THE BOURBAKI ENSEMBLE

music for string orchestra

Shostakovich Chamber Symphony
Barber Adagio for Strings
Sutherland Concerto for Strings
Grieg Two Elegiac Melodies
Holst St. Paul's Suite

David Angell, conductor

2.30 pm, Sunday 26 August 2001

St. Stephen's Church, Newtown

The Bourbaki Ensemble extends a warm welcome to all who attended our inaugural concert in February, as well as to those who are hearing us for the first time.

For our second performance, we are delighted to present a programme of (mostly) twentieth century works for string orchestra. We hope that you will be thrilled, as we are, by the intensity of the Shostakovich *Chamber Symphony* with which the concert will conclude, and moved by the understated beauty of Samuel Barber's *Adagio for strings*. Both of these pieces originated as string quartets and have been reworked for orchestra.

We continue our commitment to Australian music with a performance of the *Concerto for Strings* by Margaret Sutherland. In the first half of the twentieth century, Australian composition was dominated by English and European models; Sutherland is one of the composers of that time whose music demonstrates an awareness of different possibilities. Our programme is completed by two works in which Holst and Grieg draw upon their respective national artistic resources.

Once again the Bourbaki Ensemble would like to thank all associated with St. Stephen's for making the church available for rehearsals and performance, and for their invaluable assistance in organising the concert. For details of future concerts at St. Stephen's Church, go to `www.ststephensnewtown.org` or call 9557 2043.

If you missed the guided tour of St. Stephen's cemetery after our last concert, try to stay around for it this time! You'll never get a better opportunity to catch up on two centuries of gossip, and to hear about some of the odd events, the famous and infamous characters in the history of Sydney. Even the grass in the churchyard is something special...

PROGRAMME

Gustav Holst St. Paul's Suite

I Jig

II Ostinato

III Intermezzo

IV Finale: the Dargason

Samuel Barber Adagio for Strings, Op. 11

Margaret Sutherland Concerto for Strings

I Allegro con brio

II Tempo di menuetto

III Sempre vivace ma pomposo

INTERVAL
20 minutes

Edvard Grieg Two Elegiac Melodies, Op. 34

I Hjertesår (*Heart's Wounds*)

II Våren (*Spring*)

Dmitri Shostakovich Chamber Symphony, Op. 110a

Largo—Allegro molto—Allegretto—Largo—Largo

Gustav Holst (1874–1934) is a composer who, oddly, is best known for a work which is quite untypical of his compositional output. While *The Planets* is scored for a very large orchestra, Holst was much more at home writing for chamber forces, small orchestra or unaccompanied voices. He possessed the none too common talent of writing attractive and satisfying music for non–professional musicians. The work with which we open today's concert was written in 1913 for the orchestra of St. Paul's Girls' School, Hammersmith, where Holst had been director of music since 1905.

The Suite begins with a Jig, a sturdy dance using the characteristic rhythms and scales of English folk music; the movement is notable for a central section in which the harmony makes a clearly audible jump into a new area every few bars. The second movement is entitled *Ostinato*. The word is Italian for "obstinate", and in musical terminology denotes a theme which is repeated over and over, with the musical texture being elaborated in other parts. In this movement Holst actually employs two ostinati. The more prominent is heard at the outset in the second violins and maintained there throughout the entire piece, except for a few short bars in which it is taken over by the firsts while the composer rewards the seconds for their patience with a gracefully springing melody. The second ostinato occurs, as is more usual, in the lower instruments; comprising a descending scale of four notes, it is initially presented by the pizzicato cellos and bass at their first entry.

There follows an *Intermezzo*. The rather unEnglish character of the solo violin theme is explained by its origin in Holst's 1910 *Beni Mora* Suite, inspired by a visit to Algeria. In a faster section is heard a hint of Holst's fondness for five–beat rhythms. The finale returns to the English folk style and uses "The Dargason", a tune which actually sounds rather more like a jig than the first movement does. In passages of adroit counterpoint, the principal theme is combined with another melody in a different tempo. This second theme is too well known to need identification; suffice it to say that in a survey reported by the BBC in 1998, it topped the list of “the most loathsome electronic jingles” to hear when your phone call is put on hold.

The string quartet is not a medium which has been greatly favoured by American composers; nevertheless, important quartets have been written by Charles Ives, Elliott Carter, George Crumb and **Samuel Barber** (1910–1981). The *Adagio for Strings* is the composer’s own reworking for orchestra of the second movement of his only quartet, written in 1936. The arrangement was suggested by the great conductor Arturo Toscanini, who first performed the work with the NBC Symphony Orchestra in 1938.

As the title implies, the work is slow in tempo from beginning to end. It has often been seen as an expression of profound grief, and was performed in America after the assassination of John F. Kennedy. A different interpretation, however, approaches the work simply as music of unaffected, unselfconscious beauty. A theme is made up of one long note in the violins and a gradually rising passage; it is allowed to expand, passes to other sections of the orchestra, and occasionally is combined in gentle counterpoint with variants of the same material, though more commonly it relies for support on richly scored, slowly changing harmonies. The movement eventually reaches a climax of great intensity, with violins, violas and cellos playing in their highest registers; after a silence, the mood relaxes once more, and the work ends quietly.

Australian composers in the early twentieth century were generally content to write music in a fairly traditional British or European style. This began to change in about 1960 when composers such as Peter Sculthorpe and Richard Meale began to incorporate in their music Asian and *avant–garde* European influences. **Margaret Sutherland** (1897–1984) can be seen as something of a transitional figure in this development. In the *Concerto for Strings* she adopts a typically (though not exclusively) English ensemble, while the marking *Tempo di menuetto* on the second movement suggests a kinship with the neoclassic movement which had a European vogue in the 1920s. Indeed, the *Concerto* has been interpreted in performance and on record as a rather straightforwardly neoclassical piece. However, the very outset of the work, its octave leap followed by a passionate descending figure and supported by syncopated fluctuating harmonies, immediately stamps the music with a romantic rather than a classical character; nothing that follows contradicts this. The central section of the *Tempo di menuetto* displays perhaps the most unclassical music in the entire work, as a forlorn violin theme floats uneasily above a pulsating texture of disturbingly dissonant harmonies.

The finale also shows evidence of influences other than traditional ones. The constraints of tonality are rather severely tested in this movement; piquant "almost tonal" harmonies and alternations of major thirds and minor occasionally bring to mind the music of Béla Bartók. An important feature of the finale, as of the first two movements, is its lengthy melodic lines, generally disguised by being split up and passed around the various sections of the orchestra.

The *Concerto for Strings* was the occasion of a somewhat scandalous and doubtless discouraging episode in the composer's life. In about 1950 the score was sent to a London publisher under the name "M. Sutherland". The publisher initially expressed interest in the work, but rejected it on learning that the composer was a woman. Sutherland had to face many other difficulties in her career as a composer – though perhaps few as frustrating as this one – but nevertheless continued to produce music until the age of about 70. She spent most of her life in Melbourne, and was one of the original proponents of what became the Victorian Arts Centre; a memorial concert of her music was staged there after her death in 1984.

Norway's most famous composer is **Edvard Grieg** (1843–1907). He is best known for his songs with piano accompaniment – he wrote over a hundred – and for compositions for small orchestra, such as the incidental music for *Peer Gynt*. Grieg combined these two genres in his *Two Elegiac Melodies*, transcriptions for strings of two songs written to texts by the Norwegian poet Åsmund Vinje (1818–1870). These songs display two different responses to the arrival of spring after the long northern winter: in *Heart's Wounds* the spring helps to assuage the poet's emotional distress, while in *Spring* he is saddened by the realisation that he may not see this season again.

Vinje's love of the Norwegian countryside was shared by Grieg, and these two short pieces appear to have been among his favourite works: he conducted them frequently both in Norway and overseas. The writing for strings is idiomatic and a pleasure to play. The various sections of the orchestra are subdivided further, so that the piece is written often in nine parts, sometimes even more. Impetuous crescendi are characteristic of the *Two Elegiac Melodies*, though each of them ends quietly.

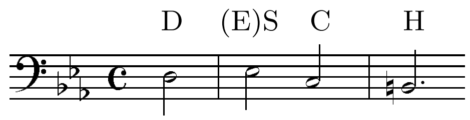
The music of **Dmitri Shostakovich** (1906–1975) underwent a considerable reappraisal in the late 1970s and the 1980s with the publication in English translation of the composer's memoirs, *Testimony*. The memoirs revealed – or, to speak more cautiously, purported to reveal – Shostakovich not as a faithful supporter of the Communist Party but as a secret dissident, a composer whose works were intended as a repudiation of the Soviet state and its leaders, a public speaker only by compulsion, and one whose every word might contain hidden meanings. No surprise, then, that the Soviet government and its supporters denounced as a fabrication both the memoirs themselves and the story that they had been dictated to musicologist Solomon Volkov and smuggled to the West, while those of differing political persuasions seized upon the idea that one of the century's greatest composers (little dispute on either side about this) was not the orthodox Communist he had long been supposed to be.

Twenty years on, it appears that *Testimony* may be taken as a reasonably fair account of Shostakovich's views, though it is less certain that it is a report of actual conversations with the composer. Shostakovich's recent biographer Ian McDonald expresses the matter concisely: "*Testimony* is a realistic picture of Dmitri Shostakovich. It just isn't a *genuine* one." The composer's son Maxim said in 1986 that "sometimes... there is too much rumour, [but] the basis of the book is correct."

At various times throughout Shostakovich's life he fell into conflict with the authorities; while some of these occasions, such as the condemnation in 1936 of two major works, may have come as a shock to the composer, it is clear that others did not. In the 1950s, for example, Shostakovich composed many works related to Jewish concerns and using motifs from Jewish folk music and poetry: at a time of severe Soviet antisemitism, he cannot have expected these compositions to meet with official approval.

It is not surprising, then, that in certain cases Shostakovich should have erected a smokescreen of ostensible ideological conformity in order to protect his music (and himself) from state retribution. The String Quartet No. 8 was composed in 1960, following a visit to Dresden, then still in ruins after the Second World War, and is dedicated "to the victims of fascism and war". But the quartet has constant recourse to motives from Shostakovich's earlier music, strongly suggesting that in fact the quartet is an autobiographical work, concerned with the victims, among them the composer himself, of stalinism rather than of fascism. It is this quartet which was reworked for string orchestra by Rudolf Barshai, with the composer's approval, to create the *Chamber Symphony* which we perform today.

Most prominent of all the autobiographical elements in the symphony/quartet is Shostakovich's own "musical signature". It is heard at the very beginning, in the first four notes played by the cellos and bass, and recurs frequently, one could even say obsessively, throughout the work. The notes D–E flat–C–B are referred to in German nomenclature as D–Es–C–H; reading this phonetically as D–SCH reveals the composer's initials.



The five movements of the *Chamber Symphony* are played continuously, except for a brief silence between the second and third. An opening in which D–SCH is combined with a quotation from Shostakovich's Symphony No. 1 – written while still a student, and his first major success – is followed by a mournful solo violin recitative. There follows a passage in which luminous major thirds in the first violins seem to offer a hope which is constantly denied by flattened inflections in the seconds. A crescendo on a long note leads into the second movement.

The *Allegro molto* plunges the listener into the whirlwind of totalitarian Russia. In structure the movement is brutally simple: a rhythmic theme is hammered out, initially in the violins, against irregular crashing chords in the other parts. Again D–SCH is prominent. A frenetic, almost hysterical dance tune comes from Jewish folk music via Shostakovich's second Piano Trio. The music careers along without respite until it crashes into silence, whereupon a new version of D–SCH begins the third movement. Here the motif turns into a pathetic, broken–spirited waltz tune, which later on becomes a kind of march, and there is a quotation from Shostakovich's Cello Concerto No. 1. After an eerie passage in which two solo violins accompany a solo cello, the waltz returns and winds down, exhausted, onto a sustained note which links the third movement with the fourth.

The *Largo* is the emotional centre of the *Chamber Symphony*. It begins with three hammered chords in which it is easy to imagine the secret police pounding on the door. A grim theme for almost the full orchestra suggests a last show of defiance in the face of the terror. The triple chords return, and after a weary D–SCH the violins begin a prison song from Tsarist Russia. In *Testimony* Shostakovich is quite clear about the intent of this passage. "The eighth quartet is autobiographical, and quotes a song known to all Russians: 'Broken by the hardships of captivity'." The song leads into a hushed murmuring, from which a solo cello in its highest register emerges to play an aria from *The Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk*, the opera which in 1936 had been so much vilified in *Pravda* that Shostakovich expected his arrest at any moment. In the opera, Katerina sings of her love for Sergei, unaware that he has already betrayed her. The cello solo trails away; the triple blows return with even greater violence than before; a solo violin, faltering, can barely begin "Broken by the hardships of captivity"; D–SCH reappears, utterly exhausted. It is difficult to understand how this music can ever have been seen as other than autobiographical.

The slow fifth movement is based mainly on the same thematic material as the first, and eventually dies away into emptiness. This music could well have been written to illustrate the final words of *Testimony*, in which Shostakovich broods over "the bitterness that has turned my life grey".

David Angell 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, the East–West Philharmonic 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. As a violist and chorister David has performed for many well–known conductors including Sir Charles Mackerras, Stuart Challender and Richard Bonynge.

David 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, as guest conductor with the North Sydney Symphony Orchestra, he gave a rare amateur performance of Brahms' *Serenade No. 1*.

In February 2001 David assembled the Bourbaki Ensemble and conducted its inaugural performance, featuring works by Sculthorpe, Debussy, Mahler and Dvořák. He is delighted that the ensemble has made it to a second performance, and is looking forward to many more! David is currently studying conducting with Richard Gill.

The Bourbaki Ensemble is a combination of professional string players and amateurs from some of Sydney's leading community orchestras. The principal aim of the ensemble is to perform music from the string orchestra repertoire, which, though it contains many well–loved compositions, is often neglected in favour of works for full orchestra. We also hope to include music by Australian composers in our programmes.

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

Violins Warwick Pulley, Margaret Howard, Kirrillie Abbott–Raymonde, Valerie Gutenev, Catherine Howard, Sheau–Fang Low, Gary Tiu, Patrick Wong.

Violas Gareth Young, Janice Buttle, Dana Lappan, Philip Silver.

Violoncellos John Napier, Guy Curd, Margaret Lazanas.

Bass Paul Laszlo.