

ANALYTICAL NOTES AND FIRST REVIEWS



ORCHESTRAL

**Hallé Orchestra (Barbirolli): Symphony No. 3 (Bax). H.M.V. C3380-5
(12 in., 39s. 9d.). Auto. C7593-8. Miniature Score, Chappell.**

The British Council again sponsors a work, paying, one presumes, part of the cost of the first recorded symphony by one who for me has long been the most satisfying (and, I think, by far the most richly endowed) British composer of our day. Bax was 60 last November. His symphonies number seven (first performed, respectively, in 1922, 1929, 1930, 1932, 1934, 1935 and 1939). Mr. Evans, in Grove, says that if he used opus numbers his output from 1924 to, roughly, 1939, would have moved, exclusive of songs, from 74 to 116—an average of something like three and a half works per annum. I believe he was present at the recording of this work, and I hope he was as pleased with it as the customers are likely to be. We remember Barbirolli from old N.G.S. days (in which, I recall, I was a prime mover in getting Bax's lovely G major quartet on our list). He has musical wisdom and force, and I hear, is training up part of a new generation of Hallé players. The strings have not yet developed the old power which was once such a strong characteristic of the band in the days when I made pilgrimages (then expensive, and so rare) to hear it: the Hallé was, I think, the first full orchestra I ever heard. The recording is full, bright, luminous. No other chamber we use seems to give a better fullness, in good focus.

The work is scored for the full orchestra, with three flutes, piccolo, cor anglais, three clarinets, bass clarinet, double bassoon, tuba, harp, celesta, tenor drum, side drum, glockenspiel, xylophone, cymbals, anvil, gong and tambourine. Some exuberance at times, not so far from that of a Stravinskyan order. By the end of the twenties the post-war influences were by no means outmoded: they date back, of course, in part to pre-last-war times; but the nagging-rhythm fun spread thinly in the twenties. Bax shows that influence here; he, perhaps in a vein of mild malice or loose-footedness. (He is by no means easy to sum up: his recent part-autobiography *Farewell, my Youth*, shows sides of him that can be paralleled in his music, not all of them charming aspects.) But he is too big a man to waste time with the weaker idioms of the past, or even to be more than strengtheningly influenced by Sibelius, the great exemplar of the century. Yet at times I think Bax a more remarkable scorer even than Sibelius: as fascinating to his day as

Strauss was to his. His thinking is so interwoven with this colouring and tang that you have to get by heart the orchestration as well as the themes. Sometimes these latter are weak, *as* “subjects”; and though I should be the last to try to pin a man like Bax down to test-book form, or to expect a symmetrical plan, I think he does show an, at times, decided weakness in that so very British way, characteristic of nearly all our composers: failing to find a strong enough melodic texture to carry tough harmonic ideas. With this, there is something (more in No. 3 than in most of the others) of that least-recognised element in almost all British music: what I can only call the forcible-feeble. When many become rumbustious, they flop (to the ear of all except, apparently, the British). V.-W. is the most obvious example of a great man’s weakness in this respect; but all the folksy-modal (I am tempted to make it “maudlin”) school suffer from it, some very badly. Even Elgar did, to a slight extent. But I don’t compare the men of to-day with Elgar: perhaps his age of thought and profusion has passed for ever. There is a good deal of the Elgarian spirit in many of our non-extremist young or middle-aged men (Bliss, e.g.). Bax has a touch of it too.

The Third isn’t, to my mind, quite the best of the symphonies, but it is perhaps the best eye- and ear-opener for those who don’t know any of them well, in that the weaknesses are readily heard (mostly in the themes, and that bit of Stravinsky-tagging rhythmic lack-of-point). The strengths are not so obvious: they grow on one. That orchestration, for instance: one can spend hours on it. Nobody else orchestrates anything like so grandly (at moments Moeran has done a ripe bit of work in that way). Most younger men (all along, we bear in mind that Bax is past 60) seem to struggle with the orchestra, not to wield it like a whole armoury of swords, rapiers, and revolvers. Bax’s handling comes as near the perfection of pure skill and emotional power as anything we are ever likely to hear.

The scores of most of Bax’s symphonies were made available in photographed-miniature form by the enterprise of Murdoch’s (now absorbed by Chappell), at the remarkably cheap price of 4.s. each: one of the best enterprises of the last twenty years. One could thus learn them, in the days when performances were not many—learn them in part, that is: for there is nothing like record-plus-score for rapidly getting to the heart of any work.

You might think from that solo-bassoon start (its first three notes are significant later) that we were in for a romanticised Hindemithian career; but the first chords make it clear, if anybody didn’t know, that Bax is, as he has himself declared, a frank romantic. The early treatment of the opening matter illustrates one of the many attractive traits in Bax, his swift emotional weighting of a theme. If he often seems more concerned about this than with long-term building, one needs to consider the question after having heard a movement a good many times. I think it will then be felt that the emotional states are so well balanced, in the long run, that one accepts their particular architectural “pull” in place of other kinds; and after all, all building is essentially construction towards emotional states. (I leave to anybody who wants ‘em the bleak dessications of the Stravinsky tribe, even now a good deal affected by some young Men.)

The muted brass soon after the middle of side 1 change the scene, and remind me a bit of

Roy Harris' third symphony, and American ways in general. The *Allegro feroce* (shaping partly on No. 1) has a modern barbaric spring—the sort of thing with which Strauss used to frighten us, forty years ago, but of course, in much-changed terms. That is a dinging stroke, about the middle of side 2, where the basses arpeggiate upwards: again one thinks of Straussian bravura. We can do with all of that we can get, in an age when secretiveness seems to have been carried to the length of monomania. The woodwind after this is just one of many bits I want to play over many times; but when can a reviewer do that? Only when, copy despatched, he goes out to expend its worth on the discs, as an honest customer. What pleasure, then, in having earned his reward ! He can now earn his musical pleasure by really learning the work: as everybody must. Not that a movement like this is hard work for anybody: about three elements stand out, but the emotional pressure is high, and they drive about pretty furiously.

Before the end of side 2 there is more magic—this time, of five solo fiddles. Very few English composers have ever written like this: in such technique Bax stands head and shoulders above all our other men. The midmost side of the movement (3) provides a tranquil, perhaps brooding interlude, chromatic beyond Frank's scope, but bearing, for me, a little of his spirit. Here might come in the word "mystic" as applied to Bax—if, perhaps, it weren't rather soiled through loose usage elsewhere. On side 4 the spirit is enriched in strength: the old sweet clarinet thirds that the ancient Romantics knew are not lacking: so long as we have them Romance will never die.

The world would dream on a kindly chord of E flat: the drum warns (arpeggic rise, noted before in basses). A few bars of what might be catastrophe (I've heard, in this, the noisiest town in England, bangs that were less frightening). Then the lone first tune again, wondrously new-decked. (Celesta near the end of this side.) Strange things happen to the other matter; in particular, about the middle of side 5, to the brass one (strings glassy, near the bridge, and side drum with snares slackened: "in eclipse", says Bax). The demons ding the coda. (Who wants a new Fate notion?)

I take it that we are reasonably agreed

- (a) that Bax's idea of symphonies can be called "loose" without implying either looseness of fibre (there is no tauter writing than his: perhaps, never has been), or of integrity; and, what goes along therewith,
- (b) that there must surely be a good deal of "programme" behind this music: "informal drama" at which we may guess, if we wish. Myself, I don't particularly want to. I don't think that even Sibelius has more marvellously integrated ideas with orchestral colour.

The slow movement (3 sides) is rather a curiosity to me. I'm as easily delighted as any man alive by gorgeous chromaticism, and this orchestration of Bax's is a constant feast to me; but I sometimes wonder if he isn't a wee bit carried away by the possibility of harp-cum-glockenspiel, strings *sul ponticello*, and, in a word, "effects." I appreciate and enjoy them, but I can't always be sure that they are vital to the thought (or feeling). Ninety per

cent. of the time, though, is sufficient. I'm not quite convinced that this slow movement comes off; in this regard, as some of the piano pieces do; but we have to remember that there has been a good deal less background for this sort of orchestral music, than for that sort of piano music. Given Bax's really original extension of chromaticism and foliation, there remains, I think, a little danger of using the orchestra so marvellously for rhapsodising on almost immaterial subjects. But nobody does it like Bax. Perhaps nobody in our century or the next will do it like this again. That, when we hear Bax, is the sword in the heart. Cherish we, then, our Baxian profusion: for the world is set on other aims, and this heaven's plenty, even excess, of harmonic and instrumental generosity is unlikely to attract the young lads, who, whether by reason of living amid the unmusical, of fashion, of impotence or with an eye to a job at the B.B.C.. have foresworn romance. "I am an unashamed romantic." says Bax, and I, for one, want no better hearing in a mad world.

The finale (4 sides) has something of transatlantic cheer, with perhaps a hint of Russian burly good humour: the first theme is as trivial as many of Haydn's (and as too many British ones). Yet more depends on what is done with a notion, and Bax's handling is almost always apt for the size of the idea. Sometimes he has perhaps tended to overwhelm a thought of the lighter order: not so with the deeper ones, or with those of pathos or Irish sentiment. (The "Irish" quality in his music is apt, I think, to be overstressed: it is obvious enough, but I doubt if it intensively shapes his art. One has to go further north for the deepest-cutting influences, I believe.)

The last page but one reminds us of the first theme of all, etherialised. There are some of the best feelings of the past age in Bax. If one likes to refer at times to a 19th century Russian kind of feeling (not to any particular composer, I think), or to a mystical trait like that of Mahler at his best, well and good. "Mysticism" is the hardest thing to define, and so, perhaps, the most dangerous term to use. But one thing that makes Bax a better composer than nine out of ten others now living is just that. One bears in mind that his exquisite endings—surely nobody has achieved so many heavenly apotheoses—may tend to make one forget some places en route in which, not imagination, but architectural creative power, seemed to flag. But he is a man who can wait, resting on faith: rather like Whitman, in that: perhaps not always enough of a realist to know when a thing is coming off or not; but that is bound up in the big question, "What is a symphony?" one that has constantly to be asked, now that the old forms are mostly discarded, and not one man in a hundred has the power, it seems, to make new ones live. If you like to call Bax's symphonies rhapsodies, why not? This recording of the Third, whatever else comes out in 1944, is the year's MUST.