THE BOURBAKI ENSEMBLE

three centuries of music for strings

Vivaldi Concerto for four violins in B minor
Bizet Adagietto from *L'Arlesienne*
Grainger Irish Tune from County Derry
Mozart Divertimento in F major, K138
Arvo Pärt Cantus in memoriam Benjamin Britten
Britten Simple Symphony

David Angell, conductor

7.30 pm, Thursday 14 August 2003

The Garrison (Holy Trinity) Church
corner Argyle and Fort Streets, The Rocks

PROGRAMME

Antonio Vivaldi Concerto for four violins in B minor, Op. 3 No. 10

1. Allegro
2. Largo
3. Allegro

Warwick Pulley, Richard Pulley, Esther Cheng, Emlyn Lewis–Jones, violins

Georges Bizet Adagietto from *L'Arlesienne*

Percy Grainger Irish Tune from County Derry

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart Divertimento in F major

1. [Allegro]
2. Andante
3. Presto

Arvo Pärt Cantus in memoriam Benjamin Britten

Benjamin Britten Simple Symphony

1. Boisterous Bourrée
2. Playful Pizzicato
3. Sentimental Saraband
4. Frolicsome Finale

Antonio Vivaldi (1678–1741) was a prolific composer of choral music, opera and smaller instrumental pieces. It seems unlikely, however, that his fame will ever rest on anything more firmly than on his immense output of concertos. Vivaldi wrote for almost every instrument available to him, and evidently delighted in composing both solo concertos and works for larger concertante groups. The latter include such pieces as the *concerto con molti stromenti* RV558 for the unprecedented – and never imitated – solo combination of two violins, two recorders, two mandolins, two chalumeaux, two theorbos, cello and tromba marina; but he also wrote many works for two or more similar instruments, his catalogue containing concertos for two guitars (to be performed at the next Bourbaki Ensemble concert), for two trumpets, for two cellos, and a large number for two, three or even four violins.

The work we perform this evening comes from *L'Estro Armonico*, the set of twelve concertos issued in 1711 by the Dutch publisher Estienne Roger. The word "estro" is given in the dictionary as "whim" or "fancy"; perhaps "harmonic fantasies" would be an appropriate translation of the title. The B minor concerto boasts a striking opening, two of the four soloists being accompanied by a lone viola for four bars before the full ensemble joins in. The first movement alternates sections of rapid figuration, usually for one soloist at a time, with episodes in which all four, together with the orchestra, combine different material. It is followed by a brief but powerful *Largo*, and then a *Larghetto* in which Vivaldi's extraordinary musical imagination is displayed as the basic harmonies are articulated in four different patterns simultaneously by the four soloists.

In the fast and attractive final movement Vivaldi occupies himself with metrical invention. It is not long before the initial firm two–in–a–bar rhythm is modified by the apparent loss of half a bar; later on the listener may well feel that the movement has slipped into three, or even five, beats to the bar. For the performers, the tension between the printed page and its audible expression is sometimes nerve–racking but always exhilarating. A brief tutti incorporating rising chromatic scales and repeated notes brings the concerto to a firm conclusion.

In 1857 **Georges Bizet** was awarded, at his second attempt, the *Prix de Rome*. Probably the most important opening available to a young French composer of the time, the principal benefit of the prize was (and is) a scholarship supporting four years' work and study at the French Academy in Rome. While travelling to Italy to take up his place at the end of that year Bizet spent some days exploring the Provençal region of southern France; it was, perhaps, a fifteen–year–old memory of this journey that inspired his incidental music for Alphonse Daudet's play *L'Arlesienne* ("The Girl from Arles") in 1872. Bizet's music, scored for a theatre orchestra of twenty six players, has many attractive moments; it only achieved independent renown, however, when he rearranged four of its numbers into a concert suite for a more conventional symphony orchestra. The third of the pieces, entitled *Adagietto*, is scored for strings alone; its tender and somewhat sentimental phrases depict the reunion in old age of two lovers separated since their youth.

Bizet was born in Paris in 1838, and after returning from his tenure of the *Prix de Rome* lived there for the remainder of his life. His last years were occupied with the composition and staging of *Carmen*. Largely because its principal roles are given to factory girls, soldiers and smugglers rather than the kings, gods and heroes of classical opera, *Carmen* encountered obstruction from the management of the Paris Opera, abuse from critics and incomprehension from the public. Although it continued to be given throughout 1875, the work was a decided failure. Legend relates that during the performance of 3 June Marie Galli–Marié, singing the title role, felt a thrust of fear in the scene where Carmen sees death in the cards; she struggled offstage and fainted in the wings. The same evening the composer, disappointed and sick, died. He had not yet reached his thirty seventh birthday.

Born in Australia, **Percy Grainger** (1882–1961) spent most of his life overseas, performing and teaching in Europe and the United States. In 1918 he became an American citizen. Nevertheless he always felt his Australian origin to be an important influence on his character and on his music. It appears that he had some intention towards the end of his life of returning to Australia permanently, but this was prevented by a combination of professional commitments, ill health and the possibility of adverse financial effects.

Anecdotes abound of Grainger's unconventional behaviour. He was married in 1928 on stage at the Hollywood Bowl, before an audience of some 20000. The ceremony was the culmination of a concert at which, as a tribute to his bride Ella Ström, Grainger had conducted his recent composition *To a Nordic Princess*. In the following year, a visit to the ageing composer Frederick Delius – in Grainger's esteem second only to Grieg – must have been like the irruption of a tornado.

> "Grainger would dash from one room to another, and, bouncing down the staircase in two jumps, fly through the doorway in mid–air and land with a crash beside Delius's carriage halfway across the yard; the old man

would shake his head and say that he really could not bear it." (Eric Fenby, *Delius as I Knew Him*.)

Like many other composers of the early twentieth century, Grainger was actively engaged in collecting, transcribing and publishing folk music. Many of his own compositions exhibit the strong influence of British and overseas folk song: *Brigg Fair* is a setting of a Lincolnshire song and the popular *Country Gardens* an improvisation on a Morris Dance tune, while the *Danish Folk Song Suite* draws on his researches into Scandinavian music. Irish music was less of an interest of Grainger's, but his setting of the *Irish Tune from County Derry*, better known to listeners as *O Danny Boy*, is much admired. It was among the first of Grainger's works to be published.

The *Divertimento* in F major, K138, is one of three composed in early 1772 by **Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart** (1756–1791). No fewer than six symphonies also emerged within the first few months of that year. Perhaps Mozart was deliberately allocating himself some time free of public activity; in the latter part of 1771 the fifteen–year–old composer, accompanied by his father Leopold, had undertaken a tour of Italy during which, at one point, he had received the libretto for a new opera *Ascanio in Alba*, composed the music, rehearsed it and seen it performed, all in the space of seven weeks.

The three *Divertimenti* for strings are sometimes referred to as Mozart's "Salzburg symphonies". The term is in some ways rather odd. The works are each in three movements, are very light in texture and are scarcely "symphonic" in the modern sense of the word. On the other hand, Mozart's acknowledged symphonies from 1772 also contain an abundance of fast and joyous music, and he was experimenting with three– and four–movement schemes; the term is therefore perhaps less inappropriate than it seems at first sight.

The first movement of K138 opens with a firm three–note figure which introduces a leaping theme for the first violins, animated by driving quavers and dashing scales. With only two or three moments of relaxation, the energy of the writing continues through to the last chords. Flowing second violin semiquavers underpin a serene melody at the beginning of the *Andante*; a certain poignancy results from the harmonic turn as early as the second bar. An expansive episode places sustained high notes in the violins above luxuriant figures in violas, celli and bass. The finale is a rondo: its vivacious first theme recurs throughout the movement in alternation with contrasting episodes.

One of the musical results of the decline and eventual collapse of the Soviet Union was that composers of the former Eastern bloc began to find it much easier to reach Western audiences. Before the 1980s, by and large, only a very few of the most prominent composers (Shostakovich, Prokofiev, Khachaturian) were known to the average listener in the West; afterwards one began to hear performances and recordings of a wide range of music from Russia and its satellite states. Composers who benefited from these changes included Giya Kancheli from Georgia, Sofia Gubaidulina (Russia), Peteris Vasks (Latvia) and **Arvo Pärt**.

Born in Estonia in 1935, Pärt studied at the Tallinn Conservatory, graduating in 1963. For the remainder of the 1960s his works, often highly complex in texture and construction, received mixed responses, and in some cases were officially banned from performance. In the early seventies he virtually ceased composition, emerging from his silence in 1976 with an utterly transformed musical aesthetic. The composer refers to this new style as "tintinnabulation" – literally, a tinkling of bells – and explains it as the construction of musical works from "very few elements... one voice, two voices... primitive materials".

The "primitive material" of which the *Cantus in memoriam Benjamin Britten* is formed is no more than a descending scale. The first violins play one note of the scale, then two, then three, extending the scale one note further at each repetition until it covers nearly three octaves. Other instruments, entering later, play just the same material at a half, a quarter, an eighth or a sixteenth of the tempo, while the regular tolling of a bell emphasizes the funereal mood. Despite – or more likely because of – this simplicity of means, the cumulative effect for the listener is hypnotic.

In 1980, frustrated with the restrictions placed on his creative work by the Soviet bureaucracy, Pärt emigrated with his family to Vienna. He now lives in Berlin.

The *Simple Symphony* by **Benjamin Britten** (1913–1976) is an alliterative amalgamation of precocious pieces from the composer's childhood. It begins boldly with the striking sonorities of a *Boisterous Bourrée* whose main melody derives directly from a schoolboy suite of pieces for piano. This tune's treatment is consistently contrapuntal; it is artfully alternated with the lilting lyricism of a short song, authored – amazingly – in 1923, before Britten turned ten.

Bows are banished from the next number, a *Playful Pizzicato*. Menacingly marked *presto possibile* (as fast as feasible), this scurrying scherzo is also adapted from a piano piece. There is an inventive interlude with colossal chords on violas and violoncellos, bolstered by bass, and a somewhat solid tune on top. A rigorously repeated statement of the scherzo ends this episode.

The *Sentimental Saraband* displays depths of extraordinary eloquence for an opus originally attributable to an adolescent. A minor–key melody, plaintive and passionate, is vouchsafed to violins in the initial instance, and subsequently shared among the entire ensemble. From a prolonged *pianissimo* violas and violoncellos unfold in unison a tranquil theme, softly supported by pulsating *pizzicati*. An agitated appearance of the initial idea leads to lumbering *pesante* passages in celli and contrabass; but the disquiet diminishes, and soon the *Saraband* closes calmly.

The work is wrapped up with a marvellous movement engagingly entitled *Frolicsome Finale*. A fiery flourish immediately introduces a mysterious melody (first fiddles, over an active accompaniment). Seconds shortly embark upon an excerpt from a syncopated song, rapidly replaced by an extended extemporisation on memorable motives from earlier episodes. A powerful *pizzicato* and a short silence precede the *presto* with which the composition concludes.

The *Simple Symphony* is dedicated devotedly to Audrey Alston.

Violins Warwick Pulley, Richard Pulley, Esther Cheng, Valerie Gutenev, Paul Hoskinson, Emlyn Lewis–Jones, Paul Pokorny.

Violas Natalie Adby, Janice Buttle, Kirrillie Moore, Philip Silver.

Violoncellos Rosalind Graham, Guy Curd, Ian Macourt.

Bass Nicole Murray–Prior.

Percussion Jane Makeham.