Arnold Bax - Concertante for piano-In Memoriam-The Bard of the Dimbovitza (1999)

1. In Memoriam Concertante for piano and orchestra *2. Allegro moderato 3. Moderato tranquillo 4. Rondo: Allegro moderato*
The Bard of the Dimbovitza
5. Gypsy Song 6. The Well of Tears 7. Misconception 8. My Girdle I Hung on a Tree-top Tall 9. Spinning Song
Margaret Fingerhut, piano Jean Rigby, mezzo-soprano BBC Philharmonic Vernon Handley , conductor

These are all premiere recordings and most welcome additions to the Bax discography. How splendid the orchestral version of In Memoriam sounds; Vernon Handley and the BBC Philharmonic give a really spine-tingling performance. Dating from 1916, In Memoriam commemorates Pádraig Pearse, one of the leaders of the 1916 Dublin uprising, executed soon after the rebellion was quashed. Bax was clearly greatly moved when writing this music it conveys all the anguish he felt at learning about all the suffering in his beloved Ireland and of the veneration he felt for Pearse. Readers of Bax's Farewell, My Youth may recall how Bax remembered meeting the martyred hero: "Scarcely had Pearse shaken hands shyly than he sat down by the fire and stared into the blaze as though absorbed in a private dream but his eyes were lit with the unwavering flame of the fanatic. Somebody said, 'Pearse wants to die for Ireland you know.' Indeed he did not have much longer to wait before his desire was granted. As he was leaving he said to his host, 'I think your friend Arnold Bax may be one of us. I should like to see more of him.'...I could not forget the impression that strange death-aspiring dreamer [Pearse] made upon me when on Easter Tuesday 1916 I read, by Windermere's shore, of that wild, scatter-brained but burningly idealist adventure in Dublin the day before. I murmured to myself, 'I know that Pearse is in this'..." Bax had fallen deeply in love with all things Irish and the English censor later declared his verses, written under his pseudonym, Dermot O'Byrne, to be subversive.

In Memoriam includes the theme that Bax later used for Mr Brownlow in his score for the film

Oliver Twist but here it is treated with that extra passion and deeper conviction appropriate to Pearse. In Memoriam is part-elegy, part-funeral march, and partly a furious remonstration against a cruelly suppressed bid for Irish independence. (Perhaps Bax, in more reflective and prudent mood, put it aside for it was never heard and indeed, until recently it was thought that Bax had never orchestrated it). Marching rhythms with insistent side drum and bugle calls contrast with music that suggests Irish Elysian Fields fit for heroes. A wonderful musical experience.

The Concertante for Piano (Left Hand) and Orchestra was written at Storrington in 1948 for Harriet Cohen who had injured her right hand. Lewis Foreman, writing in his book, Bax, A Composer and his Times regarded this work as "watery" and "...[it] is not a successful work, and unfortunately for Bax's reputation had the misfortune of being widely played for several years. The critical sneers it received, were by implication, extended to the rest of his music... Nevertheless, Left Hand Concertante, patently Bax's worst extended work was widely heard. The first movement is laboured although there are some attractive ideas. The slow movement is probably the best; beautiful if limited...But the theme of the finale, a rondo, is tawdry. His heart was not in the work. He wrote to the Dutch cellist-composer Henri van Marken during its composition: 'I find it terribly difficult to think of anything effective for the one hand... Except in the finale, Bax seldom brings the soloist away from the lower half of the keyboard, and so the left-hand limitation is thus rather more pronounced than it might have been. Ravel in his left-hand concerto, which Harriet never played, allowed his soloist a much wider compass..."

In an interview with Colin Anderson reproduced in this CD's booklet, Vernon Handley comments: "Margaret [Fingerhut] showed immediately that it's not directionless - It's very clean and clear. I admire in Bax that he doesn't mind writing something simple. By terming it 'Concertante' he's saying that the orchestral role is as important as the soloist's...He's written - better than Britten (Diversions) and as well as Ravel - something that uses the left-hand colour and register extremely well. The Concertante occupies a lighter emotional world but he touches moments of depth as he does in every work...."

So, the individual listener must decide. For myself, I found the slow movement to be the most appealing and in the sensitive hands of Fingerhut and Handley, often beautiful. The opening movement has many Baxian characteristics, including northern-mythological-type figures but at some points I felt these were caricatured and I could not dismiss from my mind's eye a picture of North American Indians that the music seemed to create - maybe it was "oddities" like these that attracted such derision?. The rhythmically exhilarating final Rondo is an odd mix of the sturdy and heroic with some grotesque and quirky figures plus some intriguing Brahmsian influences. Clearly Fingerhut and Handley have brought out the very best in this oddity amongst Bax's major works.

The Bard of the Dimbovitza was composed in 1914 and it clearly shows the influence of the Russian composers that so impressed Bax in his earlier years, as well as the French impressionists. The Bard of the Dimbovitza comprises Romanian Folk Verses collected from the peasants by Héléne Vacaresco and translated by Carmen Sylva (the nom de plume of Queen Elizabeth of Romania who was probably was more involved in their composition than she admitted) and Alma Strettel. Published in London in 1892, they became as popular as Omar Khayyam although they bore as much direct relevance to Romanian folk-poetry as Fitzgerald's verse had to Persian verse. Bax eschews any local Romanian colour. Most of the poems in The Bard of the Dimbovitza are designated as 'Luteplayer songs' or 'Spinning songs'. The influence of Rimsky-Korsakov and Sheherazade is immediately apparent in the beginning of the opening "Gypsy Song"; and there are echoes of Tchaikovsky later ('There where on Sundays...'). It is dreamy, sultry and sensual with Bax richly evoking lines like: 'The brook ripples by so clearly there...' The second song, the ghostly and mysterious "The Well of Tears" again is sumptuous but chilling too as the singer sees spectres at the bottom of a well full of tears. "Misconception" appears to be about lovers' embarrassed silences whereas simple confessions of love would have eased everything and saved the sadness that Bax later implies. This is a more fragile creation and nearer to the impressionism of Ravel and Debussy. In the more light-hearted "My Girdle I Hung on a Tree-top Tall", with Bax's cheeky cuckoo figures, the singer, a clearly head-strong and independent young woman scorns the attentions of a young man. Here Rigby has to sing a dialogue between swain and maid. The latter's arrogant scorn is well represented but the former's masculine ardour could have been more strongly communicated. The final song, "The daughter" (clearly from Bax's treatment, a spinning song) is, again, another dialogue piece, this time between a young girl, poetic, naive and eager for love and her mother disillusioned and laconic. Rigby, in the main, sings sensitively and expressively with warmth and a fine sense of the lines of the songs and Handley provides rich, evocative support. This album is a must for all Bax enthusiasts. ---Ian Lace, musicweb-international.com

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