

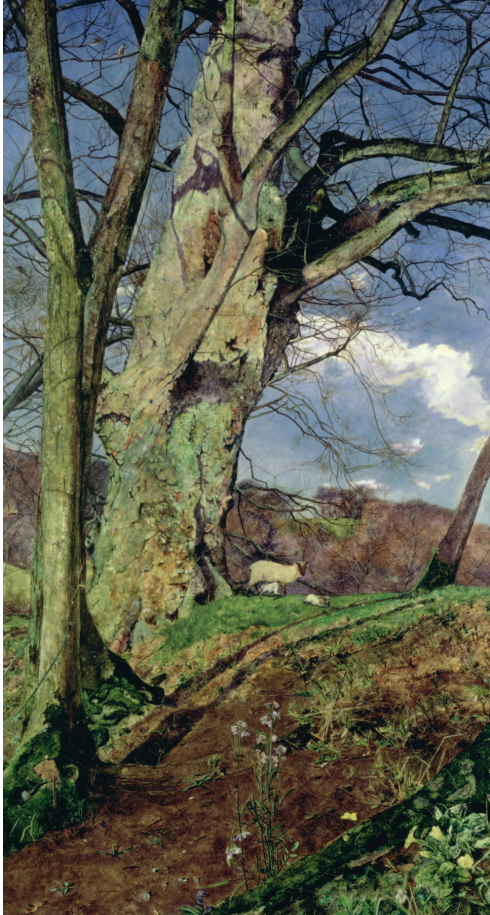
NAXOS

BAX

Symphonic Variations

Concertante for
Piano (Left Hand)
and Orchestra

Ashley Wass, Piano
Bournemouth
Symphony Orchestra
James Judd



Sir Arnold Bax (1883-1953)

Symphonic Variations · Concertante for Piano (Left Hand) and Orchestra

For a composer whose greatest triumphs came with the orchestra, Arnold Bax was notable for the way in which his musical development was centred on the piano and his own remarkable pianism. In his autobiography published in 1943 he wrote 'I cannot remember the long-lost day when I was unable to play the piano – inaccurately'. His early life was dominated by the keyboard and though not a regular concert pianist such was his technique that he tended to be called on when others failed. Thus in February 1909 he accompanied Debussy songs in the composer's presence, and in January 1914 he did the same for Schoenberg's songs. Yet he was of a somewhat nervous disposition and he played in public less and less, and when he did it was usually in his own music. He made just two commercial recordings – of Delius's *First Violin Sonata* and his own *Viola Sonata*, both in the spring of 1929.

Between 1900 and 1905 Bax was a piano pupil of the legendary Tobias Matthay at the Royal Academy of Music where his student contemporaries were Myra Hess, Irene Scharrer, York Bowen and Benjamin Dale, and a little later Harriet Cohen. For these keyboard champions Bax wrote a large body of solo piano music, including the first version of what in 1922 became his *First Symphony*. His first big reputation came with orchestral tone poems but these were soon followed by his seven symphonies, written between 1922 and 1938, indeed for a short time in the early 1930s he was regarded as the leading British symphonist. All too soon he was upstaged by Walton's *First* and Vaughan Williams's *Fourth* (which was dedicated to Bax).

Bax wrote five works for piano and orchestra, in order of composition the *Symphonic Variations*, *Winter Legends*, *Saga Fragment*, *Morning Song* 'Maytime in Sussex' and the *Left Hand Concertante*. There are also two movements from his music for David Lean's film *Oliver Twist* and sketches for an unfinished *Concertino*. As far as Bax's reputation was concerned, however, the première of the *Symphonic Variations* at Queen's Hall

on 23rd November 1920, a Promenade Concert conducted by Sir Henry Wood, was undoubtedly the most important occasion that year. Bax had inscribed the work to his lover, Harriet Cohen, and it was promoted as having been written for her. She reported that 'Sir Henry was very enthusiastic about the Variations and I think I may say he was pleased with my playing'.

There was, however, a flaw in the scheme. As a virtuoso if idiosyncratic pianist, Bax had clearly conceived the piano part for himself without recognising any limitations in his soloist. It was this which reduced the impact of the *Symphonic Variations* in Bax's musical career between the wars, for Harriet Cohen had small hands and heavily webbed fingers. Later this caused her to avoid many of the most bravura concertos of the concert repertoire. But she insisted on exclusive rights in Bax's score, even though she evidently could not encompass some of the writing, particularly in the first variation. After the first performance she persuaded Bax to make a number of cuts in the score, and by the time it appeared again – in 1922 – the first variation had been deleted and cuts made elsewhere. Only after other pianists started playing the work, starting in 1962, did we hear the complete score.

Written during the latter part of 1916, the *Symphonic Variations* was complete in short score by February 1917, but it was the end of the following year before the full score was ready. The work is in eight linked movements, each of which bears a descriptive title. These titles have never been satisfactorily explained. With its poetic motifs and self quotations, the broad non-musical inspiration is never in doubt but decoding it in detail is very elusive. It seems unlikely that when Rosa Newmarch wrote her programme note for the first performance she had not consulted the composer, and this gives us a clue: 'The work might not inaptly be compared to some great epic poem dealing

with the adventures of a hero . . . passing through a number of different experiences, a clue to which is given in the titles affixed to each variation.'

In performance the work is heard in two parts – with a break after the third variation. We need to note the self-quotations and poetic motifs that provide clues to Bax's intent. Probably the most extensive of these is the song *Parting*, written at the same time with words by George Russell, the Irish writer known as Æ. Quotations from the piano accompaniment to the song appear with the statement of the theme and at the end of the first variation. The first eight bars of the final variation 'Triumph' are a literal quotation from the song which starts: 'As from our dream we died away/ Far off I felt the outer things;/ Your windblown tresses round me play, / Your bosom's gentle murmurings.'

In this third variation Bax makes another quotation from himself. This time it is from the new last movement of the *First Violin Sonata* (to which Bax had inscribed a Yeatsian verse: 'A pity beyond all Telling is/ hid in the heart of love') that he had written in 1915, less than two years before. When it is extensively worked in the '*Strife*' movement it is always in the orchestra. Reference to the quotation also appears twice more, in the *Intermezzo 'Enchantment'*, before Bax launches into his finale with the exactly literal quotation from his song. Yet despite all this, Bax, a composer who wrote his tone poems *November Woods*, *The Garden of Fand* and *Tintagel* at much the same time, chose to give his score the formal title '*Symphonic Variations in E*' rather than a more evocative or romantic one.

When, in 1940, Harriet Cohen's house was bombed, the score was damaged and for some time further performance was thought impossible. In the early 1960s, however, a complete set of parts came to light and Chappell & Co reconstructed the lost section of the score, and in 1963 published it for the first time, though only in Bax's arrangement for two pianos.

We hear first the extended statement of the theme over an opening movement of some 53 bars – the piano entering with a rising arpeggio at the eleventh bar as the theme wells up. After some three minutes musing on

this it leads climactically into the first variation, '*Youth*', with its surging bravura opening. It is followed by the contrasted '*Nocturne*' launched like some Baxian piano solo, marked '*slow and serene*', before the orchestra comments. This is treated extensively. We might think of Bax's piano piece *May Night in the Ukraine* while searching programmatically for an explanation of what it meant to the composer.

Nevertheless this was a major work written during the First World War, and so the following variation, '*Strife*', the last section of the first part, is a different matter. For his '*Strife*', Bax writes low in the piano's register, harmonizes in fourths and moves into the minor. Those wishing to see aspects of Bax's life in his music might also want to remember this was a time of domestic crisis for him which eventually led to him leaving his wife for Harriet Cohen, his pianist. In a poem written on 23rd July 1917 he wrote: 'Thought he, "This weary strife/ Were but a crazy dream. Poor little wife, / Could you have stayed a child all your life."' After much *sturm und drang*, with brilliant piano writing unprecedented at the time in a concerto from a British composer, with soaring horns the movement now closes in a climactic G major, the key to which the *Nocturne* had modulated, and this gives the first part an underlying unity.

The fourth variation which opens the second half is marked '*slow and solemn*'. Its puzzling title '*The Temple*' is the most elusive part of the whole enigma. The structure is quite distinctive: the piano's noble solo statements of the theme, or versions of it, alternate with a tender quiet orchestral commentary which eventually includes ritualistic cymbal crashes – if it were by Cyril Scott one would suspect some oriental allusion. At around ten minutes this is the longest movement and the music becomes more and more intense. It finally leads to a short cadenza-like central section in free time, which indeed Bax had originally intended marking *cadenza*, and a quickening of pace leads into the fifth variation, the scherzo, '*Play*'. This is quite a contrast, possibly the only time Bax marked a score to be played '*light and dainty*'.

All too soon it is over and we find ourselves in another enigmatic passage - the *Intermezzo* which Bax called 'Enchantment'. What can it mean? It is really another variation, but also another link in the story. Distant drums – could they evoke far-off gunfire? – take us into a piano reverie in which far-off passages of threatening orchestral texture well up and come to a climax, like a man being threatened by unpleasant distant memories he would rather forget. But then the reverie takes over again, all rising trills and it fades over a long timpani roll.

The triumph of the final section of that name is not one of military splendour, but a musical recapitulation of what has gone before, and a return to the home and 'triumphant' key of E major. It is launched with an extended piano solo, of over two minutes – including the song accompaniment already mentioned. The theme returns on the orchestra but just as we think we have come safely home the music takes on an unexpected intensity. Indeed, the pounding chords with which the work closes have a sense of underlying anxiety, symptomatic of the post-war period to come.

Thirty years on, when Bax wrote the music for David Lean's film *Oliver Twist* in 1948, he included two movements for piano and orchestra with Harriet Cohen in mind. It was at the recording session for this score that she learned of the death of Bax's long-estranged wife and she immediately imagined he would marry her. It was at this point that Bax had to explain to her that he had another mistress of whom Harriet Cohen knew nothing. A terrific row ensued and soon after she suffered the accident to her right wrist apparently caused when she dropped a tray of glasses. She was unable to play and Bax wrote for her a concerto (or 'concertante' as he called it) for the left hand which was first performed in the summer of 1950 and became a representative Bax score at the time. At first called *Concerto for Orchestra with Piano (left hand)* it was soon changed to the above title, underlining the comparatively small scale of the concerto.

The work opens with solo piano and the soloist is playing most of the time. There is no opposition

between piano and orchestra in this score which is a happy dialogue between them. The opening piano figuration, rising from low on the keyboard, sets the mood, and is soon joined by the orchestra with the rhythmic first theme, almost like some oriental dance. The trumpet sounds the reflective counter-melody which the orchestra take up against rippling piano figurations leading to a romantic orchestral climax. The piano returns with only the lightest interjections from the woodwind leading to the return of the opening theme, which is extensively worked in the orchestra. The piano now sings the trumpet's romantic theme and the strings take it up in a wide-spanning, slow, extended romantic episode, and echoed by the piano it is heard across the orchestra, eventually leading to the close.

The romantic slow movement opens as a beautiful piano tune, a 'lollipop' looking back to the manner of his then still recent *Morning Song* for piano and orchestra. The haunting opening tune gives way to a brooding atmospheric middle section, coloured by typical Baxian orchestral textures, like swirling mists in a nocturnal vision of some Irish coastal vista. Eventually the opening theme returns on the strings and then briefly wells up triumphantly on the full orchestra before dying away to a long-drawn close. Such was the impact of this movement at the time of its first performances, Chappell & Co. published a simplified solo arrangement for two hands.

Like the first two movements, the finale opens with the solo piano. When Harriet Cohen played it this was prefaced by a brief percussion tattoo, but although Bax did not comment, this was clearly not authentic and it is now omitted, as in this performance. The piano's opening marching theme is taken up by the orchestra as the subject of a succession of variations with the piano, including an episode where the piano is accompanied by the timpani and a violin solo. Eventually the piano introduces a second theme and the orchestra comments, before the soloist has a cadenza – though not marked as such – and the orchestra builds to a big climax for a conventional close.

Ashley Wass



Photo: Jack Liebeck

Described by *The Gramophone Magazine* as possessing ‘the enviable gift to turn almost anything he plays into pure gold’, Ashley Wass is the only British pianist to have won First Prize at the London International Piano Competition and is also a former BBC New Generation Artist. He is Naxos’s first ever exclusively contracted solo artist, and his recent surveys of piano music by Bridge and Bax have been heralded as ‘unmissable’ and ‘the yardstick against which all future recordings will be judged’. He has given performances at most of the major venues in Britain, including the Royal Albert Hall as part of the BBC Proms, and also appeared in a gala concert at Buckingham Palace to mark the Queen’s Golden Jubilee. Concerto performances have included collaborations with Sir Simon Rattle and the City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra, the London Mozart Players, Philharmonia, Bournemouth Symphony and all the BBC orchestras. Ashley Wass is also much in demand as a chamber musician and has toured the United States and Europe with violinist Sarah Chang appearing at venues such as Philadelphia’s Kimmel Center and Carnegie Hall in New York. He is Artistic Director of the Lincolnshire International Chamber Music Festival.

Bournemouth Symphony Orchestra



Photo: Chris Zudiyk

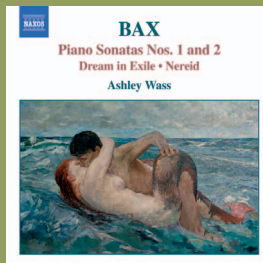
Founded in 1893, the Bournemouth Symphony Orchestra has worked with many famous composers, conductors and musicians including Elgar, Sibelius, Holst, Stravinsky, Vaughan Williams and Thomas Beecham; and more recently with Michael Tippett, John Tavener and Peter Maxwell Davies. Principal conductors since the founder Sir Dan Godfrey have included Charles Groves, Constantin Silvestri, Andrew Litton and Marin Alsop, followed in 2009 by the dynamic young Ukrainian, Kirill Karabits. The BSO has toured worldwide, performing at Carnegie Hall, New York, the Amsterdam Concertgebouw, Vienna Musikverein, and Berlin Philharmonie, as well as regular British appearances at the Royal Festival Hall and Royal Albert Hall in London, the Symphony Hall in Birmingham and the Bridgewater Hall in Manchester. The BSO is known internationally through over three hundred recordings, and continues to release numerous CDs each year with Naxos. Recent critically acclaimed recordings have included CDs of Bernstein, Bartók, Sibelius, Glass, Adams and Elgar, and three discs featuring arrangements of Mussorgsky, Bach and Wagner by Stokowski were nominated for GRAMMY awards in 2004, 2005 and 2006.

James Judd

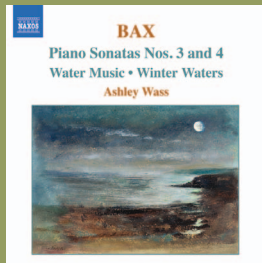


British-born conductor James Judd has amassed an extensive collection of recordings on the Naxos label, including an unprecedented number in partnership with the New Zealand Symphony Orchestra, where he is Music Director Emeritus. His previous directorships include Principal Guest Conductor of the Orchestre National de Lille in France and a groundbreaking fourteen years as Music Director of the Florida Philharmonic Orchestra. His acclaimed recordings in New Zealand include works by Copland, Bernstein, Vaughan Williams, Gershwin and many others, and he has brought the orchestra to a new level of visibility and international renown through appearances abroad, including the New Zealand Orchestra's first tour of the major concert halls of Europe, culminating with a debut appearance at the BBC Proms and the Concertgebouw in August, 2005. A graduate of London's Trinity College of Music, James Judd came to international attention as the Assistant Conductor of the Cleveland Orchestra, a post he accepted at the invitation of Lorin Maazel. Four years later, he returned to Europe after being appointed Associate Music Director of the European Community Youth Orchestra by Claudio Abbado, an ensemble with which he continues to serve as an honorary Artistic Director.

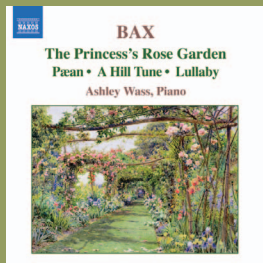
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Playing Time
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Bax completed five works for piano and orchestra, beginning in 1916 with the highly virtuosic *Symphonic Variations* dedicated to the pianist Harriet Cohen. The work was likened by Rosa Newmarch, who wrote the programme note for the first performance, 'to some great epic poem dealing with the adventures of a hero . . . passing through a number of different experiences.' The *Concertante for Piano (Left Hand) and Orchestra* (1949) is on a smaller scale. The romantic slow movement opens with a beautiful and haunting piano tune which gives way to a brooding atmospheric middle section, coloured by typical Baxian orchestral textures, like swirling mists in a nocturnal vision of some Irish coastal vista.

Sir Arnold
BAX
 (1883-1953)

Bournemouth
 Symphony
 Orchestra
 Endowment
 Trust

Symphonic Variations

Symphonic Variations (1916-18)

45:49

Part One

- | | | |
|---|--|------|
| 1 | Theme: Lento espressivo – | 2:31 |
| 2 | I. Youth: Allegro: Restless and tumultuous – | 4:11 |
| 3 | II. Nocturne: Slow and serene: Broadly – | 6:36 |
| 4 | III. Strife: Allegro vivace | |

Part Two

- | | | |
|---|--|-------|
| 5 | IV. The Temple: Slow and solemn – | 7:39 |
| 6 | V. Play: Scherzo: Allegro vivace – | 9:46 |
| | Intermezzo: Enchantment: Very moderate tempo – | 10:27 |
| 7 | VI. Triumph: Moderate tempo – Glowing and passionate | 4:39 |

Concertante for Piano (Left Hand) and Orchestra (1949)

22:22

- | | | |
|----|------------------------------|------|
| 8 | I. Allegro moderato | 8:08 |
| 9 | II. Moderato tranquillo | 7:47 |
| 10 | III. Rondo: Allegro moderato | 6:27 |

Ashley Wass, Piano

Bournemouth Symphony Orchestra • James Judd

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