THE BOURBAKI ENSEMBLE

landscapes and spacescapes

Vaughan Williams Variants of *Dives and Lazarus*

Peter Sculthorpe Songs of Sea and Sky

Aram Khachaturian Adagio from *Gayane*

Arnold Bax Irish Landscape

Andrzej Panufnik Landscape

Aaron Jay Kernis Musica Celestis

David Angell, conductor

2.30 pm, Sunday 3 May 2026

St. George's Hall, Newtown

Welcome to the first Bourbaki Ensemble concert for 2026, a programme of landscapes and spacescapes... with a seascape thrown in for good measure! Vaughan Williams' folksong adaptation for strings and harp evokes the spirit of rural England, while Andrzej Panufnik's imaginary landscape combines impressions of Poland, his birthplace, and England, his eventual home. Peter Sculthorpe transports us to the other side of the globe with his portrayal of the sea and sky of the Torres Strait. The "sky" theme continues into the second half of our programme with music from Aaron Jay Kernis and Aram Khachaturian – the latter of whom would surely have been startled by any link between his scores and outer space. These two are separated by a brief return to earth for Arnold Bax's depiction of his beloved Ireland. We wish listeners *bon voyage* for an entrancing expedition around the world and into the cosmos!

There will be two further Bourbaki Ensemble performances in 2026, in August and November – see the back cover for some details. Anyone who is not on our email list and would like to join can do so by scanning the QR code. Please join us next time for further programmes of music you (probably) haven't heard before!

The Bourbaki Ensemble's debut performance was given in February 2001, and today's concert marks our sixty–third "regular" programme, not counting our valued collaborations with soprano Ayşe Shanal and a joint concert with the Ristretto Chamber Choir. Since November 2020, our regular venue has been St. George's Hall at the Newtown High School of the Performing Arts. We are delighted to express our gratitude to the school and all those staff who have made the arrangement possible, and we look forward to giving many more concerts here in the future.

PROGRAMME

Traditional Dives and Lazarus

Camille Mercep, soprano

Ralph Vaughan Williams Five Variants of *Dives and Lazarus*

Andrzej Panufnik Landscape

Peter Sculthorpe Songs of Sea and Sky

Prelude—Saibai—Interlude
—Mission Hymn—Dance Song
—Lament—Postlude

INTERVAL
20 minutes

Aaron Jay Kernis Musica Celestis, for string orchestra

Arnold Bax Irish Landscape, from *Three Pieces for Small Orchestra*

Aram Khachaturian Adagio from *Gayane*

In considering the music of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, it is often felt that the "folk–song" composers – Bartók, Kodály, Holst and others – represent a tendency opposed to and irreconcilable with the great late Romantic symphonists such as Mahler, Bruckner and Sibelius. While this point of view is not inadmissible, an exception to the rule, an exception likewise to many other rules, and a composer who resolutely followed his own vision in defiance of public expectations and critical opinion was **Ralph Vaughan Williams** (1872–1958). For while Vaughan Williams took an active interest in English folk song, collecting and preserving traditional music before it was engulfed by the flood–tide of urbanisation and the twentieth century's rapid homogenisation of world culture, he also wrote no fewer than nine symphonies, which occupy a central place among his compositions.

Indeed, Vaughan Williams' entire mature musical output can be viewed as a series of works clustered along the backbone of the symphonies. The fourth symphony, for example, a violent and dissonant work which appalled listeners who had thought they knew what to expect from the composer, is associated with *Job: a Masque for Dancing* and the opera *Riders to the Sea*. The fifth symphony, by contrast, is serene and harmonious, though never thoughtlessly so; it is related to a number of works including *The Pilgrim's Progress* and the *Five Variants of 'Dives and Lazarus'*.

In folk music, the correspondence between words and music is commonly far from unique: the same tune can accommodate different words, while different singers will often set similar words to subtly different melodies. Vaughan Williams described the *Five Variants of 'Dives and Lazarus'* as a series of "reminiscences", from his own and others' folk music collections, of songs relating the New Testament parable of the rich man and the beggar. Scored for strings and one or more harps, the work was first performed in Carnegie Hall, Sir Adrian Boult conducting the New York Philharmonic as part of the 1939 World Fair. The basic theme, richly scored for strings in eight or more parts, leads into a variant in which a triple–time version of the melody is shared between lower and upper strings. The second variant, beginning with a slightly slower and intensely quiet theme for violas and an intermittent violin response, develops into an exultant *fortissimo* for the full ensemble. There follows a third variant featuring solo violin with harp support, and a fourth in which the violas introduce a more robust and dance–like character. The climactic fifth variant breaks off after a dozen bars to reveal a meditative cello solo, and the work ends with peacefully radiant seventeen–part string chords and harp arpeggios.

In the end, Vaughan Williams' devotion to folk song was an aspect of his concern that music should both reflect and serve the whole fabric of society. It is surely fitting that when the ashes of this "extraordinary, ordinary man" (as the writer Michael Kennedy described him) were interred in Westminster Abbey, the first music to be played was his own *Variants of 'Dives and Lazarus'*.

The life of **Andrzej Panufnik** (1914–1991) was shaped by some of the most tumultuous events of the twentieth century. After graduating from the Warsaw Conservatory in 1936 he studied for a short while in Vienna, Paris and London. With the rise of Nazism in Europe, however, he felt duty bound to return to his native Poland. In the early years of World War II he performed in cafes, large public gatherings such as concerts being forbidden under the Nazi occupation, as part of a piano duo with fellow composer Witold Lutosławski. After the war, Panufnik's increasing sense of frustration at bureaucratic interference with his creative work led to his dramatic defection to Britain, where he was granted political asylum, in 1954. As a result his music was immediately banned in Poland (though it appears that the occasional "unofficial" performance still took place); but in the west he became greatly sought after both as a composer, receiving commissions from such major figures as Yehudi Menuhin and Mstislav Rostropovich, and as a conductor. In 1990 he was at last able to return for a visit to Poland, and the following year he received a knighthood in the New Year honours list. Panufnik's daughter Roxanna (born 1968) is also an esteemed composer.

Andrzej Panufnik's *Landscape* for string orchestra, dating from 1962, is described by the composer as "an attempt to convey musically a landscape of my imagination, similar to those I have seen in Suffolk or remember from Poland – a boundless landscape which evokes melancholy… [Towards the end] one might feel that heavy clouds have gathered low over the land. In the last bars… one might imagine oneself staring at a point in the dissolving horizon until it fades into infinity".

Among the composers who have sought to develop a distinctively Australian style of composition, and who have seen their efforts rewarded by performances around the world, one of the most prominent is **Peter Sculthorpe** (1929–2014). Born in Launceston, Sculthorpe studied first at Melbourne University and subsequently at Oxford. His great interest in Balinese and Japanese music was one facet of a vision of an Australian music which need not rely solely on European traditions. Never (on the other hand) one to mindlessly reject valuable aspects of any culture, Sculthorpe wrote much fine music for stringed instruments, and described the string quartet as "one of the great achievements of Western civilisation".

Australian indigenous music has also been of lasting fascination for Sculthorpe. "As a composer," he wrote in his autobiography *Sun Music*, "it's always seemed foolish not to take heed of a music that has been shaped by this land over many thousands of years." Melodies both from northern Australia and from the Torres Strait are quoted in his compositions, and it is the latter which underpin the *Songs of Sea and Sky*. The original version of the work, for clarinet and piano, was composed in 1987 to a commission from Yale University; today we perform the 2003 version for string orchestra.

Perhaps the first impression obtained on listening to the *Songs of Sea and Sky* is of an immense spaciousness which evokes the brightness and clarity of the Torres Strait seascape. Over a pulsating bass drone, cellos begin the composition with a lengthy rhythmic and dramatic declamation, after which a flourish in the upper strings (originally a piano arpeggio) announces the second section of the work. Here, a traditional song from the island of Saibai is given to a solo violin over a sparse background. An interlude, mainly for violas, is succeeded by *Mission Hymn*, a variation of the Saibai tune recording the influence of nineteenth century religious music on indigenous culture, and by a vigorous and rhythmic *Dance Song*. The traditional song returns in a *Lament*, and a brief *Postlude* rounds off the work with spacious ocean textures and the cries of seabirds.

Aaron Jay Kernis (born 1960) is an American composer best known for his orchestral music. He was awarded the 2002 Grawemeyer Prize for his cello concerto *Colored Field*, and a Pulitzer Prize for his second string quartet. The composer writes that *Musica Celestis*, a work for string orchestra based on the slow movement of an earlier quartet, "is inspired by the medieval conception of that phrase which refers to the singing of the angels". A central section in which the whole ensemble strives upwards to the heavens in scales of increasing virtuosity is preceded and followed by ethereal textures which suggest the initial desire for, and eventual attainment of those heavens.

Perhaps **Arnold Bax** (1883–1953) has never been more aptly described than by his own self–assessment, an "unabashed romantic". Born in London, he was much attracted to Ireland – both its landscape and its mythology, – and at various times was also captivated by fantasies of Russia and of the Nordic countries. Musically, he was very little influenced by English folksong, as were other composers of his generation, but rather by Wagner and Debussy. In Bax's music, descending chromatic lines frequently create an atmosphere of nostalgia, perhaps sorrow, never, however, admitting self–pity. His sound–world is not atonal, but tonal harmonies are commonly obscured by added notes, creating a poignant mesh of sound which typically resolves, eventually, onto a beautifully spaced major triad.

Bax's *Irish Landscape* is scored for strings and harp, with the inclusion of an important part for solo violin. One theme is heard in the violas at the very outset: a rising arpeggio with Bax's characteristic interpolated chromatics. A second theme, also introduced by violas, has more of a "traditional Irish" contour, though its accompanying harmonies are still Bax's own. There is a central episode dominated by solo violins, viola and cello before a climax for the full ensemble leads to a luminous texture of harp arpeggios and widely spaced string chords.

Armenian Soviet composer **Aram Khachaturian** (1903–1978) is best known for his orchestral works and ballets. Of the former, perhaps his masterpiece is the *Violin Concerto*, a work which, written for and championed by David Oistrakh, continues the romantic tradition of violin writing exemplified by the Tchaikovsky concerto. His *Piano Concerto*, sometimes considered brash and overblown, requires fearsome virtuosity from the soloist, and has for that very reason remained popular among those pianists who can master its prodigious difficulties.

Khachaturian's music has at times become curiously prone to mis– (or re–)interpretation. The *Adagio of Spartacus and Phrygia*, a love scene from the ballet *Spartacus*, became well known as the theme music for the BBC series *The Onedin Line* – despite the absence of any nautical reference in the original. His earlier ballet *Gayane* features the thrilling and ever–popular *Sabre Dance*, but is nowadays rarely given in full. First performed in 1942, the work has nothing to do with spacescapes, nor even anything (other than the provision of a colourful background) with landscapes. Set on a Soviet collective farm, it contrasts the young, hard–working and patriotic Gayane with her lazy counter–revolutionary husband Giko, a drunkard, embezzler and arsonist who (spoiler alert) does not survive to the final curtain. All this notwithstanding, the *Adagio* in which Gayane's friends console her on her marriage to a worthless scoundrel has become for a later generation indelibly associated with the emptiness and silence of interplanetary space as portrayed in the film *2001: A Space Odyssey*. Uninterrupted by any dialogue, Khachaturian's music accompanies the journey of the spaceship *Discovery* and the everyday life of its crew in the course of their expedition to the moons of Jupiter. The *Adagio* fades into silence as Stanley Kubrick's picture approaches its haunting climax and enigmatic conclusion.

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. Highlights have included a Bourbaki concert in the Utzon Room of the Sydney Opera House; and 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. David has been guest conductor for two concerts with the Crendon Chamber Orchestra (Thame, UK), where he presented 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. The first Bourbaki Ensemble concert of 2022 premiered his arrangement of the accompaniment to Wagner's *Wesendonck Lieder*, which was heard again in the Sydney Opera House in 2024; 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. David's most recent project, a string version of Manuel de Falla's *Quatre Pièces Espagnoles*, was heard in the final Bourbaki concert of 2024.

THE BOURBAKI ENSEMBLE

Charles Denis Sauter Bourbaki (1816–1897), later a leading figure in the French military, grew up in a home where music, literature and science were greatly valued. Already as a boy he was fascinated by the advancing possibilities of manned flight, initiated by the Montgolfier brothers half a century earlier, and speculated that a balloon might even be a feasible vehicle for a journey to the heavens. His teachers at the *École Spéciale Militaire* would certainly have disabused him of this notion; most likely he had already come to the same conclusion. But the fancy for leaving the earth never disappeared; his library is said to have included Cyrano de Bergerac's *Les États et Empires de la Lune*, and it appears that in the early 1860s, he wrote his own tale *De la Terre aux Étoiles*. With the immense popularity of Jules Verne's similarly titled novel (1865), any hope of publication vanished, and no copy of the manuscript survives.

Violins Warwick Pulley, Julia Pokorny, Clare Fulton, Camille Hanrahan–Tan, Madeleina Hanrahan–Tan, Paul Hoskinson, Emlyn Lewis–Jones, Deborah McGowan, Chantal Nguyen, Paul Pokorny, Carol Tang, Victor Wu.

Violas Kathryn Ramsay, Hannah Keese, James Le Maitre, David Loonam.

Violoncellos Ian Macourt, Serena Devonshire, Ying Huang, Catherine Willis.

Basses Sasha Cotis, Deniz Emul.

Harp Marjorie Maydwell.

THE BOURBAKI ENSEMBLE

future performances

There will be two further Bourbaki Ensemble concerts in 2026. On Sunday 9 August we will present a programme including the Elgar *Introduction and Allegro*, one of the great English string orchestra works of the twentieth century. We conclude the year on Sunday 22 November by welcoming leading Sydney trombonist Greg van der Struik to perform his own *Concerto*, accompanied by the strings of the Bourbaki Ensemble and a quartet of guest woodwinds. For both concerts, we will be back in today's venue of St. George's Hall at Newtown High School of the Performing Arts. We look forward to seeing you (t)here!

The Bourbaki Ensemble is a chamber string orchestra which has been giving concerts in Newtown since 2001. Further concerts have been given at Christ Church St. Laurence, Macquarie University and the Garrison Church in The Rocks; September 2024 saw the Ensemble's Sydney Opera House debut. Besides masterpieces of the string repertoire, programmes include fascinating music by present–day composers including John Adams, Astor Piazzolla and Valentyn Silvestrov. Each concert features works by at least one Australian composer, most recently Peter Sculthorpe, Angus Davison and Iain Grandage. The Bourbaki Ensemble has given world premieres of well over a dozen pieces, some written especially for our concerts.

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