the gloom divine is all around" is very near to Gardiner's sultry prelude to the thunderstorm and the ecstatic 'delirious upbreak' of the 'great fountains of the deep': and there are other resemblances in the orchestration and echoes not least in the underlying sexual imagery that might be read into Edward Carpenter's text.

There are other influences — much of Delius (though here far removed from the innocence of his summer garden at Grez) — hints too of Elgar, Holstian triads and a shadow of the 'sick Tristan' of Wagner. The vein of melodious song, becoming impassioned with the "swaying rush of wings" and the evocation of Demogorgon, now with the full chorus, culminates in a passage "and first there comes a gentle sound" — a broad hymn-like song in the cathedral of the forest :

28 *Maestoso e tranquillo.*

And first there comes a gen-tle
 first there comes a gen-tle sound To those in talk or slum-ber

Maestoso e tranquillo.

A long passage over a pedal E and a reflective memory of the opening pages of the score introduces the two fauns, who in melodious quasi-operatic dialogue (very reminiscent of the vocal writing in Delius's *A Village Romeo and Juliet*) marvel at the domain of the spirits whose song has bewitched them. The closing bars again recall *April*.

Shelley's loosing of the chained Titan that should 'make the earth one brotherhood' became a forlorn hope. These halcyon days were too soon over, and after 1914-1918 the musical world had changed irrevocably.

Spring Fire was not performed until 1985, and *Nympholept* had to wait until 1961 for a performance. By midsummer 1922 Bax had embarked, though then unknowingly, on his symphonic cycle, less concerned (in music at least) with Ireland, the Celt having veered northwards. Balfour Gardiner succumbed to disillusion and wrote little thereafter beyond the exquisite *Philomela*. 'Hark Ah! the Nightingale, the tawny-throated' — the words of Matthew Arnold sounding a kind of coda to the rich romanticism of those years. The projected third series of concerts never took place.

Notes

- [1] Sleep, Joy and Melancholy
- [2] See fn 4
- [3] *Bax: a composer and his times* [Scolar Press, 1983], p.359
- [4] *Farewell my Youth: an Autobiography* [London: Longmans, Green & Co., 1943], pp.102/105
- [5] *Music & Letters*, xxxv, January 1 1954
- [6] *Farewell my Youth*, p.23
- [7] Letter from Kennedy Scott to the writer
- [8] Stephen Lloyd: *H Balfour Gardiner* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984]