

BORODIN & BARTÓK

Saturday 22 May, 4.30pm
Design Tasmania, Launceston

TSO musicians perform chamber music

Emma McGrath violin

Jennifer Owen violin

Doug Coghill viola

Jonathan Békés cello

BORODIN String Quartet No 2 in D, III, Notturmo (8')

BARTÓK String Quartet No 5 (32')

Allegro

Adagio molto

Scherzo: Alla bulgarese

Andante

Finale: Allegro vivace

Alexander Borodin (1833–1887) was a professor of chemistry and remained a practising scientist his entire life. Music was a side activity for him, but a very important one. He composed symphonies, operas, chamber music and songs, and belonged to a group of Russian composers known as 'The Five' (sometimes called 'The Mighty Handful') which included Rimsky-Korsakov and Mussorgsky. Despite the group's Russian nationalist objectives, Borodin's two string quartets were inspired, in part, by Beethoven's quartets. The String Quartet No 2 was composed in 1881 and is dedicated to the composer's wife. It's often said that the work commemorates 20 years of married life. The most famous of the quartet's four movements is the penultimate one, the Notturmo. In the key of A major, it commences with a long, lyrical theme (marked 'cantabile ed espressivo') enunciated by the cello and immediately taken up and repeated by the first violin. A contrasting idea is introduced (a rising scale followed by a downward motif embellished by trills) and in the course of the movement the two themes are varied, disassembled and (occasionally) combined. The work ends in a radiant halo of A major.

The string quartet enjoyed a renaissance in the 20th century thanks, most especially, to contributions made by Béla Bartók (1881–1945) and Dmitri Shostakovich. The former composed six quartets over a 30-year period. The String Quartet No 5, which was commissioned by noted American music philanthropist Elizabeth Sprague Coolidge, was premièred in Washington DC in 1935. Bartók, at that time, was still living in his native Hungary but would emigrate to the United States in 1940. The String Quartet No 5 illustrates his long-established interest in symmetrical structures. At the macro level, we can see this in the central movement flanked by slow movements which, in turn, are flanked by quick movements, thus: fast-slow-scherzo-slow-fast. Additionally, a theme from the first movement reappears in the last movement, and the fourth movement is a free variation of the second. At the micro level, we can see symmetrical structures played out in the first movement where three themes presented in the opening section are reprised in reverse order later on. In addition to composing music, Bartók conducted folk music research in Hungary and surrounding countries and amassed an enormous collection of sound recordings. He also notated folk music. Bartók was struck by the ways in which the tuning systems, scales, rhythms and performance practices of folk cultures differed from mainstream Western music. Inevitably, these observations fed into his own compositions and help to explain the expanded tonality of Bartók's music along with irregular rhythms, percussive effects, drone accompaniments and non-traditional articulations. Folk influences are made explicit in the subtitle of the third movement: 'in the Bulgarian style'.

Robert Gibson, Tasmanian Symphony Orchestra, © 2021

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