THE BOURBAKI ENSEMBLE

music for string orchestra and harp

Dvořák Serenade for Strings
Debussy Danses sacrée et profane
Sculthorpe Sonata for Strings, "Jabiru Dreaming"
Mahler Adagietto, from Symphony No.5

David Angell, conductor
Verna Lee, harp

2.30 pm, Sunday 25 February 2001

St. Stephen's Church, Newtown

Welcome to the inaugural performance of the Bourbaki Ensemble!

Charles Denis Sauter Bourbaki was a figure of some importance in the Franco–Prussian War. In 1862 he was offered, but declined, the throne of Greece. Owing to the swings and roundabouts of French military politics he was at various times forced to flee his homeland, and was at one time interned in Switzerland; but while in Paris he was a noted and enthusiastic patron of the arts, with a particular interest in music. His statue is still to be seen in the French city of Nancy. General Bourbaki's descendant Nicolas Bourbaki achieved fame as professor of mathematics at the Royal Poldavian Academy. We have adopted the name Bourbaki as one well suited to a group of people united more or less anonymously in a common purpose.

The Bourbaki Ensemble would like to thank the rector and congregation of St. Stephen's for making us so welcome in the church and allowing us to present the first in their 2001 series of musical Sunday afternoons. Special thanks to Fran Morris for organising everything! Information on future concerts may be found at `members.optushome.com.au/stephennewtown` or by calling 9557 2043.

THE BOURBAKI ENSEMBLE

Violins Warwick Pulley, Kirrillie Abbott–Raymonde, Valerie Gutenev, Zillah Hawley, Sheau–Fang Low, Heather Orr, Rebecca Pulley, Gary Tiu.

Violas Wendy Reid, Janice Buttle, Dana Lappan, Gareth Young.

Violoncellos John Napier, Margaret Lazanas, Ian Macourt.

Bass Paul Laszlo.

Harp Verna Lee.

PROGRAMME

Peter Sculthorpe Sonata for Strings, “Jabiru Dreaming”

I Deciso

II Liberamente – Estatico

Claude Debussy Danses sacrée et profane, for harp & strings

I Danse sacrée

II Danse profane

Soloist: Verna Lee, harp

INTERVAL
20 minutes

Gustav Mahler Adagietto, from Symphony No. 5

Antonín Dvořák Serenade for Strings in E major, Opus 22

I Moderato

II Tempo di Valse

III Scherzo: vivace

IV Larghetto

V Finale: allegro vivace

Peter Sculthorpe, born in Launceston in 1929, is perhaps Australia's best known composer, both at home and internationally. He has written in many genres, but possibly his most widely recognised compositions are his orchestral and chamber works. Sculthorpe's three sonatas for strings reflect his interest in both these areas, being orchestral versions of the tenth, ninth and eleventh string quartets. The score of the third sonata, subtitled *Jabiru Dreaming*, is prefaced by the following note from the composer.

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The listener will have no difficulty in imagining tribal rhythms in the theme which begins in the violas and supplies a running background throughout most of the first movement. The first entry of the violins introduces a repetitive motive of three pitches, which may suggest birds circling above the plains of Kakadu; in a later section the violins and celli play *col legno* (tapping the strings with the wood of the bow), evoking the clapsticks which are such a well–known element of Aboriginal music. Each of the two movements concludes with a marvellous effect in which a multitude of independent parts creates the impression of an immense flock of birds surrounding the listener.

The *Danses sacrée et profane* were composed by **Claude Debussy** (1862–1918) at the request of the firm of Pleyel, manufacturers of musical instruments. In 1894 Gustave Lyon had invented a new mechanism for the harp, which provided the full chromatic scale by the use of twelve strings to the octave, crossing each other at an angle so that the diatonic and chromatic notes were clearly distinguished, yet both accessible to the player's hands. A rough analogy is the arrangement in which a piano has the black keys raised above the white. The previous design of the harp had had only seven strings to the octave, with a series of pedals supplied to provide chromatic notes.

Some time later, a class in the new instrument was established at the Brussels Conservatoire. As a test piece, and also, probably, to promote the use of this instrument, Pleyel and the Conservatoire commissioned a work from Debussy. The *Danses* were first performed in 1904. As a publicity exercise for the chromatic harp they seem to have been a complete failure; performers and composers continued to employ the standard harp with the pedal mechanism (watch our soloist's feet today!) However they were much more successful from the artistic point of view, and the *Danses sacrée et profane* have become an important part of the harp repertoire.

The *Danse sacrée* is a piece of restrained and gentle harmonies, its "sacred" character suggested by the unison line of the opening and the parallel chords first heard at the entry of the harp. A middle section features more complex harmonies, with brief solos from violin and viola; the opening harp theme returns, and subsides onto a bass line picked out by the soloist's left hand. This leads without a break into the *Danse profane*.

The "profanity" of the second dance is not a matter of vulgarity (can anyone imagine Debussy writing vulgar music?) but simply proclaims it, in contrast to the first, as "secular" or "worldly". It begins, in fact, as a *valse lente*: there is a suggestion of Erik Satie's *Gymnopédies* for piano, which Debussy had orchestrated in 1896. In a middle section the tempo drops by half, the strings fall silent, and the harpist provides her own accompaniment with six–against–four, five–against–three and even more complex rhythmic patterns. The valse returns, and builds up to a glowing climax of string chords and harp glissandi.

The reputation of **Gustav Mahler** (1860–1911) as the composer of colossal and angst–ridden symphonies does justice (if at all) to only one side of his genius. Mahler was also an important composer of songs with piano accompaniment; even when his symphonies employ huge forces, they are rarely used all together, and many passages display an intimate scoring using only a few instruments. The fifth symphony, completed in 1902, is a good example. Overall, the orchestra comprises triple woodwind, six horns, four trumpets, heavy brass, half a dozen percussion players, harp and strings; but there are numerous passages for solo instruments (trumpet, horn, woodwind) with little or no accompaniment.

And there is the *Adagietto*. In this, the fourth of five movements, Mahler abandons his wind sections and writes for strings and harp alone. Analysis of the movement is superfluous: a series of melodies, now calm, now impassioned, flows through the string parts and is supported by a gentle background of broken chords in the harp. The feeling behind the movement has often been ascribed to Mahler's joy at his marriage to Alma Maria

Schindler, which took place at about the time of its composition.

In 1911 the German author Thomas Mann, in Venice, read Mahler's obituary. Inspired by the city, by its atmosphere of decay, and possibly by the character of the composer, he wrote his short novel *Death in Venice*, centred on the figure of an aging writer. Luchino Visconti's 1971 film of the novel opens with the *Adagietto* accompanying scenes of a misty Venetian dawn; throughout the film, the piece supplies an evocative background to Mann's tale of the ill–fated Gustav von Aschenbach.

The Serenade of **Antonín Dvořák** (1841–1904), one of the best loved pieces in the string orchestra repertoire, is a work of few shadows. An introductory movement in the "bright" key of E major begins with brief thematic fragments which gradually coalesce into more sustained melody, the whole bound together by an almost constant pulsation in the violas; a change of key brings a more dance–like section suggesting the folk music of Dvořák's native Bohemia. The second movement, *tempo di valse*, occasionally adopts the dotted rhythms of the mazurka. There follows a scherzo, in duple time rather than the customary triple, which features a good deal of imitation between the parts. Celli are echoed by first violins, violins by violas, second violins by firsts, and so on through a large part of the scherzo. A slow movement, *larghetto*, introduces a relaxed and somewhat nostalgic mood, full of charm, if lacking the depth of feeling to be found in the slow movements of Dvořák's later symphonies. The finale opens with more imitative writing; twice the piece stops and waits, as it were, for one half of the orchestra to catch up with the other. The main theme from the fourth movement and the close of the first are recapitulated before the Serenade ends with a return to the music of the finale.

David Angell, conductor

David has been playing viola for many years with some of the best known non–professional orchestras in Australia, including the Australian Youth Orchestra, Melbourne Youth Orchestra, and community orchestras in and around Sydney. He is currently a member of the Ku–Ring–Gai Philharmonic Orchestra and the Willoughby Symphony Orchestra and is also active in chamber music, forming together with Warwick Pulley, Rebecca Pulley and Ian Macourt the Kurraba String Quartet.

He took up conducting in 1998 with a highly successful season of *West Side Story* for Holroyd Musical and Dramatic Society, and returned to Holroyd last year to conduct *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolour Dreamcoat*. In 1999 David acted as guest conductor for a concert with the North Sydney Symphony Orchestra. David is studying conducting with Richard Gill.

Verna Lee, harp

Verna is a leading harpist who has attracted critical acclaim since her solo career started at the age of 15. She has been a guest soloist with the Australian Youth Orchestra at the Adelaide Arts Festival, and with numerous Sydney orchestras. She has performed with many leading orchestras, such as the Sydney Symphony, the Australian Philharmonic and the Singapore Symphony, and has toured Australia, Japan, New Zealand and Singapore.

Verna's recordings for film and television include a scene for the movie *The Matrix*, and the premiere recording of her own transcription of the guitar concerto by Colin Brumby. She has studied with world–renowned harpists in Sydney, Germany and the United States, her teachers including June Loney and Alice Giles.