THE BOURBAKI ENSEMBLE

shaking and trembling: music for strings

John Adams Shaker Loops
Graeme Koehne Shaker Dances
Vaughan Williams The Lark Ascending
Eric Whitacre The River Cam

Alastair Duff–Forbes, violin
Daniel Morris, cello
David Angell, conductor

2.30 pm, Sunday 21 February 2021
St. George's Hall, Newtown

After the disaster that was 2020, we are overjoyed to welcome our audience to the first Bourbaki Ensemble concert for 2021. Although, more fortunate than many, we were able to give two concerts last year (in February before lockdown took hold and in November when the situation was looking less fearful), we are still looking forward to presenting a full programme of three performances this year. Dates are yet to be finalised, so please keep an eye on our website or our Facebook page.

We are glad to be joined in this concert by two wonderful musicians who have had long associations with Bourbaki. Alastair Duff–Forbes was the concertmaster of the orchestra for most of our concerts from 2007 to 2013; he returns as concertmaster once more, and as soloist in Ralph Vaughan Williams' beloved *Lark Ascending*, in which (according to the composer's wife Ursula) the violin becomes "both the bird's song and its flight". Cello soloist Daniel Morris will perform Eric Whitacre's *The River Cam*. A talented multi–instrumentalist, Danny will also play violin in the orchestra for other works on the programme.

We are boundlessly grateful to the Newtown High School of the Performing Arts and principal Sharon Roberts for allowing us to present concerts in St. George's Hall, and we look forward to the association continuing into the future.

PROGRAMME

Graeme Koehne Shaker Dances

1 Whirling Dance
2 Precept and Line
3 Square Order Shuffle

Eric Whitacre The River Cam

Daniel Morris, cello

INTERVAL
20 minutes

Ralph Vaughan Williams The Lark Ascending, arranged for violin and strings by Martin Gerigk

Alastair Duff–Forbes, violin

John Adams Shaker Loops, for string orchestra

Part I. Shaking and Trembling
Part II. Hymning Slews
Part III. Loops and Verses
Part IV. A Final Shaking

The stylistic journey of **Graeme Koehne** (born 1956) has extended from Boulezian modernism, absorbed through lessons with Richard Meale at the Elder Conservatorium, University of Adelaide, through an admiration for the impressionist scores of Debussy, Ravel and Takemitsu, to a new simplicity and "radical conservatism". The latter, while probably self–initiated, was greatly reinforced by study with New York neo–classicist Virgil Thomson while Koehne was undertaking postgraduate work at Yale University, supported by a Harkness Fellowship. Since returning to Australia he has earned a reputation as one of this country's leading composers, especially in the fields of orchestral music and dance; among his most frequently performed works are *Unchained Melody* and *Powerhouse*, in both of which the composer seeks to adapt popular musical styles to the idiom of the symphony orchestra.

In *Shaker Dances* Koehne draws inspiration from the music of the Christian sect formally designated the "United Society of Believers in Christ's Second Appearing", but more commonly known as "Shakers". An offshoot of the Quakers, the Society was formed in northern England in the mid–eighteenth century, but is more generally associated with the New England region of north–eastern America, where leading members relocated in 1774. Their charismatic worship practices, in which music and dance played a prominent role, led to the nickname "shaking quakers", later "shakers".

The inspiration for Graeme Koehne's *Shaker Dances* would seem to be less a matter of actual musical imitation than of a desire to convey the inspired ecstasy of Shaker religious services. Only in the second movement, *Precept and Line*, is there some kind of approach to authentic Shaker music: a songlike and tranquil cello solo shares something of the spirit of the famed Shaker hymn *Simple Gifts*. Koehne ornaments the melody with graceful descants and contrasts it with a "folk fiddle" style episode before returning to a more expansive treatment of the melody. The opening *Whirling Dance* begins with much use of a figure which can only, aptly, be described as "whirling", alternating with sections featuring much syncopation and rhythmic sophistication. The "square order shuffle" is said to have been a very solemn dance: it would appear that Koehne has borrowed nothing but the title for his final movement, which with its vigorous accents and running semiquavers is anything but solemn!

While on a Visiting Fellowship at Sidney Sussex College, Cambridge, American composer Eric Whitacre used to walk his young son to school, a half–hour trip along the River Cam from Cambridge to Newnham. The composer has related how scraps of melody in an "English pastoral" style would float into his mind, inspired by the historical associations of the area and the "quiet and heartbreaking beauty" of the river. A commission from celebrated cellist Julian Lloyd Webber for a piece for cello and string orchestra, to be premiered at his sixtieth birthday concert on 14 April 2011, afforded Whitacre the opportunity to turn these fragmentary thoughts into a fully realised piece of music which he later described as "a dream of Cambridge".

The River Cam is characterised by a constant stream of flexible and lyrical melody for the soloist (and frequently for the orchestra, too), supported by a lush texture of divided strings. Harmonies largely consist of diatonic cluster chords, in which six or even all seven notes of a scale sound simultaneously, giving a richness and piquancy to the harmony while avoiding the excessive clash of harsh dissonances. The quiet orchestral chords which begin the work can be heard again near the middle of the piece, and, climactically, a third time together with the solo cello near the end.

Eric Whitacre was born in 1970 in Nevada, and his earliest musical activities centred around pop and rock genres. After receiving a degree in composition from the University of Nevada, he undertook postgraduate work at the Juilliard School, studying with eminent American composers John Corigliano and David Diamond. He has written orchestral, band and film music, but his most highly acclaimed work is his large collection of compositions for solo voice or choir; a number of these constituted his CD *Light and Gold*, for which Whitacre won a Grammy Award in 2012.

"Few compositions capture our affinity with the natural world so affectingly… Vaughan Williams's evocation of a bird flying free from earthbound realities, crossing a perfectly imagined landscape, has resonated deeply with anyone who has found themselves dreaming along with *The Lark Ascending*." Thus Richard King, in his book on "people, music and landscape in twentieth-century Britain" which borrows the composer's title.

…a title borrowed in its turn from the poet and novelist George Meredith (1828–1909): Vaughan Williams's work quotes twelve lines from Meredith's (lengthy) poem as preface to the score. Composed in 1914, the *Lark* was laid aside during the composer's war service, then revised and premiered in 1921. Some listeners and performers have heard in the work a sense of loss and an intense longing for the world which disappeared during the four–year hiatus in its composition. From its earliest performances, *The Lark Ascending* earned warm reviews from critics and, to the present day, has never been out of favour either in the concert hall or on recordings.

The Lark Ascending is structured around three extended violin cadenzas poised above hushed string chords, the solo part described by an early commentator as "[floating] in a long rapture [with] jubilations [and] carolling". The mood continues over a quietly murmuring orchestral texture which occasionally breaks out into melodic prominence. The second cadenza introduces a contrasting section with a distinct atmosphere of English folksong; the last frees itself, finally, from earthbound realities, and vanishes into the heights, "lost on his aërial rings in light".

> from **The Lark Ascending**
>
> He rises and begins to round,
> He drops the silver chain of sound
> Of many links without a break,
> In chirrup, whistle, slur and shake, . . .
>
> For singing till his heaven fills,
> 'Tis love of earth that he instils,
> And ever winging up and up,
> Our valley is his golden cup,
> And he the wine which overflows
> To lift us with him as he goes: . . .
>
> Till lost on his aërial rings
> In light, and then the fancy sings.
>
> *George Meredith*

Ralph Vaughan Williams (1872–1958), during his lifetime celebrated as one of the truly great English composers and loved for his generosity of spirit, suffered the all too common reaction against such a one after his death, his music being dismissed in certain quarters as deficient in workmanship, conventional in feeling and unadventurous in style. With the passage of time a more balanced assessment has supervened: one which recognises not only the startling originality of *Job: a Masque for Dancing* and the fourth symphony (which at the time of their appearance shocked many, even among the composer's staunchest supporters), but also the less obviously uncompromising aspects of works such as the *Fantasia on a Theme by Thomas Tallis*, the later symphonies and *Flos Campi*. Few today will dispute the strength, beauty and innate humanity of much of Vaughan Williams's music.

John Adams (1947–) grew up with a background in jazz, his father a clarinettist, his mother a big band singer. Composition studies at Harvard University (funded by occasional clarinet playing with the Boston Symphony) inculcated a commitment to serialism, while Adams' extra–curricular interests centred upon sixties pop and rock. His devotion to European modernism began to wane when, shortly after graduation, he read John Cage's seminal writings *Silence* and *A Year from Monday*. In the 1970s Adams began to be acquainted with the early works of minimalist composers such as Terry Riley. A reaction against the over–complexity of the serialists, minimalism typically set up harmonious, rhythmically active textures which varied only very slowly. A couple of early Adams minimalist essays, both entitled *Wavemaker*, were unsuccessful ("crashed and burned", in the composer's words from his memoirs *Hallelujah Junction*), and he began to feel that he "missed the shock of the unexpected" in minimalist art. After extensive redevelopment, the ideas behind *Wavemaker* turned into *Shaker Loops*.

While clearly springing from a minimalist aesthetic, *Shaker Loops* decisively resolves the composer's misgivings about the style. The opening is almost stereotypically minimalist, a constant shimmer of repeated notes in the violins supporting elemental motives in other parts. Yet it is not long before the composer introduces distinct changes of mood, even though the repeated notes scarcely pause for the whole first movement. In the slower *Hymning Slews*, fragmentary *glissando* melodies weave from instrument to instrument against "an almost motionless pool of stationary sound" (composer's note). *Loops and Verses* offers more firmly delineated melodic ideas before issuing into a climactic passage of repeatedly accelerating pairs of notes for full orchestra. The final movement remains rhythmically active, but gradually diminishes in volume and ends, almost, in silence.

David Angell, conductor


photo: Steve Dimitriadis, www.mestevie.com

As a violist and chorister, David has performed under internationally famous conductors including Sir Charles Mackerras, Stuart Challender and Richard Bonynge. Since taking up conducting in 1998, he has directed a number of musical societies and orchestras, most frequently the Bourbaki Ensemble and Orchestra 143; other recent engagements include two programmes with the Woollahra Philharmonic (one in a replica pirate costume) and one with the Eastern Sydney Chamber Orchestra. A highlight was the Orchestra 143 Mozartathon, in which he conducted all the symphonies of Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart in a series of five concerts spread over a single weekend. David has also directed two concerts with the Crendon Chamber Orchestra (Thame, UK), presenting programmes featuring works by Mahler, Vaughan Williams and Australian composers. He has studied conducting with Richard Gill.

David is actively involved in arranging music for strings. His orchestration of Debussy's *Children's Corner* suite has been performed in Australia and the UK; he has (with the composer's permission) adapted Andrew Ford's *Oma Kodu*, originally composed for clarinet and string quartet, as a work for clarinet and string orchestra; and he has arranged Marc–Antoine Charpentier's *Noëls* for (modern) string orchestra. 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.

Alastair Duff–Forbes, violin

Alastair commenced playing violin at the age of five, and piano at the age of seven. He completed a Bachelor of Music (Honours) in violin at the Sydney Conservatorium in 2004, studying under Goetz Richter, and received a number of scholarships including the Matteson and Nancy Roberts Scholarship and the Chapple Bremner Award.

As a soloist, Alastair's performances include the Barber and Mendelssohn violin concertos. In 2012, Alastair and the Bourbaki Ensemble gave the world premiere of *Chernobyl*, a violin concerto written especially for Alastair by Aaron Kenny. Alastair has been an active chamber musician for many years, and has performed in a wide variety of events including the 2007 APEC Leaders' Conference, with the Sapphire String Quartet, and the world premiere of *Dreams and Visions* by John Petersen.

Alastair has been concertmaster of many orchestras including the Sydney Conservatorium Symphony Orchestra, the Metropolitan Chamber Orchestra, Balmain Sinfonia and Bourbaki Ensemble. He also has an interest in conducting and has conducted various ensembles including Orchestra 143.

Daniel Morris, cello

Daniel Morris studied at the Sydney Conservatorium of Music and at Canterbury University. He has had wide experience in chamber music, competing in the inaugural Melbourne International Chamber Music Competition as a member of the Stringendo String Quartet. He was initially taught violin by his father and has recently taken it up again, along with the viola and double bass, performing with a number of groups across Sydney. He is currently looking into the various processes musical beginners and "re–beginners" use to gain confidence when (re–)learning both technical and ensemble skills.

General **Charles Denis Sauter Bourbaki** (1816–1897) was a leading figure in the French military during the Franco–Prussian war, as well as being a composer of noted originality. One of his major innovations was described as *musique minimale*, although whether this was Bourbaki's own appelation or a derogatory term applied by critics is unclear. His *chef d'oeuvre* in this style was a piano piece which is said to have consisted of a short passage repeated 839 times. It is reported that the work was to have been published

by an *avant garde* music publisher outside Paris, but that the publisher's offices were stormed by an enraged mob of conservative music–lovers, stirred up by the leading musical traditionalists of the day. No copy of Bourbaki's work is known to survive.

Violins Alastair Duff–Forbes, Julia Pokorny, Joanna Buggy, Camille Hanrahan–Tan, Madeleina Hanrahan–Tan, Brian Lee, Emlyn Lewis–Jones, Deborah McGowan, Jenny Mee, Danny Morris, Rob Newnham, Rob Nijs, Paul Pokorny, Warwick Pulley, Richard Willgoss, Victor Wu.

Violas Kathryn Ramsay, Liz D'Olier, Marilyn McLeod, Monique Mezzatesta, Daniel Murphy, Gabriella Parrilla.

Violoncellos John Napier, Clara Blazer, Liesje Jansen Van Rensburg, Ian Macourt, Nicole McVicar, Catherine Willis.

Bass Sasha Cotis, George Machado.

THE BOURBAKI ENSEMBLE

songs of thanksgiving and love

Beethoven Heiliger Dankgesang
Wagner Wesendonck Lieder
Richard Meale Cantilena Pacifica
Alban Berg Andante amoroso
Frank Bridge An Irish Melody

Beethoven's "Holy song of thanksgiving" is one of his most profound and affecting slow movements. Wagner's *Wesendonck Lieder* prefigure the intense romantic atmosphere of *Tristan und Isolde*, while Richard Meale's *Cantilena* was written in memory of a close friend.

date and venue TBA

The Bourbaki Ensemble is a chamber string orchestra based in Newtown. Our performances include major string repertoire by composers such as Dvořák, Tchaikovsky, Richard Strauss and Elgar, as well as fascinating music by present–day composers including Pēteris Vasks, Bryce Dessner and Julia Wolfe. Every Bourbaki concert features at least one work by an Australian composer, most recently Andrew Howes and Christine Draeger. Bourbaki has given world premieres of well over a dozen pieces, some written especially for our concerts.

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