

'One of us'

When Arnold met Patrick

Harry White on an encounter between composer Arnold Bax and Patrick Pearse



COLIN O'RIORDAN



Arnold Bax (main photograph) and Patrick Pearse, to whom Bax dedicated his composition 'In Memoriam' (original score left). Top right: UCD's Harry White. GETTY IMAGES AND UCD ARCHIVES

IN my Dublin days', the English composer Arnold Bax wrote in 1952, 'there was no talk of music whatever'. By then, less than a year before his death in Cork (where he lies in St Finbarre's cemetery), Bax had long become an eminence of British music. Knighted in 1937, he later became Master of the King's Music. But Bax's love-affair with Ireland abided to the grave.

This was a passion originally inspired by Yeats: having read 'The Wanderings of Oisín', Bax visited Ireland in 1902, and felt an immediate affinity and sense of belonging which lasted throughout his life. It was Yeats — the great enemy of music, whose poetry confirmed an ascendancy of word over tone in Ireland that prevails even today — who nevertheless flooded the young composer's imagination with images which were formative in the development of his musical voice. On the western seaboard of Ireland, the Celt in Bax stood 'fully revealed'. In the shadow of Yeats's poetry, the temple of his own art was raised.

Bax lived in Dublin from 1911 until the outbreak of the First World War in 1914, but he had already become a regular visitor to Ireland before then, and his early cycle of orchestral tone poems ('Into the Twilight', 'The Faery Hills' and 'Roscatha'), written between 1908 and 1910, affirms the burgeoning influence of Irish themes in his work. Even earlier, it was 'Cathleen Ni Houlihan' (1905), an orchestral poem inspired by Yeats's play of (nearly) the same name *Cathleen ni Houlihan* (1902), which attested the decisive impact of

Ireland in the development of Bax's musical expressivity.

Bax's volume of memoirs, *Farewell, My Youth* (1943) closes with an affectionate recollection of his 'Dublin days' and his friendship with a host of Irish writers and friends (notably Padraic and Mary Colum, Darrell Figgis, Ernest Boyd and George Russell [AE]) whom he regularly entertained at his home in Bushy Park Road, Rathgar.

Two features in particular dominate these idyllic Irish recollections: one is the cosmopolitan vigour and charm of those soirées which Bax and his wife either organised or attended in the Dublin suburbs (which he contrasts with romantic summer visits to Donegal and Connemara); the other is a complete dearth of music.

Later in life, Bax would acknowledge how impoverished musical culture in Dublin seemed to him in those years (notwithstanding exceptions such as the 'tiny pit orchestra' conducted by John F Larchet — Professor of Music at UCD from 1921 until 1958 — at the Abbey Theatre). From 1909 until 1912, Bax wrote poetry, short stories and plays under the pseudonym 'Dermot O'Byrne' (mentioned as a figure of promise in the first edition of Boyd's influential *Ireland's Literary Renaissance* [1913]), so that he materially reinvented himself as a writer in order to pass muster in Dublin's artistic circles.

This was simply because Dublin offered little or no outlet for his primary impulses as a composer. 'No talk of music whatever' does not, in these circumstances, seem to have been an exaggeration.

Farewell, My Youth contains one especially striking episode: somewhere between autumn 1912 and the early summer of 1913, Molly Colum persuaded



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Patrick Pearse to visit Bax in his Rathgar home. Molly emphasised to Bax what a rare and unlikely occurrence this would be ('he's a very difficult fish to land', she told him), but come he did. 'His expression was gentle and even almost womanish', Bax recalled, 'but his eyes were lit with the unwavering flame of the fanatic'. Pearse and Bax talked that evening of Connemara, and the composer's intimate

knowledge of the West clearly impressed his guest. 'My goodness, Mr Pearse', Molly Colum said, 'would you ever have supposed that this fella was an Englishman?'. 'Well,' replied Pearse quietly, with the ghost of an ironic smile, 'I'm half-English myself!'

Bax concludes his short account of that evening with a memorable recollection: 'As he was leaving that night he [Pearse] said to Molly, 'I think your friend Arnold Bax may be one of us. I should like to see more of him'. Bax never did see that 'death-aspiring dreamer' again, but he records that on Easter Tuesday 1916, when he read

first reports of the Rising by the shores of Lake Windemere, he said to himself, 'I know that Pearse is in this!'

Bax, as it were, said goodbye to Ireland and his youth at one and the same time. But he never forgot his imaginative debt to this country, even if Ireland all but forgot him. Not long after Pearse's execution, Bax wrote a work for orchestra entitled *In Memoriam*, on the autograph score of which he wrote (in Irish), 'In memory of Padraig Pearse'.

The work lay unperformed for almost a century until Vernon Handley recovered the score and recorded it with the BBC Philharmonic Orchestra in 1998. (It will receive its first ever Irish performance with the RTÉ National Symphony Orchestra in February of this year).

Bax used part of this composition in his film music for David Lean's *Oliver Twist* (1948) — sure evidence that the original work meant much to him, to say nothing of the man who inspired it. A century after *In Memoriam* was written, it may at last be time to make good on Pearse's perceptive aside to Mary Colum all those years ago. If *In Memoriam* isn't Irish music, it is hard to know what is.

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