THE BOURBAKI ENSEMBLE

requiems for strings

Shostakovich Requiem for Strings
Christine McCombe Of Distant Sadness
Howells Concerto for String Orchestra

David Angell, conductor

2.30 p.m., Sunday 14 October 2007
St. Stephen's Church, Newtown

Welcome to the final Bourbaki Ensemble concert for 2007. The title of our programme, "requiems for strings", is taken from that given by Misha Rachlevsky to his arrangement for string orchestra of the fifteenth string quartet by Dmitri Shostakovich. Alongside Shostakovich's lament for a life overshadowed by the oppressive Soviet regime and, more lately, by the consciousness of approaching death, we present the *Concerto for String Orchestra* by English composer Herbert Howells. If Shostakovich's work encapsulates in some way the desolation of a whole society, Howells' music expresses a much more direct and personal grief. The second movement of the *Concerto* is a double memorial: to the composer's son Michael, who died from spinal meningitis in 1935 at the age of nine, and to Sir Edward Elgar, who had passed away a year earlier. The work, however, has also the aim of expressing Howells' dedication to the English tradition of string music: its vigorous, rhythmic and passionate outer movements owe much to the example of Elgar's *Introduction and Allegro*. The circumstances underlying Melbourne composer Christine McCombe's *Of Distant Sadness* are not particularised, but it is impossible not to hear the depth of feeling expressed in its dark textures.

If you are new to Bourbaki Ensemble concerts, we hope you will enjoy our explorations of repertoire which is not commonly performed by other ensembles! The easiest way to keep in touch is to join our mailing list by leaving your email address on one of the forms available at the door, or by contacting David Angell at `ddangell@hotmail.com`. We aim to give three concerts next year, and will send out details as soon as they are available. Information about all our concerts, past and future, can always be found at `users.tpg.com.au/ddangell`.

Sincere thanks to all our supporters, old and new, for attending this concert, and we hope to see you again in 2008.

PROGRAMME

Dmitri Shostakovich Requiem for strings, Op. 144a

I Elegy
II Serenade
III Intermezzo
IV Nocturne
V Funeral March
VI Epilogue

INTERVAL
20 minutes

Christine McCombe Of Distant Sadness

Herbert Howells Concerto for String Orchestra

I Allegro, assai vivace
II Quasi lento: teneramente
III Allegro vivo: ritmico e giocoso

Alastair Duff–Forbes, violin
Kathryn Crossing, violin
Kathryn Ramsay, viola
Steve Meyer, cello

It is now almost three decades since *Testimony*, the alleged memoirs of **Dmitri Dmitrievich Shostakovich** (1906–1975), initiated stormy debate about the meaning and purpose of his music. Some commentators, unwilling to abandon the accepted view of Shostakovich as a musical spokesman for the Soviet state, a composer whose works were intended as a glorification of socialist ideals, proclaimed *Testimony* a forgery and its compiler, Solomon Volkov, a fraud. Others seized on the idea that Shostakovich's music was, on the contrary, a prominent example of the dissimulation which artists in various fields have often found necessary for survival under a totalitarian regime.

The music of Shostakovich's last decade has excited comparatively little controversy, its aesthetic scarcely admitting differing points of view. The clamour and bombast (whether real or assumed) of earlier works is frequently replaced by a melancholy sometimes bordering on the neurotic. Key compositions from this period are the song cycle to words of Aleksandr Blok and the fourteenth symphony, a setting for voices, strings and percussion of texts dealing with death and imprisonment. The mood of these late works is generally attributed to Shostakovich's consciousness of approaching death, and specifically to the heart attack he suffered in 1966, though it can be traced back to the early 1960s with his orchestration of Mussorgsky's *Songs and Dances of Death* and the score for Kozintsev's film of *Hamlet*, and even perhaps as far as 1938 when the titanic finale of the fifth symphony was closely followed by Shostakovich's first essay in the more intimate medium of the string quartet.

This work inaugurates one of the great series of twentieth–century string quartets, one which stands beside those of Belá Bartók and Elliott Carter; it's probably not all that parochial to include Peter Sculthorpe in this list too. From a genial first quartet in which, surprisingly, the influence of Haydn can occasionally be detected, the series proceeds through the intense third, officially denounced for its pessimism, and the eighth, an intensely autobiographical work ostensibly dedicated "to the victims of fascism and war", but believed by many to be in fact a memorial to the victims of Stalinism. (An orchestral version of this quartet was performed by the Bourbaki Ensemble in 2001.) From the thirteenth to the fifteenth and last, the mood of Shostakovich's quartets becomes ever more mysterious, remote and enigmatic. The fifteenth, written the year before the composer's death, was later transcribed for string orchestra by Misha Rachlevsky under the title *Requiem for Strings*.

Consisting of six linked slow movements, each in the desolate key of E♭ minor, the *Requiem* epitomises the atmosphere of Shostakovich's late compositions. The opening *Elegy* should, according to the composer, be played "so that flies drop dead in mid–air, and the audience starts leaving the hall from sheer boredom". But it is not always possible, let alone desirable, to take Shostakovich's pronouncements about his own music at face value. In fact, although the movement is unremittingly melancholy and lacking in any grand gestures, its continuous *cantabile* lines gradually become hypnotic. After about three minutes the movement eases into C major and becomes simple and childlike, an odd and much commented upon characteristic of Shostakovich's last years. The music returns to E♭ minor and continues on its unspectacular way until a sustained high note in the first violins leads directly into the second movement.

Shostakovich surely did not intend the title of the *Serenade* to be taken seriously. It begins with what has been described as a "shriek": violins and violas, overlapping each other, enunciate a series of violent and dissonant *crescendi*. These are succeeded by jangling *pizzicati* and a deep and vibrant but rhythmically irregular passage for cellos and basses, before the movement settles down to a rather morose waltz tune. The ensuing *Intermezzo* (once again, not remotely like a traditional “intermezzo”) features a solo violin in a manic scramble interrupted by outbursts from the violins and violas.

With the *Nocturne* a more orthodox approach supervenes: an elegiac viola solo (later given to all the violas) is accompanied by cascades of quavers evoking a moonlit night. A series of chords in the middle of the movement is reminiscent of Mussorgsky, whom Shostakovich revered above any other composer. The nocturne theme recurs in the lowest register of cellos and basses before a dotted rhythm, *pizzicato*, prefigures the *Funeral March*. As the march itself begins, the rhythm is announced in a forceful but expressive fashion by the full orchestra; solos and *tutti* passages alternate until the movement falls into silence.

The concluding *Epilogue* recapitulates many of the themes and effects of earlier movements, notably the solo violin’s “manic scramble”, now taken over by all the violins, and later by the cellos; and the rhythm of the *Funeral March*. The “childlike” episode of the *Elegy* is also to be heard (though in somewhat distorted form), as is the *Nocturne* theme. A recurrent trembling figure has been described by Ian MacDonald in *The New Shostakovich* as “[seeming] to embody life at a flickering minimum... heart–beat, brain–wave, or breath”. Hints of the funeral rhythm, surrounded by the all–encompassing gloom of the first movement, bring the work to its conclusion.

Christine McCombe (born 1967) has studied composition in Australia and Scotland. Beginning at the University of Melbourne and the Victorian College of the Arts with Peter Tahourdin, Barry Conyngham and Mark Pollard, she later undertook postgraduate courses at the Royal Scottish Academy of

Music and Drama (Glasgow) and the University of Edinburgh. During this time Christine had the opportunity of working with leading Scottish composer James MacMillan. After completing her studies in Britain Christine took up a position at the Queensland University of Technology, and she has recently returned to Melbourne.

Christine's music has been performed by prominent orchestras and chamber groups both in Australia and overseas. Her sextet *Night Alchemy*, commissioned in 2001 by the Australia Ensemble, was submitted by the ABC the following year to the Paris International Rostrum of Composers, an annual congress held under the aegis of UNESCO and commonly considered the year's most prestigious occasion for the presentation of contemporary music. In 2002 Christine took part in a collaboration of six composers organised by the Dunedin Consort (Scotland). *The People's Mass* is a choral setting of the Latin Mass together with solo vocal interpolations. Christine's contribution consists of the *Gloria* of the Mass and a setting for soprano and harp of *The Solstice Stone* by Orkney poet George MacKay Brown.

Of Distant Sadness was written for an Australian Chamber Orchestra composers' workshop in 1993, and revised in 1997. In a communication to the present writer, the composer recalls being influenced by the music of Tavener and Gorecki, and suggests that the work "aims to evoke a sense of past sadness which can still stir up quite raw emotions". An opening section begins with a somewhat mournful cello solo accompanied by a cello/bass drone. The solo is taken over successively by violas, second violins and first violins, and develops into an extended melodic line notable for its expressively flexible rhythm.

There ensues a slightly faster episode of considerable complexity. Fragments of melody, often combining triplet and duplet rhythms, emerge continually from the dense contrapuntal texture. Initially spanning a wide range from bass to treble, the parts gradually converge onto a narrow oscillation of D and E♭; a final section recapitulates the mood (though rarely the exact musical content) of the beginning. The end of the piece is dissonant, but in a way which is uneasy rather than confronting.

> "I think music should aspire to create a space for contemplation. Every piece of music I write or work that I create strives for this in different ways, but a common thread is the strangeness and beauty of human experience."
>
> Christine McCombe

The career of English composer **Herbert Howells** (1892–1983) was to a remarkable extent defined by two events. The first, and the more significant from a purely musical point of view, occurred when at the age of 17 he attended the Three Choirs Festival in his home city of Gloucester and heard, within the space of a few days, performances of Vaughan Williams' *Fantasia on a Theme of Thomas Tallis* and Elgar's *Introduction and Allegro*. These great works instilled in the young composer and organist a lifelong love for string music, which found verbal expression in a radio talk in 1943: "In a world of sounding brass and tinkling cymbal…it is *sonority without noise* that marks the supreme contribution made by string music".

On a personal level, the major turning point in Howells' life came in 1935 with the death of his only son Michael. Howells never really recovered from "a loss…in its very nature, beyond argument", as he later said, though he found some solace in composition. The hushed opening of his *Requiem*, written in 1936 but not performed until 1980, speaks of a man overwhelmed by grief, or rather, perhaps, by an incomprehension so complete as almost to preclude grief. The *Concerto for Strings* was composed in 1938, its slow second movement also a memorial to

Michael. A gently sorrowful opening for solo trio (violin, viola and cello) is taken up by the full orchestra and develops towards two climaxes, the first marked *appassionato*, the second *dolente*. Massive *pizzicato* chords transport the music into the depths of despair, and serve to reintroduce the initial theme. Howells concludes the movement not, as another composer might have done, with the radiance of a major chord but with bare, unadorned octaves, suggesting a grief not yet accessible to consolation.

Howells recognised the need for the outer movements of the *Concerto* to provide a musical contrast to the intensity of the *lento*. Accordingly, they are both much more vigorous and rhythmic in tone, though each has slower passages, often featuring a solo viola, which recall (or foreshadow) the slow movement. Christopher Palmer, in a sleeve note for Chandos, describes the beginning of the first movement as "like a great wind blowing off the mountains". The insistent chords with which it begins appear at structurally significant moments throughout the movement. The theme heard at the outset of the finale returns frequently in varied form; the movement also has many solo quartet passages strongly reminiscent of the Elgar *Introduction and Allegro* which had so inspired the young Howells.

Howells' list of compositions includes large choral and orchestral works, notably the *Hymnus Paradisi* which again is dedicated to Michael's memory. Chamber works are small in number but include two masterpieces, a *Rhapsodic Quintet* for clarinet and strings, and a string quartet *In Gloucestershire*. He is also remembered for his smaller choral works, such as the carol *A Spotless Rose* with its indescribably beautiful harmonies. There can be little objection to granting Howells' *Concerto for String Orchestra* an esteemed place in the catalogue of English string music which its composer so loved.

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 has performed with the Ku-Ring-Gai Philharmonic Orchestra, the East-West Philharmonic Orchestra and many others, and is also active in chamber music. As a violist and chorister he has performed for internationally famous 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. In February 2001 he assembled the Bourbaki Ensemble and conducted its inaugural performance, featuring works by Sculthorpe, Debussy, Mahler and Dvořák. In 2002 David co-wrote and conducted the soundtrack for the film *Compost Monster*, which has been screened in Sydney and in London. He is the editor of a revised score of the *Concerto for Strings* by Margaret Sutherland, and has contributed translations of Russian and Italian poetry to the Lied and Art Song Texts website.

Violins Alastair Duff–Forbes, Kathryn Crossing, Natalie Adby, Katie Dixon, Paul Hoskinson, Greta Lee, Martin Lee, Emlyn Lewis–Jones, Justin White, Richard Willgoss.

Violas Kathryn Ramsay, Dierdre Boyle, Janice Buttle, Kate Hughes.

Violoncellos Steve Meyer, Laura Hitchcock, Robert Jackson, Nicholas Thomas.

Basses Sasha Marker, Mark Szeto.

THE BOURBAKI ENSEMBLE

Formed in 2001, the Bourbaki Ensemble is a string orchestra based at St. Stephen's Church, Newtown. The ensemble is strongly committed to playing music of the last hundred or so years and is a keen supporter of Australian composers, performing in 2007 music by George Palmer, Peter Sculthorpe, Phillip Wilcher and Christine McCombe.

General Charles Denis Sauter Bourbaki (1816–1897) was an important figure in French nineteenth–century military circles. The major details of his upbringing and youth are, by and large, more than adequately documented, but Bourbaki scholars have always been aware of a gap in the record in the late 1830s. Recently, however, a jealously guarded family chronicle has come to light which places Bourbaki in Russia in 1839, possibly as a fellow traveller of the Marquis de Custine. Since Bourbaki was, even at this young age, passionately devoted to music, it is impossible to totally discount the speculation that he acquainted Russian musicians with the score of Berlioz' *Requiem* (first performed on 5 December 1837), thus paving the way for Berlioz' own visits to the Empire of the Tsar in the 1840s. There is even a family tradition that Bourbaki's written appraisal of Berlioz' orchestral techniques was passed from hand to hand among Russian composers for the next century or so; though if any such document ever existed, it would scarcely, owing to its association with the French nobility, have survived the Soviet era. Unless it lies concealed in some forgotten archive, this irreplaceable record of the connection between French and Russian music must be regarded as irretrievably lost.

ORCHESTRA 143

from Salzburg to… Uranus?

Mozart Violin Concerto No. 5 in A major
Haydn Symphony No. 45 in F♯ minor, “Farewell”
Herschel Symphony No. 13 in D Major

Alastair Duff–Forbes, violin

David Angell, conductor

3.00 p.m., Sunday 25th November 2007

St. James’ Church

King St, Turramurra

The second Orchestra 143 concert for 2007 will feature Mozart’s violin concerto in A major K219, with outstanding young soloist Alastair Duff–Forbes. Composed in Salzburg in December 1775, the concerto is famous for the “Turkish” episode in its final movement. Another famous finale is that of Haydn’s Symphony No. 45, “Farewell”, in which the players absent themselves one by one until only a duo remains. The concert opens with a symphony by William Herschel (1738–1822), a widely respected musician in various provincial parts of England who later in life turned to astronomy and achieved fame as the discoverer of the planet Uranus.

Further information `http://www.orchestra143.org`
Programme details subject to change