THE BOURBAKI ENSEMBLE

the great romantics: music for strings

Tchaikovsky Serenade for Strings

Graeme Koehne Three Poems of Byron

John Tavener Song of the Angel

Finzi *Prelude* for string orchestra

Warlock Serenade for Strings

Valda Wilson, soprano

David Angell, conductor

2.30 p.m., Sunday 20 April 2008

St. Stephen's Church, Newtown

Welcome to the first Bourbaki Ensemble concert for 2008. Our programme celebrates two of the great Romantic figures of the nineteenth century: Tchaikovsky in music, and Byron in literature. The former is represented by the *Serenade for Strings*, of all his orchestral works perhaps the most untroubled; the latter appears in the shape of three verses set to music by Australian composer Graeme Koehne.

This concert also serves to mark two dates of some significance: 19 April, the anniversary of Byron's death in 1824, and General Bourbaki's birthday, 22 April 1816. There is, in fact, a possibility that the two men may have met: we look forward to reading further historical research in this matter.

We begin in this concert our celebration of the compositions of Gerald Finzi. Not by any means the best known among English composers, Finzi wrote music, usually for smallish forces such as string orchestra or voice and piano, which possesses a haunting beauty uniquely its own. It is richly rewarding to perform (and, we trust, to hear); it can also be found in an increasing number of recordings by ensembles dedicated to encouraging appreciation of this unjustly neglected composer. His music has already appeared in Bourbaki concerts (the clarinet concerto, performed in February 2005), and in 2008 every Bourbaki Ensemble concert will include a short work by Gerald Finzi.

The Bourbaki Ensemble is delighted to welcome guest artist Valda Wilson. In 2005 Valda gave a sparkling performance with Orchestra 143 of Bach's cantata *Jauchzet Gott in allen Landen*; in this concert she will sing the Koehne settings of Byron, as well as John Tavener's entrancing *Song of the Angel*. Valda has been studying recently in the Opera School at the Sydney Conservatorium, and is looking forward to furthering her operatic experience later this year at the Royal Academy of Music, London. We wish her well.

PROGRAMME

Gerald Finzi *Prelude* for string orchestra

Peter Warlock Serenade for Strings, for Frederick Delius' sixtieth birthday

Graeme Koehne Three Poems of Byron

I Stanzas for Music
II To Woman
III She Walks in Beauty

Valda Wilson, soprano

INTERVAL
20 minutes

John Tavener Song of the Angel

Valda Wilson, soprano
Alastair Duff–Forbes, violin

Peter Ilich Tchaikovsky Serenade for Strings in C major, Op. 48

I Pezzo in forma di sonatina
II Valse
III Elegia
IV Finale (Tema Russo)

Anyone interested in the relative influence of heredity and environment on the development of an artist could do worse than ponder the case of **Gerald Finzi** (1901–1956). Born in London to an Italian father and a German mother, Finzi eventually became a composer whose characteristic "Englishness" is evident in every piece he wrote. Finzi had a deep devotion to widely varied aspects of the English cultural heritage. He collected an extensive library of English literature and composed many fine settings of English poetry; he unearthed, edited and published works by obscure eighteenth–century English composers; he cultivated apple trees, saving many rare varieties from extinction.

Finzi was indirectly but deeply affected by the First World War, his esteemed composition teacher Ernest Farrar having died on the Western Front. Before he reached maturity Finzi had also lost his father and three brothers; it is therefore not surprising that his music is often suffused with a gently elegiac spirit, passing through patient grief to a timeless wisdom. As a composer Finzi was largely a miniaturist; prominent among his compositions are dozens of settings of Thomas Hardy, whose poems frequently combine a melancholy which must have been congenial to Finzi with a darker streak of pessimism which found less response from the composer. He wrote numerous works for strings or small orchestra, many of these also with voice. Notable is *Dies Natalis* for voice and strings, a setting of words by Thomas Traherne (*ca.* 1638–1674) which conveys a picture of the world through the perceptions of a newborn child. Towards the end of his life, however, Finzi began to work on a larger scale, producing an expansive setting of Wordsworth's *Intimations of Immortality* as well as concertos for cello and for clarinet.

The *Prelude* for strings, composed in the 1920s, was neither performed nor published in Finzi's lifetime. It was originally intended as the first part of a triptych *Bud, Blossom and*

Berry, depicting the progression of nature through the seasons of spring, summer and autumn. Finzi's music is an evocation of the at first concealed, later overt efflorescence of life as winter gives way to spring. It calls to mind no pretty picture on a greeting card, but rather Dylan Thomas's "force that through the green fuse drives the flower".

The *Prelude* begins in a sombre, withdrawn F minor over a bass line whose pulsating quavers, by contrast, already hint at the potential for growth. A central section, slightly faster, sets solos for violins and cello against the full orchestral texture, and features frequent clashes of major and minor modes, an effect of which Finzi was eternally fond. The opening bars return, their darkness soon dispelled as the music turns to F major. A concluding *crescendo* suggests the bud finally unfolding, opening out into the radiant, life–giving spring sunlight.

Phillip Heseltine, who as a composer adopted the nom–de–plume **Peter Warlock**, was born in the Savoy Hotel, London(!) in 1894 and died in 1930. His best works are for voice, small ensemble, or both, and include a setting of Yeats' *The Curlew* for tenor, flute, cor anglais and string quartet. The *Capriol Suite*, a collection of ancient dances arranged for string orchestra, was performed by the Bourbaki Ensemble in 2002.

Warlock first encountered Delius' music as a schoolboy, and was so enthralled by it that he initiated a correspondence with the older composer. The two later met, and Delius became a friend and mentor to Warlock. In time Warlock grew somewhat disenchanted with Delius' music, finding it in some measure facile and outdated, though his enthusiasm was reignited when Sir Thomas Beecham asked him to assist with the organisation of a Delius festival in 1929.

Warlock's *Serenade* predates all these doubts, having been written to celebrate Delius' sixtieth birthday in 1922, and consists of a single movement in moderate tempo. Its harmonies, with their constantly varying chromatic inflections, are astonishingly reminiscent of Delius' own music. The piece begins with a gently flowing quaver rhythm in the accompaniment and a main theme enlivened by the occasional cluster of semiquavers. A second motif, given initially to the second violins, is centred around a single note, with other instruments contributing a distant texture of murmuring triplets; a third begins as a haunting duet between violas and basses. Repetition and elaboration of all these themes leads to a chord of D major, decorated with arpeggios, and a resounding final *pizzicato*.

Graeme Koehne was born in Adelaide in 1956 and studied at the Elder Conservatorium, University of Adelaide, where he is now Head of Composition. In the intervening years Graeme spent two years at Yale University on a Harkness Fellowship, where private lessons with Virgil Thomson strongly influenced his future compositional ideas. Since returning to Adelaide he has earned a reputation as one of Australia's leading composers, especially in the fields of orchestral music and dance.

George Gordon, Lord Byron was one of the leading figures in the Romantic movement in English poetry at the beginning of the nineteenth century. His personal life attracted scandal and censure to such a degree that he was forced to spend much of his life outside England. He was an ardent supporter of national independence movements in Europe, fighting to free Italy of Austrian domination, and to assist Greece in its struggle against the Ottoman Empire. In the course of the latter campaign he contracted fever, and died in 1824 at Messolonghi.

Despite Byron's classification as a Romantic poet, his verse deals no less with satirical than with romantic themes: the verses used by Graeme Koehne in the cycle *Three Poems of Byron* include examples of both. The first poem, *Stanzas to Music*, begins hesitantly, chords accumulating note by note before the entry of the voice; in the second quatrain, more turbulent figuration depicts "the charmed ocean". In *To Woman* the poet takes a distinctly jaded view of feminine fidelity; Koehne's music mirrors the varied moods of the words. *She Walks in Beauty*, however, abandons all cynicism. The exquisite violin solo which introduces the poem is later taken over by various sections of the orchestra, swelling to a magnificent *forte* in the middle of the movement. Hushed string chords diminish to a single line as the cycle ends in calmness and serenity.

Stanzas For Music (1815)

There be none of Beauty's daughters
    With a magic like thee;
And like music on the waters
    Is thy sweet voice to me:
When, as if its sound were causing
The charmed ocean's pausing,
The waves lie still and gleaming,
And the lulled winds seem dreaming;

And the midnight moon is weaving
    Her bright chain o'er the deep,
Whose breast is gently heaving
    As an infant's asleep:
So the spirit bows before thee,
To listen and adore thee,
With a full but soft emotion,
Like the swell of Summer's ocean.

To Woman (1806)

Woman! experience might have told me
That all must love thee, who behold thee:
    Surely experience might have taught
    Thy firmest promises are nought;
But, plac'd in all thy charms before me,
All I forget, but to *adore* thee.
    Oh memory! thou choicest blessing,
    When join'd with hope, when still
                [possessing;
But how much curst by every lover
When hope is fled, and passion's over.
    Woman, that fair and fond deceiver,
    How prompt are striplings to believe her!
How throbs the pulse, when first we view
The eye that rolls in glossy blue,
    Or sparkles black, or mildly throws
    A beam from under hazel brows!
How quick we credit every oath,
And hear her plight the willing troth!
    Fondly we hope 'twill last for ay,
    When, lo! she changes in a day.
This record will for ever stand,
"Woman, thy vows are trac'd in sand."

She Walks In Beauty (1815)

She walks in beauty, like the night
    Of cloudless climes and starry skies;
And all that's best of dark and bright
    Meet in her aspect and her eyes:
Thus mellowed to that tender light
    Which heaven to gaudy day denies.

One shade the more, one ray the less,
    Had half impaired the nameless grace
Which waves in every raven tress,
    Or softly lightens o'er her face;
Where thoughts serenely sweet express
    How pure, how dear their dwelling place.

And on that cheek, and o'er that brow,
    So soft, so calm, yet eloquent,
The smiles that win, the tints that glow,
    But tell of days in goodness spent,
A mind at peace with all below,
    A heart whose love is innocent!

The extraordinary range of compositional styles in twentieth century music extends from the formidable intellectual and technical complexities of Elliott Carter and Brian Ferneyhough to the meditative serenity of Arvo Pärt and **John Tavener** (born 1944). In the 1960s Tavener received great acclaim for pieces such as *The Whale*, which was recorded and issued on the Beatles' *Apple* label. Nearly all of his more recent music, however, has been written in the service of the Russian Orthodox Church, into which he was received in 1977.

The *Song of the Angel* dates from 1994. Its freely floating soprano line, mostly paralleled by a solo violin, has a text of just one word: Alleluia. The work is more than adequately described by the composer's instruction to the performers: "quietly ecstatic, very still and calm throughout, very pure and free".

No–one could turn a scale into a tune with as much skill as **Peter Ilich Tchaikovsky** (1840–1893). His symphonies and ballets are full of scales, as is the *Serenade for Strings*. The melody which opens the third movement, *Elegia*, for instance, is simply a ten–note ascending scale, given some rhythmic interest and contrasted with a descending scale in the bass; similar themes are scattered throughout all four movements.

The *Serenade* opens in emphatic style, with a majestic introduction whose theme is the top line of a series of *tutti* chords. On repetition the theme, essentially a scale with a few interpolated notes, is transferred to the lower instruments and the harmonies to the violins and violas; the tension relaxes until a brief silence is reached. The main part of the movement, *allegro moderato*, then begins. It is in two sections, the first built upon a surging figure which is heard in the first four notes of the *allegro*, the second starting quietly as *pizzicato* celli and bass support a dancing theme for violins and violas. The first section is repeated note for note, the second with minor variations. In a brilliant stroke, the composer brings back the majestic introduction at the conclusion of the movement.

Tchaikovsky loved the waltz. He included it in symphonic music and gave it great prominence in his ballet scores, composing such famous set–pieces as the *Waltz of the Flowers* from *The Nutcracker*. That which forms the second movement of the *Serenade* is marked *dolce e molto grazioso* (sweetly and very gracefully). Once again the opening is a simple rising scale, as is the coda which ends the movement.

The beginning of the *larghetto elegiaco*, hesitant and wistful, soon leads into a more confident section whose *cantabile* (songlike) theme is given initially to violins, then in a more expansive version to violas and cellos. After a brief development section with a pulsating triplet background, the *cantabile* theme resumes quietly on violas. The music becomes increasingly passionate before breaking off on two mighty chords: melodic fragments are passed from cellos to first violins, fading into silence. After a long pause the opening of the movement returns and the *Elegia* gradually winds down to a peaceful close.

The finale is the most clearly Russian part of the *Serenade*. A mysterious opening employing the typical shapes of Russian folk music falls silent – a favourite Tchaikovsky device, and one which has already been heard twice in the *Serenade*. The pause is broken by a dance tune of rather square shape, contrasted later with a gloriously lyrical cello theme accompanied by *pizzicato* violins. In fact, the dance theme is really just a faster version of the introduction from the first movement, a connection made clear when rushing scales lead to a reprise of that introduction. This in turn accelerates back into the final version of the dance, and brings our concert to an exciting conclusion.

David Angell, conductor

David conducts the Bourbaki Ensemble and Orchestra 143 (a chamber orchestra based in Turramurra); plays viola in various orchestras and chamber groups; co–wrote and conducted a film soundtrack heard in Sydney and London; has been conductor or pit muso for numerous musical theatre productions; is the editor of a revised score of the *Concerto for Strings* by Margaret Sutherland; has contributed translations of Russian and Italian poetry to the *Lied and Art Song Texts* website . . . and more!

Valda Wilson, soprano

Valda Wilson (lyric coloratura soprano) has just completed her third year of the Diploma of Opera at the Sydney University Conservatorium of Music. Principal roles with the Conservatorium Opera School have been Rosina in Haydn's *La vera costanza*, Susan in Sir Lennox Berkeley's *A Dinner Engagement*, Amore in Gluck's *Paride ed Elena* and Geraldine in Samuel Barber's *A Hand of Bridge*.

Valda completed a Science degree at the University of Sydney before beginning her operatic studies. During this time she performed across Sydney in productions of works by Gilbert and Sullivan, Puccini, and Mozart. During the past two years, Valda has performed in concert throughout NSW and has presented live recitals on radio 2MBS–FM. She is a regular soloist with Pacific Opera, Orchestra 143, the Conservatorium Early Music Ensemble and with the Sydneian Bach Choir and Orchestra.

Valda is currently playing Rosina in Rossini's *Il barbiere di Siviglia* for the 2008 Opera Australia Schools' Company. Pending the result of the Opera Foundation Australia National Opera Studio London scholarship for which she is one of six finalists, Valda will begin a Postgraduate Diploma in Performance at the Royal Academy of Music, London, in September.

THE BOURBAKI ENSEMBLE

Formed in 2001, the Bourbaki Ensemble is a string orchestra based at St. Stephen's Church, Newtown. Members of the ensemble love exploring the masterpieces of the string repertoire, both the familiar and the unjustly neglected. Sometimes we play justly neglected works too, but this is accidental. The ensemble is a keen supporter of Australian composers, and in 2008 will perform music by Graeme Koehne, Bill Cotis, Anne Boyd, Daniel Rojas and Eugene Goossens.

Charles Denis Sauter Bourbaki, later to become a prominent figure in the French army, was born on 22 April 1816 into a family of Greek extraction. His father, Constantin Denis Bourbaki, fought alongside Byron in the War of Greek Independence, and it is said that the younger Bourbaki, serving as a drummer boy for his father's regiment, was present at Byron's deathbed. Unlikely as this may seem – the boy would have been only three days past his eighth birthday when Byron died – it is nonetheless certain that Bourbaki, in common with many Greek patriots, retained all his life an intense devotion to Byron's memory.

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

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

Violoncellos Laura Hitchcock, Ben Fulcher, Steve Meyer.

Basses Mark Szeto, Moya Molloy.

THE BOURBAKI ENSEMBLE

echoes of the past: music for strings

Richard Strauss Metamorphosen
Britten Lachrymae
Finzi *Romance* for string orchestra
Bill Cotis Adagietto

Amy Stevens, viola
David Angell, conductor

2.30 p.m., Sunday 31 August 2008
St. Stephen's Church, Newtown

For our August concert we present a programme of works influenced by the music of earlier ages. Benjamin Britten's *Lachrymae*, a set of rather free variations on the Elizabethan lutenist–composer John Dowland's "If my complaints could passions move", begins with a distant variant of the song theme and gradually reverts to a concluding statement of the original. A solo viola is supported by an orchestral texture in which the dark textures of violas, celli and basses dominate. Richard Strauss's *Metamorphosen*, the 80–year–old composer's lament for the destruction during the second world war of Germany's great cultural and architectural heritage, is built around motifs drawn from the funeral march of Beethoven's *Eroica* symphony. The recent *Adagietto* by Sydney composer Bill Cotis echoes Mahler's work of the same title.

Information 95571594 or `users.tpg.com.au/ddangell`
Programme details subject to change