



BAX

DDD
8.555109

Sinfonietta
Overture, Elegy and Rondo

Slovak Philharmonic Orchestra
Barry Wordsworth



Arnold Bax (1883-1953)

Sinfonietta • Overture, Elegy and Rondo

Arnold Edward Trevor Bax was born in a south London suburb in November 1883. When he was twelve his parents moved to a rambling mansion called 'Ivy Bank' in the leafy north London suburb of Hampstead and this house with its extensive gardens provided a protected background for the development of the affluent young Bax brothers. Sixteen years their father's junior, their mother dominated the development of Arnold and his brother Clifford Bax (the latter went on to achieve celebrity between the wars as a writer and playwright).

The brothers had no need to earn their own living and – while not lavish in their tastes – they pursued their artistic aspirations free of all economic constraints until the First World War ended what Arnold referred to as 'the ivory tower of my youth'. He was not only soaking up all that was then new in music – Strauss, Debussy, Rimsky-Korsakov and Scriabin – but also was completely swept up in the artistic turmoil generated by Dyagilev's Ballets russes, who first appeared in London in 1911.

Ultimately Bax found himself confronted by the real world. During his early years he had become passionately involved with things Irish and the reality of the Easter Rising in Dublin in April 1916 caused him to react with 'painful intensity of emotion' for among those facing British troops were personal friends. He did not see military service during the Great War but a succession of personal crises resulted in his life being totally changed. In particular his fast-growing passion for the young pianist Harriet Cohen led him to reject the wife that he had married in 1911, and children, for her.

After 1918 Bax was uniquely placed to establish himself on the musical scene with the large number of

substantial scores he had written during the war and he quickly became known as one of the leading British composers of the day, a reputation underlined by his *First Symphony* in 1922. Later in the 1920s Bax gradually lost momentum, though this was not realised by his admirers at the time.

The late 1920s and early 1930s found Bax looking to develop his musical style, and at this time he wrote a number of works such as the *Northern Ballads* which, while they inform the later symphonies, were not promoted by the composer at the time, and only recently has the stature of these works become apparent. Both the works here recorded might aptly be described as 'Sinfonietta' and each, although almost unknown to present day audiences, is worthwhile in its individual way.

Bax's last symphony, his *Seventh*, dates from 1938-39. It was really his last significant work, for during his last years he composed little, though he became very well-known for two film scores, *Malta GC* and *Oliver Twist*. Delightful though they are, they are not the music by which a composer of stature may be judged and it is only with the wider appreciation of his many orchestral works (84 Bax scores require the orchestra) that we can at last see him for the significant and individual figure that he is, at least in British music.

Bax wrote his one-movement, three-sectioned, *Sinfonietta* in May 1932 and called it *Symphonic Phantasy*. He put it away and did not offer it for performance. Later he referred to it as his *Sinfonietta* and it was listed thus in his catalogue of works. Its only performance prior to this recording was during the BBC's Bax Centenary programmes when a number of

revivals and first performances were given. Although not on the scale of his symphonies, this music has a special personality all its own and most of Bax's most characteristic fingerprints may be found in it. In its variety and colourful and ever-changing orchestral textures it quickly absorbs one into Bax's varied and suddenly changing moods. The music plays continually, the opening theme acting as something of a motto, returning in the middle section, while the dramatic fast passage which follows contains the seeds of the ideas used in the closing section. As in the *Rondo* of the other work here included, this last movement reflects the end of Bax's emotional spectrum, throwing the more sombre and reflective earlier sections into sharp relief, though occasionally the music starts to slip into a more brooding mood. Quickly it all changes into fast music marked *Gaily* before the triumphal climax with which it ends.

The *Overture*, *Elegy* and *Rondo* dates from the summer of 1927 and thus falls between Bax's *Second Symphony* and the *Northern Ballads* and *Third Symphony* in Bax's output. Dedicated to his friend Eugene Goossens, it was first heard in a Queen's Hall

Promenade Concert conducted by Sir Henry Wood in October 1929. Although published in 1938, the stock of scores was later destroyed in a fire at his publisher's and it has never been widely available. The opening *Overture* has occasionally been heard on its own, detached from the complete work, and in its opening theme Bax comes the nearest he ever came to encompassing the then fashionable neo-classicism. He described this opening passage as 'suggestive of an 18th-century concerto', but the long dreamy middle-section melody is pure Bax. The central *Elegy* opens in a mood that Bax described as being 'a little spectral', and after a climax leads us to quiet music which Bax wants played 'in the manner of a cradle song'. The finale is extrovert, inhabiting the orchestral style used by the British light-music composers of the period, such as Bax's friend Eric Coates. The bright tune announced on the horns at the outset may bring Bax's *Rhapsodic Ballad* (1939) for solo cello to mind, but on comparison, the tune is much transformed in its translation from the full orchestra.

Lewis Foreman

Slovak Philharmonic Orchestra

The Slovak Philharmonic Orchestra was founded in 1949 as the first Slovak professional state symphony orchestra, based in the capital, Bratislava. Its chief conductors have included Vaclav Talich, Ludovít Rajter, and Libor Pešek. The orchestra is a regular guest at major European music festivals. On tour it has performed in eighteen European countries, in Japan, on Cyprus, in Turkey and in the United States. It has recorded extensively for Naxos as well as for other labels, national and international, and for radio, television and film companies.

Barry Wordsworth

Barry Wordsworth is the Principal Conductor of the BBC Concert Orchestra and the Brighton Philharmonic Orchestra as well as a frequent guest conductor with many of the major British Orchestras including the London Symphony Orchestra, the Philharmonia, the London Philharmonic Orchestra, the Hallé Orchestra, the Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra, the Ulster Orchestra, and the City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra. In 1989 he made his first televised appearance at the BBC Proms and has continued to conduct during every Prom season since with the BBC Concert Orchestra. His concerts with that orchestra include series at the Royal Festival Hall, the Fairfield Hall in Croydon, and regular recordings. Abroad, his engagements have included appearances with the Winnipeg Symphony, the Aalborg Symphony, the Malaysian Philharmonic, the Brabants, the Rotterdam Philharmonic, the Stavanger Symphony, the Aarhus Symphony, the Haifa Symphony, the Maastricht Symphony, the Belgian National, the New Zealand Symphony Orchestra, the Western Australia Symphony and the Sydney Symphony Orchestras. In addition to his symphonic career, Barry Wordsworth has conducted opera at Covent Garden, and until 1995 was Music Director of the Royal Ballet, with which he regularly conducts key productions, as with the Birmingham Royal Ballet, where he continues as Music Director. He has also conducted for the Paris National Opera Ballet, the Danish Royal Ballet, and the Tokyo Ballet. He has made a large number of acclaimed recordings.

First released on Marco Polo 8.223102 in 1987

This recording features two little-known works by Arnold Bax, who in the years following the First World War was regarded as one of the leading figures in contemporary British music. Both the *Sinfonietta* (originally titled *Symphonic Phantasy*, and withdrawn by the composer and never performed during his lifetime) and the slightly earlier *Overture, Elegy and Rondo* bear all those hallmarks of his mature style that his admirers will recognise.

Arnold
BAX
(1883-1953)

Overture, Elegy and Rondo 23:44

- 1 Overture** 7:57
- 2 Elegy** 8:26
- 3 Rondo** 7:21

Sinfonietta (Symphonic Phantasy) 22:00

- 4 Molto moderato – Allegro** 7:24
- 5 Tempo primo** 9:25
- 6 Allegro** 5:11

Slovak Philharmonic Orchestra • Barry Wordsworth

Recorded at the Concert Hall of the Slovak Philharmonic, Bratislava, from 8th to 12th June, 1987

Producer: Günter Appenheimer • Booklet Notes: Lewis Foreman

Publisher: Warner Chappell Music Ltd (1-3) • Performance material for the *Sinfonietta* provided by the BBC

Cover Painting: *Calderstone Park* by James Hamilton Hay (1874-1916) (Bridgeman Art Library)

NAXOS

DDD

8.555109



www.naxos.com

© 1987 & © 2003 HNH International Ltd.
Booklet notes in English
Made in Canada

NAXOS BAX: Overture, Elegy and Rondo • Sinfonietta 8.555109

8.555109

NAXOS BAX: Overture, Elegy and Rondo • Sinfonietta

NAXOS