

14 & 15 June 2024



# VAUGHAN WILLIAMS & SHOSTAKOVICH

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# CONCERT DIARY

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## JUNE 2024

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Great Classics

**Saturday 22 June, 2pm**

Sunday Afternoon Symphony

**Sunday 23 June, 2pm**

Concert Hall,  
Sydney Opera House

### ALEXANDER MELNIKOV PERFORMS SHOSTAKOVICH

ORCHESTRAL FIREWORKS

Pianist Alexander Melnikov is celebrated for '...Shostakovich playing on a level of inspiration I have only heard in my dreams.' (*Gramophone*). Don't miss the virtuosity of this astonishing artist in this concert full of orchestral fireworks, from spellbinding Shostakovich to energetic and charming Strauss.

#### SHOSTAKOVICH

Festive Overture

Piano Concerto No.1

#### R STRAUSS

Don Juan

Till Eulenspiegel's Merry Pranks

**GIORDANO BELLINCAMPI** conductor

**ALEXANDER MELNIKOV** piano

**DAVID ELTON** trumpet



International Pianists in Recital

**Monday 24 June, 7pm**

City Recital Hall

### ALEXANDER MELNIKOV IN RECITAL ROMANTIC MASTERPIECES

With three Romantic masterpieces performed by a modern-day master, this concert is a treat for anyone who loves the piano.

**SCHUBERT** Fantasie in C, Wanderer

**BRAHMS** Seven Fantasies

**DEBUSSY** Preludes: Book II

**ALEXANDER MELNIKOV** piano



Classics in the City

**Thursday 27 June, 7pm**

City Recital Hall

### HANDEL'S WATER MUSIC

SPARKLING BAROQUE

This concert, directed by the brilliant Erin Helyard, is a celebration of the spectacular, and a rare chance to hear our musicians shine in a smaller orchestra, with each virtuosic line ringing out into the City Recital Hall.

**PISENDEL** Imitation des caractères de la danse

**HANDEL** Water Music

**ERIN HELYARD** harpsichord/director



# 2024 CONCERT SEASON

## COCKTAIL HOUR WITH HANDPICKED WINES

Friday 14 June, 6pm  
Saturday 15 June, 6pm

Utzon Room,  
Sydney Opera House

# VAUGHAN WILLIAMS & SHOSTAKOVICH

## A SYMPHONIES IN MINIATURE

**GENEVIEVE LANG** presenter

### **RALPH VAUGHAN WILLIAMS (1872–1958)**

#### **Phantasy Quintet (1912)**

- i. Prelude: Lento ma non troppo –
- ii. Scherzo: Prestissimo –
- iii. Alla Sarabanda: Lento –
- iv. Burlesca: Allegro moderato

**MARINA MARSDEN** violin

**EMILY LONG** violin

**JANE HAZELWOOD** viola

**JUSTINE MARSDEN** viola

**FENELLA GILL** cello

### **DMITRI SHOSTAKOVICH (1906–1975)**

#### **String Quartet No.9 in E flat, Op.117 (1964)**

- i. Moderato con moto – attacca
- ii. Adagio – attacca
- iii. Allegretto – attacca
- iv. Adagio – attacca
- v. Allegro

**CLAIRE HERRICK** violin

**ALEXANDRA MITCHELL** violin

**ROSEMARY CURTIN** viola

**KRISTY CONRAU** cello

### **Estimated durations**

Vaughan Williams – 16 minutes

Shostakovich – 26 minutes

The concert will run for  
approximately one hour

### **Cover image**

By Craig Abercrombie

*These performances have  
been generously supported  
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# WELCOME

Welcome to **Vaughan Williams & Shostakovich**, a virtuosic concert in the intimate surroundings of the Utzon Room of the Sydney Opera House.

Handpicked Wines is delighted to be the Presenting Partner of the Sydney Symphony Orchestra's Cocktail Hour series.

At Handpicked, we understand the power of passion and artistry. We draw on both technical skill and creative inspiration to craft wines that elevate experiences; just as the artists of the Orchestra invite us to experience a program of complex and brilliant music.

The composers Ralph Vaughan Williams and Dmitri Shostakovich personify a strong sense of place. Vaughan Williams is synonymous with England, while Shostakovich is forever linked to the former USSR.

This expanded sense of 'home' occupies the very heart of their work, just as the characteristics of a region do in winemaking. There is no mistaking their place in the world, nor where their hearts lie.

The works you will hear are all written to be performed without any break between the movements. They are symphonies for small forces – exquisite, exciting and fizzing with energy.

Handpicked and the Sydney Symphony Orchestra share values of creativity and technical excellence, forming the foundation of our exciting new partnership. We are also committed to providing unique and wonderful experiences.

I hope you enjoy the concert and the wines we have selected to accompany the soulful and heartfelt music of **Vaughan Williams & Shostakovich**.

**William Dong**  
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# ABOUT THE MUSIC

## ABOUT VAUGHAN WILLIAMS



Vaughan Williams in 1913

With the *Fantasia on a theme of Thomas Tallis*, Ralph Vaughan Williams refreshed English music by returning to one of its distant sources, the psalmody of Tudor England. A few years before the ‘Tallis Fantasia’ shimmered and surged into life in 1910 in the endless reverberance of Gloucester Cathedral, the composer had embarked on another project which was to transform his, and Britain’s, music: the collection and arranging of folk-song. But it was by no means inevitable that Vaughan Williams’s style would develop as it did.

After the early death of his father, an Anglican clergyman, the composer was raised in the liberal bosom of his mother’s family – consisting of members of the Wedgwood pottery dynasty, and the Darwins of natural history. A Wedgwood aunt instructed the child in thorough-bass and harmony, while some years later another aunt, Etty Darwin, described

‘that foolish young man Ralph Vaughan Williams who will go on working at music when he is so hopelessly bad at it...They say it will simply break his heart if he is told that he is too bad to hope to make anything of it.’

Nevertheless, Vaughan Williams persisted, studying at the Royal College of Music under Hubert Parry, whose Piano Concerto of 1880 has been said to have inaugurated the so-called English musical Renaissance. After taking his degree at Cambridge, in 1895 Vaughan Williams returned to the RCM to study under the redoubtable Irish composer Charles Villiers Stanford, whose assessments included ‘damnably ugly, my boy. Why do you write such things?’, or, more succinctly, ‘all rot, my boy...’

Over a long career Vaughan Williams established one of the most distinctive and much loved voices in twentieth-century music, working in the fields of opera, chamber music, choral-music (for concert and liturgy) and the symphony. His *The Lark Ascending* routinely ranks high in ‘Top 100’ classical music votes around the world; it should be noted that after 1914 Vaughan Williams’ seemingly serene ‘pastoral’ works were imbued with the tragedy of World War I, in which he saw action, and that in works like the Fourth and Sixth Symphonies he was capable of blistering dissonance and timbre rivalling some of Shostakovich’s more contentious pieces.

# ABOUT THE MUSIC

## PHANTASIES

The idea of the Fantasia had made a come-back in 1905, when Walter Willson Cobbett (amateur musician and Chairman of Scandinavian Belting Ltd) and the Worshipful Company of Musicians established a prize for British composers, who were encouraged to submit a work for chamber ensemble. These had to be in a single movement, but made up of sections in contrasting speed and metre, and were to be designated 'Phantasy', an archaic spelling of 'fantasy' that evoked the sort of works for 'chests', or consorts, of viols in Tudor and Jacobean times. This spawned an enormous number of such works from an enormous number of British composers over the next decades.

## THE PHANTASY QUINTET

The 'Tallis' Fantasia is one of several works in the genre that Vaughan Williams composed at this time. He composed his Phantasy Quintet in 1912 at Cobbett's suggestion, and it had its premiere in March 1914, days before that of his *A London Symphony*. The composer's widow Ursula Vaughan Williams notes that the Phantasy Quintet shared the program with Maurice Ravel's *Gaspard de la nuit*, Mily Balakirev's *Islamey*, Hugo Wolf's *Italian Serenade* and works by Paul Dukas and Australia's own Percy Grainger.

It is, as the composer wrote, 'of very much smaller scope than the ordinary full-grown quartet or quintet. It is in four very short movements, which succeed each other without a break.'

The 'extra' instrument is a second viola, which gives the work as a whole a sense of great richness and warmth, and which is underlined by the opening melody being for viola alone. The melancholy of the melody is enhanced by a characteristic use of parallel triads in the accompaniment which were, according to one critic 'clear to the understanding and restful to the ear'. The scherzo is built on a repeated

ostinato figure in 7/4, which another critic heard as 'Oriental exoticism'; its ebullience is set off by a sarabande – a slow dance in triple time, where the second beat is stressed. There is a final *burlesca*, worthy of Shostakovich, that returns to the opening material of the piece.

## ABOUT SHOSTAKOVICH



Dmitri Shostakovich (Deutsche Fotothek)

Shostakovich was an adolescent at the time of the 1917 revolution. Unlike his near contemporary Prokofiev, or the slightly older Stravinsky, Shostakovich saw no need to travel abroad, let alone emigrate. The twenty-one year old composer's First Symphony premiered in his home town of Leningrad (St Petersburg) in 1928; its introduction to the West by Bruno Walter assured Shostakovich of world celebrity, but was also an announcement of the optimistic, outward looking Russia of the immediate post-Revolutionary period. That Shostakovich was broadly in sympathy with the ideals of early revolutionary Russia is suggested by his Second and Third

# ABOUT THE MUSIC

Symphonies, subtitled 'To October' and 'The First of May' respectively. It should be noted, however, that these works pre-date the official promulgation of the concept of 'socialist realism'; in them, Shostakovich displays an exuberant interest in the techniques of Western art music, such as dissonance and irony.

The political backdrop to Shostakovich's early career was the power struggle between Trotsky and Stalin that began with the death of Lenin in 1922. By the early Thirties the ascendancy of Stalin was complete and in 1934 the purges, or Great Terror, began. Within that period (1934-38) were two particularly bloody years where N I Yezhov, chief of the NKVD (later the KGB) oversaw the imprisonment and murder of Stalin's principal remaining Communist Party rivals as well as leading scientists, writers and musicians. The effect of the purges was to rob the USSR of millions of its citizens, especially leading figures in most fields, so that by the end of the 1930s the country's intellectual infrastructure was almost fatally weakened.

Despite having enjoyed a spectacularly successful two-year run, Shostakovich's opera *Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk* was attacked in the pages of *Pravda* in 1936 as 'chaos instead of music', and its composer warned that 'this could all end very badly'. Shostakovich, or the orchestral management in Leningrad, immediately withdrew his demanding Fourth Symphony, a powerfully disturbing behemoth of dissonance and irony. The composer, like many of his generation, is said to have slept for a time in the hallway of his apartment so that the seemingly inevitable arrest wouldn't traumatise his young family. (Shostakovich suffered several reversals of fortune: he was denounced in 1936, rehabilitated with the premiere of the Fifth Symphony then denounced again in 1948, despite having been awarded the Stalin Prize in 1940 and the Order of Lenin in 1946).

## SHOSTAKOVICH AND CHAMBER MUSIC

In his Fifth Symphony Shostakovich produced just what the Party thought it had ordered – though he claimed it was a journalist who gave it its subtitle of 'an artist's response to just criticism'. In the aftermath of the Symphony's success Shostakovich began writing chamber music in earnest, producing his First String Quartet in 1938. He also developed a close working relationship with the Beethoven Quartet, which premiered all but two of his fifteen quartets.

It is overly simplistic to see the quartets as 'a secret history of Soviet Russia', as Norman Lebrecht describes them. Many of the quartets are obviously personal and disturbing, but the medium acted as a small-scale laboratory in which the composer could experiment, away from public and official scrutiny, on his musical technique and emotional armoury. It's been suggested that he intended to write quartets in every available key. The fifteen he did write, nonetheless, display the composer's genius for novel solutions, formal innovation and powerfully idiomatic writing. Whether or not Shostakovich's behaviour in the face of a brutal and irrational regime was less than heroic, his musical output contains some of the greatest works of the twentieth century. As the simplistic oppositions of the Cold War fade into history, the works continue to fascinate with their often ambiguous emotive power and the astounding craftsmanship of their composer.

*A perfect*  
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# ABOUT THE MUSIC

## THE NINTH QUARTET



Dmitri and Irina Shostakovich

By the late fifties, with Stalin dead, Shostakovich was back in favour, able to travel abroad and presiding over the Union of Soviet Composers from 1960. He also became a member of the Communist Party in 1960 (though full membership was conferred after two years), when, as Richard Taruskin points out, the dissident movement was finally emerging.

Shostakovich was, by some accounts, profoundly uneasy about his new relationship with the Soviet State and contemplated suicide in self-disgust. The Eighth Quartet, ostensibly about the ‘victims of war and fascism’, is saturated with the composer’s musical monogram and moves inexorably into darkness and silence. Soon after, he contemplated a quartet based on ‘themes from childhood’ but, in the event, produced the present work in 1964, dedicating it to his wife Irina, whom he had married in 1962.

The Ninth Quartet is somewhat less searing than the Eighth; its form and tone suggest a composer exploring the abstract possibilities of chamber music for their own sake.

Like its predecessor, the Quartet is in five movements played without a break, but in contrast to the Eighth’s downward vector, this work has something of the symmetry of certain pieces by Bartók. The outer movements balance each other in scale and substance, as do the second and fourth, and the central ‘scherzo’ itself is itself a symmetrical ‘arch’ of five sections.

The first movement begins with a sinuous melody, over gently rippling accompaniment, that is soon interrupted by more dogged section featuring rhythmic pizzicato figures. The second movement takes up an idea introduced early – that a rich modal harmony of triadic chords moving in parallel. The effect is somewhat ‘English’, recalling some passages in Vaughan Williams and Britten (the latter had become friendly with Shostakovich in 1960). The central movement is vintage Shostakovich with its sardonic wit and galloping offbeat rhythms. The fourth movement, balancing the second, begins with a solo passage that has been likened to Orthodox liturgical chant, with the repeated accompaniment figures related to those of the first movement, but here again pizzicato figures (in which author Wendy Lesser hears the influence of jazz – much hated by the then General Secretary Khrushchev) and immobile drones disrupt the music’s flow. The finale also creates drama out of disjunction, and concludes with bright major fanfares.

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Crafted from the finest Tasmanian fruit, this sparkling blend features 50% Chardonnay and 50% Pinot Noir. With richness from time on lees and the oaked reserve wine and brioche notes from lees, it offers delicate red fruits, sweet lemon, and oyster shell nuances. Balanced acidity and a fine mousse leading to a clean finish.



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