Edgar Bainton's Australian symphonies

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Abstract

Dr Edgar Bainton (1880-1956) was an established British composer at the time of his appointment as Head of the New South Wales State Conservatorium of Music in 1934. He then spent 22 years in Sydney, retaining the post of Head of the Con until his retirement in 1945 and then composing, conducting and examining during his last years. Bainton made a significant contribution to Australian musical life and, amongst other works, composed two symphonies which were given their world premieres in 1941 and 1957 respectively.   Both works demonstrate Bainton's skill in handling a musical idiom not dissimilar to that of Bax, but with a more convincing sense of musical continuity than his more famous contemporary.   This paper will place Bainton's 2nd and 3rd symphonies into its larger British and Australian symphonic context. The Third Symphony emerges as the last substantial Romantic/Impressionist symphony of the British composers from his generation.

Over the past twelve years or so there has been a revival of interest in Britain in the music of the British/Australian composer Edgar Bainton. Thanks to the efforts of the British-based Bainton Society, record company Chandos have recorded three CDs of major Bainton orchestral works, including the Symphony No.2 in D minor, and Dutton released a recording of Symphony No.3 in C minor in 2007. Prior to this, Bainton's symphonies were rarely heard (with the exception of intermittent broadcasts in Australia of 1950s mono recordings). Concert performances were even rarer, with two performances of the second symphony in an Australian Heritage series of concerts in 1994 - the first since 1955 – and no performances of the third symphony since its premiere in 1957. Yet, both the symphonies were composed in Australia and represent some of the finest work ever created here. Despite his 22 years based in Sydney from 1934 until 1956, Bainton has been neglected in Australia since his death. In Britain, his extended absence as a resident in Australia led to an even greater neglect there, although the relative wealth of prominent British composers of symphonic music makes that situation more understandable.

Bainton was a product of the Royal College of Music and one of the many distinguished English composers who studied composition with Sir Charles Stanford. Following graduation, Bainton taught piano and composition from 1901 until 1934 at the Conservatorium of Music, Newcastle upon Tyne. He was Principal of the school from 1912 onwards. From 1911-1934 Bainton was also conductor of the Newcastle Philharmonic Orchestra (Bainton, H. 1977, pp.146-7). This long Newcastle period was interrupted by four years of internment in Germany during World War 1, owing to his capture as an enemy alien at the Bayreuth Festival at the outbreak of war in 1914. Apart from two major works which were published by the Carnegie Foundation – his first symphony, the choral *Before Summer* and his *Concerto Fantasia* – he was probably best known for short choral pieces during his Newcastle period. The anthem, *And I saw a new Heaven*, from 1925 remains his best-known work and can even be heard on You Tube.

After receiving an honorary doctorate from University of Durham, Bainton was appointed as Director of the New South Wales State Conservatorium of Music in 1934 and served there until 1946. He was not entirely a newcomer in Australia as he had spent several months as an examiner for the Associated Board during 1930.

Bainton's role in the development of Australian musical life has been grossly underrated: at 53 he was at the height of his powers as a composer when he arrived in Australia in 1934, and his music has not been evaluated fairly. Dianne Collins in her account of the history of the New South Wales State Conservatorium of Music suggests that from the start of his tenure there, Bainton was considered a 'second-rater' who had been recruited from the English provinces.

> *No one pretended that he was a musician of the first order. His career was solid rather than inspiring...No amount of overblown tribute could hide the fact that, in 1934, most of musical Australia did not want him* (Collins, 2001, pp 80-1).

Collins, however, later lists Bainton's accomplishments in turning around the fortunes of the Con and restoring good relationships between it and the Australian Broadcasting Commission (ABC). Her assessment of his status in 1934 was probably unfair. Sir Henry Wood, arguably the most important British conductor of the period between 1900-1940, came to a different conclusion in his 1938 book *My Life of Music.*

> *Edgar L. Bainton is a composer who should have taken a more prominent position than he has. I thought so well of his* [tone-poem] *'Pompilia'...I have often met Bainton at Newcastle-on-Tyne where he was Principal of the School of Music* (Wood, 1938, p.174).

Bainton's music appears six times in lists of new works performed at the Proms in London between 1903 and 1937 (Wood, 1938, appendix). Although he was not in the same ranking as Elgar, Vaughan Williams and Walton, his place in British music as composer was not insubstantial. Moving to Australia removed him from the extensive music network of Britain and, after 1934, he was relatively forgotten there.

For Roger Covell, writing in 1967, that was not a sufficient sacrifice to merit more than the following in his seminal book on Australian music:

> *Dr Edgar L.Bainton...is not a sufficiently distinctive composer to require a claim from Australia...Bainton's more ambitious music, such as the symphony in C minor he wrote in Australia, shows a complete familiarity with the styles of Elgar (as in some of the passages for strings and barking trombones) and with the pastoral reflectiveness of utterance characteristic of a school of English composers; and to these he added a certain modest, woodland grace of his own.* (Covell, 1967, p.144)

Composer Miriam Hyde was more generous in her appraisal of Bainton and his music. In her autobiography she wrote of him as follows:

> *I feel Australia did not give this outstanding musician the recognition that his many-sided talents and service merited. We have had few of comparable stature resident in our midst. Perhaps there was some doubt as to whether as a composer he should be claimed by England or Australia, but he wrote some major works in this country and I remember copying the viola parts for his Symphony in D minor* (Hyde, 1991, p.86).

In retirement, Bainton was vastly overshadowed by Eugene Goossens, his successor at the NSW Conservatorium from 1947 until 1956. Nevertheless, Bainton continued to compose, conduct, teach and examine, and was one of the three-member Australian jury of the Commonwealth Jubilee Composers competition. His last work, the four movement

Symphony No.3 in C minor, was composed between 1952 and 1956 and only completed weeks before his relatively sudden death on 8 December 1956.

On the basis of the recent recordings and also his own opinion of the works, Bainton's most important compositions are the symphonies that he wrote in Australia. Let us consider these two symphonies in more detail and see why Covell's assessment of Bainton and his importance in Australian music should be challenged.

According to his daughter Helen Bainton, the initial spark for Bainton's Symphony No. 2 in D minor, a one-movement symphony, was an initial sketch for a symphonic poem based on Swinburne's poem *Thalassius* dating from the early 1930s. Later, during a six-week holiday in Bundanoon (Southern Highlands of New South Wales) in 1939, Bainton returned to these sketches.

> *The canvas increased its size and when the work was completed it was a Symphony in D minor, consisting of three main sections played without a break* (Bainton 1960, p.83).

An intense encounter with bird-song one day at Bundanoon inspired the flute solo which is a prominent feature of the impressionistic slow section. Helen Bainton said that this was the first major work that her father had written in Australia (ibid, p.84). The completed work was premiered by the Sydney Symphony Orchestra under the direction of the composer in Sydney on 11 September 1941.

The autograph full score of the symphony and complete sets of parts are held in the National Library of Australia, in the Symphony Australia Collection. Bainton had the symphony published privately as a miniature score in 1943 and copies of that score are located in several University libraries around Australia. Given the revival of the work on modern recording, it would be helpful to have the score made available in a modern edition.

An extended and continuous one-movement structure was still rare in pieces bearing the title Symphony, particularly in Britain or Australia. The best-known forbears of Bainton's symphony are the Chamber Symphony Op.9 of Schoenberg and the Symphony No.7 in C by Sibelius. Of these works, it is entirely probable that Bainton knew the Sibelius, and possibly even conducted it. The work was presented in Australia during Schneevoigt's conducting tour for the ABC during the late 1930s. Of prior British symphonies, the only prominent one to be crafted in one movement was Parry's Symphony No.5. However Peter Brown links this work to Robert Schumann's Symphony No.4. Although the music is continuous, the divisions of traditional movements are clear and unmistakeable (Brown, 2008, p.200). None of the symphonies by composers like Elgar, Bax, Vaughan Williams, Walton and Rubbra are in one movement, although Moeran attempted a single movement symphony in his unfinished Second Symphony. Almost contemporaneous with Bainton's symphony are the powerful one-movement symphonies by American composers Samuel Barber (No.1, 1936) and Roy Harris (No.3, 1938). Extended one-movement, multi-sectioned symphonic poems were common throughout the late 19th century and early 20th centuries and prominent British examples include works by Parry, Delius, Elgar, Bantock, Bax and many others. Bainton had written three symphonic poems prior to coming to Australia. Another possible link to Bainton's symphony is the British penchant for the 'Fantasy Sonata', usually for small chamber music ensembles, which tended to include the essentials of sonata form movement, slow movement and scherzo in one extended and continuous movement.

Helen Bainton and Neville Cardus (review in the *Sydney Morning Herald*, 12 September 1941, p.9) both heard the Bainton work as falling into three principal sections, and it is true that silences mark some clear boundaries. I hear the piece in six sections which I will describe below. Lewis Foreman (1999) locates 12 subdivisions in this symphony, each of which is tracked in the Chandos recording.

The first two sections of the work roughly correspond to a slow introduction marked *Andante, molto tranquillo* and a fast sonata form exposition respectively. Together they correspond with Helen Bainton's first section. The symphony opens quietly with a gentle but sombre threnody for horns which tails off into clarinets and oboes. The idiom is romantic but tinged with mild dissonance. Bainton demonstrates a mastery of an extended harmonic vocabulary that generally avoids traditional 19th century cadences and conventional tonal progressions. The horn phrase is repeated and extended, its shape altered into an undulating string figure with a prominent augmented 2nd which forms one of the principal mottos for the entire work. This leads into a shimmering, misty passage for full orchestra *pp* before returning to the string idea. The metre then changes to 3/8 and the undulating string pattern subtly alters. Important solos from oboe and flute move into a massive climax and a general pause.

A rising horn fanfare, the second main motive of the symphony, launches the second section – marked Allegro vivace and full of swashbuckling writing and melodic sequences which sound like symphonic Elgar but salted with more dissonance. It leads without break into a 12/8 Meno allegro paragraph. Although the metre is different, and the string figuration is new, the fanfare idea continues to punctuate the music. The third section occurs suddenly with a dramatic change of speed to Maestoso Piu lento and a 5/4 metre. Beginning with a feeling of impending tragedy, the tone changes to triumph in the tonic major. Harmonically, this section is strongly redolent of the powerful modal harmony of the 'Pavane for the Sons of God' from Vaughan Williams's *Job* (which Bainton gave the Australian premiere in 1937 and repeated in 1939). This music looks ahead to the ultimate conclusion of the symphony.

Section 4 (beginning at 4 bars after fig.18) is an extended scherzo section, complete with slower trio section which is repeated. The thematic material consists of melodies built on pentatonic or gapped scales and a playful transformation of the opening horn motive from the beginning of the symphony. The harmonically lush trio begins and ends with an augmentation of the scherzo theme, with a faster, pastoral rocking idea in the middle. A variation of the undulating string motive from Section 2 brings the trio to an end. The scherzo music returns, and gradually peters out.

Section 5 begins slowly (Adagio) and features Bainton's bird song which he heard at Bundanoon in 1939. Delius – the opening of *Brigg Fair*, Debussy and the Bax of the *Garden of Fand* are evoked here. The impressionism then opens out into a broad modal climax based on the undulating string figure of Section 1.

Section 6 (beginning Molto maestoso) is recapitulatory. All of the material from previous sections returns except for the scherzo. The final paragraph of the symphony opens with a reprise of section 3 - first in D minor then in D major with a splendid chorale from the brass based on the principal motto of the work. Here the promise of section 3 is brought to fulfilment - but without outstaying its welcome. The timing is perfect.

This is a marvellous symphony which richly repays study. It demonstrates that Bainton was able to use the Baxian/ Elgarian language of his generation as well as anybody. There is more coherence and direction than, say, Bax in his third symphony, a work that Bainton conducted several times in Sydney and Melbourne in 1935 and after. The orchestration is opulent - and in the slow 'dream' sections - impressionistic. Formally, the one movement scheme is handled well, and the piece compares without embarrassment to the contemporary one-movement symphonies by Americans Harris and Barber.

According to Helen Bainton, her father commenced work on the Symphony No.3 in C minor during 1952. Despite many interruptions with his examining and adjudicating work, he had reached the middle of the third movement when his wife died unexpectedly in April 1954. This event impacted Bainton powerfully:

> *Immediately he became an old man. His vitality deserted him, and not long afterwards he suffered a heart attack and was unable to work as he had in the past. He endeavoured to live his life of routine and fought on with tremendous courage...the symphony lay in his drawer neglected, and he would not even talk about it.* (H. Bainton, 1960, p.107)

Following encouragement of friends like Franz Holford, the editor of the local music journal, *The Canon,* he came back to the work – possibly during the early part of 1956, but initially he struggled to maintain some impetus in his work.

> *When it was nearing completion Father played it through one night to Hans* [Furst] *and me. Never will I forget the way he played that slow movement, nor what it meant to us all. Father was happy, but deeply stirred. It had been his release...He found the last sixteen bars of his symphony the hardest. They took months to satisfy his still fastidious mind...One day I came home and quietly he remarked: 'Well, the symphony is finished at last! I will never write again'.* (H. Bainton, 1960, pp.108-9)

Bainton died while taking his customary morning walk and swim at Point Piper, Sydney on 8 December 1956. However, according to plan, the Symphony was premiered at the first subscription concert of the 1957 Sydney Symphony Orchestra season under the direction of Sir Bernard Heinze, and recorded not long after by the small local company Brolga. Owing to the score being held by the ABC in Sydney, the work never received a performance in Britain and was not heard there until rehabilitated by the Bainton Society in 2007.

The manuscript score of the work and parts are retained by Symphony Australia in the Ultimo music library.

By 1952 Eugene Goossens's had transformed the Sydney Symphony Orchestra and the technical demands that Bainton could expect in Britain were now met in Australia. In many respects the new work is a tour de force for a large orchestra. The Symphony No.3 in C minor is a much larger piece than its predecessor and more orthodox in its four movement shape. Although the Second symphony showed that Bainton was able to use a rich chromatic idiom, there were also plenty of passages offering diatonic contrast. On the surface, this Symphony in C minor is more complex in idiom. It is tonal, but often highly chromatic and dissonant. The tone of the piece is more gloomy and 'grey'.

The first movement opens with a disturbed slow introduction marked by slow rising chromatic figures centred around C minor. The mood is like waking at dawn after a shattering nightmare. This section prepares the vigorous fugato opening of the fast movement proper in which the mood is tempestuous and threatening and featuring the entire orchestra. It sounds like a mixture of Elgar and Bax and very exciting in effect. A piercing, held trumpet top A flat punctuated by the head of the first subject creates the impression of a huge crisis, followed by a reprise of the music of the slow introduction, this time beginning in E flat minor. A remarkable, impressionistic section filled with myriad 'bird songs' (remember the impression of bird song in the adagio section of the Second symphony) follows which shares the feeling of the dawn sequence that opens Ravel's *Daphnis et Chloe* Suite No.2. From this emerges a gentle pentatonic folk song-like melody, the main second subject group main theme which will take a prominent role later in the work.

The next section reverts to a faster tempo, with the metre in 12/8 - including a more tempestuous presentation of the second subject theme. Stormy Sibelian textures and sounds now emerge, redolent of the storm music of *Tapiola*, and the 'storm' sections of the finale of Bax's Sixth symphony and the finale of Moeran's Symphony in G minor. Out of the melee emerges the second subject theme presented in two-part canon at the octave between basses and upper strings, in D major. From here the music quietens to allow a final section based on the slow introduction to emerge. The movement closes on indefinite harmony and segues immediately into the second movement.

The overall shape of the scherzo movement is ternary, with a slower trio section at its centre. Although the movement begins gently and pensively, the mood quickly becomes threatening again as the music sours with bitonal harmonic elements. There are two main ideas in the slower trio that ensues; the first a skipping idea presented by solo clarinet, the second a more lush idea which uses Delius/Moeran sounding chromaticism with semitonal voice-leading. Although the scherzo begins in the same lush way as the trio it quickly becomes more threatening again as before. After reaching its principal diabolical climax, complete with trumpet trills, Bainton allows the rest of the movement to die away except for the final V - I tattoo on timpani, marked *ff*. The composer directs a break at the end of the movement.

The third, slow movement begins in elegiac mood and its sad chromatic gestures search for a definite, positive theme. This emerges with the diatonic string melody marked 'Tempo di Pavane', which possibly marks Bainton's cathartic return to work on the symphony after the extended break that followed his wife's death. The use of the Pavane suggests a connection with the similar place in Vaughan Williams's *Job* where the restoration of Job from his trials and suffering begins.   From this comes a reminiscence of the pentatonic tune from the first movement which leads to the rapt climax of the movement and a reflective, quiet ending in E flat major.

The finale falls into two main sections. The first is fast, powerful, positive and defiant and dominated by persistent repeated rhythms and sequences of downward-falling leaps that recall orchestral figures from the finale of Elgar's Violin Concerto. Formally, the section is rondo-like, with short episodes and it takes up roughly two-thirds of the movement. Like several of Bax's symphonies (for example No.3 and No.6) and Vaughan Williams's Symphonies 2, 4, 5 and 9, the movement and work closes with a slow epilogue. This section recapitulates many of the principal themes from the previous movements. In particular the pentatonic tune from the first movement and the pavane theme from the slow movement sing out in contrapuntal combination.   Finally the main theme from the slow introduction and its

mood return as if we have come full circle at the end of a dream, but the final phrase quoting the Pavane delivers us, this time, at peace in triumphant C major.

Bainton's Third Symphony is not as effective as its shorter, more compact predecessor. In several places Bainton marks time with musical gestures that are common in British music of Elgar, Vaughan Williams and Holst but which are not as thematically memorable as his better known contemporaries. Examples of this are especially evident in the first part of both the slow movement and the finale. Nevertheless, the work is a substantial achievement and its recent recording by Dutton (2007) has impressed reviewers.

Bainton was 76 when he completed this symphony, so it should not surprise us that the idiom of the work is closer to that of British and French impressionism of the first third of the twentieth century. Even in Australia, symphonies by Le Gallienne (1953), Douglas (no.2 of 1956) and Hanson (1951) demonstrate more forward-looking styles that operate on the border of tonality. However, within the world of Australian orchestral music of its period, only the Symphony by Robert Hughes approaches the mastery of large-scale musical thinking and orchestral colour of the Bainton Third. In Britain, by the mid 1950s, the dissonant and serial styles that can be encountered in works by Fricker, Hamilton, Searle and Frankel had largely replaced the Bax/Walton/Vaughan Wiliams idiom. There is no hint of popular style quotation in Bainton that we encounter in Malcolm Arnold. However, the valedictory flavour of the symphony presents a summation of much of the British music of Bainton's generation, viewed in retrospect by an old man who knew many of the principal figures in British music and who was completely familiar with the mixture of chromaticism, modal harmony and counterpoint, the impressionism of Debussy and Ravel, the brilliant orchestration and sweep of Elgar and the grotesqueries that often emerge in the music of Bax, Holst and Vaughan Williams.

Taken together, the two Bainton symphonies are amongst the most important and significant pieces to have been composed and performed for the first time in Australia. They serve as a reminder that a fine British-born composer was based in Sydney for 22 years and left a heritage worth treasuring. Now that there are good recordings of these works by which the symphonies could become well-known, it would be timely for new digitally-produced editions of the scores and parts to be produced, thus enabling live performances in Britain and Australia. The Third Symphony has never been published, and both works should be available in study scores.

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