

6 June 2024



THE SYDNEY SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA  
WITH THE

# AUSTRALIAN STRING QUARTET

«SYDNEY»  
«SYMPHONY»  
«ORCHESTRA»

Principal Partner



# SYDNEY SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA

**PATRON** Her Excellency The Honourable Margaret Beazley AC KC

Founded in 1932 by the Australian Broadcasting Commission, the Sydney Symphony Orchestra has evolved into one of the world's finest orchestras as Sydney has become one of the world's great cities. Resident at the iconic Sydney Opera House, the Sydney Symphony Orchestra also performs in venues throughout Sydney and regional New South Wales, and international tours to Europe, Asia and the USA have earned the Orchestra worldwide recognition for artistic excellence.

The Orchestra's first chief conductor was Sir Eugene Goossens, appointed in 1947; he was followed by Nicolai Malko, Dean Dixon, Moshe Atzmon, Willem van Otterloo, Louis Frémaux, Sir Charles Mackerras, Zdeněk Mácal, Stuart Challender, Edo de Waart and Gianluigi Gelmetti. Vladimir Ashkenazy was Principal Conductor from 2009 to 2013, followed by David Robertson as Chief Conductor from 2014 to 2019. Australian-born Simone Young commenced her role as Chief Conductor in 2022, a year in which the Orchestra made its return to a renewed Sydney Opera House Concert Hall. The Sydney Symphony Orchestra's concerts encompass masterpieces from the classical repertoire, music by some of the finest living composers, and collaborations with guest artists from all genres, reflecting the Orchestra's versatility and diverse appeal. Its award-winning education program is central to its commitment to the future of live symphonic music, and the Orchestra promotes the work of Australian composers through performances, recordings and its commissioning program.

## PERFORMING IN THIS CONCERT

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### FIRST VIOLINS

**Andrew Haveron**

*Concertmaster*

**Alexandra Osborne**

*Associate Concertmaster*

**Lerida Delbridge**

*Assistant Concertmaster*

**Fiona Ziegler**

*Assistant Concertmaster*

**Sun Yi**

*Associate Concertmaster*

*Emeritus*

Jennifer Booth

Sophie Cole

Sercan Danis

Claire Herrick

Georges Lentz

Emily Long

Alexandra Mitchell

Alexander Norton

Robert Smith<sup>°</sup>

Benjamin Tjoa<sup>°</sup>

### SECOND VIOLINS

**Kirsty Hilton**

*Principal*

Alice Bartsch

Emma Hayes

Shuti Huang

Monique Irik

Wendy Kong

Benjamin Li

Nicole Masters

Maja Verunica

Marcus Michelsen<sup>°</sup>

Emily Qin<sup>°</sup>

Riikka Sintonen<sup>°</sup>

### VIOLAS

**Tobias Breider**

*Principal*

**Justin Williams**

*Assistant Principal*

Sandro Costantino

Rosemary Curtin

Jane Hazelwood

Graham Hennings

Stuart Johnson

Justine Marsden

Felicity Tsai

Amanda Verner

Leonid Volovelsky

### CELLOS

**Catherine Hewgill**

*Principal*

**Kaori Yamagami**

*Principal*

**Simon Cobcroft**

*Associate Principal*

**Leah Lynn**

*Assistant Principal*

Kristy Conrau

Fenella Gill

Timothy Nankervis

Elizabeth Neville

Christopher Pidcock

Adrian Wallis

### DOUBLE BASSES

**Kees Boersma**

*Principal*

**Alex Henery**

*Principal*

David Campbell

Dylan Holly

Steven Larson

Richard Lynn

Jaan Pallandi

Benjamin Ward

### FLUTES

**Joshua Batty**

*Principal*

Lily Bryant<sup>†</sup>

**Katie Zagorski\***

*Guest Principal Piccolo*

### OBOES

**Shefali Pryor**

*Acting Principal*

Callum Hogan

**Alexandre Oguey**

*Principal Cor Anglais*

### CLARINETS

**Francesco Celata**

*Acting Principal*

Christopher Tingay

Olivia Hans-

Rosenbaum\*

**Alexander Morris**

*Principal Bass Clarinet*

### BASSOONS

**Matthew Wilkie**

*Principal Emeritus*

Fiona McNamara

**Noriko Shimada**

*Principal Contrabassoon*

### HORNS

**Johannes Dengler\***

*Guest Principal*

**Emily Newham<sup>°</sup>**

*Acting Principal 3rd*

Marnie Sebire

Rachel Silver

Bourian Boubbov\*

### TRUMPETS

**David Elton**

*Principal*

Cécile Glémot

Anthony Heinrichs

### TROMBONES

**Scott Kinmont**

*Acting Principal*

Nick Byrne

**Mitchell Nissen\***

*Guest Principal*

*Bass Trombone*

### TUBA

**Steve Rossé**

*Principal*

### TIMPANI

**Antoine Siguré**

*Principal*

### PERCUSSION

**Rebecca Lagos**

*Principal*

**Mark Robinson**

*Associate Principal*

*Timpani/Section Percussion*

Timothy Constable

Alison Pratt\*

### HARP

**Natalie Wong<sup>°</sup>**

*Acting Principal Harp*

### KEYBOARDS / EXTRAS

**Louisa Breen\***

*Guest Principal Piano*

**Susanne Powell\***

*Guest Principal Celeste*

**Bold** Principal

\* Guest Musician

<sup>°</sup> Contract Musician

<sup>†</sup> Sydney Symphony Fellow

# 2024 CONCERT SEASON

## THURSDAY AFTERNOON SYMPHONY

Thursday 6 June, 1.30pm

Concert Hall,  
Sydney Opera House

# THE SYDNEY SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA WITH THE AUSTRALIAN STRING QUARTET A MESMERISING EVOLUTION OF SOUND

**ANJA BIHLMAIER** conductor  
**AUSTRALIAN STRING QUARTET**  
**DALE BARLTROP** violin  
**FRANCESCA HIEW** violin  
**CHRISTOPHER CARTLIDGE** viola  
**MICHAEL DAHLEBURG** cello

**MAURICE RAVEL (1875–1937)**  
*Le Tombeau de Couperin (1919)*  
i. Prélude  
ii. Forlane  
iii. Menuet  
iv. Rigaudon

**JOHN ADAMS (born 1947)**  
*Absolute Jest* for string quartet and orchestra (2012)

INTERVAL

**JOHANNES BRAHMS (1833–1897)**  
arr. **ARNOLD SCHOENBERG (1874–1951)**  
*Piano Quartet in G minor, Op.25 (1861/1937)*  
i. Allegro  
ii. Intermezzo: Allegro ma non troppo – Trio: Animato  
iii. Andante con moto  
iv. Rondo alla Zingarese (Presto)

### Pre-concert talk

By Paige Gullifer in the  
Northern Foyer at 12.45

### Estimated durations

Ravel – 17 minutes  
Adams – 22 minutes  
Interval – 20 minutes  
Brahms – 40 minutes

The concert will run for  
approximately two hours

### Cover image

Australian String Quartet  
Photo by Agatha Yim

Principal Partner



# WELCOME

Welcome to **The Sydney Symphony Orchestra with the Australian String Quartet**, a brilliantly inventive concert that features *Absolute Jest* by John Adams, a mesmerising work based on fragments of music by Beethoven.

Emirates and the Sydney Symphony Orchestra have enjoyed one of the longest-standing and most significant relationships in Australia's performing arts, one of which we remain extremely proud.

We're passionate about growing music, arts and culture to enrich the lives of the communities we serve and connecting the finest talents with audiences globally.

Expanding on the true meaning of influence, this is a concert of alchemy and the genius of orchestration, as one composer blends, riffs and pays homage to another. John Adams meets Beethoven, Ravel meets Couperin and Schoenberg meets Brahms in an evolution of ideas and imagination that astounds and enchants.

The Australian String Quartet brings a superb quality to this unique work by John Adams, while Ravel is widely regarded as a true genius of orchestration. **The Sydney Symphony Orchestra with the Australian String Quartet** is a true collaboration between the original composers, the arrangers and interpreters, the conductor Anja Bihlmaier and the outstanding musicians of the Orchestra.

Our partnership with the Sydney Symphony Orchestra is a cornerstone of our ongoing support of music and arts around the world and reflects our long-standing commitment to Australia.

The unique and expansive music you will experience in this performance embodies the highest levels of originality, collaboration and excellence, qualities and values the Sydney Symphony Orchestra and Emirates both aspire to.

We are delighted by our continuing partnership, and I do hope you enjoy this compelling and fascinating concert.



**Barry Brown**  
Divisional Vice President for Australasia  
Emirates



# YOUR CONCERT AT A GLANCE

Each of the three works on this program is a kind of love letter from one composer to a composer of the past.

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## **MAURICE RAVEL (1875–1937)**

*Le Tombeau de Couperin* (1919)

Ravel's *Le Tombeau de Couperin* is a four-movement suite derived from his six-movement piano work from 1917. While he doesn't imitate the sounds of Baroque music, Ravel uses Baroque dance forms to salute the greatest French composer of the Baroque, François Couperin, partly in defiance of German aggression during World War I.

In 1919 the war was raging; the Russian revolution took place; new art works by Chagall, Braque, Duchamp and Modigliani appeared; Satie's *Parade*, Holst's *The Planets* and Poulenc's *Les Mamelles de Tiresias* were new music.

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Maurice Ravel in 1913

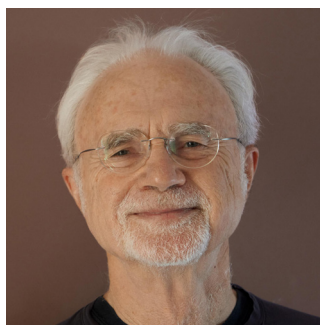
## **JOHN ADAMS (BORN 1947)**

*Absolute Jest* for string quartet and orchestra (2012)

John Adams' *Absolute Jest* is a 25-minute single movement concerto grosso for string quartet and orchestra, which plays with elements of Beethoven's string quartets in the kind of loving way that Stravinsky did with the music attributed to Pergolesi in *Pulcinella*.

It appeared in 2012, the year that despite the Mayan calendar, the world didn't end; Voyager 1 exited the solar system; Queen Elizabeth II celebrated her diamond jubilee; Barack Obama was re-elected president of the USA. New music included symphonies by Peter Maxwell Davies and Philip Glass.

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John Adams in 2022  
Photo by Deborah O'Grady

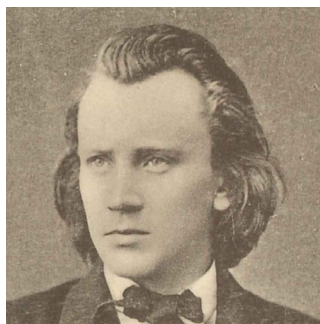
## **JOHANNES BRAHMS (1833–1897)**

**ARR. ARNOLD SCHOENBERG (1874–1951)**

Piano Quartet in G minor, Op.25 (1861/1937)

Brahms made his Viennese debut in 1862 with the G minor Piano Quartet, a large scale four-movement piece that works its ways from hefty Germanic argument to the glittering energy of what the 19th century called 'gypsy' music. Schoenberg made his orchestral version of the piece in 1937 to give it wider airplay in the United States, using a huge late-Romantic orchestra (including xylophones) that Brahms would have found amusing.

In 1862 Victor Hugo's *Les Misérables* was published; Manet painted *Le Déjeuner sur L'herbe*; Whistler painted *The White Girl*. In 1937, 'Degenerate Art' was exhibited in Munich while European modernists like Gropius, Moholy-Nagy and Schoenberg set up shop in the USA. Spain saw the bombing of Guernica, memorialised by Picasso.



Brahms c. 1865

# ABOUT THE ARTISTS

## **ANJA BIHLMAIER** conductor

Anja Bihlmaier's musical intuition, inspiring charisma and ability to combine passion with precision have made her one of the leading conductors of her generation. She has been Chief Conductor of the Residentie Orkest since August 2021.

In 2023/24 she debuts with the London Philharmonic, Frankfurt Radio Symphony, Hamburg Staatsorchester (including two concerts at the Elbphilharmonie), Deutsche Kammerphilharmonie Bremen, Royal Scottish National Orchestra, Orchestre National du Capitole de Toulouse, Sydney Symphony and Melbourne Symphony orchestras, and returns to the Salzburg Camerata in her debut at the Mozartwoche. In Summer 2023 she made her first BBC Proms appearance (with the BBC Philharmonic Orchestra).

In a wide-ranging repertoire that includes Haydn, Mahler, Strauss, BA Zimmermann to Sibelius, Bartók, Dvořák, Shostakovich, Debussy, Britten, Galina Ustvolskaya and Unsuk Chin, Bihlmaier has recently conducted the SWR Symphony, BBC Symphony, City of Birmingham Symphony, Spanish National, Barcelona Symphony, Finnish Radio Symphony, Danish National, Swedish Radio Symphony and Royal Stockholm Philharmonic orchestras, returning to many of these in the coming months.

A passionate opera conductor, Bihlmaier gained many years of experience through positions at the Hanover State Opera, the Chemnitz Theatre and the Kassel State Theatre. More recently she conducted

Gounod's *Faust* at Trondheim Opera, Britten's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* at Malmö Opera and several productions at the Vienna Volksoper, including Henry Mason's acclaimed production of *The Magic Flute* in 2020/21. In February 2023 she conducted Wagner's *Der Fliegende Holländer* in Tampere and in September Verdi's *La traviata* at the Norske Opera in Oslo.

After studying at the Freiburg Hochschule für Musik with Scott Sandmeier, Bihlmaier was awarded a scholarship at the Salzburg Mozarteum and deepened her knowledge with Dennis Russell Davies and Jorge Rotter. She was subsequently accepted into the Deutsche Dirigentenforum and received a scholarship from the Brahmsgesellschaft Baden-Baden.

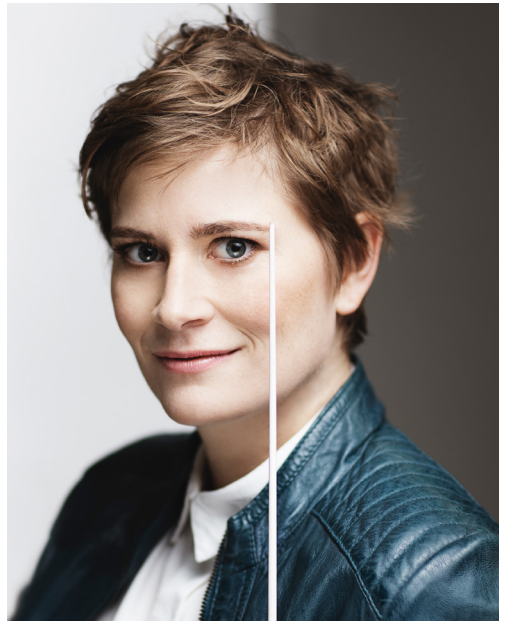


Photo by Nikolaj Lund

# ABOUT THE ARTISTS



The Australian String Quartet: Francesca Hiew, Chris Cartlidge, Dale Barltrop and Michael Dahlenburg. Photo by Jacqui Way.

## AUSTRALIAN STRING QUARTET

Since 1985, the Australian String Quartet (ASQ) has created unforgettable string quartet performances for audiences around the world.

Dedicated to musical excellence of the highest standard, they aim to create chemistry and amplify intimacy through experiences that connect people with music.

From their home base at the University of Adelaide's Elder Conservatorium of Music, they reach out across the world to engage people with an outstanding program of performances, workshops, digital content, commissions and education projects.

Their distinct sound is enhanced by a matched set of 18th century Guadagnini instruments, handcrafted by Giovanni Battista Guadagnini between c.1743 and 1784 in Turin and Piacenza, Italy. These precious instruments are on loan for the Quartet's exclusive use through the generosity of UKARIA.

Dale Barltrop plays a  
1784 Guadagnini Violin, Turin

Francesca Hiew plays a  
1748-49 Guadagnini Violin, Piacenza

Chris Cartlidge plays a  
1783 Guadagnini Viola, Turin

Michael Dahlenburg plays a  
c.1743 Guadagnini Violoncello,  
Piacenza 'Ngeringa'

# ABOUT THE MUSIC

## WHO WAS MAURICE RAVEL?

In some exasperation, Ravel once asked a friend, 'Doesn't it ever occur to those people that I can be "artificial" by nature?' He was responding to the criticism that his music was more interested in technique than expression. There is some truth in the charge: Stravinsky described him – affectionately – as the 'Swiss watchmaker of music', and Ravel's stated aim was indeed 'technical perfection'. In fact, his love of mechanical intricacy led Ravel to collect various automata and other small machines, and he dreamed, as he put it in a 1933 article, of 'Finding Tunes in Factories'.

His passion for precision and order was also in evidence in his fastidious, even dandyish, appearance, but he was a man of great courage. In the First World War, despite being 39 years old, short and underweight, he cared for the wounded and after some months became a military truck driver. With his truck, 'Adelaide', he faced a number of dangers, and for the rest of his life suffered terrible insomnia. (This experience may also have contributed to the debilitating aphasia of his last years when he could no longer write his own name, let alone the music which still rang in his head). His great Piano Trio, written

during the War, puts paid to any idea that Ravel's music lacks an emotional heart.

Also during the war he stood against the chauvinistic Committee of the National League for the Defence of French Music, which proposed to ban performances of German and Austrian music. Between 1900 and 1905 he had failed several times to secure the Prix de Rome, ostensibly because of musical 'errors' and despite his already having established himself as a major new voice. In 1909 he helped to found the Société Musicale Indépendante – independent, that is, of the Parisian musical and academic establishment – and its inaugural concert saw the premiere of the first version, for piano duo, of the *Ma Mère l'oye* (Mother Goose) Suite.

Ravel's works are frequently exquisite simulacra of existing styles and forms. In his *Tombeau de Couperin*, twentieth century piano music pays a genuine homage to the Baroque suite and keyboard style of the earlier French master. In *Gaspard de la nuit* he famously set out to write his version of Lisztian piano music, wryly suggesting that he 'might have overdone it'. His *Shéhérazade* songs evoke a typical early-20th century view of Asia where orchestration and subject matter relate directly to Russian music, especially that of Rimsky-Korsakov. His most famous piano piece, the *Pavane for a dead Infanta*, resurrects a gracious renaissance dance, tinged with his beloved Spanish idiom.

Ravel was born in south-western France to a Basque mother and Swiss father but spent his entire life in Paris. Like Tchaikovsky, he saw a strong connection between childhood and enchantment. In his opera *L'enfant et les sortilèges* a destructive child learns the value of compassion when furniture, trees and animals in the garden all come magically to life. The evocation of 'the poetry of childhood' in the original piano duo version of *Mother Goose* led Ravel to 'simplify my style and refine my means of expression'.



Maurice Ravel at the piano



# ABOUT THE MUSIC

## *Le Tombeau de Couperin* (1919)

The French critic André Suarès, writing in 1925, stressed that ‘nothing could be more objective than the art of Ravel, or more deliberately intended to be so. If music is capable of painting an object without first revealing the painter’s feeling towards it, then Ravel’s music achieves this more than any other. We have to go back to the 18th century, to the divertissements of Couperin and Rameau, to encounter a similar inclination.’

In *Le Tombeau de Couperin* it is Ravel himself who takes us back to the 18th century. The music isn’t a pastiche, however, but an anachronistic tribute that proclaims Ravel’s affinity with the French Baroque masters in his conception of music as diversion, his taste for ‘artifice’, and his preference for emotionally disengaged dance forms.

In his title Ravel revived the 17th-century French literary and musical tradition of the *tombeau* (literally ‘tomb’ or ‘tombstone’) – originally poetry written to commemorate a mentor or colleague. The earliest musical tombeaux were by lutenists, but the genre was quickly adopted by French harpsichordists: Louis Couperin (c.1626–1661) and Jean-Henri d’Anglebert (1629–1691) both commemorated their teacher Jacques Champion de Chambonnières (c.1601/2–1672) with tombeaux for the harpsichord, while in the next generation François Couperin (1668–1733) honoured the tradition with his *Apothéoses* of Arcangelo Corelli (1653–1713) and Jean-Baptiste Lully (1632–1687).

Ravel’s tombeau was conceived towards the end of 1914, when the composer wrote to Lucien Garban (of Durand publishers): ‘I’m beginning two series of piano pieces: first, a French suite – no, it’s not what you think – the *Marseillaise* doesn’t come into it at all, but there’ll be a forlane and a jig; not a tango though...’

The sketches for the ‘French suite’, largely completed, were set aside on the outbreak of World War I, and it was not until 1917 that they emerged as *Le Tombeau de Couperin* – Ravel’s last work for solo piano, each of its six movements dedicated to the memory of a friend who had died in the war. The work’s musical tribute is cast more broadly: ‘...not so much,’ said Ravel, ‘to Couperin himself as to 18th-century French music in general.’



1735 line engraving of François Couperin by Jean Jacques Flipart (1719–1782). Source: Scottish National Portrait Gallery/Creative Commons

Ravel prepared for the composition of *Le Tombeau* by transcribing a forlane from François Couperin’s *Concerts royaux*. The buoyant rhythms and refrain structure of his own *Forlane* reveal their origins in the vigorous 16th-century Italian dance as heard through 18th-century French ears. But the melody and acid harmonies are all Ravel’s. Similarly, the flowing *Menuet* is more like Ravel’s own *Menuet antique* than any by Couperin, for all the antique mood established by its modal harmonies and classically balanced phrases.

# ABOUT THE MUSIC

It was the *concept* of the French Baroque suite – each dance with its specified character and set tempo – rather than its musical style that emerged in *Le Tombeau*. And the apparent contradiction of a suite of dances dedicated to the memory of fallen comrades is perfectly resolved, although the muted gracefulness of the music suggests serenity, even resignation, rather than melancholy.

Shortly after Marguerite Long gave the first performance in 1919, Ravel orchestrated four of the movements – *Prélude, Forlane, Menuet* and *Rigaudon* – omitting the Fugue and the pianistic Toccata that had concluded the original suite. The scoring is light – pairs of winds (including piccolo and cor anglais), two horns, trumpet, harp and strings – preserving the translucence, simplicity and restrained mood of the original.

Ravel makes much of the contrast between woodwinds and strings, often passing the melodies between the two sections, but the winds are given prominence from the very beginning, with a breathless succession of rapidly articulated notes for the oboe. The orchestration takes advantage, too, of the enhanced capabilities of Erard's double-action harp, and the feeling of perpetual motion in the *Prélude* is brought to a close with ravishing trills swept up in a harp glissando. The trumpet (reserved for subtle effect in Ravel's orchestration) adds brilliance to the exuberant opening of the final movement (a vigorous Provençal *Rigaudon*), balancing the prominence of woodwind and strings in the preceding movements.

Thus transformed, *Le Tombeau de Couperin* has been claimed by many to surpass the original in its ingenuity and variety – a tribute also to its composer's infallible ear for instrumental colour.

Ravel's orchestrated version of *Le Tombeau de Couperin* is scored for two flutes (one doubling piccolo), two oboes (one doubling cor anglais), two clarinets and two bassoons; two horns and one trumpet; harp and strings.

This version was premiered in Paris in February 1920 by the Pasdeloup Orchestra, conducted by Rhené-Baton.

The Sydney Symphony Orchestra's first performance of this work was under Chief Conductor Eugene Goossens in April 1951. Other performances led by Chief Conductors include Moshe Atzmon (1971), Willem van Otterloo (1974) and David Robertson (2019), and it was a particular favourite of Gianluigi Gelmetti, who conducted it three times as a guest conductor (1987, 1996 and 2002) and again during his tenure as Chief (2008). Other notable performances with guest conductors include those led by Walter Susskind (Oct. 1954), Rafael Kubelik (Sept. 1958), Georg Tintner (May 1976) and Charles Dutoit (Sept 2003). The Orchestra's most recent performance was with Nicholas Carter in June 2021.

# ABOUT THE MUSIC

## WHO IS JOHN ADAMS?

In 1971 Adams moved from the US east coast to California where he taught at the San Francisco Conservatory of Music. The next big thing in music was minimalism, but while Adams felt it was ‘the only really interesting, important stylistic development in the past 30 years’ he was aware of its expressive limitations. As Anthony Fogg has written:

Instead of the trance-like Eastern rhythms and mechanical repetitiveness of much early minimalism, Adams’ music began to establish much clearer directions, with climaxes and more clearly-defined structures underlying the minimalist method.

He was also receptive to a wide range of influences that shaped his style and musical architecture. An example appears as early as the triptych *American Standard* (1973), which looks to the particular kind of minimalism espoused by Cornelius Cardew in England, but which at the same time abstracts and enshrines, with loving nostalgia, American vernacular music such as march, hymn and jazz ballad. (The central movement, *Christian Zeal And Activity*, is often heard as a stand-alone work.) A similar impulse is at work in the iridescent string writing of *Shaker Loops* (composed as a chamber work in 1979 but revised for string orchestra in 1983) or the rolling, big-hearted tune that appears at the climax of *Grand Pianola Music* of 1982.

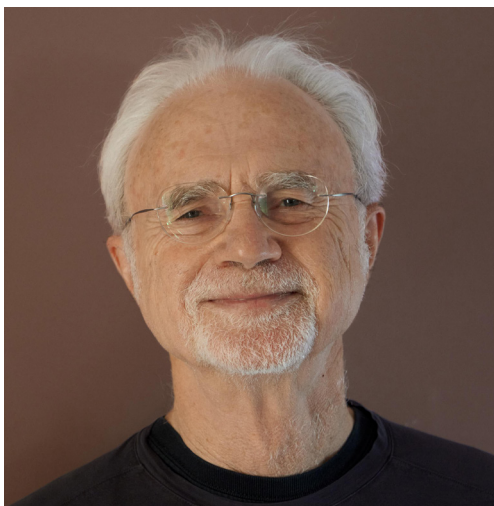
In 1979, with *Common Tones in Simple Time*, Adams began the series of large-scale orchestral works that have marked the development of his musical language. Works of the early 1980s such as *Short Ride in a Fast Machine* and *Harmonielehre* (whose title references the teaching method of Arnold Schoenberg) spring from a confident, optimistic energy embodied in the use of large-scale fields of stable diatonic harmony; by the early 1990s, in such works as his Chamber Symphony (composed at around the time of his Violin Concerto),

Adams explores more introspective, and occasionally darker, worlds in a piece that encompasses references to Schoenberg, Warner Brothers cartoons and the medieval mysticism of Meister Eckhardt. Adams also works closely with particular musicians and this in turn affects the work: *Century Rolls*, his piano concerto of 1996, celebrates the artistry of Emanuel Ax and the repertoire for which Ax is so revered.

Adams’ distinguished career in the opera theatre began in earnest with *Nixon in China* in 1982. This was followed by the still-controversial *The Death of Klinghoffer* and several other works including *El Niño: A Nativity Oratorio* (2000); *Doctor Atomic* (2005) and *A Flowering Tree* (2006).

The operas all have a direct concern with contemporary life; the essential humanism of Adams’ works is also manifest in his setting of Whitman’s Civil War elegy *The Wound Dresser* (1988), and *On the Transmigration of Souls* of 2002, his response to the appalling events of 11 September, 2001.

Recent orchestral works include *The Dharma at Big Sur* (a concerto for electric violin and orchestra from 2003), Saxophone Concerto (2013), *Doctor Atomic Symphony* (2007) and *Frenzy* (2023).

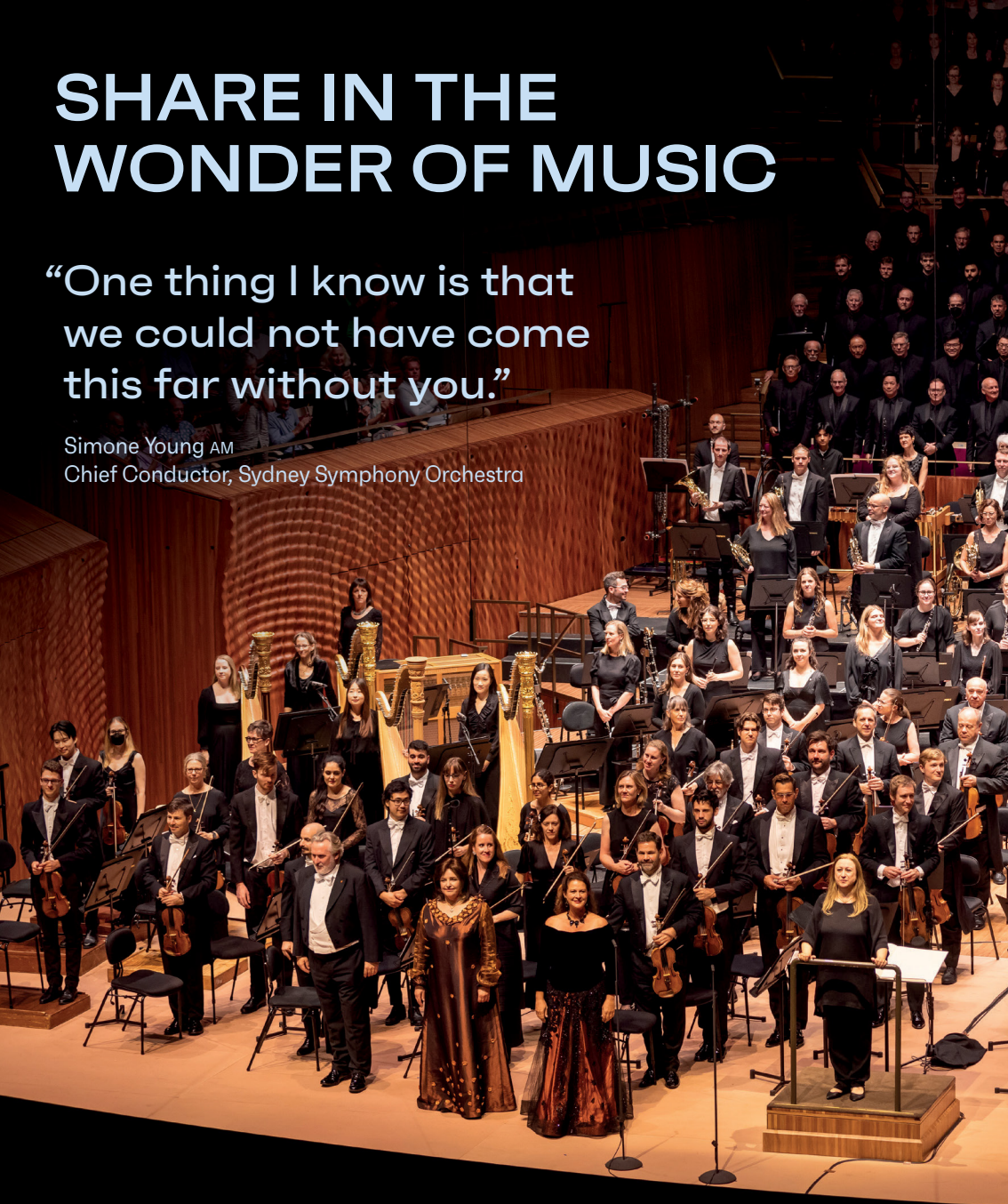


John Adams in 2022.  
Photo by Deborah O’Grady

# SHARE IN THE WONDER OF MUSIC

“One thing I know is that  
we could not have come  
this far without you.”

Simone Young AM  
Chief Conductor, Sydney Symphony Orchestra



Thank you for attending our concert today. Your support has been the driving force behind our achievements – you have made it possible for us to share the wonder of music far and wide.

Please consider a tax-deductible donation by **30 June**. Every gift, big or small, makes a difference.



With your help, we will continue to deliver inspirational performances and expand our artistic horizons in the future.

**Donate by 30 June**

**[sydney-symphony.com/appeal](https://sydney-symphony.com/appeal)**

**or call 02 8215 4600**



# ABOUT THE MUSIC

## ABSOLUTE JEST (2012)

Adams has written about how it is a rite of passage as a ‘classical composer...to share the bed’ with one of the canonical figures. And they don’t come more canonical than Beethoven, whose ‘ecstatic energy’ has frequently given Adams ‘powerful, archetypal experiences’. It was, however, a performance of Stravinsky’s *Pulcinella* by the San Francisco Symphony under Michael Tilson Thomas that got Adams thinking about taking ‘musical artefacts from the past’ and, as he says of Stravinsky, working them ‘into his own highly personal language’. For this commission, to celebrate the San Francisco Symphony’s centenary in 2011–12, Adams resolved to write a *concerto grosso* for string quartet and orchestra. Having, as he says, ‘loved the Beethoven string quartets since I was a teenager [...] crafting something out of fragments of Opus 131, Opus 135 and the *Grosse Fuge* (plus a few more familiar “tattoos” from his symphonic scherzos) was a totally spontaneous act for me’. Fully aware of the logistical challenges, and the significant differences between chamber and orchestral performance, Adams allows for discreet enhancement of the quartet’s sound, and carefully orchestrates so as not to overwhelm it.

The reliance on Beethovenian scherzos (‘jokes’) lies behind the somewhat enigmatic title, and Adams relates that some early audience members and critics took the title to mean that there was no more to the work than a ‘backslapping joke’. In fact, one critic expressed ‘disgust at the abuse of Beethoven’s great music’. But Adams was in no way seeking to make fun of Beethoven (other than the fun that is there already), nor to distort Beethoven’s music to make a political or aesthetic point, as English composer Michael Tippett does in his bitter deconstruction of the ‘Ninth’ in his own Third Symphony. Adams insists that

the act of composing the work (one that took nearly a year of work) was the most extended experience in pure ‘invention’ that I’ve ever undertaken. Its creation was for me a thrilling lesson in counterpoint, in thematic transformation and formal design. The ‘jest’ of the title should be understood in terms of its Latin meaning, *gesta*: doings, deeds, exploits. I like to think of ‘jest’ as indicating an exercising of one’s wit by means of imagination and invention.

The first of the work’s five linked sections (recomposed extensively after the premiere) begins in mystery: the timpanist quietly but insistently gives out the rhythmic cell from the scherzo of Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony under a glinting trio of cowbells, harp and piano in mean-tone tuning (that is, not the ‘equal temperament’ preferred since the late 18th century). This creates a texture of gleaming stillness despite the music’s tempo, from which the ‘Ninth’ fragment and one from the scherzo of Beethoven’s C sharp minor quartet, Op.131, emerge, using Adams’ trademark shifts of metrical emphasis and sudden cuts between the solo and orchestral groups. After three sections in fast, energetic tempos, which introduce fragments of the scherzo from the String Quartet in F, Op.135, a section marked *Meno mosso* creates a quite different atmosphere: relentless bounding is succeeded by more chromatic and pensive motifs drawn from the opening movement of Op.131, which is cross-bred with material from the *Grosse Fuge*, Op.133 (the original finale of Op.130, and a work of such abstraction that Stravinsky believed it would be ‘contemporary forever’). Overall, *Absolute Jest* is a set of free variations but here the material is treated fugally – that is, according to rules of counterpoint that might seem to undermine the spontaneity of variations form. In fact, though, Adams is merely echoing the form of the finale

# ABOUT THE MUSIC

of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony, which brings together free elaboration and strict counterpoint, as well as popular manners and 'learnèd' formality. Raw energy reasserts itself in the finale, which consists of *vivacissimo* and *prestissimo* sections that allude to the powerfully repeated opening chords of the 'Waldstein' Sonata, Op.53 (inspired by the memory of Adams' son practising), but the last word is given to the gentle chiming of the harp, piano and cowbells.

John Adams' *Absolute Jest* is scored for two flutes, piccolo, two oboes, cor anglais, two clarinets, bass clarinet, two bassoon and contrabassoon; four horns, two trumpets (one doubling piccolo trumpet) and two trombones; timpani and two percussionists; harp, piano, celeste, strings and amplified string quartet.

It was first performed in San Francisco on 15 March, 2012, with the San Francisco Symphony and the St. Lawrence String Quartet conducted by Michael Tilson Thomas.

The Sydney Symphony Orchestra gave the Australian premiere of this piece in February 2014, with the Australian String Quartet conducted by David Robertson. This is the Orchestra's first performance of it since then.

© Gordon Kerry 2017



Brahms in 1865

## WHO WAS JOHANNES BRAHMS?

Brahms died neither young, nor insane; he was never a liveried servant, nor dependent on aristocratic or royal patronage; he held several music directorships, but never for long, and, while a performer of distinction, became increasingly able to support himself on composition. He grew relatively wealthy on the sale and performances of his music, but in Vienna he lived with his piano and collection of music manuscripts and books in a three-room flat for 25 years. He never married.

He was born, in 1833, in Hamburg, in modest circumstances to a mismatched couple: Christiane and Johann Jakob Brahms, a local session-musician. His early promise as a pianist was used to augment the family finances; the 15-year old played dance music in the dockside taverns (read: brothels) of his home town at night while studying by day.

Violinist Joseph Joachim encouraged Brahms, in September 1853, to meet two of the most important influences on his life: Robert and Clara Schumann. Robert hailed the appearance of a major talent, and as Schumann slipped into madness, Brahms grew closer to Clara.

Brahms settled in Vienna around 1869, where the conservative critic Eduard Hanslick felt he had found in Brahms the embodiment of the classical tradition of abstract music. He never taught, but was instrumental in the state stipend given to Antonín Dvořák in the latter's early maturity.

His earliest works are for piano, some for public performance (though with an eye firmly on his posterity, Brahms destroyed a great many pieces in all genres) and some as studies. The period around the end of the 1850s and into the new decade see Brahms' first 'official' attempts at orchestral music, notably the First Concerto and the First Serenade. In the 1860s, Brahms focused on chamber music, though his mother's death catalysed a major choral orchestral piece: *A German Requiem*.

He suffered stage fright when it came to the symphony, and it is only in 1876 that the First, a work that had been gestating for many,

# ABOUT THE MUSIC

many years, appeared. His symphonies, Second Piano Concerto and the two string concertos all date from the period 1876-1887 as do his three Violin Sonatas.

The String Quintet, Op.111, dating from 1890 was to have been his last chamber work, but fortunately he made the acquaintance of clarinettist Richard Mühlfeld soon after, inspiring the Clarinet Trio and Quintet. His final works were Bachian chorale preludes, including two based on the chorale, 'O world, I must leave thee'. He died of liver cancer on 3 April 1897.

## ...AND WHO WAS ARNOLD SCHOENBERG?

Schoenberg, born in Vienna to a Hungarian Jewish family, at first cultivated the opulent late-Romantic manner of composers like Gustav Mahler, Richard Strauss and Alexander Zemlinsky, as we hear in works like *Pelleas und Melisande* from 1905. To him it was inevitable that the harmonic richness and chromaticism must be pushed further, such that the old sense of harmony as an opposition of consonant and dissonant chords (with consonance always triumphing) would give way to a music where all notes were created equal. This produced, in works like the last movements of the Second String Quartet of 1908, the pervasively dissonant

sound known (not by Schoenberg) as 'atonality'; in systematising this, Schoenberg worked on the principle that all twelve notes of the chromatic scale (all the black and white notes within an octave on the piano) had to be sounded an equal number of times. His solution was the twelve-note series: all notes in a row, with strict rules about when they could be sounded. The method still provokes strong reactions, but in fact is capable of producing music of a huge range of colour, mood and emotion.

Schoenberg saw himself as embodying a long tradition that went back to the Baroque; as a teacher, he placed Beethoven at the centre of his method.

## BRAHMS AND SCHOENBERG

Late in life, Brahms was so impressed by a young Viennese composer's work that he helped arranged a stipend, which the young man then turned down. Half a century later in 1947, the composer, Arnold Schoenberg, wrote his famous article *Brahms the Progressive*, in which he argued that the conventional view of Brahms as an academic classicist was wrong: Brahms' command of chromatic harmony was as advanced as that of Wagner, and his elaboration of large structures from small motivic cells was greater. Numerous scholars have pointed out that Schoenberg played down the conservative elements in Brahms, like his adherence to classical forms and genres, in favour of those that appeared in his own music, and in a sense a more searching tribute can be found in the orchestration of Brahms' G minor Piano Quintet that Schoenberg made in Los Angeles in 1937. His motivation for making the arrangement was simply that he liked the piece, but that it was, at the time, rarely heard and usually played badly.

In 1857, Brahms received his first professional position. For three months' work each year in the prince's court at Detmold, Brahms received the equivalent of a year's salary: his duties included performing as pianist at Court concerts, giving lessons to the Princess



Schoenberg



# ABOUT THE MUSIC

Friederike and conducting the amateur choral society which Brahms described as 'richly adorned with Serene Highnesses' and other music-loving aristocrats.

It was at this time (which was in the wake of Robert Schumann's tragic death in 1856), that Brahms began work on, among other things, the two piano quartets in G minor and A major. Both works were ultimately completed in 1863 when Brahms, with the considerable advice and support of Clara Schumann, made his debut in Vienna with the G minor Quartet.

The scale of the first movement, and the roiling emotions it unleashes, mask how rigorously Brahms derives his material from the initial mosaic of four-note motifs – something of which Schoenberg greatly approved. In his version, Schoenberg uses a much larger and more varied orchestra than Brahms ever had, but despite some of the opulence of Mahler and Richard Strauss, the piece displays a deep knowledge of the Brahmsian sound. The opening use of winds has several precedents in Brahms (though admittedly not the inclusion of E flat and bass clarinets) as does the warm writing for strings and solo horn. Schoenberg, moreover, reflects what he called Brahms' technique of 'developing variation' in a kind of developing orchestration throughout the work. The recapitulation of this movement is rendered in significantly different colouring including the fleeting glitter of the glockenspiel.

At Clara Schumann's suggestion Brahms changed the title of his scherzo to *Intermezzo*, and it is certainly a far cry from some of the boisterous early Brahms scherzos, preferring instead quiet suggestion and nuance. Schoenberg responds with the pastoral sound of oboe and cor anglais, followed by flutes, who dominate again at the movement's end.

The *Andante* is the essence of simplicity, a ternary design full of Brahmsian melodising and the constant variation of material and a Schumannesque 'march' (though in 3) as the central trio. Schoenberg's orchestration is richly

Brahmsian here, though soon enough we hear solo violins and wind choruses and an almost Mahlerian intensity in the trio. Schoenberg's scoring brings out the expressive counterpoint in the return to the opening section.

Like the *Intermezzo*, the finale looks ahead to later Brahms, this time in his assimilation of 'Hungarian' idioms, learned in the taverns in Hamburg but more closely as duo-partner to violinists Reményi and Joachim. The latter, also well known as the composer of the *Hungarian Concerto*, heard this *Rondo alla Zingarese*, and announced that Brahms had beaten him on his own turf. Here Schoenberg (who was of Hungarian descent) has a great deal of fun, with the (in)famous use of the xylophone for those piano passages, in the original, that imitate the cimbalom, or dulcimer. In some of the slower, syncopated sections, Schoenberg evokes certain *klezmer*-influenced passages in Mahler, and throughout, chinks in the fully scored tutti reveal fragments of delicate solo writing. The final moments feature extravagant cadenzas for clarinet, that most Brahmsian/Hungarian of instruments, and a rhythmically thrilling finish.

Schoenberg's orchestration of Brahms' Piano Quartet is scored for three flutes (all doubling piccolo), three oboes (the third doubling cor anglais), three clarinets (the second doubling E flat clarinet and the third doubling bass clarinet) and three bassoons (the third doubling contrabassoon); four horns, three trumpets, three trombones and tuba; timpani, four percussion and strings.

The Quartet was premiered in 1861 in Hamburg, with Clara Schumann at the piano. Schoenberg orchestrated the work in 1937 at the urging of conductor Otto Klemperer, who led the world premiere performance by the Los Angeles Philharmonic on 7 May, 1938.

The Sydney Symphony Orchestra first performed this work in July 1983 under then-Chief Conductor Charles Mackerras. Other notable performances include those led by then-Chief Conductor Edo de Waart (1994), Sergiu Comissiona (1989) and Matthias Pintscher (2015). Our most recent performance was in May 2019 under Andrey Boreyko.

**Notes by Yvonne Frindle ©1999/2012 (Ravel *Le Tombeau de Couperin*) and Gordon Kerry © 2016, 2020, 2024.**

**Scoring and history by Hugh Robertson.**

## FEATURE



# BEETHOVEN IN A HALL OF MIRRORS: JOHN ADAMS AND ABSOLUTE JEST

**The Australian String Quartet and conductor Anja Bihlmaier discuss inspiration, collaboration and the ‘ecstasy’ of Beethoven.**

By Hugh Robertson

The great poet TS Eliot once wrote: ‘Immature poets imitate; mature poets steal; bad poets deface what they take, and good poets make it into something better, or at least something different.’ He was talking about the power of inspiration on creativity, the way an old work can light a fire and lead you into exciting new territory.

This June, the Sydney Symphony Orchestra embraces the spirit of Eliot’s observation in a unique concert that features three very different works where their composer has transformed music from an earlier era into something new – and newly-inspiring.

In his *Tombeau de Couperin*, Maurice Ravel took the structure and forms of Baroque dance music as his bedrock upon which to

build a memorial to friends lost during World War I; Arnold Schoenberg took Brahms’ First Piano Quartet and expanded it for full orchestra, eschewing the piano in favour of drawing out every ounce of harmonic richness and drama from a much larger ensemble; and in *Absolute Jest*, American composer John Adams uses excerpts of Beethoven’s string quartets as the bones of a new work that is a little bit Beethoven, a little bit Adams, and a lot of fun.

Adams took as his chief inspiration Beethoven’s late string quartets, in particular No.14 (Op.131), No.16 (Op.135) and the Grosse Fuge (Op.133), taking small fragments and ‘tattoos’ from those works and walking them through ‘a hall of mirrors’.

‘They appear and disappear,’ says Adams in a video on his website. ‘They get stretched, I turn them upside-down, I pile one on top of another on top of another, and create a very dynamic dialogue between the solo string quartet and the orchestra.’

Adding to the excitement is that these concerts will witness a rare collaboration between the Sydney Symphony and another of this country’s great music ensembles, the Australian String Quartet. It is extremely unusual to have a string quartet and an orchestra on stage at the same time, but that is the setup demanded by Adams in *Absolute Jest* – he essentially treats the string quartet as if it were the soloist in a concerto, the focal point and driver of much of the action.

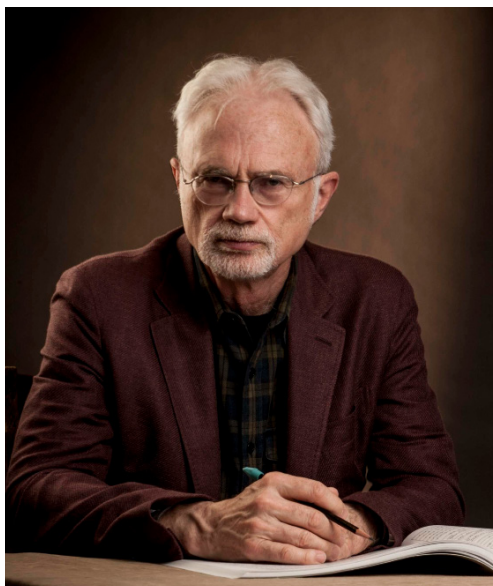
‘I read something that Adams himself had said or written, says ASQ cellist Michael Dahlenburg. ‘He was pointing out that the DNA of this work is the ecstasy of Beethoven.’

‘And he also talks in another interview about the ecstasy and the power of the scherzos, which, when we think of Beethoven, that’s where he does his most concise work in the shortest space of time with the fewest notes. He can really create this absolute paradigm that encompasses that whole movement, that therefore really gives it its life, its playfulness.’

*Absolute Jest* is a work that asks a lot from both the quartet and the orchestra, and not just because of the unfamiliar structure of the piece. It demands everything that a Beethoven symphony demands, all the power and emotional expression of those towering works, as well as the intricacy and richness of the late quartets.

It’s a rich feast for an audience, but also for the musicians on stage who get to experience this rare and unique structure.

‘It’s absolutely fabulous,’ says Christopher Cartlidge, the ASQ’s viola player. ‘Both string quartets and orchestras are such extraordinary mediums of art and character and sound and expression.’



‘What I really love about this piece is that Adams doesn’t change the quartet and he doesn’t change the symphony orchestra,’ says ASQ violinist Francesca Hiew. ‘He keeps the symphony at full pelt. And you’re hearing French horns and all sorts of things moving past. You feel like you’re in this cloud of the ghost of Beethoven whizzing past here and there.’

There is also the added complication that Adams’ music doesn’t always go in the same direction as Beethoven: a challenge for fingers familiar with the originals.

‘Adams quotes quite extensively from the scherzo of Beethoven’s very final quartet, Op.135,’ explains Dale Barltrop, one of the two violinists in the ASQ. ‘The first violin part is quite acrobatic, but John Adams takes it in a slightly different direction and I catch myself out almost every time when I’m playing it, because I always want to return to Beethoven.’

‘But it’s so brilliantly crafted. It’s really exhilarating. [And] there’s so much to discover. It’s just so rich and so brilliantly woven together.’

‘This particular piece is different than I think anything else we’ve done,’ he continues. ‘It requires us to be so rhythmically intertwined, the four of us. We have to be so tight. [And] I cannot understate the importance of the conductor in the web of relationships that formed in performing this piece.’



That conductor is the German Anja Bihlmaier, who will be making her Sydney Symphony debut with this concert. Born in southwest Germany, Bihlmaier has spent two decades progressing through the ranks of opera conductors in her homeland, before making the switch to symphonic repertoire. Since then she has experienced a meteoric rise, very quickly appointed Principal Guest Conductor of Finland's esteemed Lahti Symphony Orchestra and Chief Conductor of The Hague's Residentie Orkest – in the process becoming the first woman to hold either of those roles – and having recently debuted at Glyndebourne and at The Proms. And she is thrilled to be making her first visit to Australia.

'I think the program is just amazing and just fantastic because it has so many colours,' she says with a smile. 'We have this red line that you have two composers for every piece, but very different ones.'

'They are all related with each other,' she continues. 'But if you listen to it, it's totally different music. And that's what I think is very exciting...it's a nice combination.'

Bihlmaier's approach to conducting is somewhere between a theatre director and a hiking enthusiast, paying close attention to the story of the music but also to the topography of the music.

'It's like exploring a landscape,' she explains. 'A score for me is like a map. First of all, you try to find out how you get from A to

Z, to learn the basic things you need to understand. How is the texture? How is the architecture? How does that look like? Is it round? Is it more like a square?'

'And then once you know that, then you try to find what you want to explore. Who is living next door? Where are the streets? Where is the forest? Where is this and that? And it's the same with a score.'

Music as landscape is a well-worn metaphor to describe the emotional terrain of a piece of music, the ebbs and flows of energy and intensity – but in this case Bihlmaier means it quite literally.

'Sometimes if I find it tricky to oversee the whole landscape of a score, I copy pages and add them next to each other. And then I stand on a ladder and then I see all this paper, in black and white, and then you can see the texture better. It looks like mountains, like valleys, or whatever. And then I try to memorize, "Okay, that was here and here's the next high point.'

'As a conductor I think it's important to know the dramaturgy of a piece. There is a story in every piece of music. And then if I know the big moments, then I can try to get more and more into the details.'

It's not just her own exploration that excites Bihlmaier, but then taking those discoveries to an orchestra and starting a conversation together, a process of back and forth where ideas are tested and perspectives challenged.

'The fascinating thing then, in a rehearsal together with orchestra, is to agree on a concept,' says Bihlmaier enthusiastically. 'What do we want to bring out?'

'Like in *Absolute Jest*: are we focussing on the rhythms, or do we want to focus on details so that we really hear the Beethoven? And which colour do we play that? Is it more an oil painting, or more like watercolour? Do we want it to look more like a big field, like an atmosphere? Or you zoom in and you have all the details?'

'Many different things are possible, and I try to find out what I think what makes the piece fascinating and how it comes alive the best for our audience.'

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