

Concert and Recital Reviews

40th Anniversary Concert – British Music Society

The British Music Society (BMS) celebrated its 40th anniversary with a public concert at St John's Smith Square, London on 22 June. It was played by the Ealing Symphony Orchestra under its Music Director and also the BMS's Vice-President, John Gibbons, in an all British concert the likes you will find it hard to replicate elsewhere.

I grew up with Sir Arnold Bax's music at school but, ashamed as I am to admit it, this was the first live performance of the First Symphony I have heard, so rare it is in our concert programmes. The first of seven symphonies, its neglect is shamefully exposed by this invigorating and superbly played performance. Gibbons moulded the three contrasted movements allowing his players to revel in the extraordinary mix of sonorities, melodies and lyricism.

Like Brahms, Bax was a fully mature composer by the time he came to write his First Symphony in 1922. He spoils his listeners with an almost over-plentiful content, both melodic and harmonic which gives rise to comments about unnecessary complexity in the sound world he develops. But it is at a live performance where we are allowed to listen to every bar in the score that Bax's symphonic views become apparent. No matter what the supposed background to the music was (Bax, like Sibelius, referred to his symphonies as "pure music") there was no denying the explosive forces at work in the first movement, nor the elegiac tendencies heard in the contrasting middle movement, opening the way for celebrations in the finale.

We heard a mix of other works before the Bax. The overture, *Bishop Rock*, by Dorothy Carwithen displays her acute feel for atmosphere and enhances her reputation for being one of the most accomplished composers of her generation.

Michael Hurd, whose legacy left to the BMS has proved invaluable in the promotion of less well-known British music, was heard in his *Dance Diversions*, five movements that showed him to be a kindred spirit of Malcolm Arnold in his melodic fluency. A bigger work, *Ode to a Nightingale*, by Sir Hamilton Harty followed, where the soprano soloist, Kirstin Sharpin, sang a text of the same title by

John Keats. Much is made of Harty's style originating from Wagner and Elgar but this work comes from a fully formed view of how to use the musical language of the day (1907) to his own particular advantage, just as also can be heard in the music of his contemporary Sir Granville Bantock. Ms Sharpin stood in at short notice due to the indisposition of Helena Dix but carried the day with her robust tone clearly heard over the opulent orchestration. Both she and Gibbons did Harty proud in this performance.

William Alwyn was heard to good advantage in his role as a famous composer of film music with his *Nemesis*, from *Odd Man Out* and Frank Bridge gave evidence of his skilful writing for strings in his *An Irish Melody*.

Edward Clark