THE BOURBAKI ENSEMBLE

reflections for strings

Richard Strauss Sextet from *Capriccio*

Gavin Bryars The Porazzi Fragment

Valentyn Silvestrov Zwei Dialoge

Ella Macens Superimposition

Michael Grebla Affine

William Alwyn Concerto Grosso No. 2

David Angell, conductor

2.30 pm, Sunday 25 June 2023

St. George's Hall, Newtown

Welcome to the second Bourbaki Ensemble performance for 2023! Our programme of *reflections* centres around compositions which take their inspiration from earlier works or earlier musical styles. British composer William Alwyn, in commenting on his *Concerto Grosso* for strings, notes that "the title... suggests neo–classical treatment", alluding to a movement prominent in the early to mid–twentieth century, in which composers sought to elevate classical ideals of clarity and restraint above what were seen as the excesses and self–indulgence of the romantic era. Sydney composer Ella Macens traces the origins of her *Superimposition* to the striking impression made upon her by her first hearing of certain works by Arvo Pärt and Henryk Górecki, while Richard Strauss's opera *Capriccio* (whose prelude features on our programme) was loosely inspired by a libretto from the time of Mozart. Scraps of music by Wagner form the basis for compositions by both Gavin Bryars and Valentyn Silvestrov; the Silvestrov, in addition, recalls a waltz improvised at the piano by Schubert.

Richard Willgoss, a long–time member of the Bourbaki Ensemble, and his wife Sue have been generously sponsoring a variety of composition prizes at UNSW since 2016. We are delighted to present in today's concert Michael Grebla's *Affine*, the winning entry in the 2021 Willgoss Ensemble Composition Prize. Michael's work explores ideas of the connections that remain when we are separated from family and friends.

Today will be Bourbaki's seventh concert in St. George's Hall, and we would like to express our heartfelt gratitude to Newtown High School of the Performing Arts for allowing us to use this wonderful space. We look forward to giving many future concerts here – the next, on Sunday 19 November, will feature Michael Tippett's *Concerto for Double String Orchestra*. Please see the back cover of the programme for full details.

PROGRAMME

Richard Strauss Sextet from *Capriccio*

Michael Grebla Affine, for string orchestra

Ella Macens Superimposition, for string ensemble

Gavin Bryars The Porazzi Fragment, for 21 solo strings

INTERVAL
20 minutes

Valentyn Silvestrov Zwei Dialoge mit Nachwort

I. Hochzeitswalzer
II. Postludium
III. Morgenserenade

William Alwyn Concerto Grosso No. 2, for string orchestra

I Allegro moderato e vigoroso
II Adagio ed espressivo
III Vivace (allegro ma non troppo)

Warwick Pulley, Julia Pokorny, violins
Kathryn Ramsay, viola
Ian Macourt, violoncello

“None of [Strauss’s] opera scores is more refined, more translucent, more elegant… and none ends so magically.” A verdict (Michael Kennedy in *Grove*) on *Capriccio*, the last of the fifteen operas which occupied **Richard Strauss** (1864–1949) in the latter part of his composing career, which raises the obvious question: why is it so seldom seen on the operatic stage? Despite their immense vocal and orchestral requirements, the scandalous *Salome*, the obsessive *Elektra* and the warm, romantic *Rosenkavalier* are produced frequently around the world, while the relatively modest *Capriccio* remains in obscurity. Perhaps by the 1940s, when it was composed, the public had been so stunned by Strauss’s earlier works, not to mention those of Berg and Puccini, that it had no appetite for the calm and undramatic discussion of the relative place of poetry and music which its composer referred to as a “conversation piece”.

The opening of *Capriccio*, while not in any way spectacular, is thoroughly original in its restraint. Just six instruments, two violins, two violas and two cellos, perform the prelude to the opera from the orchestra pit; when the curtain rises, an identical ensemble placed onstage (but behind the scenes) accompanies the opening lines of the singers. The six independent lines weave a tapestry of elegant melody, subtle counterpoint and poignant harmony to match anything in Strauss’s other late masterpieces such as *Metamorphosen* (performed by Bourbaki in 2008) and the *Four Last Songs*; occasional brief turbulent episodes serve mainly to emphasize the generally peaceful atmosphere. Today we follow the not uncommon practice of expanding the instrumental complement from the original chamber scoring to a full string orchestra. The sextet from *Capriccio* may be rarely heard from the pit, but it will surely always have a place in the affections of those who love string music.

Australian composer **Michael Grebla** (1989–) has studied at the University of Western Australia and the New England Conservatory, Boston, Massachsetts, and is now resident in Manhattan. His compositional activity centres mostly around concert music, though he has also been involved with creating film soundtracks. He has received awards and grants from organisations including the Australia Council for the Arts and the New York Composers Circle, and won the 2021 Willgoss Ensemble Composition Prize at UNSW for his work *Affine*.

In a note to the score, Michael explains that the title of the work is Italian, and means "Kindred". In it, the composer seeks to explore "the connection we share to others, particularly in their absence", and goes on to remark that a particular source of inspiration was the indefinite (geographical) separation from his family caused by the pandemic. A feature of *Affine* is its reliance both for thematic and background material on closely clustered harmonies, perhaps a metaphor for the longed–for personal closeness with relations. These harmonies are, for the most part, presented quietly, so that the effect is of a heightened tonality rather than of harsh dissonance. A number of long, songlike melodies, frequently involving the cello section, are surrounded by elaborate accompaniments. As the piece approaches its conclusion, it becomes quiet and reflective (*tranquillo e dolce*), settling at last into a peaceful E major.

Ella Macens is an Australian composer of Latvian heritage. She studied at the Sydney Conservatorium, completing a Bachelor of Music in composition, and is currently working towards a Master of Music; she is also a member of the teaching staff at the same institution. Ella's music has been performed by eminent Australian ensembles including the Melbourne and Tasmanian Symphony Orchestras, the Goldner String Quartet and the Song Company, and overseas by the State Choir Latvija and the Riga Cathedral Girls' Choir. Ella's orchestral composition *The Space Between Stars* was recently nominated by Simone Young as a candidate for the Sydney Symphony Orchestra's inaugural "People's Choice" concert.

A string work in eleven parts, *Superimposition* originated as a response to Ella's first acquaintance with two seminal compositions from the 1970s. Arvo Pärt's *Cantus in Memoriam Benjamin Britten* and Henryk Górecki's *Symphony of Sorrowful Songs* inspired a fascination with the possibilities of creating musical structures from the layering – superimposition – of simple motifs and ideas. The work begins with an introduction marked "solemn, stately" in which parts enter one by one, beginning with the bass. In the course of the work much use is made of simple *crescendo* scales, proceeding at different rates in different parts, sometimes with complex cross–rhythms. Towards the end of the piece, the scales issue into strong and deeply scored chords for the full ensemble; after a brief silence, a lyrical and expressive coda brings the work to a quiet close.

In December 1858, Richard Wagner was at work on the second act of *Tristan und Isolde*. His sketches for the opera contain much material which, frequently after considerable rewriting, would form the heart of the work. But there is also a curious fragment, just eight bars long, which didn't make the final cut. It's very plausible that Wagner, at some stage, intended it for *Tristan*: not only does it appear in the same papers, but it has the characteristic yearning chromaticism of many themes from that masterpiece, and it bears the apt annotation *schmachtend*, "with longing". But in the end, it remained a brief doodle on the margins of the larger work. Wagner had not forgotten it, however. In 1882, while staying in the Piazza dei Porazzi in Sicily, during the composition of his last opera *Parsifal*, he retranscribed the theme, adding another five bars; but it still was not used in any completed work.

Gavin Bryars (born 1943) began his musical career as a jazz bassist before turning to composition. He was greatly influenced by American minimalist composers and by other members of the musical avant–garde in the eastern USA, at one time studying with John Cage. His earliest successes include *The Sinking of the Titanic* (1969) and *Jesus' Blood Never Failed Me Yet* (1971, with many subsequent versions). The latter consists of a brief recording of a homeless man's singing, originally made when Bryars was collaborating on a documentary film about homelessness in London, which loops repeatedly with a gradually elaborating orchestral accompaniment which, in the composer's words, "[respects] the homeless man's nobility and simple faith". Bryars' more recent works include five operas, four string quartets, and choral and dance scores.

In 1999 Bryars made the Wagner sketch described above the basis for a string piece. Written in 21 separate parts, *The Porazzi Fragment* consists essentially of a long stream of melody surrounded by fragmentary related motives and a quiet but elaborate accompaniment. The melody begins in the general style of the Wagner, gradually reproducing the sketch with increasing accuracy; the work finishes with a more or less exact statement of Wagner's original above warm A flat major harmonies.

Valentyn Silvestrov was born in 1937 in the Ukranian capital Kyiv. *Two Dialogues and an Afterword*, for string orchestra with piano, was written in 2001–2002 and is dedicated to the great Estonian composer Arvo Pärt; like much of Pärt's own music it occupies a world of intense quietness. The dialogues are imaginary encounters between Silvestrov and composers of earlier centuries. The first is an adaptation of a waltz performed by Franz Schubert at a wedding in the Kupelweiser family. It appears that Schubert improvised the waltz at the keyboard and never wrote it down; it was passed down orally in the family until 1943, when at last it was committed to paper and included in his catalogue of works. In Silvestrov's "recomposition" of Schubert's waltz, the strings envelop the piano part in a hazy texture which has been characterised by Tatjana Frumkis in a sleeve note for ECM Records as "[not] a sharply etched image [but] a slightly unfocused daguerreotype".

The second dialogue is with a fragmentary *Theme in A flat major* by Wagner – the same one used by Gavin Bryars. (Silvestrov and Bryars are not alone in this undertaking: the Italian Salvatore Sciarrino has worked with the same material, as have certain composers of American wind band music.) A comparison between Silvestrov's and Bryars' realisations of Wagner's sketch is fascinating: Silvestrov's version employs a very much more hazy and "unfocused" atmosphere, following his Schubert setting. The afterword, entitled *Morning Serenade*, is Silvestrov's own composition. A delicately poised violin melody, described as "light, transparent, *dolce*, distant", is supported by a gently arpeggiated accompaniment. Luminous bell–like sounds in a remote key herald the work's concluding retreat into silence.

William Alwyn (1905–1985) was not only a composer but a conductor, a poet, an artist and a talented flautist. In the latter capacity he was for some years a member of the London Symphony Orchestra. His compositions include five symphonies, over seventy film scores and an opera *Miss Julie*, based on the play by Swedish dramatist August Strindberg. His harp concerto *Lyra Angelica* gained public recognition when it was used by figure skater Michelle Kwan to accompany her silver medal winning perfomance at the 1988 Winter Olympics.

In a sleeve note for Lyrita Records, the composer describes his *Concerto Grosso No. 2* for strings (1951) as belonging to the "neoclassical" genre – though in the very next sentence he suggests that this description "should be taken with a pinch of salt" and emphasizes the work's romantic leanings. The vigorous and rhythmic opening, admirably written for string orchestra, certainly exemplifies the style often adopted by composers professing an allegiance to neoclassical or neobaroque models. There is a more lyrical second subject, initially given to a solo string quartet before being taken over by the full ensemble. The movement concludes with a brief restatement of the opening material.

There follows an elegaic and expressive *adagio* movement with something of the character of a *nocturne*. The solo string quartet provides an introduction, which merges into an accompaniment for the first main theme, stated quietly but intensely by the *tutti* first violins. The theme reappears after a contrasting episode, this time with an added rhapsodic solo violin line. The alternation between major and minor thirds almost suggests a slow blues number. The end of the movement consists of an exquisite duet for solo violins poised above sustained harmonies in the orchestra. The finale begins with further classical/baroque references in the shape of a *gigue*–like main theme, and proceeds through various complex textures. Violins and violas have a close–harmony passage which fleetingly brings to mind popular music of the 1930s and 1940s. A reprise of the initial theme from the first movement is still not the last surprise in Alwyn's consistently inventive composition.

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. A highlight was the Orchestra 143 Mozartathon, in which David conducted all the symphonies of Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart in a series of five concerts spread over a single weekend. He has also been guest conductor for two concerts with the Crendon Chamber Orchestra (Thame, UK). Earlier this month David directed a concert of Haydn, Schubert, Mendelssohn, Fauré, Elgar and Ravel with The Lawyers' Orchestra. 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 both in Australia and in the UK, and the first Bourbaki Ensemble concert of 2022 premiered his arrangement of the accompaniment to Wagner's *Wesendonck Lieder*. 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.

THE BOURBAKI ENSEMBLE

The Bourbaki Ensemble is a chamber string orchestra which has been giving concerts in Newtown since 2001. Programmes include works by composers such as Stravinsky and Richard Strauss, as well as fascinating music by present–day composers including John Adams and Julia Wolfe. Every concert features at least one work by an Australian composer, most recently Diana Blom, Nigel Butterley and Peter Sculthorpe.

Despite having yet to reach his thirteenth birthday, **Charles Denis Sauter Bourbaki** (1816–1897), later a leading figure in the French military, journeyed to Berlin to attend Mendelssohn's celebrated revival of the Bach *St. Matthew Passion* (11 March 1829). The youthful Bourbaki conceived the idea that contemporary music might emulate the ideals of earlier eras. Sadly, Bourbaki's only exposition of *musique neoclassique*, in his private diary, was later burnt. Only oral tradition remains to indicate that, as so often, he was a century ahead of his time.

Violins Warwick Pulley, Julia Pokorny, Stephanie Colomb, Camille Hanrahan–Tan, Madeleina Hanrahan–Tan, Emlyn Lewis–Jones, Daniel Morris, Rob Newnham, Paul Pokorny, Richard Willgoss, Alvin Wan, Victor Wu.

Violas Kathryn Ramsay, Joseph Phillips, Emily Speers Mears, David Tocknell.

Violoncellos Ian Macourt, Liesje Jansen Van Rensburg, Nicole McVicar, Catherine Willis.

Basses George Machado, Daniel Morris.

Piano Diana Blom.

THE BOURBAKI ENSEMBLE

double strings – and more!

Tippett Concerto for Double String Orchestra
Chris Williams Time Before and Time After
Colin Spiers Anna
Anna Clyne Within Her Arms
Emily Howard Passacaglia

David Angell, conductor

2.30 pm, Sunday 19 November 2023
St. George's Hall, Newtown

Double Bourbaki! – what more could you want?? Tippett's *Double Concerto*, one of the great string works of the twentieth century, features jazzy syncopations, blues harmonies and Scottish folk tunes. Leading contemporary British composer Anna Clyne's piece, in 15 separate parts, takes its title from lines of Vietnamese poetry:

Earth will keep you tight within her arms dear one–
So that tomorrow you will be transformed into flowers.

The Bourbaki Ensemble commissioned and premiered Chris Williams' piece in 2016: in 2020 it was awarded first prize in the competition "Musica per Archi", Lviv, Ukraine. *Passacaglia* is an early string work by a composer who has more recently achieved great acclaim for her large and complex orchestral pieces. Colin Spiers' *Anna*, in 17 parts, is dedicated to the memory of the composer's maternal grandmother.

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