

Sir Arnold Bax

English composer

born: Streatham, November 8, 1883; died: Cork, October 3, 1953

Tintagel

First Classics performance: January 9, 1941, conducted by Franco Autori;

most recent performance: November 3, 2002, conducted by JoAnn Falletta, duration 15 minutes

Although the music of Arnold Bax is seldom performed today, he enjoyed a measure of international respect for his evocative scores, most of them dedicated to the rich heritage of the British Isles. While his style is overtly Romantic, he always preserved a balance of classical poise and refinement.

Bax pursued his advanced musical training in composition at the Royal Academy of Music in London, where he also became a fine pianist. But he was intellectually restless, with an abiding love for English literature, keenly influenced by **The Wanderings of Oisín**, by the Irish poet William Butler Yeats. When Bax visited the west coast of Ireland in 1902, his artistic persona underwent a revolution of a kind - "The Celt within me stood revealed." After his marriage to the pianist Elsie Sobrino, the couple took up residence in Dublin, where Bax adopted a nom de plume, Dermot O'Byrne, under which he published poetry, short stories and several plays.

But along the way, Bax was a dutiful composer, and by the end of his life, his catalog included seven symphonies, various tone poems, instrumental pieces and several film scores. Among his finest works are the tone poems *The Garden of Fand*, *November Woods* and *Tintagel*. The latter, by far the best known, was composed in 1919.

In Arthurian legend, at one point (Branch XX, No.19) the fable tells of how Sir Lancelot and Sir Gawain, riding with King Arthur, came upon a remote site at the edge of the sea where they found the ruins of an old castle. An aged priest tells them that the castle, Tintagel, fell into a mystic decline decades before because, while King Gorlois was away, his Queen, Igraine, was deceived by the magic of Merlin to believe her husband had returned. To her chamber she accepted the rival King Uther, who was perfectly disguised. The child she conceived, in honorable sin, was named Arthur, who, from his lowly birth in disgrace, would one day become the most worthy and revered King. (We can hardly imagine Arthur's shock at the news.)

For reference, the ruins at Tintagel are still there, on a promontory at coast of Cornwall (many images can be viewed on the internet). As for the music, Bax creates a sonic canvas that conjures the mystique of the castle at the sea, chock full of the deft Romantic colors and dashing harmonies which are the hallmark of English Romanticism. After spinning its lyrical tale, the music ends in surging, white-cap C major.

Carl Nielsen

Danish composer

born: June 9, 1865, Sortelung; died: October 3, 1931, Copenhagen

Violin Concerto, Op.33

Praeludium: Largo

Allegro cavalleresco

Poco adagio
Rondo: Allegretto scherzando

First and only performances of this work on the Classics series: March 10, 11, 1995, conducted by Hermann Michael with violinist Cho-Liang Lin; duration 35 minutes

Biographies are fond to relate anecdotes from composers' formative years. We learn that at his debut recital, 10-year old Saint-Saëns offered to perform any one of Beethoven's 32 sonatas for piano from memory. We discover that Wagner was so certain of greatness that he began to write his autobiography at the age of 14. And we read about 7-year-old Mozart who attended an opera and ran home to write out the score from memory. The shelves are full of these stunning tales about wunderkinds who were also lucky to have the advantages of first class musical training from day one.

But there are a few rare tales about individuals who - despite zero opportunity - were able to reveal their extraordinary gifts. One of those was Danish composer Carl Nielsen, the seventh of 12 children in an exceedingly poor family. The story tells that at age 5, Nielsen went to the wood pile behind the family shed, selected a set of fire logs that produced different pitches when struck (like a primitive marimba) and proceeded to 'perform' popular folk tunes that he had heard in the neighborhood!

To be sure, it did not take long for Nielsen's talent to be discovered. But just about the time he began his advanced studies, the Romantic era began to yield under pressure from all directions: the future was soon to be safe, after Wagner, for Impressionism, atonality and even the avant garde. So for his part, Nielsen dipped his pen eagerly into the harmonic ink of the 20th century, but left his heart safe and sound in 19th century Romanticism. Listeners often observe this nuance throughout the composer's full output - a catalog that features six symphonies, an abundance of chamber music, well over a hundred songs, choral and theater works and three concertos, of which the current work was the first to emerge from Nielsen's desk in 1911.

Nielsen cast his *Violin Concerto* in two major parts, each with an initial slow section connected to a full-blown, high-energy narrative. Also, in several respects *Opus 33* is a flashback to the flair of the great Baroque traditions, despite the musical vernacular of the early 20th century. For example, the opening *Largo* is set off in the manner of a Baroque *Prealudium*, calling at once for an ambitious cadenza from the soloist. After this broad and expansive opening the flint and spark of the *Allegro cavalleresco* takes off like a stallion at breakneck speed over a storm of orchestral color.

Reflecting Bach-ward once again, at the very beginning of the second big section marked *Poco adagio* the music begins with a quote of the famous Bach motive: B-flat, A, C, B-natural, which in German spells out "Bach" - exactly. For those who are hearing the 'Bach motive' for the first time it is worth noting that Johann Sebastian Bach himself was fascinated by such numerology and that very same sequence of tones shows up often throughout his complete catalog. But while Bach most often used those tones in his harmonizations and counterpoint, Nielsen uses them as seeds for the principal theme of the *Poco Adagio* - like an unraveling Nordic allegory, heard in full in the solo violin over horns and bassoons. The fast section which follows without pause is a delightful *Rondo*. Stand by for more high-wire acrobatics, especially at the point of another adventurous cadenza from the violin. In a few breathtaking moments the soloist and orchestra return to the rondo roundup and dash to a punctuated close in bright-emerald D major.

Sir Edward Elgar

English composer

born: June 2, 1857, Broadheath; died: February 23, 1934, Worcester

First performed on the Classics series on December 5, 1935, conducted by Lajos Shuk; most recently performed on January 29, 2011, conducted by JoAnn Falletta; duration 29 minutes

“Enigma” Variations, Opus 36

Theme - Andante

Variation 1 - Listesso tempo.....Caroline Alice Elgar

2 - Allegro.....H.D. Steuart-Powell

3 - Allegretto.....R.B. Townsend

4 - Allegro di molto.....W.M. Baker

5 - Moderato.....R.P. Arnold

6 - Andantino.....Isabel Fitton

7 - Presto.....A.T. Griffith

8 - Allegretto.....Winifred Norbury

9 - Adagio.....A.J. Jaeger (Nimrod)

10 - Intermezzo: Allegretto....Dora Penny

11 - Allegro di molto.....G.R. Sinclair

12 - Andante.....B.G. Nevinson

13 - Andante.....Lady Mary Trefusis

14 - Moderato.....Sir Edward Elgar

Whenever the “Enigma” Variations are performed, listeners begin searching for superlatives: a radiant masterpiece from la belle epoque, a rainbow coloratura -- possessed of wit, humor and delicate innuendo, gorgeous melodies, brazen rhythms, exquisite finesse, ravishing brilliance, soft heartache, joy and sheer elegance -- we’re just getting started!

Elgar’s opus 36 of 1899 might have just as well been titled ‘Portraits at an Exhibition,’ since each of the selections is a musical portrayal of a close acquaintance from the composer’s life, including a sketch of his wife (Variation 1) and another of himself (Variation 14).

Sir Edward heartily enjoyed his inscrutable reputation, and he coyly nurtured the riddle associated with the ‘Enigma.’ According to the composer, the original theme upon which the variations are based was composed as a counter-melody to a very familiar tune, the identity of which he never revealed. About the piece he noted:

“In this music I have sketched, for their amusement and mine, the idiosyncrasies of fourteen of my friends, not necessarily musicians; but this is a personal matter and needs not have been mentioned publicly. The Variations should stand simply as a ‘piece’ of music. The *Enigma* I will not explain - its ‘dark saying’ must be left unguessed....but through and over the whole set another and larger theme ‘goes’ but is not played. I’ve written the variations each one to represent the mood of the ‘party.’ It’s a quaint idea and the result is amusing to those behind the scenes and won’t affect the reader who ‘nose nuffin’ (knows nothing).”

Despite Elgar's enigmatic withholding, we at least have the advantage of his written account of the musical metaphor framed by each 'portrait variation,' two of which are capsuled here: Variation 9, to my publisher and friend, A.J. Jaeger:

"This variation is the record of a long summer evening talk, when my friend discoursed eloquently on the slow movements of Beethoven, and said that no one could approach Beethoven at his best in this field, a view with which I heartily concurred. It will be noticed that the opening bars are made to suggest the slow movement of the Eighth Sonata, the Pathétique.

Variation 11 (to G.R. Sinclair, organist of Hereford Cathedral):

"This variation has little to do with G.R. Sinclair, except remotely. The first few bars were suggested by his great bulldog, Dan, falling down the steep bank into the River Wye (bar 1); his paddling upstream to find a landing place (bars 2 and 3); and his rejoicing bark upon landing, (second half of bar 5). G.R. Sinclair said 'Set that to music!' I did; here it is."

An intriguing detail about performances of Elgar's "Enigma" is the question so often raised by first time listeners: "What was that utterly gorgeous variation?" Invariably the answer is the "Nimrod" variation, No. 9 (described above). Music more lovely has never been scored.

program notes by Edward Yadzinski

