

3 & 4 March
Sydney Opera House

DVOŘÁK'S STRING QUINTET NO.3

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MARCH 2023



MARIE-ANGE NGUCI IN RECITAL A RISING STAR

Works by **RACHMANINOV, PROKOFIEV, S Scriabin** and **KAPUSTIN**

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SAINT-SAËNS Piano Concerto No.2
MUSSORGSKY arr. RAVEL
Pictures at an Exhibition

Emirates Masters Series
Emirates Thursday Afternoon Symphony

Wednesday 8 March, 8pm
Thursday 9 March, 1.30pm
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Saturday 11 March, 8pm

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Sydney Opera House

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MARIE-ANGE NGUCI piano



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IVES Central Park in the Dark
GERSHWIN Rhapsody in Blue

Royal Caribbean Classics Under the Sails
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Friday 17 March, 7pm
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Sunday 19 March, 2pm

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COCKTAIL HOUR

Friday 3 March, 6pm
Saturday 4 March, 6pm

Utzon Room,
Sydney Opera House

DVOŘÁK'S STRING QUINTET NO.3

BRIGHT & SPIRITED STRINGS

GENEVIEVE LANG presenter

BÉLA BARTÓK (1881–1945)

Sonata for solo violin, BB124, Sz.117

i. *Tempo di ciaccona*

ii. *Fuga*

iii. *Melodia*

iv. *Presto*

ANDREW HAVERON violin

ANTONÍN DVOŘÁK (1841–1904)

String Quintet No.3, Op.97

i. *Allegro non tanto*

ii. *Allegro vivo — Un poco meno mosso*

iii. *Larghetto*

iv. *Finale. Allegro giusto*

LERIDA DELBRIDGE violin

ANNA SKÁLOVÁ violin

JUSTIN WILLIAMS viola

SANDRO COSTANTINO viola

CATHERINE HEWGILL cello

ESTIMATED DURATIONS

24 minutes, 31 minutes

The concert will conclude
at approximately 7pm.

COVER IMAGE

By Jaimi Joy

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ABOUT THE MUSIC

BARTÓK, BACH AND FOLK MUSIC

Bartók and his wife had arrived in the USA as refugees from fascism in 1940 and made a precarious living from performances and teaching. By 1944 Bartók was gravely ill with leukemia, and struggling financially. In his memoir, *Unfinished Journey*, Yehudi Menuhin recounts how, knowing the composer was 'too proud to accept handouts', he offered to commission a work – something fairly modest for solo violin. 'Little did I foresee,' notes Menuhin, 'that he would write me one of the masterpieces of all time.'

One of the towering figures of modernism in early-20th century Europe, Bartók had forged a unique voice from what seem like two utterly different influences. During the early 19-teens Bartók began collecting folk song from Hungary, Romani, Bulgaria and Turkey. As he got to know this music in depth — and particularly by arranging it — a very important insight presented itself:

the simpler the melody the more complex and strange may be the harmonisation and accompaniment that go well with it...It allows us to bring out the melody more clearly by building around it harmonies of the widest range varying along different keynotes.

The other major influence, to which he assimilated folk elements, was the music of the Baroque, especially the elaboration of strongly profiled motives in counterpoint. Baroque music also allowed to him articulate another important principle of his work:

We can trace in Bach's music motifs and phrases which were also used by Frescobaldi and many others among Bach's predecessors. Is this plagiarism? By no means. For an artist it is not only right to have his roots in the art of some former time, it is a necessity.



Béla Bartók in 1941

ABOUT THE MUSIC

Bartók scholar Judit Frigyesi has noted that the composer ‘often noticed in folk music techniques that he had encountered many years before in art music’, and notes that in both Hungarian folk-song and Bach fugues, the principle of transposing themes upward by the interval of a fifth (say, from A to E) is common. In the Sonata, his last completed work, Bartók brings together the great legacy of Bach’s solo sonatas and partitas with the sounds of Hungarian folk-music.

THE SONATA FOR SOLO VIOLIN

The titles of the first two movements immediately signal work that the work takes Bach as its starting point. Menuhin rightly describes the opening *Tempo di ciaccona* as a ‘translation’ of Bach’s Chaconne (from the D minor Partita BWV 1004) ‘into Hungarian idiom’. It begins with a characteristically Bachian gambit — full chords that outline the work’s tonic and dominant harmony, and a distinctively Baroque dotted rhythm — but soon begins to explore the unmistakable world of Bartók’s fusion of modernist and folk-inspired language. It has the relentless tread of a Bachian chaconne (constructed of varied episodes over a repeated pattern known as a ‘ground’) but in fact the form of the movement is closer to a classical sonata design. The more immediate impression, though, is of the music’s technical demands. Menuhin writes that when he first saw the score, ‘I admit I was shaken. It seemed to me almost unplayable’, though soon discovered it was ‘eminently playable, beautifully composed for the violin, one of the most dramatic and fulfilling works that I know of, and the most important composition for violin alone since Bach.’ The movement is almost orchestral in sound, often in three real parts — a serious challenge for the player, but written so as to lie under the hand.

ABOUT THE MUSIC

Where a chaconne weaves a contrapuntal web above a repeating musical idea, the fugue lays out a theme or subject (here it is a series of very short motifs of two or three notes) that is then sounded in a new key against a second theme (here a series of more smoothly articulated figures). After that, the composer has a greater degree of formal freedom. Bartók's second movement *Fuga* is no strict textbook example but rather a free invention on the idea of the Baroque form, producing music of often-breathtaking violence and increasingly elaborate figurations. By way of much need contrast, the following *Melodia* is deceptively simple, with its long, modal phrases that might evoke folk-song. Bartók uses a range of techniques, however, to evoke the kind of 'night music' that occurs in so much of his earlier work: icy harmonics, trills and so forth. The final *Presto* evokes the wild dances of the Balkan peasantry — indeed, Bartók had intended the rapid passagework to include phrases built of quarter-tones, though Menuhin, who edited the final score, argued that semitones would provide a clearer line. Bartók was scrupulous about seeking Menuhin's technical advice, though the violinist in fact had to ask for very few changes.

FOLK MUSIC AND ROMANTICISM

The generation of composers like Bartók, Vaughan Williams and Grainger who collected folk music did so 'scientifically' — often with new recording technology — and both Bartók and Grainger attempted to retain the formal freedom of such music rather than fitting it into the more regular structures of classical music. A hundred years before, composers such as Haydn and Beethoven had made piano trio arrangements of British and Irish folk-song suitable for middle-class Viennese amateurs to perform. But as the 19th century went on artists outside the main 'centres' of European culture — London, Paris and German-speaking capitals began to explore their own local folk-cultures. It was strand of Romanticism which rediscovered the vernacular for both aesthetic and political purposes. According to the late Robert Hughes this kind of romanticism



Yehudi Menuhin in 1943

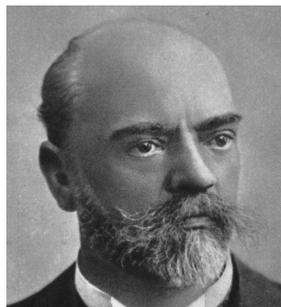
ABOUT THE MUSIC

set writers, scholars and musicians free to examine and mine their traditional cultures, to use their motifs without embarrassment, to use the 'provincial' as a counterweight to the cosmopolitan, aristocratic culture that set earlier norms. This spoke of the freshness of the old, of traditions that weren't authoritarian.

DVOŘÁK AND FOLK MUSIC

Dvořák was an early adopter of vernacular music, mining his own Bohemian heritage in numerous major works. In 1892, he took up the position of director of the National Conservatory of Music of America, a ten-year old school that was the only such institution in the US at the time. In 1895 he wrote an article on the state of music in the US in which he argued passionately that composers should look to their vernacular musics for ideas. In particular, he believed that music by African- and Native Americans, the songs of Stephen Foster, as well as the folk traditions of immigrant groups could be the basis for a distinctly American classical music. As he said: 'undoubtedly the germs for the best in music lie hidden among all the races that are commingled in this great country.' 'Nothing', he added, 'must be too low or insignificant for the musician. When he walks he should listen to every whistling boy, every street singer or blind organ grinder...it is a sign of barrenness which such characteristic bits of music exist and are not heeded by the learned musicians of the age.'

In 1893, he composed his E-flat major Quintet during a visit to Spillville, Iowa, where a substantial Czech community maintained a number of traditions, namely liturgical chorale singing and secular folk-music; complementing this, Dvořák also heard both the religious and secular music of local African-Americans.



Antonín Dvořák

ABOUT THE MUSIC

Dvořák once said that the American experience made possible his 'New World' Symphony, the String Quartet Op.96 (which until surprisingly recently was often tagged, but not by Dvořák, with a racist nickname) and the present work. But with only one possible exception, he never appropriated (or claimed to quote) any pre-existing music. In fact he has often been ridiculed for pointing out similarities between various 'ethnic' musics, but as Bartók might have agreed, much folk music — everywhere — uses elements like the pentatonic scale (the black keys of the piano), and certain repeated rhythmic patterns.

THE STRING QUINTET IN E FLAT

The work is for string quartet with 'extra' viola (an instrument played by a surprising number of composers from Mozart to Brett Dean, and including Dvořák himself) which gives the music a rich 'centre'. The first of its four movements, in a fast 3/4 time, is cast in classical sonata design, with two contrasting themes dominated by pentatonic melodies (introduced significantly by second viola) and a repeated dotted rhythm. This has been perhaps too confidently described as an 'Indian' drumming rhythm; the movement's second theme is likewise sometimes said to be a native American melody. More important, perhaps, is Dvořák's development of this material, creating dramatic emotional effects by switching from minor to major modes, generating tension by the repetition of a variety of rhythmic cells (some of which inform material in later movements) and exploiting the full range of colour and texture afforded by the ensemble.

The second movement is a scherzo — the customary 'dance' movement in such a work — in 4/4 time, which also begins with the second viola, this time hammering out a single-note rhythm that may or may not be of non-Bohemian provenance. The interest here is primarily rhythm, though a vigorous pentatonic melody winds through the music.

ABOUT THE MUSIC

A central section sees the first viola singing a simple minor-key melody against pizzicato accompaniment, perhaps suggestive of guitar. That melody then climbs through the texture to the top of the first violin's compass.

The emotional heart of the piece is the slow movement. The theme falls into two, the first half minor and the second in the major key, and these then form the basis for a set of five variations. Precedents for this minor/major flip, which was flagged in the opening movement, exist in Haydn and Schubert, both derived from Hungarian folk-music. The variations encompass delicate high tracery over the theme in the violas; the theme in the violins over a restless bass; fragments of the themes move rapidly from pair to pair of instruments; ghostly shimmer; an insistent fast variation before a fully-scored coda, or end-section.

The finale is, according to classical precedent, a rondo, where repeated refrain based on the earlier drumming rhythm separates a joyful series contrasting, high energy episodes.

Dvořák and Bartók were both 'learned musicians of their age' and both listened to the music around them, not to appropriate from other cultures or classes, but to learn from them. In fact, as Alex Ross has noted,

Dvořák had assumed that American music would come into its own when it succeeded in importing African-American material into European forms, but in the end the opposite happened: African-American composers appropriated European material into self-invented forms of blues and jazz.

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