

A Portal into the Past: Lionel Tertis's Recording of the Arnold Bax Viola Sonata

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Throughout the flowering of European musical Romanticism in the nineteenth century, England operated as a comparative backwater. Although the English were the most prodigious consumers of music, for a numbers of reasons—well rehearsed in the secondary literature—very few composers of stature emerged. However, the years from around 1880, and continuing through the turn of the twentieth century, saw a surge in English musical activity, both in quantity and quality. A new generation of composers and performers strove to establish a native practice to rival the more fashionable Continental music scene. Arguably, England was experiencing a cultural revival with an increase in activity in music education, academic research, as well as performance and composition by English musicians. Historians commonly refer to this movement as the English Musical Renaissance.¹

This fertile environment allowed leading violist Lionel Tertis (1876–1975) to bring the "Cinderella" of the orchestra out from the shadows. Through his performance, teaching, and composing, Tertis was a powerful advocate and urged many composers such as York Bowen, Rebecca Clarke, Eric Coates, Harry Danks, Benjamin Dale, Watson Forbes, Max Gilbert, and Bernard Shore to write for his beloved instrument. He thus became largely responsible for a massive influx of virtuosic works into the viola catalogue.² Tertis developed strong relationships with these composers, and contributed greatly to pushing the boundaries of the instrument and its music. One person strongly influenced by Tertis's enthusiasm was the English-born composer and poet Sir Arnold Bax (1883–1953).³

As a young student, Bax met Tertis at the Royal Academy of Music in 1901. Tertis had recently been appointed Professor of Viola, and Bax found himself surrounded by a circle of promising young pianist/composers studying under the keen Wagnerian Frederick Corder (1852–1932).⁴

¹ See, for example, Thomas James Tatton, "English Viola Music, 1890–1937" (DMA diss., University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 1976); Meirion Hughes, *The English Musical Renaissance and the Press, 1850-1914 : Watchmen of Music* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2002); Meirion Hughes and R. A. Stradling, *The English Musical Renaissance, 1840-1940: Constructing a National Music*, 2nd ed. (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2001).

² Lionel Tertis, *My Viola and I : A Complete Autobiography* (London: Kahn & Averill, 1991); Maurice W. Riley, *History of the Viola* (Ypsilanti: Eastern Michigan University Press, 1980).

³ Lewis Foreman, *Bax : A Composer and His Times* (London: Scolar, 1983), 28.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 28.

Over the years, Bax and Tertis collaborated extensively and Bax was to write four works for the virtuoso violist throughout his career.⁵ The most significant of these was his Sonata for Viola and Piano, a work that constitutes the focus of this paper. Like the Viola Concerto (later re-named *Phantasy for Viola and Orchestra*), the Sonata was dedicated to Tertis. This three-movement work was completed in 1922 and premièred at the Aeolian Hall in London on 17 November that year, performed by Tertis with Bax at the piano.⁶

Bax is often described as having had a lifelong enthusiasm for Ireland, and spent as much time as he could exploring the country. It is said that the Viola Sonata may have been one of his last tributes to Ireland and its people, after being tormented by the loss of so many loved ones in the Easter Rising and the events of the First World War.⁷ Although the sonata does not sit in Bax's deemed "Celtic years," its Celtic influence (a feature so regularly associated with his early works)⁸ is still very much present, with its haunting autumnal melodies and quasi-modal harmonies.

In May 1929, through the encouragement of the English music critic and musicologist Ernest Newman, Tertis and Bax recorded the Viola Sonata for the Columbia Gramophone Company.⁹ This recording, which was not released until 1981, provides a portal into the past—offering a rare insight into the combined musical powers of two inspired performers.¹⁰ It also documents early twentieth-century performance practices, and as such is the primary focus of this paper, which provides an analysis of the playing styles embedded in the recording (as well as comparison with a more recent recording by Doris Lederer and Jane Coop).¹¹ The analysis will draw upon the earlier work of Brown¹², Cook¹³, Haynes¹⁴, Leech-Wilkinson,¹⁵ and Philip,¹⁶ and will focus upon four musical

⁵ Graham Parlett, *A Catalogue of the Works of Sir Arnold Bax* (London: Clarendon Press, 1999).

⁶ *Ibid.*, 161.

⁷ Lewis Foreman, compact disc liner notes for *Bax: Viola Sonata, Legend, Trio in One Movement, Concert Piece*, Julian Rolton (piano), Laurance Jackson (Violin), Martin Outram (Viola), recorded in Suffolk, February 20-22, 2005, Naxos 8.557784, 2006.

⁸ Mark Fitzgerald and John O'Flynn, *Music and Identity in Ireland and Beyond* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2014).

⁹ Lewis Foreman, *Bax: A Composer and His Times* (London: Scolar, 1983), 250.

¹⁰ *The Art of Lionel Tertis*, with Lionel Tertis (viola), Arnold Bax (piano), recorded in London, 1929, Heritage HTGCD261, 2014.

¹¹ *Music of Arnold Bax and York Bowen*, with Doris Lederer (viola) and Jane Coop (piano), Centura CRC2660, 2010, Arnold Bax Viola Sonata, tracks 5-7.

¹² Clive Brown, "Bowing Styles, Vibrato and Portamento in Nineteenth-Century Violin Playing," *Journal of the Royal Music Association* 112 (1988), 97-198.

¹³ Nicholas Cook, "Changing the Musical Object: Approaches the Performance Analysis" in Zdravko Blazekovic and Barbara Dobbs Mackenzie, *Music's Intellectual History: Founders, Followers and Fads* (New York, RILM, 2009).

¹⁴ Bruce Haynes, *The End of Early Music: A Period Performer's History of Music from the Twenty-First Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

elements: tempo, rubato, vibrato, and portamento. Differences between the two recordings will be highlighted through a series of spectrograms. Simply put, a spectrogram is a visual representation of the spectrum of frequencies, or pitch content (the vertical axis) as they vary over time (the horizontal axis). The discussion will focus primarily on aspects of string performance and technique.

Figure 1 is a spectrogram of a small part of the first movement of the sonata as performed by Tertis and Bax, beginning at the upbeat to bar 76 and running for eighteen seconds. Aligning the spectrogram visually with the recording reveals a number of interesting characteristics. The image shows separated instrumentation as the piano is represented primarily in the lower part of the frequency spectrogram—with straighter, clearer lines than the wavering frequencies seen in the viola. When looking at the viola line, we see that each note comprises a zig-zag-like element indicating a fluctuation of frequency on an individual note. The width and speed of this fluctuation allows us to analyze the nature of the vibrato employed. The spectrogram also provides a vivid visual depiction of portamento, with a large angled line indicating increases or decreases in the frequency of the glissando-like movement between two consecutive notes (see Figure 2).

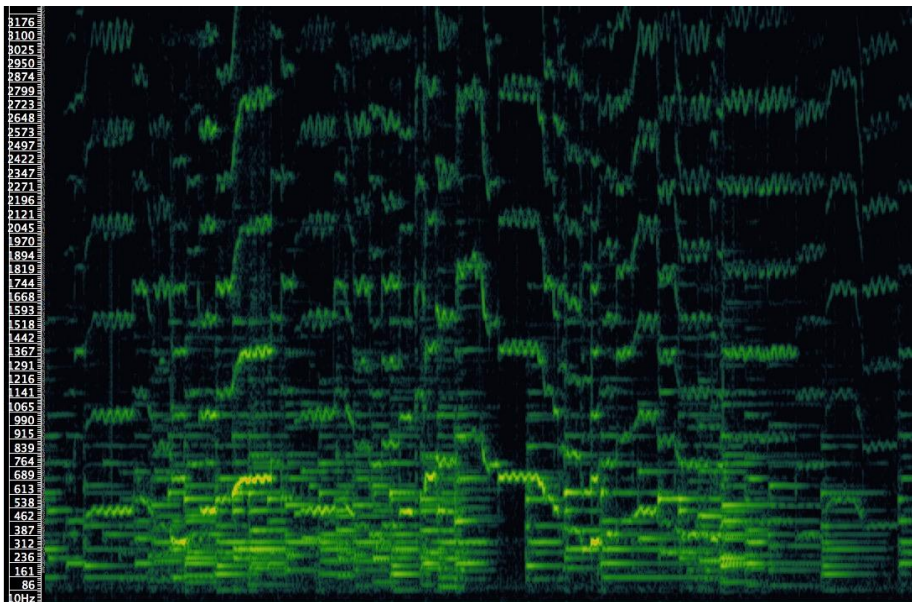


Figure 1. A spectrogram of the recording by Tertis and Bax

¹⁵ Daniel Leech-Wilkinson, "Recordings and Histories of Performance Style," in *The Cambridge Companion to Recorded Music* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

¹⁶ Robert Philip, *Early Recordings and Musical Style: Changing Tastes in Instrumental Performance, 1900-1950* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

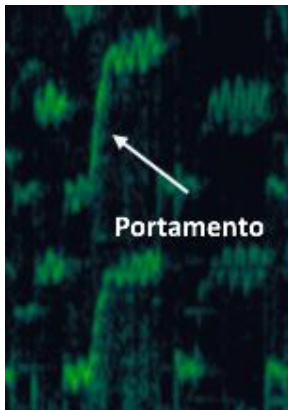


Figure 2. An example of the portamento as seen in the spectrogram of the recording by Tertis and Bax

Figure 3 is a spectrogram that begins at the upbeat to bar 76 of the first movement, now performed by Doris Lederer and Jane Coop. This excerpt also runs for exactly eighteen seconds, allowing us to compare the vibrato in both recordings. Surprisingly, the speed of vibrato does not seem to vary greatly between the two recordings. However, the images clearly indicate that Tertis’s vibrato is much wider than that of Lederer, as his [Tertis’s] oscillation covers a wider range of frequencies on the spectrogram. The spectrogram images also vividly illustrate that Lederer's use of portamento is far more subtle and less frequent than that employed by Tertis.

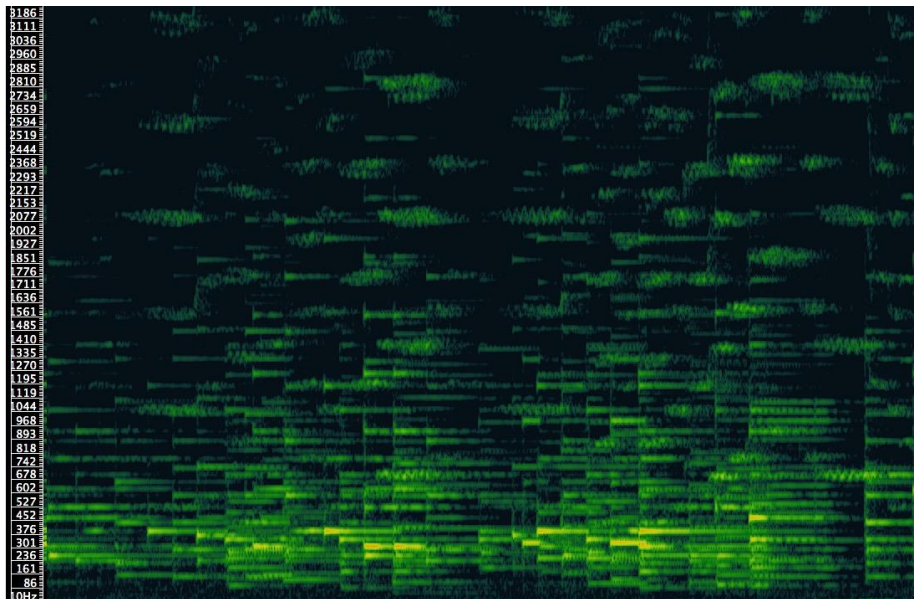


Figure 3. A spectrogram of the recording by Lederer and Coop

These spectrograms can also be used to illustrate the amount of rubato employed in the recordings (see Figures 4 and 5). To do this, a series of points is created on the

image, representing the down beat of each bar. The distances between these points is then translated into a vertical graph to more vividly illustrate the fluctuations in tempo (wider spaced lines means slower, narrow spacing means faster). The higher the line on the graph, the slower the tempo (thus, the vertical graph is an inversion of tempo). As Leech-Wilkinson suggests in a description of this methodology, it is as if you were cycling up and down hills: as the graph gets higher the tempo slows, and then it speeds up on the descent.¹⁷ Because the tempo varies between the two recordings, I have stretched out the image of Tertis’s recording to visually align the two graphs, thereby making for easier comparison.

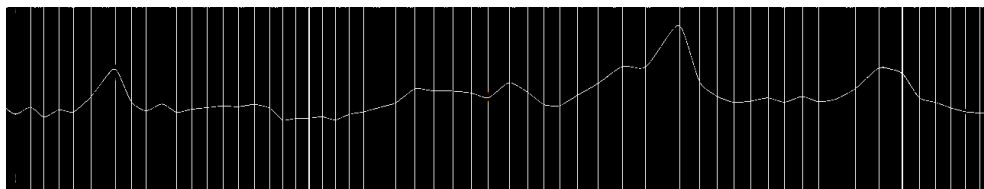


Figure 4. A graph of rubato used in the recording by Tertis and Bax

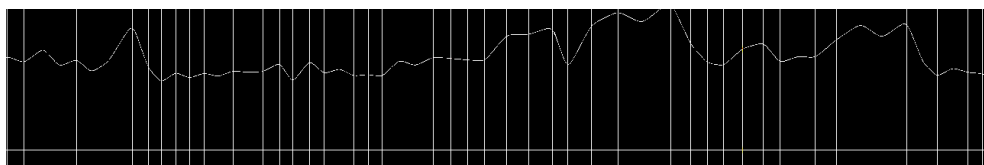


Figure 5. A graph of the rubato used in the recording by Lederer and Coop

It is clear that although the rubato in the two recordings occurs in roughly the same places throughout the movement, the 1929 recording sits at a more consistent tempo overall, with a more drastic tempo variation when rubato is put into place—particularly when slowing down at the ends of phrases. The next stage in this research would be to take the data obtained from the spectrogram and to re-analyze the score, identifying the potential musical (or interpretative) motivations underlying these tempo fluctuations. Due to limitations of space, this step is beyond the scope of this paper.

A further point of interest is how these two recordings differ in tempo. Lewis Forman, in his book *Bax: A Composer and his Time*,¹⁸ discusses the Bax recording and relates that the performers were somewhat dissatisfied with the final result—as both felt they performed the first and last movement of the work substantially faster than their normal practice. This is a common response when performers listen back to their own

¹⁷ Daniel Leech-Wilkinson, “Making Music with Alfred Cortot: Ontology, Data Analysis,” in *Gemessene Interpretation: Computergestützte Aufführungsanalyse im Kreuzverhör der Disziplinen* (Klang und Begriff; Vol.4, 2011), 142.

¹⁸ Foreman, *Bax : A Composer and His Times*, 28.

recordings, and it reminds us of the need to question the interpretative accuracy attributed to these early recordings. Surprisingly, after comparing a number of modern recordings of the first movement of the sonata, the Tertis and Bax recording sits almost a full 10bpm faster on average than other recordings. Comparisons of several significant recordings of movements one, two, and three are shown below in Table 1 and Table 2.¹⁹

Table 1. Comparisons of the tempos used across segments of movement 1, over five different recordings

	Tertis/Bax (1922)	Primrose/Cohen (1937)	Outram/Rolton (2006)	Lederer/Coop (2010)	Williams/Norris (2015)
Mvt 1: Recording Length	7:51	11:12	9:14	11:04	9:17
b. 1-10	60	42	55	52	55
b. 22-26	110	75	100	95	108
b. 38-50	100	80	95	72	82
b. 85-90	80	58	68	61	75
b. 136-138	100	88	80	75	100
b. 152-160	80	56	70	55	70
Average Tempo	88.33	66.5	78	68.33	81.6

Table 2. Comparisons of the overall tempos for movements two and three, over five different recordings

Mvt. 2: Recording Length	5:54	6:55	6:08	7:09	6:18
Mvt.3: Recording Length	6:35	8:55	7:19	8:29	6:55

For a string player, the other most noticeable difference between these two recordings (that of Tertis/Bax and Lederer/Coop) is the amount and type of portamento used by the violist. Portamento is intimately connected with the performer's chosen fingerings, and the shifting decisions made by the performer create a particular soundscape unique to that fingering.

Tertis's approach can be seen in his published editions of viola works by Benjamin Dale, a colleague of Bax at the Royal Academy of Music and a composer who was also strongly influenced by Tertis.²⁰ These editions contain Tertis's suggested fingerings and bowings; and they illustrate an approach that would be deemed unsafe or risky by today's standards. Typically, modern performers search for fingerings that are guaranteed to work 100% of the time, allowing for consistency and accuracy in intonation. Tertis's fingerings, however, appear to be chosen primarily for their musical effect rather than

¹⁹ To do this, I highlighted distinct bar numbers from the score that sat evenly (that is, had minimal tempo fluctuations). I then went through these bars in each recording and made an approximation of the tempo marking within the bars in question. An overall average for the movement was then calculated.

²⁰ Foreman, *Bax: A Composer and His Times*, 12.

their technical reliability. Even William Primrose (1904-1982), one of the most well-regarded violists of the twentieth century, often felt that Tertis's fingerings were quite "bizarre." After considering the more unusual shifts found within Tertis's editions, Primrose notes:

While I might not agree, in the final judgment I sensed that he had arrived at a system of fingering that evoked the sonorities and the rather exclusive beauties of the viola as distinct from the violin. . . .²¹

Tertis chose fingerings to produce the colour he wanted to express. The differing physical characteristics of each finger (and string) affords each note a unique quality of tone and vibrato. Tertis also chose fingerings in order to stay on one string for big leaps, thereby creating a consistency of sound. Choosing to use this type of shifting, and in particular staying on the same string for large intervals, encourages and creates more portamento as both the physical contact with the instrument and the musical line are sustained (and not broken by a string crossing). Another approach was to employ alternate shifts when the music is repeated, in order to create new colours and timbres. Tertis specifically relates this strategy in his 1938 treatise:

Whenever possible use a different string for the repetition of a phrase—for the sake of the altered colour and general vitality of effect which the variation in the method employed affords. If this is not possible and the repetition can only be played on the same string, use all your ingenuity to give the repetition as much alteration of fingerings as you can, for the important effect of variety.²²

An example of Tertis's approach to fingering can be seen in Figure 5—a short excerpt from the "Romance" from Benjamin Dale's Suite for Viola and Piano.²³ In the absence of a published record of Tertis's fingerings for the Bax Sonata, analysing the recording of the work reveals a similar approach. The same colour, texture, and lines are evident—findings which are also consistent with other research in this area, particularly that of Robert Philip on portamento in orchestral playing.²⁴

A close examination of the fingerings employed in Dale's "Romance" (Figure 5) demonstrates Tertis's use of different shifts, and different strings, over a repeated motive to create colour variation and arguably to facilitate the accelerando with increasing energy. The dotted quaver to semiquaver motive over the A-flat octave is repeated four times, each time using a different fingering. The first time Tertis leads from the "C" string

²¹ David Dalton, *Playing the Viola: Conversations with William Primrose* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 114.

²² Lionel Tertis, *Beauty of Tone in String Playing* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1938), 8.

²³ Benjamin Dale, *Suite for Viola and Pianoforte. Op. 2*, ed. Lionel Tertis (London: Novello and Co, 1914).

²⁴ Robert Philip, *Early Recordings and Musical Style*, 179-204.

taking the A-flat up on the G string before returning down to first position. The second time, he chooses not to shift at all, simply crossing the string in position. The third time, he again crosses to the D string but this time allows for a shift into third position, before returning to first position to take full advantage of portamento up to the final A-flat on the same string. Each repetition of the motive gives the listener a new perspective on how the figure could be played. The use of shifting not only creates colour variation across the motive, but also exploits portamento to increase tension throughout the passage (in synchronisation with the *accelerando*).



Figure 6. An example of Tertis's fingerings in the "Romance" from Dale's *Suite for Viola and Piano*

The information from Tertis's editions, recordings, and writings²⁵ can be correlated, affording us a more complete picture of his performance practice. A precise replication of Bax and Tertis's interpretative decisions is almost feasible. We can adjust our tempo and rubato to what has been demonstrated on record, and copy the fingerings and bowings provided by Tertis (where applicable), facilitating the replication of similar tone colours. We could also strive to replicate the specific type of piano, and obtain a copy of the unusually large viola used by Tertis (which may be beyond the physical capabilities of many players). But, how far should we take this? What if we don't necessarily like what we hear?

In most historic music, we can never really know what original performances sounded like. Here, we are provided with a rare first-hand glimpse. Thus, these recordings can potentially challenge the epistemological foundations of our (sometimes unquestioned) assumptions with regard to authenticity and the 'composer's intentions.' Is this original performance imbued with a special prescriptive authority? Or are some aspects of the recording (and edition) ones that could be considered idiosyncratic to the performers, and not necessarily to be taken as authoritative models to follow? The authority of the composer over their work is often an unquestioned assumption in classical music, which stands in contradistinction to much postmodern scholarship. For Roland Barthes, for instance, writing on literature, once an author's thoughts are written on the page and published, the author's opinions and interpretations are considered

²⁵ In Tertis, *The Beauty of Tone in String Playing*, we learn how much Tertis valued perfect intonation, continuous vibrato, and legato (with the bow clinging to the string at all times).

"dead."²⁶ The unique element in music is that although the work is written down and conserved from the composer's hand, every time it is performed it is reinvented. Taruskin was one of the first to raise some of these questions, and to suggest alternate understandings of authenticity, such as the "authenticity of conviction."²⁷ A deeper investigation of this discussion is beyond the scope of this paper, but it is important (at the very least) to acknowledge the questions arising.

The Bax-Tertis recording offers us not only a unique glimpse into the performance practices of the early-twentieth century, but also access to something like an intimate conversation between two significant musical personalities. The extent to which this performance is representative of historical performance practices in the early twentieth century more generally requires further investigation. Nevertheless, the recorded performance of Bax and Tertis provides fascinating insights into the performance practices and interpretative strategies used in Bax's Sonata for Viola and Piano. The observations of the tempo settings of Tertis and Bax can open our ears to different possibilities. Likewise, the awareness of the portamento used by Tertis can free us from the constraints of the modern soundscape, encouraging us to explore less conventional fingerings in a search for colour variation. These insights potentially deepen our understanding of the musical language, allowing us to translate and interpret the score with greater acuity and confidence.

²⁶ Roland Barthes, "The Death of the Author," www.tbook.constantvzw.org/wp-content/death_authorbarthes.pdf.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 72.