

Bax and the Veil of Enchantment

by Ian Lace

'I think that in the lives of all men there must be fleeting moments invested by the imagination from some intangible cause with a vast and awe-inspiring significance out of all proportion to the actual event... For in such an instant the veil of enchantment that was woven about our memories in the cave of birth is lifted, only to fall again, alas! before our vision has time to become accustomed to the light that broods upon eternal things... On very rare occasions it happens, perchance, to some men to be able to seize for a fraction of a second the hem of a departing dream, and between the clouds of its twilight hair to catch a half-glimpse of those fateful eyes before they fade again into the folded shadows of the ages.'

That quotation comes from Arnold Bax's short story, *The Lifting of the Veil*, written in 1912, when the composer was 29. I was reminded of it when, in preparation for a lecture, I revisited the 1983 Chandos recording of Bax's Fourth Symphony coupled with *Tintagel*, and reread, after some 17 years, Lewis Foreman's notes that begin with it. Lewis goes on to say that the quotation encapsulates Bax's 'experience of momentary states of ecstatic vision which underlie his greatest music. Bax was an intuitive artist who (in his own words) did "not possess a gift" but was "possessed by it as by a demon"'

One can conjecture endlessly, and probably unproductively, about the nature of artistic inspiration. Yet the reference to a 'veil of enchantment' and 'the cave of birth' immediately struck a chord for me and set off a chain of linked memories, thoughts and impressions that involved the work of other British composers and writers and their creative inspirations.

In 1991, I was a dinner guest, in Hong Kong, of the late Austin Coates, son of the composer Eric Coates. Readers will remember that Eric Coates and Bax both attended the Royal Academy of Music at the same time and that they were friends. Now, Austin Coates was an accomplished writer of many books on an extraordinarily diverse range of subjects from rubber plantations to horse racing in Hong Kong, to Numerology. He had been a magistrate in Hong Kong's New Territories and had written about his experiences in dealing with the very different mindset of the Chinese in a witty book entitled, *Myself a Mandarin*. Austin had also served in a number of government posts spread across the Far East and in doing so had gained formidable knowledge and experience of some pretty bizarre things. After dinner that night in Hong Kong, the conversation got round to such matters and, on a whim, I asked Austin if he believed in reincarnation. He paused and in reply told us this story:-

"You know that most, if not all of us, can only remember isolated events, traumatic events, or nothing at all of our early childhood. In many cultures what is known as the Veil of Forgetfulness descends over our minds after the age of about five years old. It happened that during the war, an allied intelligence mission was required to visit an isolated village. A guide was needed who knew the village and was fluent in its dialect. Only one person was suitable but she flatly refused, and it was only after much cajoling that she agreed to go - but extremely reluctantly. Apparently, she had once lived there but was forced to flee the brutality of her husband. This crude man had subsequently remarried and fathered a child but he had died shortly after the baby's birth. It was with great trepidation that our reluctant guide approached the village. The place was quiet. The only person in the street was a small child of about three playing serenely. The child looked up to see the approaching party. When he saw the woman, his innocent expression vanished to be replaced with features of utmost malevolence. He began to swear and curse her most abominably. The woman grew pale and shrank. She stood rooted to the spot trembling. Eventually she was able to point to the child and exclaim, "It's him, he's come back - it's him! my husband! - he's in that child!" The mother of the child rushed out and was dumbfounded. No way, she asserted could her baby have known those adult blasphemies!"

That concept of the Veil of Forgetfulness is interesting. Why is it that we cannot remember our early years? Scientific minds might explain that all the necessary neural connections in our brains are still not in place and incomplete. Yet as parents and grandparents we are occasionally stunned by transitory expressions, remarks, and actions that seem way beyond our infant's years. And this is not just mimicking their elders.

Could it be that we bring something of our pre-life? Could it be that the Veil of Forgetfulness is lowered so that we are forced to get on with the business of the present life?

Turning now to Gerald Finzi and to his setting of William Wordsworth's Ode *Intimations of Immortality*. Like Bax, Finzi often felt possessed, creatively. He said in response to critics' attack on him for having the trepidation to set such hallowed verses, "I don't think everyone realises the difference between choosing a text and *being chosen by one*." Listen again to Finzi's sublime 'mysterious glimmering "immortality" horn calls at the beginning of the work,' to quote Stephen Banfield's note for the Hickox EMI recording of the work. Recall too, Finzi's inspired music that sets this relevant Wordsworth verse:

Our birth is but a sleep and a forgetting:
The Soul that rises with us, our Life's star,
Hath had elsewhere its setting,
And cometh from afar:
Not in entire forgetfulness,
And not in utter nakedness,
But trailing clouds of glory do we come
From God, who is our home:
Heaven lies about us in our infancy!
Shades of the prison-house begin to close
Upon the growing Boy

Finzi had an unhappy childhood haunted by the deaths of his father and all his brothers by the time he was seventeen. Yet it is significant that he chose to set verses about the intuitive freshness and vision of early childhood and pre-birth glory, not only in *Intimations of Immortality* but also in *Dies Natalis* (setting verses by Thomas Traherne, the 17th century metaphysical poet).

Of course metaphysical inspiration, and a widespread interest in mysticism and the occult, in the earlier years of the 20th century, was common for many British composers. One only has to think, for instance, of John Ireland, and his preoccupations with the writings of Arnold Machen, and, for example Ireland's *Legend for Piano and Orchestra* that was inspired by his vision of ghostly children dancing on the Sussex Downs.

Perhaps Bax, Finzi and Wordsworth were vouchsafed glimpses beyond the veil and their talent has been harnessed as a conduit to pass on to us glimpsed past lives, legends, and maybe something of what has been termed the collective subconscious. In their words, and in their music their visions have been immortalised?

Ian Lace

Addendum (May 2018)

I very recently [reviewed](#) John Bridcut's excellent film *The Passions of Vaughan Williams* now released on DVD. Ralph Vaughan Williams was a self-confessed agnostic yet he prepared much music for the church (e.g. his editing of *The English Hymnal* and, in later life, his refined and totally committed performances of the Bach St Matthew Passion at Dorking in which he encouraged audiences to join in singing the Chorales). RVW had always been inspired by John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* and this Fifth Symphony uses material from RVW's then unfinished operatic work, *The Pilgrim's Progress*.

In the context of this article I was very interested in the reaction of one of the contributors to Bridcut's RVW film, Jill Balcon. She is seen listening to RVW's Romanza movement of his Fifth Symphony. She is very clearly moved by its beauty - tears standing in her eyes. Her reaction is noteworthy, 'Where does it come from?' she asks in awe.

Yes, indeed, where does such exquisite inspiration come from?