THE BOURBAKI ENSEMBLE

late romantics: music for strings

Mahler *Adagio* from Symphony No. 10

Elgar Introduction and Allegro for Strings

Enescu Deux Intermèdes

Colin Spiers Arc of Infinity

David Angell, conductor

2.30 pm, Sunday 6 November 2011

St. Stephen's Church, Newtown

Welcome to the final Bourbaki Ensemble concert for 2011! If you are a Mahler fan you will be aware that 2011 marks the centenary of the composer's death; over the last two years you may well have heard the Sydney Symphony perform all the orchestral music he ever wrote. Today we would like to present some orchestral music Mahler didn't write. . . not quite.

The tenth symphony was Mahler's last, and remained unfinished at his death, more or less complete sketches being left for all five movements. Over the years, at least seven separate attempts have been made to work up what Mahler left into a performable symphony for full orchestra. An entirely different approach was taken in 1971 by Hans Stadlmair, conductor of the Munich Chamber Orchestra. Concentrating solely on the twenty–five minute opening *Adagio*, he rescored Mahler's sketches for strings in fifteen parts. The adaptation is an audacious project but not an unreasonable one, much of the musical substance in Mahler's original being entrusted to the strings. From the melancholy opening for violas to the ethereal final harmonies, the *Adagio* traces a sometimes wayward, sometimes purposeful path consisting of poignant melody, satirical asides and sonorous grandeur. Although it's not the way Mahler wrote it, the work is still a magnificent piece of music and an important addition to the string repertoire.

Bourbaki dates and programmes for 2012 are yet to be finalised, but as usual we expect to give three concerts presenting masterpieces of the string repertoire alongside pieces you are unlikely to have heard before. Details will be posted on our website `www.bourbakiensemble.org` as soon as they are available, but to be sure of not missing out, you can't do better than to join our email list. We invite you to leave your email address on the list at the door, or send it to `david.355.113@gmail.com`. We look forward to seeing you at our concerts next year.

PROGRAMME

Sir Edward Elgar Introduction and Allegro for string quartet and string orchestra, Op. 47

Alastair Duff–Forbes, violin
Kathryn Crossing, violin
Kathryn Ramsay, viola
Nicholas Thomas, violoncello

Colin Spiers *Arc of Infinity*, for string orchestra

George Enescu Deux Intermèdes, Op. 12

I. Allègrement
II. Très lent

INTERVAL
20 minutes

Gustav Mahler *Adagio* from Symphony No. 10, adapted for strings by Hans Stadlmair

The *Introduction and Allegro* for strings was written at a time when **Sir Edward Elgar** (1857–1934) had at last succeeded in achieving a measure of public acclaim. A long period of struggle, ending only in 1899 with the performance of the *Enigma Variations*, had left him with a personality compounded of wildly contradictory elements. In February 1905, with characteristic offhandedness, Elgar wrote to his friend and champion August Jaeger, "I have finished the string thing and it's all right". After the work's premiere in March had attracted only a lukewarm reception, however, he wrote to Dora Penny with an equally characteristic mixture of pride and despair: "Nothing better for strings has ever been done and they don't like it".

In late 1904 Jaeger had suggested to Elgar that he compose "a *brilliant* quick String Scherzo… a real bring down the house *torrent* of a thing such as Bach could write". Hardly an assessment of Bach's music which modern ages would find sympathetic; be that as it may, Elgar took up the idea and within four months had completed the *Introduction and Allegro*. The only hints of any Baroque influence on the piece are the opposition, very loosely in the manner of a *concerto grosso*, of solo quartet and string orchestra, and the "devil of a fugue" (Elgar's words) which comprises the central part of the work. Far from being a Baroque pastiche, the work is most notable for its overt Romanticism, and for the depth of feeling which Elgar, so wary of revealing in real life, was never afraid to display in his music.

The beginning of the *Introduction and Allegro* features frequent and often abrupt changes of mood and tempo. The majestic chords and triplets of the opening almost immediately give way to an aspiring passage for the solo quartet (annotated as "smiling with a sigh" in Elgar's manuscript score), which in turn is succeeded by an important dotted motif in violas, cellos and bass. This itself lasts only two bars before we hear a more relaxed version of the triplets, two more bars of the quartet theme and two of the dotted theme – six short sections within the first minute of the piece. In the first extended episode a solo viola announces a theme inspired by a Welsh folk song which Elgar had heard while on a ramble in the country. A return to the triplets of the opening is crowned by four mighty pauses, and a melancholy quartet version of the "Welsh" theme concludes the *Introduction*.

The *Allegro* begins with the "smiling with a sigh" theme and introduces a new idea in which vibrant semiquavers alternate between quartet and orchestra. Eventually the second violins lead off the fugue, which reaches a powerful climax before easing into a recapitulation of the *Allegro*. Brilliant scales in semiquavers usher in a final section in which the "Welsh" theme, *molto sostenuto*, appears at last in the full ensemble.

Australian composer **Colin Spiers** was born in Brisbane in 1957 and studied at the Queensland Conservatorium, graduating with a Medal of Excellence in 1979. Since 1990 he has been on the staff of the Newcastle Conservatorium, where he now holds the position of Senior Lecturer in Composition. Colin is also a noted pianist, having been a member of leading contemporary music ensemble *Perihelion*. His compositions include five piano sonatas, the second of which, composed in 1992 and subtitled *Desperate Acts*, won the prestigious Jean Bogan Prize.

Arc of Infinity was composed in early 2006 and premiered later that year at a special concert in memory of David Howard Jones, who had been tragically killed in a car accident in 2005 after thirty years first as a student and later as a teacher at the Newcastle Conservatorium. The piece begins in a restrained and elegiac mood, with a gentle and serene melody repeated eight times. The changing harmonies beneath the theme create the illusion that it changes in pitch as the work unfolds: in fact, it remains essentially unchanged in its melodic contour, though it is subtly varied in rhythm and in instrumental colour.

The opening section of the piece concludes as the ensemble comes to rest on a unison middle C. So firm has been the work's insistence on a limited set of pitches that the drop to B which begins the next episode, though undemonstrative, is quite startling. A hazy and indistinct background of rising scales for four solo instruments (second violin, viola, cello and bass) supports a solo first violin in what eventuates as the work's main theme, turned upside down. Gradually more instruments are added to the five soloists, leading to a passage in which descending scales for the full ensemble suggest peals of funeral bells. The opening melody returns, now entrusted to violas and then cellos; more scales follow, culminating this time in searing and anguished *glissandi*. A final return to the principal theme is accompanied by the most enigmatic harmonies yet, and the piece ends in an air of mystery as the music disappears into infinity.

George Enescu (1881–1955) was one of the most accomplished all–round musicians of the twentieth century. Active as a conductor, composer, violinist and pianist, he was also an infrequent but renowned violin teacher, counting among his pupils Yehudi Menuhin, Arthur Grumiaux and Ida Haendel. He graduated from the violin class at the Vienna Conservatory at the age of just thirteen, before pursuing further studies in composition at the Paris Conservatoire. His teachers in Paris included Gabriel Fauré; his fellow students, Maurice Ravel and Charles Koechlin.

As a composer, Enescu is best known – indeed, to a great extent *only* known – for his two *Romanian Rhapsodies*. In fact, his list of works ranges across many genres. He composed three symphonies (not counting two which remained unfinished, and four "study symphonies" from his years at the Conservatoire); an opera *Oedipe*, whose composition was spread across ten years of actual work and another ten during which the composer's sketches, sent from Romania to Russia for safety during World War I, were lost; and numerous chamber works, mostly for strings with or without piano.

The *Deux Intermèdes* for strings date from 1902 and 1903, a few years after Enescu's graduation from the Paris Conservatoire. Curiously, catalogues usually collect them together with Enescu's chamber music, though there is little doubt that they were intended for orchestral strings. The first begins with a gently flowing theme, delicate and artless, set against passages of discreet counterpoint. Adroit changes of tonality give the music an air of enticing strangeness before the return of the initial melody, a fuller scoring lending it a character of calm but joyous warmth. Further episodes feature a graceful chromaticism before the movement ends in serenity.

In the second *Intermède*, a poised melody in the first violins floats above a hushed but complex harmony. As the movement proceeds, the lower parts gradually begin to adopt a more contrapuntal aspect, until at last the music settles into a clear G major. The hushed chord which ends the movement covers almost the entire compass of the string orchestra.

In speaking of **Gustav Mahler** (1860–1911) at Harvard University in 1973, the American conductor Leonard Bernstein famously proclaimed that, "Ours is the century of death, and

Mahler is its musical prophet." For a number of decades after Mahler's death his music, while never being forsaken by admirers such as the composers Berg and Shostakovich and the conductor Bruno Walter, was frequently regarded in wider circles as idiosyncratic and eccentric. Bernstein probably did more than any other single person to restore Mahler's music to the consciousness of the concert–going public, not only in America but also in Europe, even in Vienna itself, where Mahler had been director of the Court Opera from 1897 to 1907. So it's hard to disagree with Bernstein on the subject of Mahler. In fact, Mahler's music is not only about death, but also about life, and about life after death. It's about childhood, and about maturity. It's about the beauties of nature, and about the workings of the human soul. And there is no doubt that Bernstein understood this (so there's actually no need to disagree with him), but it's unfortunate that the above quotation has become the best known of his comments about Mahler. The image of Mahler as death–obsessed and pessimistic also gets a good deal of impetus from the finale of *Das Lied von der Erde*, perhaps from its title even more than from the music itself. *Der Abschied*, "The Farewell", is seen as the composer's parting from the world, his despair in the face of approaching death due to a hereditary heart condition which had been diagnosed in 1907.

And yet, there is evidence to indicate that in his last months Mahler had found a new serenity. His anguish at the discovery of his wife Alma's affair with the architect walter Gropius had been succeeded by a reconciliation, and the manuscript sketches for the tenth symphony are covered with messages of love for Alma. Richard Osborne, writing in *The Dictionary of Composers* (Macmillan, 1981), compares Mahler to the fictional protagonist of *The Great Gatsby*. "Like Fitzgerald's Gatsby, Mahler was the creator of a dream... Mahler never lost his sense of wonder. He retained a romantic hope, even in the face of death. 'Tomorrow we will run faster, stretch out our arms further... And one fine morning –' "

The opening *Adagio* from Mahler's tenth symphony is a work of many moods, but the most predominant are a gentle melancholy, stopping well short of pessimism and despair, and a generous melodic warmth. The contrast of the two is heard at the very outset of the movement, as the lengthy unaccompanied *Andante* – one of the great moments of the orchestral repertoire for violas – with which it begins fades into uncertainty, only to blossom into the F♯ major of the *Adagio* proper with the entry of violins and cellos. Even at its first appearance the *Adagio* theme is beset with the bitter–sweet alternation of major and minor inflections; later on it is surrounded by a harmonic and contrapuntal texture which, "more than anything else Mahler ever wrote, ... pushes at the edges of tonality" (Raymond Tuttle), as well as by the weird, satirical asides which had always been part of Mahler's musical vocabulary. Yet the identity of the theme is never compromised, nor does it ever lose its warmth.

The *Andante* theme also recurs throughout the movement, twice in its original guise for violas, and many times woven into the overall pattern of the music. After about fifteen minutes it is heard again, pale and hesitant, in the high register of the violins, before the full ensemble bursts forth in a gigantic and terrifying chord of A♭ minor. The succeeding episode culminates in a penetrating high–pitched unison for violas, assailed by massively dissonant chords in all the other instruments. But this too disappears and the *Adagio* resumes its course. As the music approaches its conclusion it becomes ever more tenuous and fragile, seeming always as though it is about to fall apart. But the delicate thread of melody, never quite broken, finally succeeds in arriving at an extended and radiant cadence.

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. As a violist and chorister he has performed under internationally famous conductors including Sir Charles Mackerras, Stuart Challender, Richard Bonynge and John Hopkins. He is active in chamber music, having been the violist of the Kurraba String Quartet and the Wombat String Quartet, and has extensive experience playing in pit bands for community musical theatre productions.

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. Since then the Ensemble has attracted note for its imaginative programming and its support of Australian composers. David has conducted the Bourbaki Ensemble in three recordings released on CD by Wirripang, and in numerous concerts recorded for broadcast on 2MBS–FM. Since its inception in December 2002 he has also been the conductor of Orchestra 143, a classical chamber orchestra based in Turramurra, and he has guest conducted the Mosman Orchestra and the North Sydney Symphony Orchestra.

In 2002 David co–wrote and conducted the soundtrack for the film *Compost Monster*, which has been screened in Sydney and in London. For Bourbaki's winter 2010 concerts he prepared, with the composer's permission, a string orchestra version of Andrew Ford's clarinet quintet *Oma Kodu*. 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.

THE BOURBAKI ENSEMBLE

Formed in 2001, the Bourbaki Ensemble is a string orchestra based at St. Stephen's Church, Newtown. The Ensemble seeks to perform exciting recent music alongside the greatest masterpieces of the string repertoire. It is strongly committed to Australian music, and in 2011 performs compositions by Stephen Cronin, Derek Davies, Ross Edwards, David Keeffe, Johanna Selleck and Colin Spiers.

Bourbaki appears on three CDs released on the Wirripang label. *Mozart in Love* is largely of a collection of music for oboe or cor anglais with strings, and features soloist Rachel Tolmie performing works by Charles Ives, Aaron Copland and Colin Brumby. Three pieces by Sydney composer Phillip Wilcher also appear on the CD *Into His Countenance*, issued to celebrate Phillip's fiftieth birthday in 2008. The 2010 release *Mermaids* includes Bourbaki's recording of the title track, a work for eleven solo strings by John Wayne Dixon. All three discs can be purchased online at `http://australiancomposers.com.au`.

Violins Alastair Duff–Forbes, Kathryn Crossing, Dawid Botha, Mark Chambers, Stephanie Fulton, Steven Harvey, Paul Hoskinson, Emlyn Lewis–Jones, Deborah McGowan, Paul Pokorny, Margery Sherman, Elena Vershinina, Justin White, Richard Willgoss.

Violas Kathryn Ramsay, Janice Buttle, Derek Davies, Elizabeth D'Olier, Kate Hughes, Michelle Urquhart.

Violoncellos Nicholas Thomas, Michael Bowrey, Ian Macourt, Bronwen Whyatt, Gabrielle Williams, Catherine Willis.

Basses Sasha Marker, Caitlin Cahill.

Fired by the success of his research into authentic performance practices of Ruritanian folk music, Charles Denis Sauter Bourbaki (1816–1897) turned his attention to the music of rural Romania. This was a matter of some delicacy, inasmuch as the Romanian government of the day viewed any foreign attempt to study their culture as nothing but a pretext for espionage. Nevertheless, Bourbaki made the journey to Romania and travelled all over the country under the name "Charles Bourbescu". Sadly, this rather transparent pseudonym completely failed to deceive the canny peasantry, who amused themselves for some weeks at the foreigner's expense before reporting him to the authorities. As a serving officer in the French army, Bourbaki was fortunate to escape summary execution; his research notes were ordered to be destroyed and he was expelled from the country. The French government was anxious to avoid a diplomatic incident, and to the present day neither French nor Romanian documents retain any official record of the affair. Rumours persist, however, that the excellence of Bourbaki's notes was instantly recognised; that they were not in fact destroyed; that they formed the basis of musicological studies in Romania, and to this day are held in a secret annexe to the library of the *Universitatea Naţională de Muzică Bucureşti*.