

SUBLIME STRINGS

Saturday 30 January, 2pm and 4.30pm
Queen Victoria Museum and Art Gallery, Launceston

TSO musicians perform chamber music

Emma McGrath violin

Jennifer Owen violin

Douglas Coghill viola

Jonathan Békés cello

BARBER Adagio (8')

MONTGOMERY Strum (7')

BEETHOVEN String Quartet in G, Op 18 No 2 (26')

American composer Samuel Barber (1910-1981) is best known for a single work, the celebrated Adagio for Strings. The Adagio, in fact, is an arrangement of the slow movement of Barber's String Quartet, which was composed in 1936. It is the original version of the Adagio – the version for string quartet – that is performed in this concert. Barber has chosen the somewhat remote key of B-flat minor (a key signature with five flats) and the unusual time signature of 4/2. In choosing the latter, the printed page gives the appearance of music in the antique style and the stepwise motion of the principal theme, which is heard at the outset, bears a resemblance to the ancient art of plainsong. Perhaps this accounts, in part, for the timeless quality of Barber's haunting music. The String Quartet was composed when Barber was only 26 years of age. He would go on to write many others works – including symphonies, concertos and operas – but he is remembered, above all, for the poignant Adagio.

We remain with an American composer for the second work, Strum, by Jessie Montgomery (b.1981). Strum was composed in 2006 and revised in 2012. The composer writes:

Originally conceived for the formation of a cello quintet, the voicing is often spread wide over the ensemble, giving the music an expansive quality of sound. Within Strum, I utilized texture motives, layers of rhythmic or harmonic ostinati that string together to form a bed of sound for melodies to weave in and out. The strumming pizzicato serves as a texture motive and the primary driving rhythmic underpinning of the piece. Drawing on American folk idioms and the spirit of dance and movement, the piece has a kind of narrative that begins with fleeting nostalgia and transforms into ecstatic celebration.

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827) composed the six string quartets which make up Op 18 in the period 1798-1800. Shortly after arriving in Vienna from Bonn, in November 1792, Beethoven commenced lessons with Joseph Haydn, who had done more than any other composer to establish and champion the string quartet. Understandably, Beethoven held off writing quartets until he felt skilled and confident enough to meet the challenge set by his illustrious teacher. The Op 18 quartets are his first essays in the genre. The second in the set, Op 18 No 2, opens with a sunny Allegro. Symmetrical phrasing abounds along with one of Beethoven's favourite devices – a unison statement followed by silence. The slow movement, marked Adagio cantabile, is in the key of C and includes a surprising uptempo episode (Allegro) in F. The good-humoured Scherzo brings a return to G and the quartet closes with a rollicking finale (Allegro molto quasi Presto) where Beethoven exhausts all possibilities (melodic and rhythmic) of the short figure heard at the beginning. Haydn was renowned for his witty finales. Here, Beethoven takes a leaf out of his teacher's book.

Robert Gibson, Tasmanian Symphony Orchestra, © 2021

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