

NAXOS

BAX

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Symphony No. 2
November Woods

Royal Scottish National Orchestra
David Lloyd-Jones



Arnold Bax (1883–1953)

Symphony No. 2 in E minor and C major • November Woods

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 17. 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 Uisneach (Oisín)*, by 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 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, but eventually separating, thereby allowing Bax to pursue his own musical and amorous ventures in a measure of freedom.

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 Fleischmann in Cork, the place he loved best.

Bax eventually completed his *Symphony No. 2 in E minor and C major* in 1926, after intermittent work for the previous two years. It was dedicated to Sergey Koussevitzky who, after protracted negotiations with Bax, conducted the first two performances in Boston with the Boston Symphony Orchestra on 13 and 14 December 1929. Eugene Goossens conducted the first London performance with the Queen's Hall Orchestra on 20 May 1930. The symphony is scored for piccolo doubling flute, two other flutes, two oboes, cor anglais, three clarinets, bass clarinet, two bassoons, double bassoon, four horns, three trumpets, two tenor trombones, bass trombone and tenor and bass tuba. A varied percussion section includes timpani, bass drum, tambourine, cymbals, xylophone, glockenspiel, celesta, piano and two harps. Use is made of the organ and the orchestra is completed by the usual strings.

In a perceptive analysis of the symphony, Lewis Foreman has drawn attention to the four ideas heard in the *Molto moderato* introductory section to the first movement, motifs that recur, particularly in the first and third movements. The first of these appears, dark-hued, over a bass drum roll, near the beginning of the work. The eighth bar brings a second sombre element, introduced by the cor anglais, clarinet and bassoon. A short but significant motif is heard from the lower strings and tubas, immediately followed by a slightly longer motif from three flutes and muted trumpets. Tension mounts as the music moves forward to the *Allegro moderato*, with its emphatic opening before the related first subject, announced by the clarinets. The music presses forward as the material is developed. A second subject eventually appears, introduced *Poco largamente*, followed by flute and solo cello, marked *Moderato semplice*. The material undergoes further development, with the motifs from the opening emerging from time to time in remarkable orchestral colours, suggesting at times the palette of Richard Strauss in its sonorities. The recapitulation brings back the urgency of the first subject, the slower and more lyrical second subject and interwoven reminiscences of the

basic motifs that give the work its unity. Flutes and harp open the second movement, against which the rising third motif of the introduction to the first movement is heard from cellos and double basses. A lyrical melody is announced by the violins and a transition leads to a second theme in the strings. A dynamic climax is followed by a third element, underpinned by an organ pedal C. A solo violin prefigures the return of the first theme and the hushed closing section of the movement, in a positive B major. There is a short introduction to the last movement. Here the threatening third motif is heard, as in the first theme of the subsequent *Allegro feroce*. There follows a sinister march-like passage, spurred on by a Mahlerian use of the trumpet, and then a more subdued element, lightly scored, with a melody for bassoons and cellos against an insistent violin rhythm. There is a direct quotation of part of the introduction to the first movement, soon to be followed by the final section of the movement, similar in length to the initial introduction and bringing the symphony to a whispered ending, always in the varied instrumental colours that have marked the whole work.

The evocative *November Woods* was completed in 1917 and first performed in Manchester by the Hallé Orchestra under Hamilton Harty on 18 November 1920. It is scored for a similar orchestra, but with a brass section that is without bass trombone and a second tuba and with a percussion section of timpani, cymbals, glockenspiel and celesta. Bax makes use again of the motto theme from his *Violin Sonata No. 2* of 1915 and of a motif from his 1916 piano piece, *Dream in Exile*, presumably a recollection of Ireland. According to the composer the work was not to be taken as a mere depiction of a wood in the Chilterns in late autumn, dank and stormy, but rather as a reflection of his own troubled experiences of the period, with the second theme suggesting a feeling of happier days in the past. The main theme forms the substance of the first part of the tone poem, its varied textures leading to a second theme, after the curious rattle of dry sticks from the cellos, briefly marking the passage that, with its oboe melody, immediately precedes this *Andante con moto*. Here there is a melody for cor anglais, bassoon and viola, coloured by the sounds of the celesta and mounting to a climax of feeling. A solo violin is heard, followed by four violins and then by eight, in a variegated texture that continues to suggest the changing weather of a winter scene, as the wind blows, bringing the stillness of icy cold. There are broad elements of tripartite sonata form in the structure of the work, with the return of the earlier material, in changed instrumentation, leading to a gentle conclusion, as the sound of the bass clarinet fades away to nothing.

Keith Anderson

Royal Scottish National Orchestra

formed in 1891 as the Scottish Orchestra, in 1954 the ensemble, now full-time, took the name of the Scottish National Orchestra, later assuming the title 'Royal', in 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 hometown 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 *Gramophone* and the orchestra now embarks on a series of recordings for Naxos that will include works by Bruckner, Bax, Holst and Alfvén.

David Lloyd-Jones

began his career in 1959 on the music staff of the Royal Opera House, Covent Garden, and soon became much in demand as a freelance conductor for orchestral and choral concerts, BBC broadcasts and TV studio opera productions. He has appeared at the Royal Opera House, Welsh National Opera, Scottish Opera and the Wexford, Cheltenham, Edinburgh and Leeds Festivals. In 1972 he was appointed assistant music director at 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, on the invitation of the Arts Council of Great Britain, he founded a new opera company, Opera North, with its new orchestra, the English Northern Philharmonia, of which he became artistic director. During 12 seasons with the company he conducted 50 different new productions, including *The Trojans*, *Die Meistersinger* and the British stage premiere of Strauss' *Daphne*, as well as 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 had a busy career as a conductor in the concert hall and opera house that takes him to leading musical centres throughout Europe and the Americas.

DDD

Playing
Time:
56:51

Arnold BAX

(1883–1953)

Symphony No. 2
November WoodsRoyal Scottish National Orchestra
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STEREO



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Symphony No. 2
in E minor and C major

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|---|--|-------|
| 1 | Molto moderato – Allegro moderato | 16:45 |
| 2 | Andante | 12:13 |
| 3 | Poco largamente – Allegro feroce –
Molto largamente | 11:05 |
| 4 | November Woods | 16:48 |

The sheer dramatic impact of the turbulent opening movement shocked audiences when the *Symphony No. 2* was first performed in 1929. Feeling that too much was expected of him as he followed in Elgar's footsteps, Arnold Bax changed the direction of British music with powerful and rugged symphonies, the *Second*, for large orchestra, creating the most brilliant tonal colours. Yet in his early career he also composed a series of evocative tone poems, *November Woods* being one of his most famous.

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