

The short piano solos of Arnold Bax, 1912 - 1922: a premature abandonment of the genre?

Rodney L. Smith, *Elder Conservatorium of Music,
The University of Adelaide.*

Arnold Bax's virtual abandonment of the small-scale piano tone-poem by 1922, the year of his 1st Symphony, marked a definite move towards larger structures. Some of his contemporaries, such as Frank Bridge, also began to discard this musical form at approximately the same time. The paper will examine the roles played by the Performing Rights Society (established in 1915), the developing recording industry, and Bax's own circle in his rejection of a genre that had played a significant role in keeping the public directly in touch with his latest compositional styles.

However, a number of Bax's generation, especially fellow students of Corder at the Royal Academy of Music and of Knorr at the Frankfurt Hoch Conservatory, such as Bowen and Scott, continued to exploit the small-scale piano tone-poem with success. Therefore the paper will also investigate issues surrounding the apparent ease with which Bax felt able to dispense with it (he had a private income) and the effect the change may have had both on the development of his ability to handle concentrated forms in a larger context and on his public standing.

Many of the 22 short piano solos by Bax published prior to 1921 have been broadcast by Rodney Smith. He will perform excerpts to illustrate aspects of their construction and style in relation to Bax's larger works of the period with special reference to their significance for Bax's technical development, about which Delius remarked "If only that boy would concentrate he'd do something fine." (Fenby 1962 cited in Scott-Sutherland 1973: 40)

People, places and events undoubtedly had an influence on Arnold Bax's compositional output, although not always directly on its musical substance. For instance, while he had previously orchestrated some of his short piano solos for concert performance it is still highly surprising that he actually acted upon suggestions from Harriet Cohen and Arthur Alexander to orchestrate his intended third piano sonata as a symphony (Scott-Sutherland 1973: 63). But it is incontrovertible, according to Lewis Foreman's seminal Bax biography, that the piano score of the outer two movements, with the title 3rd Sonata, predated the orchestral score by some time (Foreman 1988:190). That such an important work as Bax's first publicly acknowledged symphony should have germinated as a piano sonata illustrates not only the importance he attached to personal advice at this time but also to the piano itself

The significance of 1922, the year of his first symphony, is also underlined by Bax's virtual abandonment of smaller-scale things such as songs with piano accompaniment, and in particular the miniature solo piano tone-poem, hitherto an apparently minor but nevertheless noticeable element in his oeuvre. As Foreman comments "it was the latter [chamber and piano music] which established his name in the mind of the musical public of the early 1920s" (Foreman 1988: 186). Of the twenty plus small piano solos that were published and survive as solos rather than in subsequent orchestrations, the majority had appeared at an increasing rate from 1915 to 1920, and were dedicated mostly to the pianist Harriet Cohen. Further evidence of the importance of Bax's personal relationships lies in their relatively sudden cessation, to be replaced by three larger scale, more objective piano sonatas between 1919 and 1926 all dedicated to Cohen, plus a multiplicity of orchestral and chamber works including his first two symphonies.

Cohen undoubtedly played a pivotal role in moving Bax towards bigger and more significant works both for herself as a pianist and in the wider field of instrumental music. However it was by no means inevitable that this would have prevented Bax from continuing to compose smaller vignettes for her and for general public consumption. Bax's near contemporaries Bowen, Ireland and Scott regularly turned out such compositions throughout their composing lives, and before the more general adoption of the gramophone into households in the nineteen thirties such works acted to keep their names before the public through armature and semi professional performances. However another important composer of works in this genre, Frank Bridge, ceased writing such pieces after 1926, not long after having secured ongoing financial support from the American arts patron Mrs Elizabeth Sprague Coolidge, further underlining the significance of such works for at least some composers as a means only of maintaining their financial security.

Eric Coates, one of Bax's near contemporaries as a student at London's Royal Academy of Music, underlined this point when he wrote of the establishment of the Performing Rights Society in 1914 "before the advent of the Society, many of the successful song writers of that time said to me that they wondered how I could spend so much thought and energy on writing orchestral works with no hope of financial return, when there was so much money to be made out of songs" (Coates 1953: 182). For the pianist this would translate across to writing small scale character pieces or tone-poems. Despite the war, undoubtedly 1915 marked a new beginning for many British composers in terms of royalties that could now be earned from larger scale music.

With a private income of his own Bax had no such need of financial support, yet other factors may have been at play. His relationship with the mercurial Cohen had been steadily morphing into something beyond the small intimacies revealed in the piano miniatures, and this was reflected in the broad canvasses he wrote for her after 1922. Stark, all encompassing and often threatening, the piano sonatas and *Winter Legends* reveal a world beyond a relationship of just two persons, and

indeed separated, compartmentalised, from any personal involvement with Cohen, reflecting their gradual distancing from each other. Such compartmentalising proved a recurring theme through Bax's life as he dealt with its various public and private challenges, from his roles as Irish poet-patriot Dermot O'Byrne, to Sir Arnold Bax Master of the King's Musik and to Village Squire at the White Horse, Storrington in Sussex.

Furthermore, Bax had always enjoyed close support from influential family members and friends, a circle that widened considerably following his attachment to Cohen. During studies on Bax's piano music with the pianist Vivian Langrish, a fellow Matthay pupil of Bax's (along with Swinstead and Hess amongst others), the writer became aware of the many links that emanated from Matthay, Wood, Corder and other prominent musicians working in North London at the time that assisted Bax, a naturally diffident personality, to advance his career as a composer. Such links would have given Bax the confidence to strike out onto broader pathways from 1922 onwards and explore routes that had no place for smaller more intimate forms.

A final issue that could have strengthened Bax's resolve against small-scale piano solos took place in 1923, when he passed his fortieth birthday, an event he felt keenly as it moved him further away from his youth. His Forward to his popular memoir *Farewell My Youth*, published in 1943, a slim volume which contains long passages of romantic nostalgia and reminiscence for his years before 1914, relates "And then, after one turns thirty or so, youth itself and the tide of boorishness are found, imperceptibly at first, to be receding" (Bax 1943: 6). Foreman, in turn, opines that "If Bax had not lived beyond his first symphony we should still remember him as a major figure.....for he would not have lived beyond his time into a period that was increasingly unsympathetic to his ideals" (Foreman 204), and quotes Bax as writing to his brother Clifford about their youth together "I, at any rate, was very much happier in those days." (Foreman 1988: 204). Henceforth he would need all his resolve to meet the challenges of change and produce greater things. Smaller things would be forgotten in the process.

A question that immediately arises from these changes to Bax's output concerns whether the omission of smaller things and concentration on larger scale works had any perceptible effect on the quality of his subsequent compositions. Unsupported hypothesis can be a dangerous game to play, but the musical evidence that follows does appear to indicate that Bax's major compositional problem, his tendency to lengthy complexity, would have been more easily grappled with had he not drastically reduced his output of small-scale composition, in particular the piano tone-poems.

Scott Sutherland has neatly encapsulated the musical world into which Arnold Bax was born. "Arnold Bax was almost exactly contemporary with Berg (b. 1885), Webern (b.1883), Bartok (b.1882), Kodaly (b.1881) and Stravinsky (b. 1882), a few years younger than John Ireland and the junior by eleven years of Vaughan

Williams. At the date of his birth, Liszt, Franck, Gounod, Tchaikovsky and Brahms had still a few years to live; Wagner had only just died.” (Scott-Sutherland 1972: XV). The period of Bax’s impressionable youth in London, for which he continually yearned in later years, was dominated by the music of Wagner and Brahms, and of these Wagner was the model placed before the students of Frederick Corder of whom Bax was one.

Unlike his more pro-active contemporaries Bartok, Stravinsky and Schoenberg, the shy escapist, romantically oriented Bax was disinclined to remake himself as a composer following the cataclysmic First World War, but instead reacted within the boundaries he had already set before the war. These boundaries, taking in the chromaticism of Richard Strauss, the impressionism and Slavic qualities of Alexander Skryabin, and the Celtic literary associations of William Butler Yeats, manifested themselves through melodic linear narrative and coruscated accompanimental figuration. The juxtaposition of related or opposed thoughts and ideas through a multiplicity of keys and rhythms, such as Schoenberg and Stravinsky explored, was alien to him. His dream world moved slowly and deliberately, exploring, often lingeringly, a single emotion at a time.

Nevertheless, within these boundaries Bax made considerable progress towards a somewhat more direct, less crenulated style in the years following World War 1. In this context it is fascinating to read Katherine E. Eggar, writing in the *Music Student* of November 1921 outlining Bax’s answers, maybe tongue in cheek, to some of her questions, as quoted by Foreman “What do you advise the ordinary pianist or teacher to do, so that your music may not remain a more or less sealed book to them? He thought and then said: “Let them take a course of reading the Wagner piano scores preferably not the simplified vocal scores with the inner parts taken out, but the piano reductions of the whole thing. Then they will find the contrapuntal basis of harmony exemplified, and that, I think, is what bothers them in my music. My harmonies come about as the result of contrapuntal movement.....Each part must be taken as a melodic line” (Foreman 1988: 186-187).

The difficulty with this assessment of his own music is that Bax omits to observe there is far less equality in his melodic lines than in, say, those of Bach. All his life Bax remained essentially a romantic melodist for whom the surrounding contrapuntal coruscations play an important but subservient role. While it is possible to argue that the resulting harmonies are essentially of linear origin, the benefit of hindsight, today, enables us to observe that they are at least as much harmonically based, playing second fiddle to, and colouring, the principal theme of the moment. For Bax’s other musical obsession, like most late romantics, was for harmonic colouration of the melodic line, and his colours are often enhanced through chordal aggregates that are chromatic to the prevailing tonal centre. This is undoubtedly the language of Liszt, Wagner, and Richard Strauss and it would have needed a seismic shift to modernise it towards the more objective, tauter,

tighter, more transparent and rhythmically driven language of modernism in the 1920s and 1930s.

Objectivity was not Bax's forte, and he contented himself simply with a somewhat leaner style as the years following World War 1 passed by. A comparison between two of his short piano solos dating from 1912 and 1920 respectively will illustrate some of these matters.

The 164-bar Nocturne, subtitled *May Night in the Ukraine*, (from *Two Russian Tone-Pictures*, Parlett 144) mixes the language of Rimsky-Korsakov (similarly to Stravinsky in *Firebird*) with early Skryabinesque features into an exotic romantic mélange. Even its simplest structures, outlined in its first page (figure 1), illustrate the derivation of Bax's accompanimental so-called counterpoint. In bar 4 for example the melody drops a minor second to B# instead of a more conventional major second to B. The highest accompanimental part rises synchronously only to G rather than G#, and the bass line maintains a tonic pedal, all illustrative of the night's torpor and languor. There can be little doubt that the driving force behind the passage is the melodic sweep itself with its refusal to move to a true supertonic accompanied by dominant harmonies. Indeed the whole of the first section is dominated by the lengthy melody, a vehicle guaranteed to lengthen rather than shorten the dimensions of the section since the problem with romantic melodies in general and Bax's melodies in particular is that they do not easily sub-divide but can bear only repetition in toto. This is indeed what happens on the second page as the melody is transferred to the left hand accompanied by a chromatically inclined counter-melody in the right hand.

Figure 1

TWO RUSSIAN TONE-PICTURES.

N^o 1. "NOCTURNE.""MAY-NIGHT IN THE UKRAINE!"
(To OLGA and NATASHA, 1910.)

ARNOLD BAX.

Length of performance
about 4½ minutes

Tempo moderato quasi andante. *dolce cantabile*

PIANO. *p dolcissimo*

cresc.

pp poco rit.

a tempo

pp lontano e delicato

tr tr tr tr

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The entire piece, timed according to the first page note at "about four and a half minutes", is cast in full sonata form with a second subject in F# minor commencing at bar 56:2 and a development section at bar 73:1. Bax brings back the first and second subject groups in reverse order in the recapitulation (bar 112:2) and includes a coda at bar 156:1. Given the profusion of melodic ideas cast in sonata form that Bax squeezes into so short a time frame his only recourse is to concentrate the developmental elements into the accompaniment figuration. The effect is therefore one of harmonic luxury festooned with chromatic decoration forming chordal aggregates of some complexity.

If this work, and those of similar vintage such as its fellow Gopak or the Toccata (Parlett 155) of 1913 are contrasted with small piano pieces of the same period but more representative of the first half of the twentieth century, such as Debussy's *Preludes* (1910 -1913), Schoenberg's *6 Kleine Klavierstücke* (1911) or more

particularly Bartok's *Bagatelles* (1908), the differences come starkly into focus. The Bagatelle's modal treatments go beyond chromaticism, their spare part-writing is crystal clear and tersely suited to small forms, and their rhythmic drive forms at least as important a feature as their harmonic construction.

Bax's *A Hill Tune* of 1920 (Parlett 232), of which the first two pages are given at figure 2, forms part of his final group of small piano tone-poems written before the decision was taken, consciously or sub-consciously, to concentrate on bigger things. It demonstrates a far more sophisticated approach to the challenges of writing something brief and to the point. In particular it illustrates how Bax sought to solve the problem of maintaining a tonal base and a melodically propelled structure while ensuring developmental imperatives were accommodated without resorting to undue complexity of figuration.

Figure 2

A HILL-TUNE

Arnold Bax

Andante

PIANO

molto legato sempre

pp *molto cantabile*

non troppo f

sempre pp

cantabile

crescendo

poco f

diminuendo

p cantabile

cant.

p

f

f

p

p

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In short, Bax resorts to a single melodic idea (mirroring the title) for this modest 58-bar work and binary form, with part B commencing at bar 32:3. However, he subtly recasts the contents of parts A and B by superimposing “a kind of variation form” as Scott Sutherland suggests (Scott-Sutherland 1972: 105). Thus while the principal melodic idea is restated at bar 14:3, its character is darkened by moving it from the tonic Bb major to D minor accompanied by increased chromaticism. It is repeated a third time at bar 25:3 in A minor with yet more chromaticism and agitated dynamics, but returns triumphantly at bar 32:3 in the tonic, followed by a coda at bar 45:1. In performance the changes in mood and character occasioned by key alterations, chromaticism and dynamics can even hint at sonata form with the melody’s first repeat (bar 14:3) deputising as a second subject, its third repeat as a development section, and the triumphal return to Bb major (bar 32:3) giving an impression of a recapitulation.

Thus while the essence of Bax's romantic musical creed, melodic chromaticism, is maintained throughout, the piece's monothematic construction ensures the proliferation of ideas encountered in Nocturne has been constrained to fit a smaller landscape and the figuration has space to proliferate more gradually and with less continuous intensity. This represents subtle change of a high order and indicates Bax's skill in detail and minutiae. These matters show he possessed areas of strength in clear contrast to those skills he employed for the broad avenue of symphonic writing on which he was about to embark. They demonstrate his ability to maintain tight control of his material and taut construction, abilities completely in harmony with mainstream twentieth century thinking but not abilities he chose to foster during ensuing years. Despite Bax's amazing skills in all areas of symphonic writing, his inability to restrain his romantic musical tendencies ensured the seven symphonies and other orchestral works of the twenties and thirties were always on a scale that was out of character with the times. Had Bax kept a tighter rein on his ideas and developmental procedures in the manner hinted at in his last batch of small piano solos his position within the musical world of the times might have been more congruent. The exposition section of Elgar's Third Symphony as completed in short score by the composer, for example, shows Elgar coming to grips with this very problem. Its compact structure contains ideas that are compressed and much more direct than his previous symphonic works to the extent that a conventional repeat sign is placed before the development in the older classical manner to give greater weight and gravitational pull to the opening section (Payne 1998: Track 1). Bax's symphonies had no need for such repeats.

Three other pieces, *Nereid* (Parlett 177) of 1916, *Romance* (Parlett 206) of 1918 and *Burlesque* (Parlett 229) of 1920 further illustrate these issues and give some additional ideas of Bax's innovative forms within limited parameters.

According to Parlett (Parlett 1999: 120) Bax had several conflicting thoughts about *Nereid* and the two principal versions (the original named *Ideala*) differ markedly in that *Ideala* contains an additional 87 bars in place of the five that conclude *Nereid*. This in itself is evidence of Bax pruning an overlong soliloquy-like work that eventually comprised only 42 bars in the final published version. Once again the melodic treatment dictates some mild chromaticisms in the accompaniment in the initial bars (figure 3). Simple variation form is adopted with thematic statement (bars 1–10), first variation (bars 11–26) and second variation (bars 27–36) followed by a coda (bars 37–42). This admirably compact structure moves from B major to Bb major (for Variation 1) to B major again (Variation 2 plus coda). The floating stasis of the music and mood mould themselves into a convincing canvass built initially on a second inversion of B major triad that accommodates an A natural melodic shift in bar 3 by accompanying it with a first inversion of the flattened mediant harmony. Analytically, it is impossible to ignore the connection between this melodic shift downwards by a semitone and the key shift downwards by a semitone to Bb major for variation 1 on the second page. The

similarities of treatment between *Nereid* and the earlier *Nocturne* include the use of pedal points and semitonal shifts, but the differences are already great although only four years separate the two pieces. *Nereid's* compact formal structure, monothematic foundation and simple but effective chromaticisms mark it out as a model Bax could have built on.

Figure 3

2

To Harriet Cohen.

NEREID.

Arnold Bax.

Delicate and floating. Easy tempo.

p

p clear and expressive

pp

mf singing

simile

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In a sense he did so, briefly, as *Romance* and *Burlesque* are also in simple forms. *Romance's* 88 bar structure is simply divided into three, with part B commencing at bar 27 and a return combining the material from both sections at bar 58. Once again its playing time does not exceed five minutes and its opening bars contain a significant melodic note depressed chromatically by a semitone, this time from E to Eb in bar 4 (figure 4). Again the accompanying so-called counterpoint complies chromatically. While material contrasted in figuration and key commences at bar 27, it is not sufficiently different to cause a major change of mood, but simply a development of it. In that respect it is instructive to compare this treatment with the way Bax achieved a greater mood change in *Hill Tune* (bars 14:3 and then 25:3) without introducing new material at all. In both works the effect is to substitute any feeling of outright change for one of gradual development, a wholly subtle means of containing the material within the limited parameters of a short piece while maintaining a feeling of forward momentum without recourse to ever more complex accompanimental figurations.

Figure 4

To Miss Harriet Coken.

A ROMANCE.

Very moderate tempo.
Dreamy and passionate.

ARNOLD BAX.

PIANO.

Burlesque (figure 5) is an altogether more energetic, rambunctious, rhythmically driven work, its short-breathed $\frac{3}{4}$ time signature of 144 bars belying the fact its *Allegro vivace* playing duration is less than three minutes. The form is of the utmost simplicity, a second section in A minor commencing at bar 71 followed by a brief return of the first section material at bar 106 with a more reflective coda at bar 120. So short a work would be overburdened if true ternary form, with new material in the second section, had been used. But the A minor middle section contains many references to the principal thematic motifs and so, once again, the work is essentially monothematic. While its structure can be interpreted in a number of ways, its relationship to classical Binary form (with the second section extending from bar 71 to the end) seems very strong. The language of this work, with its stomping open fifths and entirely tonal principal melody is mildly reminiscent of festive pre-baroque music and given the universality of the piano in the 1920s and views of old music current at that time, it is not as entirely incongruous as it may

appear at first to present day ears. Although it takes a romantic view of old music *Burlesque* is not entirely cast in romantic language. Above all its rhythmic drive, combined with its comparatively restrained chromaticism offer models that would have allowed Bax a way forward from his romantic road block.

Figure 5

The image displays a page of a musical score titled "BURLESQUE." by Arnold Bax. The score is written for piano and violin. The tempo is marked "Allegro vivace." The key signature is one flat (B-flat major or D minor). The time signature is 3/4. The piano part begins with a forte (*f*) dynamic, followed by a *dim.* (diminuendo) section, and then a *p* (piano) section marked "leggiero". The violin part features a melodic line with various dynamics, including *f* and *p*. The score is divided into four systems, each with a grand staff (piano and violin staves). The first system includes the tempo and dynamic markings. The second system shows the beginning of the violin melody. The third system continues the piano accompaniment and violin melody. The fourth system concludes the piece with a final forte (*f*) dynamic.

While these and other piano works from the period 1912 to 1922 show Bax experimenting with new ways of encapsulating his passion for romantic melody into more succinct musical forms suitable for the post-ww1 era, in the event they were not pursued further and Bax embarked on large-scale symphonic works and chamber music with most romantic conventions intact. Initially many of the symphonies, concerti, sonatas and other major compositions were met with great acclaim as the concert going public believed that this was modernism with a more

acceptable face. But as the post-ww1 musical revolution began to take hold during the 1930s and into the 1940s Bax's music appeared increasingly anachronistic. It was as if Stravinsky had continued to write music like *Rite of Spring* for the remainder of his life.

Official kisses of death, a knighthood in 1937 followed by the appointment as Master of the King's Music in 1942, seemed only to cement his position as a reactionary and musical irrelevance, although if nothing else they proved the continuing strength of Bax's support base, mentioned earlier. Evidence that a stronger continuing representation of smaller scale compositions like the piano solos would have ensured Bax continued to develop the tools to alter this situation has already been given. There is also plenty of evidence to indicate he felt a flexibility of interaction between orchestral and piano sonorities which permitted his writing for one to influence the other. Not only do we have the presence of the two outer movements of the 1st Symphony as a previously composed 3rd Piano Sonata, but also the central section of the middle *Lento* of the 4th Symphony with its substantial quotations of large tracts of the 1918 piano solo *A Romance*, discussed earlier. Furthermore Parlett indicates that the principal melody of *A Hill Tune* (1920), also discussed earlier, was written in 1908 "as part of the second thematic group in the first movement (at 3:4 ff.) of the String quartet in G" (Parlett 1999:149). In addition there are examples of Bax subsequently recasting orchestral works for piano solo, such as *Ceremonial Dance*, *Serpent Dance* and *Water Music* from his incidental music of 1920 to Barrie's play *The Truth about the Russian Dancers*.

Continuing down the modernist path would have involved a change of heart on Bax's part which it is difficult to imagine. He would have had to forego some of his most cherished romantic traits and substitute rigorous agendas concerning the hierarchy of musical fundamentals, although passages from the piano pieces discussed in this paper and elsewhere indicate that he could have done so without discarding all his beliefs. Had he succeeded the ensuing music need not have sounded like Prokofiev or Vaughan Williams, but like Bax himself with a leaner more direct profile.

At the height of the anti-romantic reaction in 1956, Peter J Pirie, who was warmly supportive of romanticism, felt able to write only of the "Crippled Splendour of Elgar and Mahler", from today's perspective a more apposite epithet for Bax's music than their's (Pirie 1956: 70). Bax proved a staggeringly talented, prolific composer, whose position in life and natural temperament militated against changing his early beliefs. Other worldly, shy, with a tendency to circumvent rather than confront difficult challenges, Bax made a very public stand on the one set of issues that he had ample talent and ability to circumvent very successfully if he chose. Deciding not to do so brought his reputation half a century of neglect and obscurity.

About the Author

Rodney Smith was a piano student of Vivian Langrish and Margaret Kitchin in London, gave his debut recital at the Wigmore Hall in 1969 and was a prizewinner in the Olivier Messiaen Competition in Royan, France, the same year. He has taught at the Royal Academy of Music and the University of Illinois and was Senior Piano Organiser for the Inner London Education Authority. He founded the Australasian Piano Pedagogy Conference in 1993 and is currently Head of Vocational Education and Training Programs and Co-ordinator of Pedagogy Programs at the Elder Conservatorium of Music, University of Adelaide.

Contact details

Rodney Smith. Head, Vocational Education and Training Programs
Elder Conservatorium of Music., The University of Adelaide. SA 5005
Tel: (08) 8303 3708
Email: rodney.smith@adelaide.edu.au

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