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VIVA 21

Cameron Hill
Helen Ayres
Stephen King
Simon Cobcroft
Konstantin Shamray

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Program

Wednesday, 22 September 2021, 7.30pm
Adelaide Town Hall

Cameron Hill *violin*
Helen Ayres *violin*
Stephen King *viola*
Simon Cobcroft *cello*
Konstantin Shamray *piano*

Peter SCULTHORPE (1929-2014)

String Quartet No. 15 (1999) 16 min

I *A song for dancing*
II *An exorcism*
III *A song for mourning*
IV *A love song*
V *A cry of joy*

Antonín DVOŘÁK (1841-1904)

String Quartet No. 12 in F major, op 96 'American' (1893) 30 min

I *Allegro ma non troppo*
II *Lento*
III *Molto vivace*
IV *Finale: Vivace ma non troppo*

Johannes BRAHMS (1833-1897)

Piano Quintet in F minor, op 34 (1864) 41 min

I *Allegro non troppo*
II *Andante, un poco adagio*
III *Scherzo: Allegro*
IV *Finale: Poco sostenuto – Allegro non troppo – Presto, non troppo*

With special thanks to our Ensemble Patrons the Berg Family Foundation
for its support of this concert. And to our Concert Champions,
Dr Susan Marsden & Michael Szwarcbord.

About the Music

*From composer **Peter Sculthorpe**:*
My String Quartet No. 15 is based upon a sequence of songs belonging to the Simori mountain people of Western New Guinea. In his book, *Music in New Guinea* (1967), the Dutch ethnomusicologist Jaap Kunst describes these songs in some detail. For the most part, the descriptions given by him dictate the structure and scalic material of each movement of the quartet. The work consists of five short movements, played almost without break. It should be said that String Quartet No. 15 does not set out to imitate Simori music. Rather, the work is a personal response to it. Unlike the Simori sequence of songs, for instance, the five movements of the quartet are motivically related. Falling minor thirds, heard at the very outset, are especially harmonically related; and the harmonies that I employ are characteristic of my present style. Also characteristic are figurations suggesting the Indonesian gamelan, as well as rhythms associated with northern Australian Aboriginal music. Both can be found in the traditional music of New Guinea.

Antonín Dvořák brings hope to all who are approaching a quarter- or mid-life crisis, as his great talents were not fully honed nor recognised until he had spent more than a decade playing in bands for weddings and parties, teaching, and working as Principal Viola in the major Prague pit orchestra. He graduated from his tertiary studies with a second prize, not a first. His biography – with its gentle pleasures of pigeon-fancying, trainspotting and early-morning nature walks, – is a far cry from the scandalous lifestyle that many of his composing contemporaries lived, but it was not without passion: for his country, his native language, and of course for music.

By the mid–1880s Dvořák was receiving invitations and commissions from across Europe, and particularly from Britain. It was enough to allow him to buy a modest country retreat in Vysoká, a quiet place to concentrate on composing. In 1891, though, he had an offer he couldn't refuse: the wealthy Mrs Jeanette Thurber lured Dvořák away from his beloved home to be Director of her Conservatory in New York. He would, she hoped, inspire a new school of American composition.

She made an interesting choice. People think that Dvořák quoted lots of folk tunes, but in truth it's more common to find just a glimpse of one which then set him off down his own compositional path. Mrs Thurber may have hoped that Dvořák would imbue some of her students with a similar ability to absorb the musical elements around them, and develop them into individual artistic statements.

New York was interesting, but the homesick composer found the social expectations difficult and tiring. He would visit Central Park Zoo to see the pigeons, and go down to the harbour to study the steamships in the way he used to catalogue steam trains, but it wasn't the same. The other sore spot was that he and his wife Anna had left four of their beloved children behind, bringing only Otilie and Antonín jr with them.

By June 1893 Dvořák needed a holiday. His young assistant (later son-in-law) Josef Kovarik suggested a journey half-

way across America to Spillville, Iowa, which had a large number of Czech immigrants. The other four Dvořák children came out from Europe for this summer interlude. It was a happy one: almost everyone spoke his beloved native language, his family was reunited, he could play Czech hymns in the church of St Wenceslas, and apart from a lack of pigeons and trains it was all very relaxing.

Over a mere two weeks or so of that June, Dvořák was inspired to sketch out a sunny string quartet in F major.

It has become known as the 'American', but really it is pure Bohemia. Just as with his 'New World' Symphony, it is the artistic statement of a Czech man who finds himself in a foreign land – a fairly agreeable one, but not one which can ever dominate the sensibilities of such a patriot. Musicologists continue to argue over whether he really included musical references to Native American or African-American melodies.

The quartet opens with a wonderfully strong theme. Due to its pentatonic mode (five notes, as though using just the black notes of the piano), to some ears it may actually sound a little Asian but this is a common feature of much folk music around the world, and sounds just as much Czech as anything else.

A beautiful though poignant theme in the lilting second movement, is presented by the violin before being taken up by the cello. It does have a hint of the blues about it, and the haunting atmosphere lingers right through to the last shimmering chord.
Most agree that a real American motif is to be found in the third movement – that of a local birdcall, heard during one of Dvořák's morning nature walks with his wife. It may have been the Scarlet Tanager. The minor key of the central Trio section reinforces the movement's rather earnest character.

The catchy rhythms and cheerful busyness of the Finale have suggested the railway to more than one listener. Perhaps the potent air of optimism which hangs over at least three of the movements is part of what endears this quartet so strongly to New World listeners, reflecting how they would like to see themselves.

Brahms liked nothing more than composing chamber music, as the statistics show: a repertoire of 24 major pieces, more than any of the main composers since Beethoven. The appeal of chamber music for Brahms was its audience – not in quantity, but let's say, in quality. When writing chamber music, Brahms was writing for a select group, made up of people who credited themselves with a superior musical intelligence upon which to build their appreciation. Brahms could write for these people secure in the knowledge that they would understand the intelligence in his music, allowing him to try things out before exposing himself in the more public forums of symphony concerts, and helping him to strive for perfection of form and content.

In a classic example of the long gestations for which Brahms is notorious, the Piano Quintet took a circuitous route to find its ideal expression. It started out in 1862 as a string quintet on the model of Schubert's, with an extra cello added to the normal string quartet formation. His friends and advisors responded with enthusiasm, but the violinist Joseph Joachim, whose opinion Brahms esteemed, confessed after

playing it a few times that it needed a lift in texture: 'What I miss in it for unalloyed pleasure is, to pinpoint it in a single phrase, an attractive sonority… The instrumentation is not energetic enough to my ears to convey the powerful rhythmic convulsions; the sound is almost helplessly thin for the musical thought. Then again for long stretches everything lies too thickly.'

Brahms reconfigured the piece for two pianos, but was still dissatisfied on this question of sonority, and gave the piece a third incarnation bringing together the best of both worlds: combining piano with strings. The Piano Quintet was essentially a new kind of chamber music formation, an innovation of Brahms' hero Robert Schumann. The idea of a piano blending on an equal expressive footing with a string quartet had become a more attractive possibility with the dramatic improvements to the concert grand's sonority and depth which developed in the 1860s. For Brahms, this formation addressed precisely the concerns of Joachim, lending the piece the desired combination of force and lyricism.

The greatness of the Piano Quintet derives from the wealth of intelligent musical invention it contains. The first movement, in sonata form, begins with a short exposition which contains the statements of a declamatory first theme and a contrasting sensitive an lyrical second theme. These are then 'put through the wringer' of development, Brahms concocting and exploring an extensive chain of different treatments of this material, shifting between lingering reflection and accelerating outbursts, before the opening is recounted in the recapitulation. Brahms then gives himself some extra scope for free development by appending a coda which builds from a meditative texture to a concluding flourish.

Brahms treats his structural outlines even more freely in the other movements, reinforcing the observation that these are simply devices for guiding the composer's imagination. The second movement's 'song without words' melody is stated by the piano before the strings respond, building a sustained reflection on this noble phrase. The piano takes the lead in unleashing the gusto of the concertolike *Scherzo*, while the strings set a haunting, deeply expressive mood to introduce the *Finale*. Here Brahms gives free rein to his skill in the method Schoenberg described as 'developing variation', characterised by rich, endless invention upon motivic cells and melodic elements. The movement traverses a broad palette of emotional characters and intensity, from rustic jauntiness to Romantic expressionism, before building to its impetuous climax.

The Piano Quintet was premiered in 1866 at the Leipzig Conservatorium. Brahms' associate, the conductor Hermann Levi, who had played through the two-piano version with Clara Schumann and who had also been in Baden-Baden in 1864, declared, upon hearing it in its final form: 'The quintet is beautiful beyond measure: no-one who didn't know it in its earlier forms – string quintet and sonata – would believe that it was conceived and written for other instruments. Not a single note gives me the impression of an arrangement: all the ideas have a much more succinct colour. Out of the monotony of the two pianos, a model of tonal beauty has arisen; out of a piano duo accessible to only a few musicians, a restorative for every musiclover – a masterpiece of chamber music.'

Meet the Artists

Cameron Hill is a violinist who appears frequently in Australia as a soloist, chamber musician and orchestral player. He studied in Melbourne with Cathryn Bills, William Hennessy and Alice Waten, and in Vienna with Dora Schwarzberg and Boris Kuschnir. He has performed as a concerto soloist with many Australian orchestras.
During 2014, Cameron appeared as guest concertmaster of the MSO for several months and in 2015 toured and performed as guest leader of the Australian String Quartet. He is currently the Associate Concertmaster of the ASO.

Helen Ayres is a Doctoral graduate of the University of Melbourne. She has appeared as guest of numerous Australian ensembles including Flinders Quartet, Melbourne Chamber Orchestra, Melbourne Symphony Orchestra and guest principal with Orchestra Victoria and Tasmanian Symphony Orchestra. Helen is currently playing as a guest with the London Philharmonic Orchestra and studying pedagogy at the Yehudi Menuhin School.

Stephen King is the violist of the Australian String Quartet, based at the University of Adelaide. Prior to this he spent almost nine years performing with the Australian Chamber Orchestra. This included a major role in planning and running the ACO education program and ACO2.
Stephen grew up in Canberra and after an architecture degree commenced formal viola studies with Elizabeth Morgan in Brisbane, then James Dunham, Kathy Murdock and Michael Tree in the USA. Stephen holds a Doctorate in Chamber Music from the University of Maryland and has worked closely with the Emerson and Guarneri String Quartets.

Simon Cobcroft enjoys a diverse life as a performer of solo, orchestral and chamber music in Australia and further afield. Since 2014 he has been Principal Cello with the Adelaide Symphony Orchestra, and has also held the positions of Associate Principal Cello with the Queensland Symphony Orchestra and Sub-Principal Cello with the Malaysian Philharmonic Orchestra.
Simon is passionate about education, and has taught at the Elder Conservatorium and the Queensland Conservatorium. He plays on a beautiful English cello made in 1840 by Thomas Kennedy. In his spare time, he loves to cook.

Described as an exhilarating performer with faultless technique and fearless command of the piano, Australian based pianist **Konstantin Shamray** enjoys performing on an international level with the world's leading orchestras and concert presenters.
In 2008, Konstantin burst onto the concert scene when he won First Prize at the Sydney International Piano Competition. He is the first and only competitor to date in the 40 years of the competition to win both First and People's Choice Prizes, in addition to six other prizes. He then went on to win First Prize at the 2011 Klavier Olympiade in Bad Kissingen, Germany, and he was awarded the festival's coveted Luitpold Prize for 'outstanding musical achievements'.
Konstantin is Lecturer in Piano at the Elder Conservatorium of Music at the University of Adelaide.

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