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# Symphony No. 5

The Tale the Pine-Trees Knew

Royal Scottish National Orchestra

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## Arnold Bax (1883–1953) Symphony No. 5 • The Tale the Pine-Trees Knew

Arnold Bax was born to an affluent, cultured family where it followed naturally that he should be introduced to music at an early age. When he was ten years old his father took him to the Crystal Palace Saturday Concerts and his keen musical interest quickly became apparent. The concert programmes were kept neatly bound by his father and Bax spent hours amusing himself by improvising piano pieces from the short musical extracts printed in them. During his mid-teens he showed significant pianistic talent and in 1900 he entered the Royal Academy of Music, where he studied with Frederick Corder. Compared to the Royal College of Music, where composition was taught with a rather Brahmsian bias under Stanford, the Academy tended to be freer and angled more towards the directions of Wagner; Corder himself was a devoted Wagnerian, but as was Liszt (whom the Principal had known in person) and Richard Strauss. In this sympathetic atmosphere and the encouragement of established musical figures and gifted peers, Bax was free to develop an extraordinarily imaginative and complex musical style entirely his own.

In 1902 Bax made a discovery which had tremendous influence on the rest of his life: the heady poetic world of W.B. Yeats. He related naturally to Ireland and Celtic folklore, its aspirations, mythology and history firing both a musical and literary vision. In 1904 he wrote *A Celtic Song-Cycle* and began publishing novels in Dublin under the pseudonym Dermot O'Byrne. One of many highly evocative tone-poems, *In the Faery Hills* (1909), was followed by his first *Piano Sonata* (1910), an expressive piece redolent with memories of Russia after a recent trip in pursuit of his first love. Women played an important part in his

life, including a short-lived marriage which failed as soon as he encountered the pianist Harriet Cohen, for whom he wrote numerous pieces, and friend and lover Mary Greaves, who travelled with him to Scotland on frequent occasions.

In addition to his passion for all things Irish, the wilds of Scotland similarly captivated Bax and each winter from 1928 to 1940 he escaped the bustle of London and journeyed to Morar in Inverness-shire. There, the bracing air and breathtaking views across the Atlantic to the Hebridean Islands catalysed his seven symphonies. They speak with his deeply personal voice led by harmony and instrumental colour, with emphasis on the metamorphosis of thematic ideas. With the onset of the Second World War, Bax's composition slowed considerably and he wrote nothing between August 1939 and the summer of 1942. From 1941 to 1953 he lived in a hotel in Sussex during which time he made a brief foray into film music, but it was clear that his youthful vision had considerably faded. He died peacefully while holidaying with friends in Ireland, by then a much-honoured composer.

At the same time that Bax discovered Morar he was drawn to the unique sound-world of Sibelius and the Norse legends, having been intensely moved by the profundity of expression in Sibelius's *Symphony No. 1*. From this time on his work took on a distinctly Nordic feel, and Bax himself described music including his *Symphony No. 5* and *The Tale the Pine-Trees Knew* as his 'craggy, northern works'. Bax was undoubtedly influenced by Sibelius and, having met him personally, dedicated to him the *Symphony No. 5*, begun in the winter of 1931 at Morar.

The work is a closely woven fabric enriched by impressionistic blocks of instrumental colour and

enormous emotional range represented in conflicts of rhythm, texture, tonality and pitch. Throughout the first movement, the music moves seamlessly from fast, thrusting sections into slower, lyrical moments with perfectly balanced precision. It begins with a winding clarinet theme rising and falling while pulsating bass and timpani beat out a mysterious march. Tension is increased by muted strings and wind and off-beat rhythms culminating with waves of brass and strings until the music pauses completely – a breath of air before launching headlong into the main body of the movement. Complicated rhythms and awkward accents introduce a new theme (which Bax ordered the strings to play 'with confident ferocity') and soon the music gamers new energy from bouncing staccato strings and woodwind, driving the music on further still. Slowly the pace quiets, blurring the sharp edges with muted brass, glockenspiel and harp, followed by wistful solo violin and oboe melodies. After reaching a final climax the music subsides, eventually revealing the initial clarinet theme before a quiet close.

Shimmering strings and trumpet fanfares catalyse the feeling of otherworldliness that begins the second movement, before the violas, cellos and basses present a sombre melody echoed by the woodwind. The rich texture of a cor anglais solo is followed by a muted tuba solo, pervaded by the undulating arc of the flute line until, despite brazen interjections from the brass, the movement slips into a final pool of calm.

A driving 'liturgical' string line begins the finale, interrupted by the opening theme of the first movement

that appears in chattering woodwind. A strong rhythmic drive propels the music forward with repeated figures in the trombone and tuba, leading to a climax before the tension starts to dissipate, preparing the way for the final *Epilogue*. Here the triumphal resolution of the liturgical theme is completed with exultant strings and blazing brass resounding with solemn splendour before the work ends with a full orchestral flourish.

*The Tale the Pine-Trees Knew* was completed in December 1931 and its imaginative atmosphere clearly informs the atmosphere of *Symphony No. 5*. It begins with running semi-quavers on the violas rushing like wind through the trees. In fact at this time he wrote to Mary Greaves, 'The pine trees ... sighed and sighed and I longed for you to be with me.' Although he was keen to refute any strong extra-musical significance of his work, Bax did admit that during its composition he was 'thinking of the Norse sagas and wild traditional legends of the Highland Celts'. The principal theme appears on brass while strings wind up and down with great energy. A long slower section follows with muted strings and harp punctuated by sections of solo wind and horn piercing through the haze. The tempo draws itself on again and builds up, gradually leading to a vigorous statement of the main theme with brass and percussion. It is not long, however, before a violin solo restores the previous quiet atmosphere and ends the work in the mists and shadows of the forest.

Nina Large