THE BOURBAKI ENSEMBLE

echoes of exile

Dmitri Shostakovich Chamber Symphony

Eugène Ysaÿe Exil!

Aleksandr Glazunov Saxophone Concerto

Iain Grandage The Wild Geese

Béla Bartók Romanian Folk Dances

Felix Coster, saxophone

David Angell, conductor

2.30 pm, Sunday 25 May 2025

St. George's Hall, Newtown

Welcome to Bourbaki's first concert for 2025! *Echoes of Exile* presents works written by composers who were forced by circumstances to forsake their native lands. The great Belgian violin virtuoso Eugène Ysaÿe – also, though less well known, a composer – fled to London at the outbreak of World War 1, and later to America. Alexandr Glazunov, one of the great Russian composers of the nineteenth century, found himself out of sympathy with the Soviet regime and ended his days in Paris, while in 1940, Béla Bartók escaped the Nazi domination of Europe by relocating (somewhat unhappily) to the USA.

Despite many difficulties in his relations with the Soviet state, Dmitri Shostakovich never abandoned his homeland. His eighth string quartet, however, centres around references to convict songs from Tsarist Russia, and to his own opera concerning Siberian exiles. The quartet was later arranged for string orchestra to form the *Chamber Symphony* with which we conclude today's concert. Australian composer Iain Grandage's *The Wild Geese* is based on the tale of Irish Republicans exiled to Western Australia in the 1860s, and rescued by a group of their comrades based in America.

Our next concert, on November 23, will feature Christine Draeger, flute, and Rachel Tolmie, oboe. We have given many concerts (and made recordings) with Christine and Rachel, and we're delighted to work with them again. The concert will include works responding to the iconic kunanyi/Mount Wellington which soars above Hobart, and to the gently rolling hills of southern England. For full details see the back cover of the programme. If you don't receive our emails and would like to, you can join up by scanning the QR code on the right. We look forward to seeing you in November!

PROGRAMME

Béla Bartók Romanian Folk Dances, arranged for strings by Mark Lansom

1. Jocul cu bâtă
2. Brâul
3. Pe loc
4. Buciumeana
5. Poargă Românească
6. Mărunţel
7. Mărunţel

Iain Grandage The Wild Geese

Aleksandr Glazunov Concerto in E♭ major, Op. 109, for alto saxophone and string orchestra

Felix Coster, saxophone

INTERVAL — 20 minutes

Eugène Ysaÿe Exil!, poéme symphonique for high strings, Op. 25

Dmitri Shostakovich Chamber Symphony, Op. 110a

I Largo
II Allegro molto
III Allegretto
IV Largo
V Largo

Béla Bartók (1881–1945) was born in Nagyszentmiklós, a village then in Hungary but nowadays a part of Romania. Beginning in the early years of the twentieth century, he undertook frequent trips recording by phonographic methods, and then transcribing, the songs and dances of his native region and other areas of Hungary. In the course of his studies he came to realise that the true Hungarian/Romanian village music was altogether different from the gypsy music which had earlier been taken as native Hungarian.

It is fascinating to compare Bartók's arrangements of seven *Romanian Folk Dances* with the originals, as transcribed in his book *Romanian Folk Music*. In some cases the complex rhythms of folk music have been "straightened out"; perhaps Bartók felt that audiences (or performers!) would have difficulty with rapid alternations of nine–, ten– and eleven–semiquaver bars. Many of the melodies also use intervals which do not occur in the standard Western scales; these would be hard to play accurately on orchestral instruments, and quite impossible on the piano.

The titles of the dances in the suite performed today can be translated as stick dance, sash dance, dance in one spot, horn dance, Romanian polka and fast dance. They include round dances and dances for couples. The Jocul cu bâtă is a young man's solo dance in which, as a concluding act of bravado, the dancer is expected to kick the ceiling!

Australian composer **Iain Grandage** has gained great acclaim for his concert and stage music. Highlights include music for the dramatic adaptation of Kate Grenville's *The Secret River*, and an opera based on Tim Winton's *The Riders*. He held the post of Artistic Director for the Perth Festival from 2020 to 2024, and has directed or collaborated in numerous other festivals. *The Wild Geese* evokes the 1876 rescue by the whaler *Catalpa* of six Irish Republicans being held in exile in the then penal colony of Western Australia. (The Catalpa Memorial, a sculpture featuring six wild geese, now stands by the seashore in Rockingham, WA.) The opening of Grandage's work is an extended evocation of the sea: glittering reflections of sunshine, the measureless depths of the ocean, the mighty surge of the waves, flurries of wind on the surface. About half way through, violins and violas introduce the chorus of the folk song *Catalpa*; towards the end of the piece one hears once again the fury of the surf and the crash of the waves.

Aleksandr Glazunov was born in St. Petersburg in 1865. His early efforts at composition were brought to the attention of Balakirev and Rimsky–Korsakov, who saw to his musical education, and arranged for his first symphony to be performed when Glazunov was only sixteen years of age. He soon achieved fame both in Russia and abroad, and in 1905 was appointed director of the St. Petersburg Conservatorium. Musically conservative, he had little taste for the compositions of Stravinsky, Prokofiev and others; but his generosity of character is attested by the fact that he never let his musical views prevent him from giving young composers all the assistance in his power, both educationally and personally. His most eminent pupil, Dmitri Shostakovich, was said to have spoken with warmth and respect of Glazunov's personal qualities, though with a certain disdain of his music.

Glazunov's political opinions were also conservative, and no doubt uncongenial to those in power after the 1917 revolution. Nevertheless, he retained his post at the Conservatorium, probably because the authorities could not fail to recognise the excellence of his leadership. In 1928, however, Glazunov took the opportunity afforded by a European tour to leave the Soviet Union permanently. He died in Paris in 1936.

Glazunov composed his *Saxophone Concerto* in 1934: it is thus a product of his Parisian sojourn. The solo part is written for the alto instrument, at the time by far the most widely used member of the saxophone family: one wonders if Glazunov was inspired to write the concerto by the instrument's great popularity among French composers from Berlioz and Bizet to Debussy, Milhaud and beyond. The work has no formal division into movements, but consists of several clearly defined sections. The first is moderately fast; the second, slower, begins with a lyrical and songlike melody for the soloist before becoming more complex and accelerating into a solo *cadenza*. A lively dancing theme is introduced by the saxophone alone, before being taken up by violins, then cellos and basses, and eventually the full orchestra. The solo part becomes more and more virtuosic (the orchestral parts are not easy either!), and the concerto ends in a blaze of excitement.

The Belgian violinist **Eugène Ysaÿe** (1858–1931) was possibly the foremost virtuoso of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Although he remains little known as a composer, he in fact produced a considerable number of works, mainly featuring his own instrument. His most frequently performed composition is the collection of six sonatas for unaccompanied violin, each evoking the style of a different leading violinist of the time. *Exil!* was composed in 1917, after Ysaÿe had sought refuge in Britain from the German invasion of Belgium. It is most unusually scored for violins and violas in eight parts, without cellos or basses. The complex harmonies, often poignantly dissonant though never atonal, evoke the composer's longing and nostalgia for his homeland. A quiet and simple conclusion transmutes sadness into hope – or, at least, into the possibility of hope.

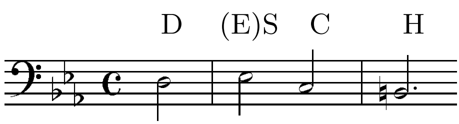
The music of **Dmitri Shostakovich** (1906–1975) underwent a considerable reappraisal in the late 1970s and the 1980s with the publication in English translation of the composer's memoirs, *Testimony*. The memoirs revealed – or, to speak more cautiously, purported to reveal – Shostakovich not as a faithful supporter of the Communist Party but as a secret dissident, a composer whose works were intended as a repudiation of the Soviet state and its leaders, a public speaker only by compulsion, and one whose every word might contain hidden meanings. No surprise, then, that the Soviet government and its supporters denounced as a fabrication both the memoirs themselves and the story that they had been dictated to musicologist Solomon Volkov and smuggled to the West, while those of differing political persuasions seized upon the idea that one of the century's greatest composers (little dispute on either side about this) was not the orthodox Communist he had long been supposed to be.

Forty years on, it appears that *Testimony* may be taken as a reasonably fair account of Shostakovich's views, though it is less certain that it is a report of actual conversations with the composer. Shostakovich's biographer Ian McDonald expresses the matter concisely: "*Testimony* is a realistic picture of Dmitri Shostakovich. It just isn't a *genuine* one." The composer's son Maxim said in 1986 that "sometimes…there is too much rumour, [but] the basis of the book is correct."

At various times throughout Shostakovich's life he fell into conflict with the authorities; while some of these occasions, such as the condemnation in 1936 of two major works, may have come as a shock to the composer, it is clear that others did not. In the 1950s, for example, Shostakovich composed many works related to Jewish concerns and using motifs from Jewish folk music and poetry: at a time of severe Soviet antisemitism, he cannot have expected these compositions to meet with official approval.

It is not surprising, then, that in certain cases Shostakovich should have erected a smokescreen of ostensible ideological conformity in order to protect his music (and himself) from state retribution. The String Quartet No. 8 was composed in 1960, following a visit to Dresden, then still in ruins after the Second World War, and is dedicated "to the victims of fascism and war". But the quartet has constant recourse to motives from Shostakovich's earlier music, strongly suggesting that in fact the quartet is an autobiographical work, concerned with the victims, among them the composer himself, of stalinism rather than of fascism. It is this quartet which was reworked for string orchestra by Rudolf Barshai, with the composer's approval, to create the *Chamber Symphony* which we perform today.

Most prominent of all the autobiographical elements in the symphony/quartet is Shostakovich's own "musical signature". It is heard at the very beginning, in the first four notes played by the cellos and bass, and recurs frequently, one could even say obsessively, throughout the work. The notes D–E flat–C–B are referred to in German nomenclature as D–Es–C–H; reading this phonetically as D–SCH reveals the composer's initials.



The five movements of the *Chamber Symphony* are played continuously, except for a brief silence between the second and third. An opening in which D–SCH is combined with a quotation from Shostakovich's Symphony No. 1 – written while still a student, and his first major success – is followed by a mournful solo violin recitative. There follows a passage in which luminous major thirds in the first violins seem to offer a hope which is constantly denied by flattened inflections in the seconds. A crescendo on a long note leads into the second movement.

The *Allegro molto* plunges the listener into the whirlwind of totalitarian Russia. In structure the movement is brutally simple: a rhythmic theme is hammered out, initially in the violins, against irregular crashing chords in the other parts. Again D–SCH is prominent. A frenetic, almost hysterical dance tune comes from Jewish folk music via Shostakovich's second Piano Trio. The music careers along without respite until it crashes into silence, whereupon a new version of D–SCH begins the third movement. Here the motif turns into a pathetic, broken–spirited waltz tune, which later on becomes a kind of march, and there is a quotation from Shostakovich's Cello Concerto No. 1. After an eerie passage in which two solo violins accompany a solo cello, the waltz returns and winds down, exhausted, onto a sustained note which links the third movement with the fourth.

The *Largo* is the emotional centre of the *Chamber Symphony*. It begins with three hammered chords in which it is easy to imagine the secret police pounding on the door. A grim theme for almost the full orchestra suggests a last show of defiance in the face of the terror. The triple chords return, and after a weary D–SCH the violins begin a prison song from Tsarist Russia. In *Testimony* Shostakovich is quite clear about the intent of this passage. "The eighth quartet is autobiographical, and quotes a song known to all Russians: 'Broken by the hardships of captivity'." The song leads into a hushed murmuring, from which a solo cello in its highest register emerges to play an aria from *The Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk*, the opera which in 1936 had been so much vilified in *Pravda* that Shostakovich expected his arrest at any moment. In the opera, Katerina sings of her love for Sergei, unaware that he has already betrayed her. The cello solo trails away; the triple blows return with even greater violence than before; a solo violin, faltering, can barely begin "Broken by the hardships of captivity"; D–SCH reappears, utterly exhausted. It is difficult to understand how this music can ever have been seen as other than autobiographical.

The slow fifth movement is based mainly on the same thematic material as the first, and eventually dies away into emptiness. This music could well have been written to illustrate the final words of *Testimony*, in which Shostakovich broods over "the bitterness that has turned my life grey".

Felix Coster, saxophone

Felix Coster has studied saxophone for 7 years, and is currently studying Classical Saxophone at the Sydney Conservatorium of Music. In June, he will be touring with the SYO on their *2025 Big Sky Tour* through western NSW and will be playing clarinet, bass clarinet and alto saxophone in Ravel's orchestration of *Pictures at an Exhibition* by Mussorgsky.

Felix has particularly enjoyed performing works written for the saxophone in the 20th century by composers like: Heitor Villa–Lobos, Astor Piazzolla, Ryo Noda and Ronald Binge, and the French composers such as Henri Tomasi, Ida Gotkovsky, Pierre–Max Dubois, Paule Maurice and Gabriel Pierné. He has also enjoyed performing more recent Australian compositions such as Ross Edwards' *Full Moon Dances*.

The Glazunov Saxophone Concerto is well known to classical saxophonists, but is rarely played in its full orchestration. Felix is looking forward to this opportunity to play with the Bourbaki Ensemble in Glazunov's original scoring.

THE BOURBAKI ENSEMBLE

The Bourbaki Ensemble is a chamber string orchestra which has been giving concerts in Newtown since 2001. September 2024 saw the Ensemble's Sydney Opera House debut. Programmes include masterpieces of the string repertoire, as well as fascinating music by present–day composers. Each concert features at least one work by an Australian composer.

The sparkling and successful military career of General **Charles Denis Sauter Bourbaki** (1816–1897) was at one point interrupted by the humiliation of exile. After a string of victories in the Crimean War and a command in the *Garde impériale* under Napoleon III, Bourbaki was placed at the head of the *Armée de l'Est* during the Franco–Prussian War. Driven by hostile forces over the Swiss border, the army was detained for some weeks before being repatriated. The incident is vividly depicted in the Bourbaki Panorama, a must–see for all visitors to the Swiss city of Luzern.

Violins Warwick Pulley, Julia Pokorny, Joanna Buggy, Clare Fulton, Camille Hanrahan–Tan, Madeleina Hanrahan–Tan, Emlyn Lewis–Jones, Deborah McGowan, Jennifer Mee, Daniel Morris, Rob Newnham, Paul Pokorny, Michael Poulton, Victor Wu.

Violas Kathryn Ramsay, Hannah Keese, Rob Nijs, Philip Poulton, David Tocknell.

Violoncellos Ian Macourt, Liesje Croeser, Serena Devonshire, Deirdre Hanrahan–Tan, Ying Huang, Nicole McVicar, Catherine Willis.

Basses Sasha Cotis, Deniz Emul.

THE BOURBAKI ENSEMBLE

a century of string music

Gustav Holst Fugal Concerto
Imogen Holst Suite for Strings
Grażyna Bacewicz Concerto for Strings
Cecilia McDowall Great Hills
Angus Davison Mountain

Christine Draeger, flute
Rachel Tolmie, oboe

2.30 pm, Sunday 23 November 2025

The November Bourbaki Ensemble concert will feature a number of wonderful string works written within the span of exactly a century. Gustav Holst's *Fugal Concerto* (1923) will be performed by our great friends Christine Draeger and Rachel Tolmie. Holst's daughter Imogen selflessly devoted her life to promoting her father's music: it is heartening to see her own compositions at last emerging from the shade. The *Concerto for Strings* by Grażyna Bacewicz has been described as a "modern *Brandenburg Concerto*". UK composer Cecilia McDowall's *Great Hills* – also featuring Christine and Rachel – is inspired by the rolling downs of southern England, while Tasmanian composer Angus Davison's *Mountain* (2023) is a musical picture of kunanyi/Mount Wellington.

`www.bourbakiensemble.org`
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