THE BOURBAKI ENSEMBLE

echoes of the past: music for strings

Richard Strauss *Metamorphosen*, for 23 solo strings

Britten *Lachrymae*: reflections on a song of Dowland

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

Welcome to the Bourbaki Ensemble's winter concert (very much so) for 2008. As well as our programme "echoes of the past", today will feature the first public appearance of our latest CD, which will be available for purchase.

Mozart in Love was recorded here in St.Stephen's Church in February this year by the Bourbaki Ensemble with Rachel Tolmie, oboe and cor anglais, and other soloists. Tracks include Australian composer Colin Brumby's genial *Scena* for cor anglais and strings, and the *Concertino* for the same combination by Alan Ridout. The Ridout admirably exploits the deep tone of the cor anglais in its first movement *Plaint*, while the finale features haunting string chords strongly reminiscent of Sibelius' *Swan of Tuonela*. There are three American compositions: the popular *Quiet City* by Aaron Copland (in which Rachel is joined by trumpet soloist Andrew del Riccio); a brief song without words entitled *The Rainbow*, in which the originality and quirkiness of Charles Ives' compositional thought is evident; and the charming *Four Celtic Pieces* by Swan Hennessy.

There are also three works by Sydney composer Phillip Wilcher; these have already appeared on *Into His Countenance*, a CD released to celebrate Phillip's 50th birthday. The title track features flautist Amanda Muir with the Bourbaki Ensemble; *Mozart in Love* and *1791* are pieces for oboe and strings. This CD is also available today.

We would like to thank Rachel for suggesting that works from our July 2007 concert be put on CD, and Amanda and Andrew who also joined us in solo roles. Also Prue for playing the small but vital piano part in the Ives! Peter Bell did a wonderful job recording the sessions in the church, not to mention the mammoth task of editing the takes into a finished product. Finally, our thanks to Anne Keats of Wirripang for assiduously guiding the CD through production.

PROGRAMME

Gerald Finzi

Romance for string orchestra

Bill Cotis

Adagietto

Benjamin Britten

Lachrymae: reflections on a song of Dowland

Amy Stevens, viola

INTERVAL
20 minutes

Richard Strauss

Metamorphosen, for 23 solo strings

Each of this year's Bourbaki Ensemble concerts features a short piece by **Gerald Finzi** (1901–1956). Today we present the *Romance* for string orchestra, composed in 1928 but not performed until 1951, when it was given by the Reading String Players under conductor John Russell, to whom the work is dedicated.

The *Romance* is an altogether gentler piece of music than the dark–hued *Prelude* which opened Bourbaki's 2008 season. Nonetheless Finzi's traits of exquisitely wrought melody and poignant harmony are still very much to the fore. The composer's love of false relation (a "chromatic contradiction" with notes such as B♮ and B♭ occurring simultaneously or in close proximity) is often evident.

The concentrated, intensely still opening of the *Romance* begins bit by bit to move more freely, suggesting a landscape shrouded in gradually clearing mists. After a *ritardando* which almost brings the piece to a standstill, the principal section of the work begins with a resumption of the initial tempo and a violin theme which is reminiscent (no doubt unintentionally) of Elgar's violin concerto. Many small variations of tempo continue to enhance the expressive impact of the music. A faster middle section is introduced by a solo violin, and builds to a rhythmic climax before relaxing into a restatement of the "Elgar" theme. The music becomes ever more introspective, ending with a few bars marked *doppio più lento*: twice as slow as the beginning. One feels that the final hushed chords need never finish.

Bill Cotis became interested in music at a young age, teaching himself the piano and guitar as well as studying trumpet and French Horn. Although he studied music at University, he is largely a self–taught composer. His output to date includes works for orchestra, string quartet and children's songs which were composed during his time as a music teacher. He classifies his approach to music as being from heart and soul as opposed to mind and intellect. In 1994 his orchestral work *Reflections* was runner–up in the World Pater Awards for TV and Film music. Bill continues to compose on a part–time basis as his time is shared with owning and running a computer software business. *Adagietto* was composed in 2004 as a reaction to events of the day, both political and personal. The music in *Adagietto* is largely grounded in tonality and also pays homage to the composers Bill grew up with. *Adagietto* was first performed by the Eastern Sydney Chamber Orchestra in 2007. The composer would like to thank the members of the Bourbaki Ensemble and especially David Angell for today's performance.

Programme note kindly supplied by the composer.

Benjamin Britten (1913–1976) is remembered not only as one of the leading composers of the twentieth century but also as an outstanding performer. He was particularly renowned as an accompanist and conductor, and in both capacities enjoyed lasting associations with many of the foremost artists of his day, among them Peter Pears, Janet Baker, Mstislav Rostropovich, Dennis Brain and William Primrose. Their collaborations formed frequent highlights of the Aldeburgh Festival, founded by Britten and Pears in 1948.

Lachrymae: reflections on a song of Dowland, was composed in 1950 and in its original version for viola and piano was first performed by Primrose and Britten at Aldeburgh in that year. It is an expression of Britten's continuing interest in Elizabethan and other early music, which also bore fruit in his 1963

Nocturnal after John Dowland for guitar, in his realisation of John Gay's *The Beggar's Opera* and in the rescoring of *Lachrymae* for viola and string orchestra, completed just a few months before Britten's death in 1976.

Britten could never be described as an *avant–garde* composer (though things may have turned out otherwise had the Royal College of Music, where he was a student, permitted him to study with Alban Berg in Vienna), and his approach to the basic elements of music – melody, rhythm, harmony – is, broadly speaking, conventional. On the other hand, he never ceased to display a keen intellectual interest in the problems of musical technique and expression, and many of his works are strikingly original in their solutions to such problems.

The difficulty which Britten had to face in transferring the piano party of *Lachrymae* to a large body of strings was how to prevent the low–lying notes and somewhat veiled tone of the solo viola from being swamped by the orchestra. His solution was to rebalance the orchestra in favour of its lower sections – basses, cellos, violas, – including only one violin line (actually labelled "second violins" in the score) instead of the usual two. This scoring also serves an expressive purpose in accentuating the sombre sound of the piece, in line with the lovelorn mood of Dowland's song "If my Complaints should Passions move" on which the work is based. The structure of the work is also original: essentially a set of variations, it reverses conventional procedure by starting out with a distant variant of the first two phrases of the song and ending with a simple but expressive scoring of the last two.

The work begins in an atmosphere of mystery with trills and *tremolo* effects, though the integrity of Britten's conception can be discerned in the first bar of the solo line, comprising the first three notes of the first phrase in Dowland's theme, and that of the orchestral violas which announce the first three of the second phrase. Both phrases are heard in full shortly afterwards in the low register of cellos and basses. A first variant consists of a freely moving and somewhat *scherzoso* viola part over offbeat chords in the accompaniment; in the second the soloist plays *pizzicato* throughout, interrupted by hushed chords extending across the whole range of the string orchestra; while in the third it is the soloist whose murmuring cadenza–like figures interrupt the orchestra's quietly stated melodic lines.

The fourth variation consists of a unison line for violas, cellos and basses (the violins remaining silent) with the character of a somewhat ghostly waltz, though the variant is not actually labelled as such in the score; the soloist adds a descant beginning in long notes and becoming rather frantic towards the end. This leads directly into a march–like section (again not actually labelled as such) featuring emphatic chords in the orchestra, and then into a sixth variation in which the viola quotes elements of another Dowland song, "Flow, my Tears", over a turbulent accompaniment. The next two variants are marked *alla valse moderato* and *allegro marcia*, thus completing the symmetric design of the work's central section.

After a brief silence, a quiet and very slow ninth section for violins and violas leads into the final part of the work. Punctuated by resonant low *pizzicati* in the basses, the soloist's scurrying demisemiquavers gradually pick up speed, until they are taken over by the orchestra while the viola proclaims in its highest register the Dowland theme. The music gradually subsides into a coda, with two violas and a cello from the orchestra joining the soloist in a quartet. Britten's *Lachrymae* ends with an almost literal transcription of the closing phrases of "If my Complaints".

On a calendar the centuries are sharply separated, as it were by a thick black line. In cultural matters things are rarely so clear–cut, artistic and social movements popularly associated with a particular century casting shadows both before and behind. In his book *Illegal Harmonies*, Andrew Ford notes that Pierre Boulez once referred to the 1894 premiere of Debussy's *Prélude à l'aprés–midi d'un faune* as the true beginning of twentieth–century music (perhaps he could even have cited Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde*, first performed in 1865 and often considered one of the mainsprings of modern harmony), and suggests in his turn that the musical nineteenth century only ended with the late works of **Richard Strauss** (1864–1949).

Strauss was born in Munich, where his father was principal horn in the Court Opera, a post he held for almost half a century. After study in Munich and Berlin Richard began to make a name for himself as a conductor and a composer. Many of his early successes were for orchestra; in his fourth decade he turned to opera; in both genres his facility in instrumentation enabled him to convey to the listener all sorts of impressions. His tone poems range from the ardent *Don Juan* to the philosophically inspired *Also sprach Zarathustra* and the brilliantly comic *Don Quixote*; operas include *Salome* and *Elektra*, considered by some early audiences shocking to the point of depravity, and the warm and gracious *Der Rosenkavalier*. Strauss also wrote songs, especially for the soprano voice, throughout his career.

It is difficult to make a fair assessment of Strauss's life under the Nazi regime. After the war he attracted much criticism for his refusal to abandon Germany at this time, and for cooperating in state musical enterprises as a performer and an administrator. Commentators sympathetic to the composer point out his advanced age, the fact that he occasionally committed himself in writing to clearly anti–Nazi opinions, and that outright opposition could have had fatal consequences for his Jewish daughter–in–law and her family. In any case, it is quite certain that Strauss was never involved in Nazi atrocities. It is probably reasonable to regard his actions as the often naive and sometimes incautious behaviour of a man to whom nothing was really important except music.

Metamorphosen, composed in 1945, is the elderly composer's expression of bewilderment and despair at the destruction of his world. In a letter, he wrote specifically of the bombing in 1943 of the Munich National Theatre ("there can be no consolation and in my old age, no hope"), but he may well also have had in mind the destruction by the Nazis of German culture and society. Scored for an ensemble of 23 strings, each playing a separate part, the work begins with a passage for five cellos and bass, gradually adding the other instruments. It proceeds through various episodes of increasing tempo, some almost pastoral in character, some involving grinding collisions of different tonalities. Eventually half of the orchestra abruptly cuts out, leaving the other half suspended on a high G, which promptly swoops downwards an octave and a half and leads into a *fortissimo* restatement by the full ensemble of the opening cello/bass theme. As the piece reaches a close there appears in the depths of the orchestra the funeral march from Beethoven's *Eroica* symphony; the second phrase of the theme has been (accidentally, according to Strauss) implicit in *Metamorphosen* since its tenth bar. An ever–descending bass line brings Strauss's lament for his beloved nation's fate to a sombre close.

Late in life Strauss declared, "I may not be a first–rate composer, but I am a first–class second–rate composer." Upon hearing his greatest works – *Zarathustra*, *Rosenkavalier*, and *Metamorphosen*, among others – few listeners will wish to deny him a place among the world's first–rate composers.

Amy Stevens, viola

Amy commenced her musical studies at the age of four in Orange with John Gould and Lorraine Moxey. During these formative years, she regularly participated in workshops and camps held by the Sydney Symphony Orchestra and Orange Regional Conservatorium.

Since picking up the viola in 2004, Amy has been a regular member of the Australian Youth Orchestra and the Sydney Sinfonia, performing nationally and worldwide on the 2007 European Tour, and working with internationally recognised conductors such as Charles Dutoit, Rumon Gamba and Richard Mills. She has been awarded several scholarships including the Kathleen and Allison Short scholarship and Margaret Henderson scholarship to assist her study at the Sydney Conservatorium of Music and private lessons in the UK and Austria. A keen chamber musician, Amy attended the Australian Festival of Chamber Music in 2006 as an emerging artist with the Stables Piano Quartet, and performs regularly around NSW with the Majorian Ensemble. Amy also enjoys performing modern and contemporary works with the Conservatorium's Modern Music Ensemble and the Newtown–based Bourbaki Ensemble. Other solo engagements this year include a performance with the Orange Symphony Orchestra as the major Margaret Henderson prize–winner, and a performance of Mozart's *Sinfonia Concertante* in Canberra with the Maruki Orchestra.

Earlier in the year Amy attended the prestigious International Musicians' Seminar at Prussia Cove, UK, and hopes to return to Europe in late 2009 to recommence studies following graduation this year from her Bachelor of Music (Performance) at the Sydney Conservatorium of Music where she currently studies with distinguished violist Roger Benedict.

THE BOURBAKI ENSEMBLE

The Bourbaki Ensemble has been giving concerts in Newtown since 2001. 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. Bourbaki keenly supports Australian composers, and in 2008 performs music by Graeme Koehne, Bill Cotis, Anne Boyd, Daniel Rojas and Eugene Goossens.

General Charles Denis Sauter Bourbaki (1816–1897) was a prominent figure in French nineteenth–century society. The Greek origins of his family led to a fascination with the athletic culture of antiquity; in the early 1890s he maintained an active correspondence on this subject with William Penny Brookes in the UK and Pierre de Coubertin in France. Bourbaki's part in their deliberations suffered from his increasing frailty as he approached his eightieth birthday, but he was finally able to record in his diary (burnt by his family after his death) his satisfaction at the successful outcome of their collaboration in the first modern Olympic Games at Athens in 1896.

Violins Alastair Duff–Forbes, Kathryn Crossing, Natalie Adby*, Katie Dixon, Paul Hoskinson*, Greta Lee, Emlyn Lewis–Jones, Deborah McGowan, Justin White, Richard Willgoss. [*viola in *Lachrymae*]

Violas Kathryn Ramsay, Janice Buttle, Kate Hughes, Luke Spicer, Amy Stevens.

Violoncellos Steve Meyer, Nicholas Comino, Rachel Hill, Laura Hitchcock, Nicholas Thomas.

Basses Sasha Marker, Caitlin Cahill, Mark Szeto.

THE BOURBAKI ENSEMBLE

music for chamber orchestra

Wagner Siegfried Idyll
Anne Boyd Flute Concerto
Finzi A Severn Rhapsody
Daniel Rojas *Little Serenade* for string orchestra
Goossens By the Tarn
Dag Wirén Serenade for Strings

Christine Draeger, flute
David Angell, conductor

2.30 p.m., Sunday 26 October 2008
St. Stephen's Church, Newtown

The final Bourbaki Ensemble concert for 2008 includes Richard Wagner's only important chamber orchestral work, and two British musical landscapes: Gerald Finzi's *Severn Rhapsody*, an evocation of the composer's beloved west country, and Eugene Goossens' brief impressionistic *By the Tarn*. Swedish composer Dag Wirén's Serenade has been described as "[an exploration of] two musical languages: classicism and jazz". Two Australian works complete the programme: Anne Boyd's sparkling flute concerto, with soloist Christine Draeger, and the syncopated Latin rhythms of Chilean–born Daniel Rojas' *Little Serenade*.

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