

A black and white close-up portrait of Eugene Goossens, looking slightly to the right. The image is the background for the entire cover.

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# BAX

## Symphony No. 2

BBC Symphony Orchestra  
Eugene Goossens

## Winter Legends

BBC Northern Symphony Orchestra  
John McCabe, piano  
Raymond Leppard

A BBC recording



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## **Symphony No. 2**

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English composer Arnold Bax was born in the late nineteenth century but had his maturity and came to prominence in the first half of the twentieth. His was an affluent and literate London-based family and Bax was able to pursue a dazzling career undistracted by worldly necessities. He had no need to earn a living, teach, give concerts, court the great and good or chase commissions. In this sense he was like his ultimately more popular contemporary Vaughan Williams.<sup>1</sup> No stranger to writing songs, chamber music and piano solos, Bax seemed most fluently at ease with the orchestra. He was also the author of poems<sup>2</sup>, short stories and a sadly curtailed autobiography<sup>3</sup>.

Three of his numerous tone-poems date from during and around the Great War years: *The Garden of Fand* (1916), *November Woods* (1917) and *Tintagel* (1919). From his death in 1953, and even now, *Tintagel* is the work that promoters tend to reach for when it is felt that Bax must have a place in the concert-hall. The orchestral poem as a form gripped his attention life-long and there are numerous examples across the Bax chronology. These reach back to 1905 with *Cathleen-ni-Hoolihan* when he was 22. They extend far forward to *A Legend* in 1944 when he was 61, within nine years of his death. His tone-poems have kept a precarious hold on the concert stage but it is his even-less played seven numbered symphonies that most masterfully reflect his ambitions and achievement.

His apparent preference for the "tone-poem" over the "symphonic-poem", left clear blue water, for works of frank symphonic gravitas or intent to be called "Symphony". This division is further amplified by his freedom to speak candidly about the underlying plot or atmosphere of the tone-poems. Compare this with his largely maintained silence when questioned about any biographical or other inspiration behind the symphonies. In a BBC talk<sup>4</sup> Bax mentions his First Symphony but his word-play leaves us with no

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<sup>1</sup> It is a mark of the comparative achievements of the two composers that by 1939 Bax was known for his seven symphonies while Vaughan Williams had written four, the last of which was dedicated to Bax. Bax died in 1953 and Vaughan Williams in 1958 having completed nine symphonies

<sup>2</sup> "Ideala - Love Letter and Poems of Arnold Bax", Ed. Colin Scott-Sutherland, Fand Music Press, 2001

<sup>3</sup> "Farewell My Youth", Ed. Lewis Foreman, Scolar Press, 1992

revelations and only gently pressed home obfuscation. As for the symphonies, they are creatures of the inter-War years - written between 1922 and 1939, a clear demarcation in time from those three hallmark tone-poems. It is instructive to read Edwin Evans' extensive entry for Bax in the 1924 "A Dictionary of Music and Musicians"<sup>5</sup> where Bax emerges not as a symphonist but as a composer with the emphasis on the voice, the piano and the orchestra. Evans refers to what later became known the First Symphony (1922) and to the unnumbered symphony *Spring Fire* (1913).

Edwin Evans ends his article: " If it were necessary to find a label for Bax we might call him a Neo-Romantic. He has a strong feeling for beauty, both of line and of texture, and, contrary to a tendency prevalent among modern composers, he is not afraid to give it full play, whether in the fashioning of a poetic melody, or in a more prolonged flow of fantasy. In a certain sense of the word, he is one of the most musical of present-day composers, for music flows from him in a generous stream. The length of some of his works is due to this, and not to diffuseness, or the common practice of adopting the larger musical forms, and filling them. Almost invariably this stream is lyrical. It sings in every mood, but always with a romantic inflection." This verdict still holds good although it is a mark of the depths of musical fashion that in 1966 during the winter of Bax's reputation a leading musicologist wrote: "he could not curb prolixity, nor concentrate his invention into the memorable or distinctive theme ... his great talent was never sufficiently disciplined ..."<sup>6</sup> The critical world has changed for the better since then courtesy of the BBC, Bax Trust, Vernon Handley, Norman Del Mar and Bryden Thomson, Chandos and Lyrita and Richard Adams' Arnold Bax website<sup>7</sup>. Bax's biographers Colin Scott-Sutherland<sup>8</sup> (first on the scene after Bax's death) and Lewis Foreman<sup>9</sup>, the latter with one of the finest composer biographies ever written, have also

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<sup>4</sup> 6 June 1949 Symposium Records 1336

<sup>5</sup> pp. 32-34, J M Dent & Sons Ltd, 1924

<sup>6</sup> Frank Howes, "The English Musical Renaissance", Secker & Warburg, 1966, pp. 214-215

<sup>7</sup> <http://arnoldbax.com/>

<sup>8</sup> Colin Scott-Sutherland, "Arnold Bax", J M Dent & Sons Ltd, 1973

<sup>9</sup> Lewis Foreman, "Bax - A Composer and His Times", Ashgate, 1983; Scolar, 1987, Ashgate, 2007

been instrumental in bringing Bax's music to the fore. We should bear in mind that taste in music can just as easily cant around again. While there are three complete recorded cycles, and one in part, Bax's symphonies remain a rarity in the concert hall.

## SECOND SYMPHONY

The Second Symphony had its premiere in the USA - unusual for British works of the 1930s. There are a few American connections. His *Garden of Fand* saw light of day in front of an audience at a concert given by the Chicago Symphony Orchestra when it was conducted by Frederick Stock on 29 October 1920. This was a couple of years before Bax set about the Second Symphony. His Seventh Symphony is dedicated to "The People of America" and had its first performance in Carnegie Hall by the New York Philharmonic on 10 June 1939. It was conducted by Adrian Boult. The original dedicatee was Basil Cameron who proved a staunch Baxian. He also gave the world premiere of the Fourth Symphony with the San Francisco Symphony Orchestra on 16 March 1932 and conducted an early 1960s broadcast of Northern Ballad No. 1.

The Second Symphony, written in London and Geneva, carries a dedication to Serge Koussevitsky who directed the premiere with his Boston Symphony Orchestra on 13 December 1929. Koussevitsky was not completely new to Bax. He had conducted *The Garden of Fand* in Paris on 17 May 1923. Goossens gave the United Kingdom premiere on 30 May 1930. Bax who had not been able to travel to Boston, wrote: "I feel very grateful to Eugene for his brilliant performance ... which lifted it at last for me into a purely abstract world. So for the moment I feel unduly tender towards its grim features."<sup>10</sup>

The Second Symphony is a creature of widely-distanced extremes. Gloom, tragedy, fantasy and heady love-music rack and exalt this score. Across its three movements the symphony proceeds in a kaleidoscopic motion of mood and atmosphere.

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<sup>10</sup> Letter (undated) to Gustav Holst, quoted in Graham Parlett, "A Catalogue of the Works of Sir Arnold Bax", 1999, Clarendon Press, Oxford, p.176

The first movement opens proceedings in a grim and louring landscape comparable with that sustained across fifteen minutes in the Northern Ballad No. 2 (1934). This is fitfully shaken off as Bax evokes more fantastic realms - borne up and along by harp, flute and the violins. A lively figure stalks the work reminiscent of the First Symphony's barbaric march finale. Sinister contributions from the woodwind recall the earlier parts of Balakirev's *Tamara*, a title which later attracted a ballet score from Bax.

The second movement, in a world not that far removed from the glistening nature mysticism of *Spring Fire*, rises to one of Bax's most emotive, touching and long-limbed melodies. This proceeds from the depths of the strings and rises to towering heights. Surely this was a celebration of the lost youth that he was to lament in the title of his autobiography, "Farewell My Youth". Opulent colours glimmer and shimmer in the aural equivalent of canvases by Klimt and Bakst. Dark colour-points provide contrast as if to remind the listener that exultation is transitory. The strings rise to a dazzling mobile climax which is further topped by Mussorgskian brass and the equivalent of the *Dies Irae*, baleful and fearful.

The scowling finale, casting glances back to the First Symphony, at first reeks of catastrophe. It soon takes up a whoopingly savage dance worthy of the Ballets Russes. The music gradually becomes more contemplative and a cloud-hung idyllic epilogue arrives. A solo violin adds a sweet descant but dark undercurrents leave things emotionally unresolved. There is more peace to be found in the epilogues to the Third, Sixth and Seventh Symphonies.

Goossens, recently returned from Australia, had taken up this studio assignment after the BBC had mused on offering it to Nikolai Malko.<sup>11</sup> Goossens had a track record with Bax.<sup>12</sup> There was the pioneer recording of *Tintagel* in 1928 with the New Symphony Orchestra. He also recorded Bax's lightweight picture-postcard, *Mediterranean*. *The Happy Forest* bears a dedication to Goossens who was the conductor of preference in

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<sup>11</sup> BBC letter dated 24 September 1956 to Malko

<sup>12</sup> Dutton CDBP 9779

*The Garden of Fand* for the Murdochs-sponsored all-Bax concert at London's Queen's Hall on 13 November 1922. Goossens was a sound choice as this broadcast dating from 2 November 1956 attests. This version, from almost three decades after the UK premiere, has a special resonance. It's a volcanic, lucid, lively and very emotional reading which transcends its historical status and mono technology. Goossens died in June 1962 having, just one month earlier, recorded Robert Still's Third Symphony for Saga - later reissued on Lyrita.<sup>13</sup>

The Second Symphony was also conducted by Barbirolli - such a pity that he did not follow up with it after his classic recording of the Third Symphony with the Hallé. As it was, the first stereo recording of the Second Symphony had to wait until a Ken Russell-sponsored LP in October 1970 when the conductor was Myer Fredman.<sup>14</sup> It has not made much headway in concert: the most recent airing being at a BBC Prom on 16 August 2011 when Andrew Litton was the conductor.

## WINTER LEGENDS

*Winter Legends* came within a hair's breadth of being dedicated to Sibelius whose name appears on the manuscript but struck through. The Finnish composer, much revered by Bax, was supplanted by the Harriet Cohen.<sup>15</sup> Cohen was for many years the work's only pianist champion<sup>16</sup> until after her death in 1967 when the work was recorded by Margaret Fingerhut for Chandos<sup>17</sup> and by Ashley Wass for Naxos<sup>18</sup>. Bax was to return

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<sup>13</sup> SRCD.285

<sup>14</sup> SRCD.233

<sup>15</sup> Several major works show this indecision. The identity of the original dedicatee is often revealing. The Sixth Symphony began with a superscription to Szymanowski then switched to Adrian Boult. The Seventh Symphony began with Basil Cameron as dedicatee but this was altered to "To the People of America"

<sup>16</sup> Dutton CDBP 9751

<sup>17</sup> CHAN8484 reissued as CHAN10209-10. Played without cuts - possibly for the first time. Unusually Margaret Fingerhut gave a concert performance with the Guildford Philharmonic Orchestra conducted by Vernon Handley at Civic Hall, Guildford on 29 November 1992

<sup>18</sup> 8.572597. Played with cuts

to the subject and Sibelius's name appears on the Fifth Symphony. Both works, together with the *Northern Ballads* show a dour Scandinavian tendency. That said, there's little or no Sibelian redolence in Bax except for an echo of *Tapiola* in the Sixth Symphony.

John McCabe (1939-2015)<sup>19</sup> is the pianist for the present revival. He had for years been a staunch Bax champion and was a natural choice for this 1978 studio pathfinder for the many Bax concerts in 1983 carried through by the BBC to mark the centenary. McCabe returned to the work in 1981<sup>20</sup> when the conductor was Vernon Handley with the BBC Scottish Symphony Orchestra.

The conductor of the present recording was Raymond Leppard who had figured in the Lyrita catalogue as the conductor of Bax's Symphonies 5 and 7<sup>21</sup>. His appearance in the early 1970s as the conductor of these first-ever recordings was something of a surprise as previously he had been very much a denizen of the Baroque revival on record. There could hardly be a more violent contrast. As for the quality of what he brought to Bax it proved imaginative and apt to the task. Still, he was an astonishing choice when Vernon Handley was in the early flush of the Baxian revival. Leppard's mastery of the idiom - which for most listeners he was creating - was deft and fortunate. The results could have been misfires given the absence of a widely experienced tradition. Sure there had been broadcasts of symphonies 5 and 7 by Stanford Robinson, Rudolph Schwarz, Barbirolli, Cameron and Boult but few apart from the most adamant Bax fans with reel-to-reel tape recorders were familiar with those fleeting radio events. In any event the BBC music management appeared happy with its choice of Leppard who had been Principal Conductor (1973-1980) of the then BBC Northern Symphony Orchestra - now BBC Philharmonic Orchestra. After those Lyrita LPs Leppard had done more Bax with the

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<sup>19</sup> For Lyrita McCabe also recorded the Rhapsody No. 3 by Bax's contemporary, E J Moeran: SRCD.248 and furnished the liner notes for Lyrita's Rawsthorne Symphonies (SRCD.291). He spoke extensively about *Winter Legends* in an interview to be found on Richard Adams' Bax website:  
<http://arnoldbax.com/john-mccabe-and-robert-barnett-discuss-arnold-bax/>

<sup>20</sup> BBC Radio 3, 20 May 1981

<sup>21</sup> Richard Adams' Bax interview with Leppard can be found here:  
<http://arnoldbax.com/ramond-leppard-on-bax/>



BBC Northern Symphony Orchestra: Violin Concerto (Dennis Simons), Third Symphony and *The Garden of Fand*.

Bax was unusually forthcoming - after a fashion - about *Winter Legends*. His programme note said of it that there was "... no pretence of [it] being a piano concerto in the ordinary sense. The piano is not used as a means of technical display though it plays a difficult part." He maintained that "neither has the piece any communicable programme." He then went on to say that "The listener may associate what he hears with any heroic tale or tales of the North — of the far North, be it said. Some of these happenings may have taken place within the Arctic Circle. ..." The language is typically oblique: "may" and "associate" and it is the listener who is doing the "associating" not Bax. Bax comes off the fence in one respect, no doubt wanting to squash the tired "Celtic twilight" allusions beloved of contemporary critics: "There is nothing consciously Celtic about this work."

This work, was premiered by Harriet Cohen with the BBC Symphony Orchestra conducted by Adrian Boult at the Queen's Hall on 10 February 1932. The BBC National Programme broadcast the event live. Not everyone loved it. Britten wrote of it as "longwinded rambling boring stuff — so feeble and dull after the Ireland [*Maidun*]."<sup>22</sup> The US premiere was given by Cohen at Boston, again with Cohen and Koussevitsky on 11 November 1932. Cohen returned to the work in Paris on 18 February 1934 where the conductor was Pierre Monteux and in the 1950s on the BBC Third Programme.

The long first movement *Allegro* opens in a grippingly arresting way with a side-drum volley and a galloping piano part. Not for the last time in this work the piano takes a craggy path although there are peaceful interludes where the piano is shadowed by the cor anglais. Another aspect strongly to the fore is the introduction of kinetically garishly exciting and emphatic dance episodes for both piano and orchestra. Colin Scott-

<sup>22</sup> Diary entry, 10 February 1932. Donald Mitchell and Philip Reed (Eds.), *Letters from a Life: Selected Letters and Diaries of Benjamin Britten*, Vol. 1, London, 1991, p. 235

Sutherland refers to Bax's predilection for a "riot of colour and texture of a Brangwyn canvas"<sup>23</sup> and this is fully in evidence throughout *Winter Legends*.

The *Lento* coolly sidles in with a melody that skates very close to sentimentality: a cousin to "There's no place like home". The orchestral texture adds sufficient umami and shade to fend off disaster. The solo part becomes more animated and darkens before a horn solo muses in the Nordic sunlight. There's a touch of Ravel in the mix. That opening melody returns in bleakness and finishes on a held note for the woodwind - neutral and enigmatic.

The finale (*Molto moderato*), which includes an epilogue, opens with a long, glittering and chimingly obsessive piano line contrasted with a deeply groaning brass. This is a magical stroke from a composer who achieved similar results with the opening to the second movement of the Fifth Symphony and the finale of the Seventh. This melts into another of those savage dances which mercurially rotates with lambent poetic asides oddly reminiscent of Falla's *Nights in the Gardens of Spain* - a work beloved of Harriet Cohen. This rises to an embattled climax topped off by an heroic French Horn statement. The piano charts a shallow falling gradient into a gaunt and crashing fanfare carrying overtones of victory and tragedy.

I am deeply indebted to Graham Parlett for access to entries from the unpublished second edition of his Bax catalogue<sup>24</sup>. The errors are mine and where there is credit it is due to Graham.

**Rob Barnett**, August, 2017

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<sup>23</sup> Colin Scott-Sutherland, "Arnold Bax", J M Dent & Sons Ltd, 1973, p. 43

<sup>24</sup> Graham Parlett, "A Catalogue of the Works of Sir Arnold Bax", 1999, Clarendon Press, Oxford.

Also Available by Sir Arnold Bax on Lyrita

- Northern Ballad No.1, Mediterranean, The Garden of Fand, Tintagel, November Woods  
London Philharmonic Orchestra, Sir Adrian Boult..... SRCD231
- Symphony No.1, Symphony No. 7\*  
London Philharmonic Orchestra, Myer Fredman, Raymond Leppard\*..... SRCD232
- Symphony No. 6\*, Irish Landscape, Rogue's Comedy Overture, Overture to Adventure,  
Overture Work in Progress  
New Philharmonia Orchestra, Norman Del Mar\*  
Royal Philharmonic Orchestra, Vernon Handley.....SRCD296
- Symphony No. 2, Symphony No. 5\*  
London Philharmonic Orchestra, Myer Fredman, Raymond Leppard\*.....SRCD233
- The Piano Music  
Iris Loveridge.....(3CDs) REAM3113
- Cello Concerto, Bate Cello Concerto  
Lionel Handy, cello, Royal Scottish National Orchestra, Martin Yates.....SRCD351
- Cello Sonata (1923) Sonatas by Ireland & Delius  
Lionel Handy, cello Jennifer Hughes, piano.....SRCD361
- Variations on the name Gabriel Fauré, Works by Benjamin, Stevens, Panufnik & Berkeley  
Boyd Neel Orchestra, Boyd Neel.....(Itter Broadcast Collection) REAM1117
- Violin Concerto, Concertos by Benjamin, Moeran & Cello Concerto by Walton  
André Gertler, violin BBC Symphony Orchestra, Sir Malcolm Sargent  
.....(Itter Broadcast Collection) (2CDs) REAM2114

## THE LYRITA RECORDED EDITION TRUST ITTER BROADCAST COLLECTION

Richard Itter had a life-long fascination with recording and he habitually acquired professional equipment for disc and tape recording even for solely private use. From his home in Burnham he was able to receive a good signal from the BBC Wrotham transmitter, which was constructed in 1951 and began broadcasting VHF/FM on 2 May 1955. His domestic recordings from BBC transmissions (including Proms, premieres, operas, symphonies and chamber music – more than 1500 works in total), date from 1952-1996. Everything was initially recorded on magnetic tape, but up to 1955 particularly important performances were transferred to acetate disc. These fragile discs were never played and have remained in excellent condition, as have the majority of the tapes which make up the bulk of the collection. In 2014 the Lyrita Recorded Edition Trust begun to transfer this priceless archive and has put in place formal agreements with the BBC and the Musicians Union to enable the release of items from it to the public.

## SIR ARNOLD BAX (1883-1953)

	Symphony No. 2 (1924-6)	36'46"
1	I Molto moderato	14'41"
2	II Andante	11'58"
3	III Poco largamente - Allegro feroce	10'07"

BBC Symphony Orchestra conducted by Sir Eugene Goossens  
BBC Studio Recording, Broadcast 3 November 1956

	Winter Legends for piano and orchestra (1930) *	42'53"
4	I Allegro	15'03"
5	II Lento, molto espressivo	14'00"
6	III Molto moderato - Allegro molto	8'47"
7	IV Epilogue. Molto cantabile	5'03"

John McCabe, piano

BBC Northern Symphony Orchestra conducted by Raymond Leppard  
BBC Studio Recording, Broadcast 6 October 1978

Total playing time 79'41"



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In 1952 Richard Itter, the founder of Lyrta, began to make domestic recordings of BBC transmissions using state-of-the-art disc and tape recorders. He documented his collection but rarely listened to it, thus preserving a pristine archive. The Lyrta Recorded Edition Trust began a transfer programme in 2014 with the intention to release the best and rarest of these recordings to the public.



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