THE BOURBAKI ENSEMBLE

music for harp and strings

Beethoven *Grosse Fuge*

Debussy Danses Sacrée et Profane

Grandjany Aria in Classic Style

Roussel Sinfonietta for Strings

Sculthorpe Lament

Elgar Sospiri

Verna Lee, harp

Steve Meyer, cello

David Angell, conductor

2.30 pm, Sunday 24 June 2012

St. Stephen's Church, Newtown

2.00 pm, Sunday 1 July 2012

Camden Uniting Church

Welcome to the Bourbaki Ensemble winter concerts for 2012! We are delighted to welcome back Verna Lee to play *music for harp and strings* with us. As Newtown locals may already know, St. Stephen's is the perfect Sydney venue for a concert of harp music, the cemetery surrounding the church being the resting place of Nicolas–Charles Bochsa. Born in France in 1789, Bochsa displayed musical talent from an early age, and by his mid–twenties had been appointed official harpist to the Emperor Napoleon Bonaparte. Regrettably, he also developed a distinct aptitude for counterfeiting and forgery, talents which made rapid departure from his homeland a matter of necessity. Settling in London, Bochsa involved himself in a wide range of musical activities. Neither the authorities nor British society, it would seem, felt any inclination to hand him over to the Emperor's courts on account of the still pending forgery charges; but it was another matter when he began a liaison with Anna Bishop, wife of the respected composer Henry Bishop (later the first musician ever to be honoured with a knighthood), and Bochsa was once again on the move. Together with Anna he toured America and Europe; they arrived in Sydney in December 1855, but Bochsa soon passed away and was buried in Camperdown Cemetery. If you look out from the main church doors, his tomb is about 50 metres forward and to the left: it features a broken column and a now barely discernible harp. If you can't find it, ask one of us to show you.

The next Bourbaki Ensemble concert is scheduled for Sunday 28 October; unfortunately, St. Stephen's is not available on this date. At this stage we have not yet been able to secure a suitable alternative venue in the Newtown area. To ensure that you are informed when details are available, we recommend that you join our mailing list and keep an eye on our website. If you have any suggestions please let us know!

PROGRAMME

Albert Roussel Sinfonietta for string orchestra, Op. 52

I Allegro molto
II Andante
III Allegro

Peter Sculthorpe Lament for solo cello and strings

Steve Meyer, cello

Marcel Grandjany Aria in Classic Style, Op. 19

Verna Lee, harp

Claude Debussy Danses Sacrée et Profane

Verna Lee, harp

INTERVAL
20 minutes

Sir Edward Elgar Sospiri: Adagio for String Orchestra, Op. 70

Ludwig van Beethoven Grosse Fuge, Op. 133, version for string orchestra

Born in 1869, **Albert Roussel** belonged to the generation before the iconoclastic group of French composers known as *Les Six* (Poulenc, Milhaud *et al.*). Coming relatively late to music, however – he spent seven years in the French Navy – much of his most characteristic music emerged beside theirs in the 1920s and 1930s. Roussel is best known for his stage and chamber works, and orchestral music including four symphonies and the *Sinfonietta for String Orchestra.*

Published three years before the composer's death in 1937, the *Sinfonietta* consists of a central *andante* flanked by two brief faster movements. The opening of the first emphasizes rhythm and accentuation, but soon yields to a more lyrical section beginning on violas. The slow(ish) movement begins strongly, becomes quiet and a little eerie, and then returns to a more powerful texture. The heavy anapaestic (short–short–long) figures in cellos and basses lead without a break into the vivacious finale.

The *Lament* for string orchestra of **Peter Sculthorpe** (born 1929) was written in 1976, and is described by the composer as a "farewell gesture" to the melancholia which was characteristic of Australian literary and artistic expression in the nineteeenth century, and of Australian music after the Second World War. The piece was revised in 1991, the *obbligato* cello line being developed into a fully–fledged solo. Any extended description of the work is superfluous; the oscillating cello theme, initially marked *desolato* and nearly always set in the instrument's highest register above quietly dissonant harmonies, perfectly expresses the mood aimed at by the composer. Of interest are two free (unconducted) sections in which individual players proceed at their own pace, creating a nebulous and haunting texture. The *Lament* closes with a non–traditional but fiercely resonant sustained chord for the full ensemble, which peaks at only the second *forte* in the entire score before fading to silence.

Until the early years of the twentieth century it was common for leading performers to produce virtuoso compositions for their own use and their students', a practice which has largely died out nowadays. **Marcel Grandjany** (1891–1975), a celebrated harpist who studied at the Paris Conservatoire and became a highly respected teacher, especially in his later years at the Juilliard School in New York, accordingly wrote dozens of works for solo harp, mostly unaccompanied. The *Aria in Classic Style* was composed in about 1950 to a commission from the great American patron of chamber music, Elizabeth Sprague Coolidge. Originally for harp and organ – Grandjany was himself also an organist – the accompaniment was later arranged for strings. A poised and elegant melody is stated first by harp alone, then by orchestra and harp jointly; finally it is entrusted to the orchestra, the soloist supplying by way of decoration a dazzling series of wide–ranging arpeggiated passages. A brief cadenza brings the work to a peaceful and sonorous close.

The *Danses sacrée et profane* were composed by **Claude Debussy** (1862–1918) at the request of the firm of Pleyel, manufacturers of musical instruments. In 1894 Gustave Lyon had invented a new mechanism for the harp, which provided the full chromatic scale by the use of twelve strings to the octave, crossing each other at an angle so that the diatonic and chromatic notes were clearly distinguished, yet both accessible to the player's hands. A rough analogy is the arrangement in which a piano has the black keys raised above the white. The previous design of the harp had had only seven strings to the octave, with a series of pedals supplied to provide chromatic notes.

Some time later, a class in the new instrument was established at the Brussels Conservatoire. As a test piece, and also, probably, to promote the use of this instrument, Pleyel and the Conservatoire commissioned a work from Debussy. The *Danses* were first performed in 1904. As a publicity exercise for the chromatic harp they seem to have been a complete failure; performers and composers continued to employ the standard harp with the pedal mechanism (watch our soloist's feet today!) However they were much more successful from the artistic point of view, and the *Danses sacrée et profane* have become an important part of the harp repertoire.

The *Danse sacrée* is a piece of restrained and gentle harmonies, its "sacred" character suggested by the unison line of the opening and the parallel chords first heard at the entry of the harp. A middle section features more complex harmonies, with brief solos from violin and viola; the opening harp theme returns, and subsides onto a bass line picked out by the soloist's left hand. This leads without a break into the *Danse profane*.

The "profanity" of the second dance is not a matter of vulgarity (can anyone imagine Debussy writing vulgar music?) but simply proclaims it, in contrast to the first, as "secular" or "worldly". It begins, in fact, as a *valse lente*: there is a suggestion of Erik Satie's *Gymnopédies* for piano, which Debussy had orchestrated in 1896. In a middle section the tempo drops by half, the strings fall silent, and the harpist provides her own accompaniment with six–against–four, five–against–three and even more complex rhythmic patterns. The valse returns, and builds up to a glowing climax of string chords and harp glissandi.

A deep sense of melancholy became increasingly evident in the music of **Sir Edward Elgar** (1857–1934) as the composer approached his sixtieth year, distressed, among other things, by the international situation which was soon to develop into the First World War. Not that Elgar's major works had ever been in any way superficial; but the robust and vigorous stretches which had existed alongside more deeply felt passages in, say, the *Pomp and Circumstance Marches* and the *Cockaigne Overture* became increasingly rare after 1914.

The sound world of *Sospiri* ("Sighs"), a brief work for strings with harp and optional harmonium, is dark and heavy–hearted. After a desolate introductory chord, the first violins introduce a plangent theme, frequently at odds with the underlying harmonies. As it proceeds, the accompaniment becomes more elaborate, leading into a setting of the original theme (now for violins and half the cellos) against a background of duskily shimmering harmonies punctuated with weighty accents. A brief coda rounds off the piece; but the ultimate resolution into the key of F major offers little in the way of consolation.

The last two years in the life of **Ludwig van Beethoven** (1770–1827) were occupied with the composition of string quartets. The work was prompted by a commission from Prince Nikolai Golitsin, who asked for three quartets and promised to pay the composer whatever fee he asked – perhaps an exceedingly rash undertaking, in view of Beethoven's sense of his own worth! In the event, Beethoven wrote four quartets during this period: those in B♭ major, C♯ minor, A minor and F major. The immense finale of the B♭ quartet, a compilation of overture, fugue, slow movement and scherzo, the culmination of a work which had already comprised five movements and lasted over half an hour, was felt by many to border on the unplayable (and unlistenable), and the composer's publisher Artaria begged him to replace it. Astonishingly, Beethoven, not normally influenced in the slightest by external opinion on his music, agreed; he wrote a far shorter and simpler last movement for the quartet, the original finale being published as a separate work under the title *Grosse Fuge*, Op. 133.

Over the years there have been a number of arrangements of the *Grosse Fuge* for string orchestra. Such arrangements are often, perhaps with reason, condemned as being inimical to Beethoven's very carefully thought out compositional processes. In this one exceptional case, however, the expansion to an ensemble of multiple strings is usually considered justified by the immense scale and power of the music.

In its construction from a series of contrasting sections, the *Grosse Fuge* has distinct similarities with the finale of the "Choral" symphony; like the symphony it includes, near the end, a brief reminiscence of motives from the beginning of the fugue, and it features the joyful dancing triplet textures with which Beethoven accompanies the "Ode to Joy" in the symphony. It commences with a brief *Overtura* consisting of three short and enigmatic pronouncements. Firstly, the full orchestra in unison announces a powerful chromatic motive which will turn out to be the principal theme of the whole movement. The brusque figures and interpolated silences provide an arresting opening. Secondly, a much slower and more richly textured episode introduces semiquaver passages which will assume an important role in the later slow parts of the *Grosse Fuge*. Thirdly, the opening chromatic theme is heard on first violins alone, ghostly and hesitant.

The fugue proper begins with a jagged line in the first violins, immediately joined by the principal theme, already heard in the introduction, on violas. One by one the remaining sections of the orchestra enter with these two themes, which later are transmuted into other rhythms and textures. An unrelenting *fortissimo* persists for some five minutes: the composer makes no concessions either to his performers or to his audience! Though it is not easy to keep one's bearings, perhaps the best idea is to keep listening for the initial "jagged" line in various instruments. It is easy to imagine that Beethoven was attempting to depict an earthquake or some other natural cataclysm.

As abruptly as it started, the fugue twists into the remote key of G♭ major and settles onto a quiet chord leading into a slower episode. In contrast to the violence of the first fugue, this section is quiet and ethereal – the performers are in no danger of forgetting this as Beethoven issues the direction *sempre pianissimo* (always very softly) over and over again. This slow movement, as it were, begins with the semiquavers from the second part of the *Overtura*, set high in the first violins. They are soon joined by the chromatic theme, initially given to the violas and later heard in the very depths of the bass instruments. Eventually the music settles onto a quiet murmuring, broken abruptly by a *fortissimo* outburst of the main theme. This initiates a dance–like section in $\frac{6}{8}$ time, made up of at least four identifiable subsections, and culminating in what is in fact a reprise of the earlier slow episode, though transformed into a much more forceful and scarcely recognisable form. A series of weighty chords, interspersed by silences, accelerates back into the $\frac{6}{8}$; one final interruption presents brief reminiscences of the "jagged" motive and the semiquavers before a unison statement of the principal theme announces the *coda* which concludes this truly extraordinary work, described by Igor Stravinsky as an "absolutely contemporary piece of music that will be contemporary forever".

Verna Lee, harp

Verna began studying harp at the age of 12, made her public solo debut at 13 and has worked professionally since she was 19. As a soloist, she has attracted critical acclaim for her performances; she is often invited to perform for festivals and music clubs, and has toured nationally. She has performed as soloist with many Sydney orchestras; one of her career highlights was in 1996 when she was the soloist with the Australian Youth Orchestra at the Adelaide Arts Festival, performing Ravel's *Introduction and Allegro*.

Harp has taken her around the world on tours (Japan and New Zealand), for work (Singapore Symphony Orchestra) and study (Germany and the United States). An active recitalist and chamber musician, she has played with various ensembles such as the Deutsche Kammerakademie Neuss. Other international artists she has worked with include the Kiev Ballet, the English National Ballet and Il Divo.

Verna has worked and recorded with orchestras such as the Sydney Symphony, Australian Ballet and Opera, Tasmanian Symphony, Australian Philharmonic, and was principal harp of the Australian Youth Orchestra for ten years.

A dedicated teacher, she teaches at several Sydney schools, at the Australian Institute of Music and has a busy private studio. She founded the Sydney Harp Eisteddfod in order to encourage and create opportunities for students to perform. She also organised the 2010 Australian Harp Weekend, attracting many harpists from around the country and abroad.

Verna has also performed with Aled Jones, Tina Arena and soprano Amelia Farrugia. As well as recording for television, radio and soundtracks, Verna and her harp had a lot of fun filming a scene in the movie *The Matrix*.

THE BOURBAKI ENSEMBLE

Formed in 2001, the Bourbaki Ensemble is a string orchestra based at St. Stephen's Newtown. The Ensemble performs exciting recent music alongside the masterpieces of the string repertoire, and is strongly committed to Australian music.

While renowned for his military genius, Charles Denis Sauter Bourbaki (1816–1897) was essentially a man of peace, turning swords into ploughshares as a patron of the arts. Towards the end of his career Bourbaki, in charge of procuring rations for the army, commenced dealing with the firm of A.A. Sprague in Chicago. It was no doubt at this time that he made the acquaintance of Elizabeth, the daughter of the house, who shared his passion for chamber music. It is fitting that some of Bourbaki's payments eventually bore musical fruit when Elizabeth, in later life Mrs Elizabeth Sprague Coolidge and her father's sole heir, became America's leading patron of music, commissioning works from Ravel, Bartok and Poulenc, to name but a few.

Violins Emlyn Lewis–Jones, Kathryn Crossing, Dawid Botha, Elizabeth Cooney, Stephanie Fulton, Paul Hoskinson, Greta Lee, Deborah McGowan, Ketan Patel, Shaun Stewart, Justin White, Richard Willgoss.

Violas Kathryn Ramsay, Robyn Botha, Derek Davies, Kate Hughes.

Violoncellos Steve Meyer, Michael Bowrey, Jemma Thrussell, Gabrielle Williams, Catherine Willis.

Basses Sasha Marker, Joal Taylor.

Harp Verna Lee. **Harmonium** Prue Gibbs.

THE BOURBAKI ENSEMBLE

concertante strings

Peter Sculthorpe Port Essington
Herbert Howells Elegy
Aaron Kenny new work
Eugene Ysaye Harmonies du soir
Grażyna Bacewicz Concerto for String Orchestra

Sunday 28 October 2012
Venue: TBA

The next Bourbaki Ensemble programme will consist of works for string orchestra together with solo ensembles drawn from the orchestra, and will feature the world premiere performance of a violin concerto being written especially for Bourbaki and soloist Alastair Duff–Forbes by young Australian composer Aaron Kenny.

The concert will also include Howells' *Elegy* for viola, string quartet and string orchestra (soloist: Michelle Urquhart) and a work by Ysaye for quartet and orchestra. Sculthorpe's *Port Essington* includes *obbligato* roles for two violins and a cello.

Celebrated in her homeland, Polish violinist and composer Grażyna Bacewicz is sadly little known abroad. We look forward to presenting her exciting *Concerto for String Orchestra* (1948) at our next concert.

Note that at this stage we have not been able to obtain a suitable venue for this concert: if you are not on our mailing list, please keep watching our website for further information. If you have any suggestions please let us know!

Further information 0433074322 or `www.bourbakiensemble.org`
Programme details subject to change