

2024



STEEL CITY STRINGS

Illawarra's Chamber Orchestra

Beauty

OUT OF DARKNESS

presents

Steel City Strings traverses continents, centuries and cultures as we examine what it is to be human. Criss-crossing musical worlds, the program includes music by Gerald Finzi, Granville Bantock, Franz Schreker and acclaimed Yorta Yorta soprano and composer Deborah Cheetham-Fraillon.

17 March **Shellharbour Civic Centre** Sunday 2pm

23 March **Wollongong Art Gallery** Saturday 7.30pm

24 March **Berry School of Arts** Sunday 2pm



Beauty out of Darkness is
proudly supported by the
NSW Government through Create NSW



Upcoming Steel City Strings performances

Reel Music

Sunday 16 June	2pm	Berry School of Arts
Saturday 22 June	7.30pm	Wollongong Art Gallery
Sunday 23 June	2pm	Bowral Memorial Hall

REEL MUSIC navigates a trail through cinematic classics such as Psycho, Cinema Paradiso, Riptide and more. A commissioned work from Lauren Mercovich creates a soundscape for the imagination.

Choral Riffs

Sunday 15 September	2pm	Bowral Memorial Hall
Saturday 21 September	7.30pm	St Francis Xavier Cathedral, Wollongong
Sunday 22 September	2pm	Nowra School of Art

In CHORAL RIFFS we are joined by con voci chamber choir and Wollcon Chamber Choir to sing a new work commissioned from Australian composer Sally Whitwell, as well as choral music by Eric Whitacre and Gabriel Fauré. Enjoy the colour and vibrancy of mixed voices singing as one, joined in harmonious partnership with the luxuriant sounds of Steel City Strings.



The Program

Tarimi Nulay (Long Time Living Here)

Deborah Cheetham Fraillon
(b.1959)

Novelette Op 52, No 1 in A major

Samuel Coleridge-Taylor
(1875-1912)

Intermezzo for String Orchestra, Op 8

Franz Schreker
(1878-1934)

Nicht langsam – Schnell, leidenschaft (alla breve) – Tempo 1

Scenes from the Scottish Highlands

Charles Granville Bantock
(1868-1946)

Strathspey, The braes o Tullymet

Dirge, The Isle of Mull

Quickstep, Inverness gathering

Gaelic melody, Baloo, baloo

Reel, The de'il among the tailors

INTERVAL

Romance, Op 11

Gerald Finzi (1901-1956)

Like Snowdrops You Will Shine

Katia Beugeais (2018)

Simple Symphony

Benjamin Britten (1913-1976)

Boisterous Bourrée

Playful Pizzicato

Sentimental Sarabande

Frolicsome Finale

The Orchestra

Conductor	Luke Spicer
First violins	Samantha Boston * Monique Ziegelaar Janine Jackson Wen-Tjen Lim
Second violins	Jacob Antonio * Clinton Lau Minh Thi Tran
Violas	Adrian Davis * Jo Landstra
Celli	Karella Mitchell * Emily Johnson Louisa Lovasz James Norton
Double Bass	Ethan Ireland *

** denotes principal*

Program Notes

Music hath charms to soothe the savage breast.

When William Congreve wrote these words in 1697 he was drawing upon an ancient idea, one central to the Greek myth of Orpheus, and echoed in various literary works from the Bible to Shakespeare and beyond. It was only in the twentieth century that medical science identified how music might 'soothe the savage breast', discovering that listening to certain music released the so called 'feel-good hormones': dopamine, serotonin, endorphins and oxytocin. Hence music therapy has developed as a recognised practice in addressing a number of dysfunctional clinical and social situations. Equally the pleasure of hearing a live concert or a recording continues to draw audiences seeking that 'feel-good' experience.

But how might a composer deal with the intense act of composition, a task demanding serious mental and emotional exercise, let alone handle the pressures on personal well-being brought about by unwelcome circumstance? Today's program explores how some composers have responded to periods of darkness in their lives by creating music of great beauty.

Criss-crossing musical eras and styles, the repertoire draws on music that reacts to personal crises with individual courage and strength, finding comfort in the unblinking expression of ideas and emotions that help define our shared humanity.

Novelette Op 52, No 1 in A major

Samuel Coleridge-Taylor
(1875-1912)

The child of an extra-marital liaison between an African father and an English mother, Samuel Coleridge-Taylor achieved early recognition as a composer of Hiawatha's Wedding Feast (1898) his immensely popular setting of texts from Longfellow's poem. He was highly regarded by Elgar, Sullivan, and Vaughan Williams, and lauded in America as the 'African Mahler'. Yet though popular on both sides of the Atlantic, he had little business sense and frequently struggled financially to support his family.

Any such worries are belied by the often-cheerful music that poured copiously from his pen of which the Four Novelletten, Op.52, (1903) is a good example. The first Novelette seems to waltz blithely through the grand salons of Europe: the string writing is as effervescent as champagne, with triangle and tambourine adding extra fizz to this glittering movement. Surprisingly little-known today, the Novelletten were among his favourite works. He would frequently program them in the concerts he conducted over his short life, a life prematurely ended by pneumonia at the age of 37.

Intermezzo for String Orchestra, Op 8

Franz Schreker
(1878-1934)

Vienna in the final decade of the nineteenth century was the centre of major intellectual and artistic upheaval: figures such as architects Otto Wagner and Adolf Loos, painters such as Klimt, Kokoshka and Schiele are all examining the contemporary value of the modes of expression inherited from Romanticism. Similarly, the composers of the day found themselves questioning the musical legacy of Wagner on the one hand and the language of French impressionism on the other. Into this milieu came a teenage Franz Schreker, a nervous provincial boy from an impoverished background, on a scholarship to study at the Vienna Conservatory. The experience could easily have overwhelmed him, but he made an immediate and positive public impression with his Intermezzo for strings, Op. 8 written shortly after his graduation in 1900 and which secured first place in a prestigious award that included cash and the publication of the score.

While Schreker retained elements of Romanticism, he employs an expanded tonality like that found in Schoenberg's contemporaneous tone poem, Transfigured Night (1899). The single movement Intermezzo contains three sections: the first and last are marked by a gentle Brahms-like lyricism uttered in a wistful melody, framed by lush sonorities achieved by dividing violins into four parts while violas and cellos each split into two. The central section moves faster, making various chromatic digressions on its passionate journey. Syncopations, shifting accents and irregular phrase lengths all suggest an exploration of a new musical identity, one that would soon emerge in his operas. These later dramatic works brought him great success and subsequent appointments to various important academic posts, however his Jewish ancestry saw him dismissed from these positions and his reputation maligned by the Third Reich. Suffering a stroke in 1933, no doubt the consequence of his despair at such public humiliation, he died some three months later. It is only in recent years that his music has once more been recognised as a significant milestone in the transition to the modernist style of the later Schoenberg and his pupils.

Scenes from the Scottish Highlands

Charles Granville Bantock
(1868-1946)

The English composer Charles Granville Bantock, despite coming from a wealthy middle-class background, found himself struggling to make money as a musician in the years following his graduation from the Royal Academy of Music in 1890s. He took jobs conducting musical comedy troupes on international tours, an employment which left him with a wealth of practical experience but little pecuniary reward. But his profile as an orchestral and choral conductor in Liverpool from 1896 began to spread his reputation as one who would promote the work of British composers, and which brought him into contact with Elgar who recommended Bantock for an academic position as head of the Midland school of Music in Birmingham (1900). Bantock later succeeded Elgar as the Peyton Professor of Music at the University of Birmingham in 1907, an appointment he would hold for the following 27 years.

It seems that Bantock was quite a character and had a penchant for dressing up: he would frequently invoke his Scottish heritage by appearing in a kilt. His fascination with Scotland extended to its music, in particular Scottish dance tunes and Gaelic folk song. This interest fostered several scores that drew on the traditional music he had heard at social occasions.

The set of five scenes alternate fast and slow dances, beginning with Strathspey, characterised by its so-called 'Scottish snap' rhythms that create an energetic but jerky movement. The Dirge is notable for its evocation of loneliness, a reference specific to the composer's impression of 'those islands far north, where the wash of treacherous waters and the wild cries of seabirds surround with ceaseless undertone the rocky, mist-bound shores.' The Quickstep references an Inverness gathering where sports and dancing were held. The Gaelic melody is an ancient tune called 'Lady Anne Bothwell's Lament', a cradle song telling the story of a deserted mother and child. The lively Reel which concludes this suite of dances borrows a popular tune composed by the fiddler James Scott Skinner in the nineteenth century.

INTERVAL

Romance, Op 11

Gerald Finzi (1901-1956)

A profound sense of melancholy inhabits the music of the English composer Gerald Finzi. He was no stranger to adversity: his father died two weeks before his eighth birthday, and his three brothers died during his teenage years. He had begun composition studies with Ernest Farrar in 1915, but he too was to die in action on September 18, 1918, Farrar's second day on the Western front. Finzi was deeply affected by these losses which coloured his bleak view of life. He sought solace in poetry, particularly that of Thomas Hardy with whom he shared a love of the English countryside. However, the isolation of life in Gloucestershire removed Finzi from the professional musical world of London to which he returned in 1926, continuing his studies in composition and moving amongst his colleagues including Vaughan Williams, Holst, Rubbra and Bliss.

The Romance was initially written in 1928 and later revised in 1941, though not performed for a further ten years. The music is gently tender and evokes the pastoral style of Elgar and Vaughan Williams. Lush sonorities arise from divided strings, while a solo violin heard briefly in the opening bars gains prominence in the central section where it hovers lightly above the orchestra in wistful song. Though Finzi regarded the piece as antiquated, it captures the beauty of an idyllic, perhaps unattainable, world.

Like Snowdrops You Will Shine

Katia Beaugeais (2018)

Like Snowdrops You Will Shine was written in 2018 for the Hush Foundation, an organisation that works with 'renowned Australian artists to create music that brings calm and optimism to patients, their families, and staff in stressful hospital and healthcare environments'

The composer writes that the work 'is based on a set of pitches of a pentatonic nature that evolve into a series of various modulations to form the main musical material. Opening with a delicate and playful 'snowdrop' pizzicato motif bouncing around the ensemble, shining melodic colours and thick, warm chordal harmonies create an uplifting and positive ambiance. Soothing seagull bird-like harmonic glissando sounds enhance a calm and meditative soundscape atmosphere.'

Program Notes

Simple Symphony

Benjamin Britten (1913-1976)

Britten, as if to demonstrate his growing sophistication as a young composer – he was now twenty years old and had already had a work broadcast – raided his prolific collection of manuscripts written in childhood in search of material from which to construct his Simple Symphony. Finding some of this material, in his words, ‘not too uninteresting’, he rescored the music for strings, ‘changing bits here and there, and making [it] more fit for general consumption...’

The alliteratively titled movements draw on songs and piano pieces from the mid-1920s, but these are now adapted to create symmetrical classicist structures which are instantly recognisable and appealing. The first movement has fun with the clichéd perfect cadence, leading the listener into unexpected harmonic territories, while elements of contrapuntal imitation lend mock seriousness to otherwise elementary tunes. The second movement, Playful Pizzicato is just that: energetic arpeggios maintain an exuberant buoyancy as though the strings are playing a game of chasings. The central section has a folk-like quality, with strummed open strings accompanying a quasi-modal melody. The following movement, the longest in the symphony, captures a baroque sensibility, its expressive power deriving from a strong pedal point. A poignant middle section is built on simple lyrical phrases underpinned by subtle pizzicatos. A rhetorical passage leads to a return of the earlier material that comes to a resigned ending. It is not too far-fetched to suggest that the genuine depth of feeling in this movement may be in part a consequence of Britten composing the movement at a time when his father was dying. The finale may be ‘frolicsome’ in its manipulation of harmony and rhythm, but beneath the musical wit there rests a gravity, perhaps asserting Britten’s growing confidence as a composer of serious and well-crafted music.

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Kyle Little, Artistic Director and Concertmaster

Steel City Strings

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