

LEWIS FOREMAN, *BAX: A COMPOSER AND HIS TIMES*, third edition (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2007), ISBN 978-1-84383-209-6, 616pp, £29.95/\$55.

Reviews of new editions such as this ('completely revised and updated', we are informed by a Boydell & Brewer advertisement) are rather unusual, but then so is one of the principal factors motivating Foreman's revision of his authoritative biography of Arnold Bax (1883–1953): the opening in 1999 of the papers bequeathed by Harriet Cohen to the British Library. When Cohen died in 1967, she left her papers to the British Library on the condition that they remain unopened for thirty years; in 1999 they were 'made available...following examination by the Library and consultation with the surviving executors'.<sup>1</sup> Presumably Cohen's reasons for restricting access to the papers were similar to those which restrained Bax from producing a sequel to his 1943 autobiography, *Farewell, My Youth* (which presents scenes from his life up to around 1916).<sup>2</sup> Bax appears to have considered producing a sequel, sketching a number of possible topics before abandoning the idea; when working on the proofs of *Farewell, My Youth* he commented to Cohen that he had had to 'alter and delete a great deal for fear of causing offence' (p. 358).<sup>3</sup>

Cohen was one of the foremost English pianists of her time, having works dedicated to her by, among others, Bax, Vaughan Williams, E. J. Moeran and Peter Racine Fricker. She was an important champion of Bax's music and was his lover from around 1914 onwards; their correspondence provides a large proportion of the new material included in the third edition. Cohen seems to have had a somewhat jealous and proprietary interest in Bax:

When Bax died, although he had changed his will, leaving his effects to his executors, Harriet went immediately to his room at the White Horse inn in Storrington [where Bax lived for the last 14 years of his life], removed all his scores and papers, and refused to part with them. It is difficult to know the extent to which she may have culled the collection, except that we may suspect that some letters have been destroyed, as there is here only one surviving example written by Mary Gleaves [Bax's partner in the last decades of his life], one by Christine Ryan and nothing from his wife, Elsit (which Harriet had already demanded Bax destroy). (p. xii)

As a result, the Cohen bequest 'clearly consists of the joint collections of Cohen and Bax, including as it does not only Bax's letters to Cohen but also letters to Bax written

---

<sup>1</sup> Inventory of 'The Cohen Papers' (deposit 1999/10), compiled by the British Library.

<sup>2</sup> Arnold Bax, *Farewell, My Youth* (London: Longmans, 1943).

<sup>3</sup> References to the third edition are given in the main text. All other references, including those to earlier editions, are given in footnotes. The first edition was published in 1983, the second in 1987.

by many correspondents in addition to Cohen, Bax's early letters to his parents and a variety of photographs and old negatives' (p. xii).

The new edition contains a relatively substantial amount of new material derived from the Cohen Papers, which combines with other new material, such as re-assessments and reconsiderations of a number of minor works, to make it a timely and worthwhile update. The greatest part of the original text remains unchanged, however: almost all of the material is preserved, and revisions tend to be minor. Given the quality of the original, this should not be seen as a shortcoming, although some opportunities for revision or further exploration may have been missed. The observation, for instance, that 'it was to Ireland that he now turned, and from Ireland that he was to forge his mature style' (p. 39), and a discussion of Bax's reaction to the Easter Rising, do not lead to a detailed examination of Bax's relationship with Ireland and engagement with Irish culture, which was complex to say the least. As a result, we are given no clear indication of how Ireland actually influenced Bax and how this might be reflected in his style or music. A useful comparison is with Paul Rodmell's biography of Stanford, where that composer's English, Irish and British connections and identities are carefully considered.<sup>4</sup> Frequent references to Bax's inspiration from personal experience, passionate emotion and also nature (and its expression in his music) are emphasized in the new edition, but no definition or exploration of their exact nature and workings is attempted. Given the wealth of scholarship dedicated to such types of inspiration produced since 1987, this is regrettable.

A practical function of this review should be to give readers an indication of the extent and significance of new and revised material. To readers unfamiliar with the earlier editions, the new edition may be recommended on the same grounds as its predecessors: principally Foreman's thorough and meticulous scholarship, attractive writing style and palpable enthusiasm for his subject. To these should be added the greater detail and accuracy of the new edition as well as the luxury of the added perspective of twenty years, which cannot but enhance the picture Foreman presents, of Bax, his times and his music. The current level of interest in the music of Bax and his contemporaries, due not least to the exertions of figures such as Foreman, also calls for updated appraisals of its reception. Commenting on Raymond Tobin's praise of a number of Frederick Corder's pupils other than Bax, including Granville Bantock, York Bowen, Arthur Hinton, Benjamin Dale and Joseph Holbrooke, Foreman noted in 1987:

---

<sup>4</sup> Paul Rodmell, *Charles Villiers Stanford* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2002).

...all these composers are now forgotten (with the exception of several works of Bantock) and totally unplayed.... In one or two cases there are certainly particular works by these composers that should be revived, and they may yet maintain a small niche in the more specialized repertoire of individual instrumentalists, but whether to have hailed them as 'the glory' of English music was a mistake or not, must await further investigation.<sup>5</sup>

The update reads:

...all these composers, once forgotten and largely unplayed, are also beginning to be explored again...the revival of the music of Bantock and Bowen on compact disc, and performances of works by Hinton and Dale, have demonstrated that Tobin's view was far from mere hyperbole. (p. 15)

Similar reappraisals of Bax's music occur, for instance of the 'early and overlong' String Quintet,<sup>6</sup> which can now be described as 'a delightful score', after the benefit of a 'convincing' recording by Divertimenti on the Dutton Epoch label (p. 60).

In the new edition, as in the older ones, Foreman makes frequent references to recordings of Bax's music, such as the one just mentioned. In the earlier editions this seemed reasonable, as recordings of Bax's music were only beginning to become widely available and much music had yet to be recorded. In the new edition, however, I occasionally found these references (to new and old recordings, always in the main text) a little out of place in a study of *A Composer and his Times*, and at least some of these would perhaps have been more appropriately placed in endnotes. This is admittedly a minor point, but references such as these, and also to editions and orchestrations of Bax's music, sometimes seem to inhibit the flow of the discussion, a problem very occasionally exacerbated by the insertion of unnecessary quotations, while also going beyond the nominal (and already prodigious) scope of Bax and his historical context.

It should also be noted at this point that, as in the earlier editions, technical discussion of the music is limited, the 'composer and his times' being the focus rather than his music. What musical discussion there is can, however, seem somewhat uneven, as discussions of orchestration, texture and instrumental colour often take precedence over other features. Furthermore, the (perhaps inevitable) disproportionate attention to particular works, such as those where some reappraisal is necessary or minor works that were unknown in 1987, draws attention to the lack of technical discussion of other works. While extensive analysis, even of Bax's major

---

<sup>5</sup> Second edition, 14.

<sup>6</sup> Second edition, 52. The 'overlong' is omitted in the new version.

works, is outside the scope of Foreman's study, its lack highlights the need for an independent, extensive survey of Bax's music (Graham Parlett's catalogue of Bax's works is a step in the right direction).<sup>7</sup>

The layout of the new edition, meanwhile, is much improved, using a slightly smaller font, but with more generous spacing. The indentation of longer quotations that were originally embedded in the main body text makes for increased clarity, although in one instance the combination of quotations and main text within an indent (on p. 29) is confusing, and must be a mistake. The amount of new material can be gauged from the fact that, although the new layout allows for around ten percent more material per page, there are 41 more pages of main text in the new edition. In addition there are a number of new photographs, and many of the original ones are reproduced in significantly enhanced quality. The discography, catalogues of Bax's writings and works, and the bibliography are updated, while the original appendices are preserved; the prefaces to the earlier editions and Felix Aprahamian's foreword to the first edition are also given, and David Owen Norris provides a new foreword.

Two unfortunate errors, one minor, the other more substantial, should also be pointed out, as they are likely to cause confusion. The attribution of the original edition (1983) to Ashgate and the second edition (1987) to Scolar Press in the publication information at the start of the book should be reversed. A blunder of considerable magnitude, meanwhile, is the reproduction of the original endnotes for the last five chapters—this means not only that the new material in these chapters lacks references, but that the original references are also out of place (and thus more or less useless). Since several quotations are not clearly referenced in the main text, this is a serious oversight, and particularly unfortunate in an updated edition such as this.<sup>8</sup>

As noted above, the greatest proportion of new material consists of quotations from letters, mainly those from Bax which were found among the Cohen papers. These include an endearing and vivid description of his Royal Academy of Music interview with Sir Alexander Mackenzie and Frederick Corder, reports of Bax's busy social life in Dublin and much information on his music, including inspirations, the process of composition, performances and interpretations. His consternation at finding the second movement of his Third Violin Sonata 'indescribably difficult' to play, for instance, is amusing given the considerable but unselfconscious complexity of much of

---

<sup>7</sup> Graham Parlett, *A Catalogue of the Works of Sir Arnold Bax* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1999).

<sup>8</sup> An errata sheet with the updated endnotes is now available from the publisher. [7 November 2007: the publisher has informed *JSMI* that the book has now been reprinted with the correct material in place.]

his music (p. 279). Opinions of other composers and their music are also occasionally offered, a significant example being Bax's dislike of Mozart on account of a perceived lack of 'untrammelled passion and extasy [sic]' (p. 347). About Beethoven's Violin Concerto Bax comments: 'that Beethoven Concerto is simply *bloody*—dull, long, trivial' (p. 188).

Rather than presenting a large quantity of new information, many of the letters quoted provide vivid illustration. Occasional glimpses, such as of the privileged upper-middle-class Bax (who never had to work for a living and remained largely untroubled by the First World War, intoxicated with Celtic rusticity, working the fields making hay and speaking 'excited Gaelic' with his fellow workers in Glencolumcille in 1910, are tantalizing (pp. 81–2), and Bax's social life in Dublin is illuminated by a number of letters. The vague mystery surrounding the occasion when W. B. Yeats praised Bax's poetry is finally dispelled; Foreman had commented on Harriet's report of an evening out in Dublin in the second edition: 'This is almost certainly the occasion on which Yeats elaborately praised Bax's wartime "Irish" poetry.'<sup>9</sup> Letters found among the Cohen papers reveal that Bax initially travelled to Ireland on his own (in 1919, his first visit to Ireland since the Easter Rising) and Harriet joined him afterwards. In fact it is to her that Bax communicated his excitement at finding 'Æ, Yeats, Mrs Sheehy-Skeffington, Dancke, Figgis, Maud Gonne and Iseult' present at a gathering in Maud Gonne's house. Bax goes on to relate how

Yeats has just had a daughter and it was very interesting to hear Æ congratulating him with the most extraordinary shyness like some huge awkward schoolboy. W.B. was very cheerful, his manner much brisker and energetic than it used to be. I was somewhat gratified in that directly I was introduced to him he proclaimed in a loud voice that my poem 'A Dublin Ballad' was a masterpiece and a real addition to the literature. This from W.B.! (p. 180)

Two days later, Bax provided Harriet with this colourful portrait of Yeats and Æ (George Russell):

It is strange how Willy Yeats and Æ seem to irritate one another, especially does Yeats annoy Æ, who seems to have a contempt for W.B. in every capacity except as a poet. I think he is right, for Yeats talks fearsome nonsense about politics and a great deal of it—yet immediately he gets on to poetry he is a wonder. He seems very cheerful just now—and much more human than he was. He teases Maud Gonne a great deal about her ideas and says she has learned her political hatred from English Suffragettes. (p. 180)

---

<sup>9</sup> Second edition, 166.

Not surprisingly, Harriet Cohen herself features more prominently in the new version, and the reader is given a more detailed impression of her character than in previous editions, most notably through her own letters. Indeed, the amount of new material increases as she enters the story, even from the time before her affair with Bax. The two knew each other through the Royal Academy of Music, and a reference by Harriet to 'your naughty little wife' in a letter written during the earlier, innocent days of their friendship seems now almost cruel in its irony (p. 133). The episode in Cornwall, which inspired one of Bax's most successful scores, *Tintagel*, and which is explored in greater detail in the new edition (it is also discussed exhaustively in Thomas Elnaes's 2005 master's thesis),<sup>10</sup> is indicative of the social pressures Bax and Harriet experienced during their relationship. However, this does not lead Foreman to the kind of reinterpretation of *Tintagel* that Elnaes suggests.

That Harriet was prone to jealousy (often justifiably) is made abundantly clear. Indeed, we learn a little more about Bax's many affairs. We also learn more about Bax's wife Elsitia in this new edition. Having previously been a rather shadowy presence, the reproduction of what is probably the only surviving letter by her (to Arthur Alexander) is particularly interesting; in fact, one wonders why Foreman did not include it before. Bax's occasional awkwardness in dealing with his wife (and Harriet), particularly following the breakdown of his marriage, is illustrated by the following passage:

Bax's impractical nature in the matter of everyday life was responsible for a souring of his relationship with Harriet when he bought Elsitia a house in Golders Green, not 10 minutes' walk from Harriet Cohen's flat. Elsitia also hired a detective to shadow them, with as Harriet said, 'his money'. (p. 183)

Elsitia refused to divorce Bax, so Harriet's wish to marry him remained unfulfilled, although it seems unlikely that he had any wish to remarry in any case. The impression that he treated both Elsitia (who was hardly a suitable partner) and Harriet unfairly cannot be denied. Amid a number of affairs and a long-lasting relationship with Mary Gleaves (from the late 1920s onwards, which Harriet only found out about in 1948) Bax continued to be on intimate terms with Harriet (his will, originally leaving everything to Harriet, was revised to include both Harriet and Mary). Foreman can now compare letters to Harriet and Mary written in 1931: (to Mary) 'I am so infinitely grateful that I have found you, my wild young naiad. All my body and spirit send

---

<sup>10</sup> Thomas Elnaes, *An Anglo-Irish Composer: New Perspectives on the Creative Achievement of Sir Arnold Bax* (MLitt. dissertation, University of Dublin, Trinity College, 2005).



their kisses to yours'; (and to Harriet) 'I often think of holding you all dear and naked in my arms' (p. 289). Bax's letters to his lovers often contain erotic passages, including mention of the nude photographs found among the Cohen papers.

Some of the material following Elsit's death in 1948 is fascinating, as Bax was eventually forced to reveal Mary's existence to Harriet. This placed him in an awkward situation, reflected in his letters to Harriet. In one of these, an unrelated point is raised as Bax comments rather unexpectedly about Walton: '...prejudice and intrigue (Willie) are against me. I began slowly to fall from grace from the moment that Willie appeared' (p. 388). Apparently Bax blamed Walton for the neglect of his music; a slightly paranoid (and perhaps envious) mistrust of Walton is more clearly revealed in the new edition, indeed it becomes apparent that Bax strongly disliked Walton and his music.

Of Bax's other contemporaries, many are mentioned. For instance, a number of letters from Bax to Harriet describe his visits to Eynsford, where Philip Heseltine (Peter Warlock) and E. J. Moeran shared a house in the mid-1920s. Bax, along with many other friends, was an occasional visitor, and the regular riotous gatherings in Eynsford are the stuff of legend. In fact, suspicions that Bax, Moeran and Constant Lambert were adversely affected by regular exposure to 'alcohol on more than a social scale' (p. 246) seem justified. Bax reported on one occasion that 'the perpetual boozing of Heseltine and [Cecil] Gray was a gloomy and irritating spectacle', although he had earlier reported about the same visit 'I was somewhat uproarious last night but not so violently bacchic as one would have expected' (p. 245).

These examples should demonstrate that Bax's social life, his friendships and relationships are colourfully illustrated by the many letters quoted, and the wealth of added detail enhances Foreman's depiction as well as its authority. There are, however, few additions of far-reaching significance, and discussion of the music is largely unchanged (only a number of relatively minor works are afforded a revised evaluation). Overall, the many added details and minor corrections lead to a more accurate and comprehensive portrayal of Bax, his life, his musical development and tastes, while also giving an impression of the period in which he lived and the most important people in his life. Inevitably, the quotations from Bax's letters and discussion of his relationships reveal much about his personality; Bax is carefully and vividly depicted, and the impression of Bax as a sympathetic but somewhat troubled man is reinforced. An insight from his most 'ego-centric letter' (p. 373) is revealing: 'I have always thought that art may be a disease of the soul, like the pearl in the oyster.'

Surprisingly, the final chapter, 'Decline and Revival', remains virtually unchanged, charting the gradual revival of interest in Bax's music after the period of neglect that followed his death. Important performances and recordings are discussed, but the

twenty years since the publication of the second edition of Foreman's book are barely mentioned. Given the considerable audience which the many recordings and performances of Bax's music has attracted since 1987, such a discussion may have seemed unwieldy and unnecessary to Foreman; the resulting conclusion to the book does, however, seem somewhat abrupt, and a slightly enlarged discussion of the period of revival in which Foreman's own efforts played such a prominent role would have been desirable. There is no doubt, meanwhile, that Foreman's latest effort is essential reading for anyone with an interest in Bax.

Fabian Huss

University of Bristol