

## Bax – String Quartets Nos. 1 & 2 (1999)

Written by bluesever

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String Quartet No. 1 In G Major 1 *Allegretto Semplice* 8:30 2 *Lento E Molto Expressivo*  
8:19 3 *Rondo: Allegro Vivace* 6:44 String Quartet No. 2 In A  
Minor 4 *Allegro* 12:04  
5 *Lento, Molto Espressivo* 10:05 6 *Allegro Vivace* 8:18  
Maggini Quartet: Cello – Michal Kaznowski Viola – Martin Outram Violin [I] – Laurence  
Jackson Violin [II] – David Angel

Had Dvorák written an Irish Quartet to sit alongside his delectable American, it might well have sounded like the start of Bax's First String Quartet. Completed in 1918 and subsequently dedicated to Elgar (who 'liked the look of it' but sadly never heard it), this is one of Bax's most endearing and approachable scores.

The clean-cut opening *Allegretto semplice* positively beams with happiness, and it's succeeded by a wistfully intimate slow movement. In the latter, listen at 3'52" and 6'39" for the brief quotation from *A Romance*, a piano miniature penned at about the same time as the quartet and a piece Bax later revisited in the central *Lento moderato* of his Fourth Symphony.

The finale begins and finishes in a mood of pagan revelry, though there's time for a ravishing episode in Bax's sweetest lyrical vein, its indelible tune a close cousin to the folksong *The Fair Hills of Ireland*.

The Second Quartet of 1924--25 proves an altogether tougher nut to crack. Conceived at the same time as the Second Symphony (with which it shares something of the the same driven, oppressive quality), it's a knotty, densely plotted creation, as harmonically daring as Bax ever

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ventured and demanding formidable concentration from performers and listeners alike (repeated hearings confirm that the cello's declamatory solo at the outset sows the seeds for so much that follows).

I can report that the Maggini Quartet do Bax absolutely proud, their performances striking an ideal balance between urgent expression and purposeful clarity (the luxuriant textures of the Second Quartet are sifted with especial insight). Both rival readings on Chandos have considerable strengths (and we could do with a reissue of the Griller Quartet's classic Decca version No 1 – 1/42, nla), but the Maggini's scrupulously dedicated advocacy will captivate both seasoned Baxians and newcomers alike. With exemplary production-values throughout, this is an outstanding coupling in every way. --- gramophone.co.uk

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