

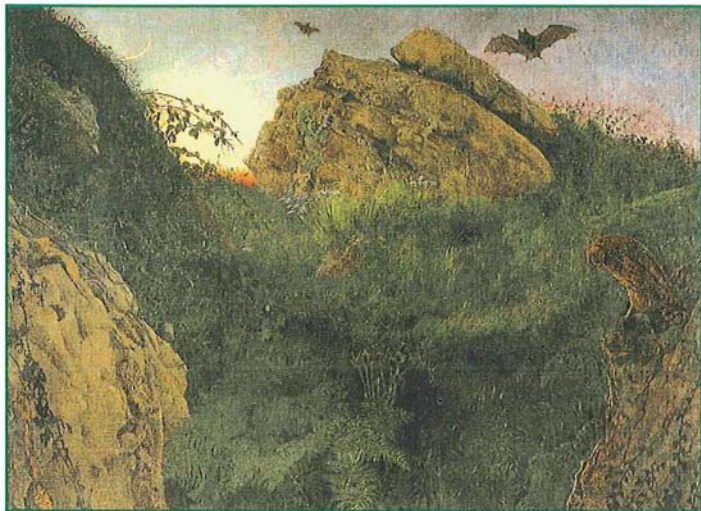
BAX

Symphony No. 1

In the Faery Hills • The Garden of Fand

Royal Scottish National Orchestra

David Lloyd-Jones



Arnold Bax (1883 – 1953)

In the Faery Hills • The Garden of Fand • Symphony No. 1 in E flat

The son of cultured and well-to-do English parents, Arnold Bax was born in Streatham but spent much of his childhood in Hampstead, where the family later settled, taught at home by a private tutor and strongly influenced by the cultured and comfortable environment in which he found himself. His early interest in music persuaded his father, a barrister, to allow him to enter the Royal Academy of Music in London at the age of seventeen. There he became a piano pupil of Tobias Matthay, while studying composition under the Wagnerian Frederick Corder.

In 1902 Bax came across the poem *The Wanderings of Usheen* (Oisín), by the Irish poet W. B. Yeats, and discovered in himself a strong Celtic identity, although racially descended from a family long established in East Anglia. He and his brother, the writer Clifford Bax, made their first visit to Ireland and were captivated. Here they established themselves for a time, associating with leading figures in Irish cultural life, while Bax himself won a reputation as a poet and writer, assuming, for this literary purpose, the name Dermot O'Byrne and studying Irish legend and the old Irish language. A visit to Russia with a Ukrainian girl that he had met in London and her Italian friend, introduced a further influence to his cultural formation. While his pursuit of the Ukrainian girl came to nothing, he was able to absorb something of the spirit of Russian music, secular and sacred, and was dazzled by the glories of the Imperial Ballet, as he was to be by Dyagilev's *Ballets russes* on his return to London. His return also brought marriage to the daughter of the then distinguished Spanish pianist Carlos Sobrino and the present of a house from his father. Bax, however, could not settle in London. Before long the couple had rented a house in Ireland, and then returned to England, living in various places, but eventually separating, thereby allowing Bax to pursue his own musical and amorous ventures in a measure of freedom.

The tone-poem *In the Faery Hills* was written in 1909, later forming the centre of a trilogy of tone-poems under the general title *Eire*. It is dedicated to the composer Balfour Gardiner, an important figure in the musical life of London among younger composers, to whom he was able to give practical encouragement, particularly in a series of concerts of music by English composers that he organized in 1912 and 1913, and is scored for a characteristically large orchestra. The instrumentation includes piccolo, bass clarinet, two harps and a varied percussion section, with glockenspiel and celesta, in addition to the usual instruments of the full symphony orchestra. The work was first performed in 1910 at a Promenade Concert, when it was conducted by Henry Wood, who had requested its composition. The poem by Yeats, to which *In the Faery Hills* owes its inspiration, allows Oisín or Usheen, replying to St Patrick, to

describe his wandering:

*And Niamh blew there merry notes
Out of a little silver trump
And then an answering whispering flew
Over the bare and woody land*

The clarinet opens with this faery summons, in the tone-poem, followed by the gradual gathering of the Little People. At the heart of the work Oisín sings:

*But when I sang of human joy
A sorrow wrapped each merry face.*

A boy comes forward and seizes the harp:

*And caught the silver harp away,
And, weeping over the white strings, hurled
It down in a leaf-hid, hollow place.*

Now they dance away with him, laughing as they go. The picture evoked is a Celtic one, but not without a touch of the other pagan world earlier suggested by Mallarmé and Debussy in *L'après-midi d'un faune*, of which there are perceptible echoes. The work starts with a characteristic faery motif, that is to be re-echoed, and a suggestion of the Celtic twilight in a secondary motif from the flute. The faery world wakens into an *Allegro vivace* jig. The dance ends and the trumpet repeats the opening motif, as the bard begins his tale, represented at first by two violas, followed by the bassoon, with a harp accompaniment and faery interpolations. The narrative continues, until the faery dance is heard again, first from a bassoon. The harp seems to sink in the water, as the jig resumes. The music slows and the horn-call sounds again, re-echoing. A solo viola, followed by a single flute, leads the dance to its end.

The Garden of Fand was completed in 1916, described by Bax as the last of his Irish works. It again makes use of a large orchestra, now also including a double bassoon, used colourfully, with detailed and meticulously notated percussion effects, evoking the sea, the Atlantic Ocean, in its delicate opening, characteristic of Bax, but nevertheless suggesting something of Debussy in its harmonic and melodic material, and initial delicacy. In his introduction to the published score Bax explains that the garden of Fand is the sea. The picture at first is of a calm sea, over which a small ship sails into the sunset, to be tossed by a wave onto the shore of Fand's miraculous island. There the voyagers are caught up in the endless revelry of the place. Fand sings her song of love, enchaining the hearts of her hearers for ever: there is dancing and feasting, and then the sea rises, to overwhelm the island, leaving the immortals to ride on the waves, laughing at the mortals drowned in the depths of the

ocean. Twilight falls, the sea grows calm again and Fand's garden is seen no more.

The composer's description gives a clear account of the tone-poem itself and its structure. The story of Fand is part of the saga of Cuchulain, the great hero of Irish legend, who is beaten in a dream by two strange women, who had appeared before as birds. For a year Cuchulain lies sick, watched over by his companions and neglecting the deeds of heroism demanded of him. In Lady Gregory's version of the tale, Fand, rejected by the sea-god Manannan, and taking her name, meaning a tear that passed over the fire of the eye, from her purity and beauty, calls Cuchulain to her aid, provoking the jealousy of the hero's wife Emer. Matters are resolved when Fand and Manannan are reconciled once more and she is able to cast a mantle of oblivion over what has passed. More relevant to Bax's tone-poem are the lines of W.B.Yeats: ... and him

*Who met Fand walking among the flaming dew
By a grey shore where the wind never blew,
And lost the world and Emer for a kiss.*

The following years brought continued association with Ireland and sympathy with the idealism that led to the Easter Rising of 1916, in which a number of his friends played a leading part. The same years of war in Europe brought an end to the world Bax had known. This is reflected in the first of his symphonies. Bax completed his *Symphony No. 1 in E flat*, not the first he had written, in 1921 in piano score, finishing the orchestration of the work by the following year. The slow movement he had written for what was originally to have been his third piano sonata was replaced by an orchestral movement that reflected more adequately the events of recent years. The symphony may be heard as a reaction not only to the tragedy of the war that had just finished, but even more to the tragedy of Ireland and the frustrated idealism and sacrifice of the Easter Rising of 1916. He calls for a large orchestra with four flutes, doubling also piccolo and bass flute, two oboes, cor anglais and heckelphone or bass oboe, four clarinets, including one doubling with an E flat clarinet and a bass clarinet, two bassoons and a double-bass sarrusaphone or double bassoon, four horns, three trumpets, three trombones, tuba, two harps, a percussion section including timpani, tenor, bass and side drum, gong, cymbals, triangle, glockenspiel celesta and xylophone, together with the usual strings. The use of lower pitched wind instruments gives a darker colour to much of the writing, with a telling use of percussion, the side drum with loosened snare in the slow movement, and the pointing of themes by the subtle very occasional use of celesta or xylophone. The work is dedicated to John Ireland. The composer referred to the symphony as in E flat, without the qualification major or minor, and there are elements of each in the motif that starts the first movement, marked *Allegro moderato e feroce*. This sets the sinister and menacing character

of the first subject, modified by a secondary element to it, based on a descending scale-figure, which mounts to a climax in which the two elements that make up the subject appear in a grandiose *Largamente*. A short bridge passage leads the way to a second subject worthy of Glazunov in its strongly lyrical character. Elements of the two subjects join together in relative tranquillity moving forward into a central development that also features an insistently repeated accompanying rhythmic figure, with a demonstrable mastery of the orchestral forces used. The recapitulation in a movement that is broadly in the customary tripartite symphonic first movement form, is relatively short, with the *largamente* first subject and the second, scored now for flute, accompanied by harps and upper strings, a return to gentle tranquillity. The movement ends with a coda that allows the bassoon initial prominence, before a strong E flat minor conclusion. Celtic mists brood over the second movement, as fragments of lower melody emerge through an accompaniment of harps and eerie tremolo strings. The music moves forward to a dynamic climax, reinforced by the timpani, a relaxation of tension with a fragment of melody heard on the bass flute and cor anglais and then the sound of a medieval chant from bassoons and trombones, taken up by other wind instruments, as it is developed. A tragic mood, a strengthening of the first thematic material, returns, followed by a gentle version of the chant, before the movement ends as it had begun. The first element to appear in the third movement, a reminiscence of what has passed, is strongly stated by the brass, before an *Allegro vivace* offers livelier treatment of a derivative of the second movement, with instrumental textures and melodic motifs that might briefly suggest the language of Stravinsky. A melody for cor anglais, trumpet and viola, marked grotesquely, follows, a wild dance in its memories of the first subject of the first movement. With a shift of key, the heckelphone, first trombone and violas overtly recall the first theme, melting into a more lyrical mood as tranquillity is restored. The final triumphal march is based on the opening theme of the symphony, which, in spite of the brighter key of E flat major, never completely loses its implicitly threatening strength.

In many ways it must seem that the 1920s brought Bax his period of greatest success. He was prolific in his creativity and his works were widely performed. With the end of his marriage, he was able to continue his close association with the pianist Harriet Cohen, although this did not preclude other relationships. He wrote a quantity of piano music for Harriet Cohen, including a piano concerto for the left hand after the injury in 1948 that made use of her right hand for a time impossible. The 1930s brought public honours and at the end of the decade appointment as Master of the King's Musick, although his gifts did not lend themselves easily to the composition of occasional celebratory works, as the position seemed to demand. The changes in musical style and taste left Bax to some extent alienated from the world in which he

found himself. Composition continued, however, including a *Coronation March* in 1952 for the accession of the new monarch. He died, as he might have wished, in Ireland, while staying with his friend, the German-born Irish composer Aloys Fleischman in Cork, the place he loved best.

Royal Scottish National Orchestra

Formed in 1891 as the Scottish Orchestra, in 1951 the ensemble, now full-time, took the name of the Scottish National Orchestra, later assuming the title Royal, a recognition of its importance in the musical life of Scotland. Distinguished conductors who have worked with the orchestra include Karl Rankl, Hans Swarowsky, Walter Süsskind, Bryden Thomson and Sir Alexander Gibson, the last named becoming the first Scottish-born principal conductor in 1959. Neeme Järvi, who was conductor from 1984 to 1988 is now Conductor Laureate and Walter Weller was appointed Music Director in 1992. The orchestra has a busy schedule in Scotland, including regular seasons in its home-town of Glasgow, annual appearances at the Edinburgh Festival and regular performances in the Henry Wood Promenade Concerts in London. In addition to concerts in England, the orchestra has travelled to other countries abroad, with tours of North America, Japan, Austria and Switzerland. The wide repertoire of the Royal Scottish National Orchestra extends from the Baroque to the contemporary. There have been two recent awards from the Gramophone magazine and the orchestra now embarks on a series of recordings for Naxos that will include work by Bruckner, Bax, Holst and Alfvén.

David Lloyd-Jones

David Lloyd-Jones began his professional career in 1959 on the music staff of the Royal Opera House, Covent Garden, and soon became much in demand as a free-lance conductor. In 1972 he was appointed Assistant Music Director at the English National Opera and during his time in that position conducted an extensive repertory which included the first British performance of Prokofiev's *War and Peace*. In 1978, at the invitation of the Arts Council of Great Britain, he founded a new full-time opera company, Opera North, of which he became Artistic Director, with its new orchestra, the English Northern Philharmonia. During his twelve seasons with the company he conducted fifty different new productions and numerous orchestral concerts, including festival appearances in France and Germany. He has made a number of very successful recordings of British and Russian music and has a busy career as a conductor in the concert-hall and the opera-house that has taken him to leading musical centres throughout Europe and the Americas.

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Arnold

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DDD

Playing
Time
64:05

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| 1 | In the Faery Hills | <i>15:04</i> |
| 2 | The Garden of Fand | <i>16:32</i> |
| | Symphony No. 1 in E flat | |
| 3 | Allegro moderato e feroce | <i>13:41</i> |
| 4 | Lento solenne | <i>10:21</i> |
| 5 | Allegro maestoso – Allegro vivace ma non troppo presto | |
| | Tempo di marcia trionfale | <i>8:26</i> |

Recorded at Henry Wood Hall, Glasgow, Scotland
on 31st January 1996.

Producer: Tim Handley

Engineer: Tim Handley

Music Notes: Keith Anderson

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