

**Omega Ensemble**



**Vocalise**  
**Rachmaninoff and Poulenc**

**2:30PM | Sunday | 21 October 2018**  
**Sydney Opera House**

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# Vocalise

## Rachmaninoff and Poulenc

**Sunday 21 October 2018**

2:30pm

Utzon Room, Sydney Opera House

Presented as part of the 2018 Master Series

### **Francis Poulenc**

Chanson d'Orkenise (Banalités)

Hôtel (Banalités)

Voyage à Paris (Banalités)

C (Deux Poèmes de Louis Aragon)

Air Vif (Air Chantes)

Violon (Trois Poèmes de Louise de Vilmorin)

Les Gars qui vont a la fête (Chanson Villageoises)

### **Sergei Rachmaninoff**

Selections from 14 Romances, Op.34

Vocalise

Muza

Arion

Voskresheniye Lazarya

Kakoye Schast'ye

### **Ian Munro**

Letter to a Friend (Words by Judith Wright)

[Australian premiere]

### **Franz Schubert**

The Shepherd on the Rock

The concert will last approximately 75 minutes without interval



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Omega Ensemble reserves the right to alter scheduled artists and programs as necessary.

# About the music

**Francis Poulenc (1899-1963)**

## **Selected Chansons, Banalités and Poemes**

- I. Chanson d'Orkenise (Banalités S 107)
- II. Hôtel (Banalités)
- III. Voyage à Paris (Banalités)
- IV. C (Deux Poèmes de Louis Aragon S 122)
- V. Air vif (Air chantés S 46)
- VI. Violon (Fiançailles pour rire, S 101)
- VII. Les Gars qui vont a la fête (Chansons villageoises S 117)

Francis Poulenc was one of the group known as *Les Six*, who had relatively little in common beyond a kind of arch neo-classicism formed partly from their admiration of Stravinsky and partly in reaction to the music of Debussy. Poulenc began writing *melodies*, or art-songs, with works such as his *Rapsodie nègre* as early as 1917, when his career was first taking off. The bulk of his music in this genre, however, dates from after 1935, when he began working with the baritone Pierre Bernac on a regular basis. The composer was repeatedly drawn to the work of certain poets of the *symboliste*-surrealist bent, among them Paul Eluard, Guillaume Apollinaire, Louis Aragon, and Louise de Vilmorin.

The 1940 set *Banalités* sets six poems by Apollinaire. 'Chanson d'Orkenise' describes a tramp arriving at the gates of the Burgundian city of Autun bringing 'only his heart', only to be mocked by the sentries. In 'Hôtel', the poet, still half asleep, just wants to sit in his hotel room, smoking as the sun comes up. Poulenc responds with music of extreme inaction. In his quirky waltz setting of the fifth song, 'Voyage à Paris', Poulenc embodies

Apollinaire's love of Paris and consequent contempt for anywhere else.

One of two poems by Louis Aragon that Poulenc set in 1943, 'C', as Bernac once wrote, "evokes the tragic days on May 1940, when a large part of the French population was fleeing before the invading armies. In this horrible exodus, the poet himself, at the Ponts-de-Cé close to Angers had crossed the Loire, filled with 'overturned vehicles' and 'discarded weapons' in the total confusion of a forsaken France."

Greek emigré poet Jean Moréas (1856-1910) was associated with the *symbolistes*, even penning the *Symbolist Manifesto* in 1886, but by 1927 his reputation had slipped, and Poulenc cynically regarded his work as 'ripe for mutilation' in the early cycle, *Airs chantés*. In the 'Air vif' he gives cheery clothing to Moréas' somewhat laboured Romantic imagery.

Poulenc set Vilmorin's *Fiançailles pour rire* (A light-hearted betrothal) for soprano and piano 'so that I could more often turn my thoughts towards Louise de Vilmorin, imprisoned in her castle in Hungary for God knows how long' during 1939. (The poet Vilmorin had made one of several ill-advised marriages, this time to a Hungarian count.) The fifth song of the cycle, 'Violon' likens the instrument and its player to a mismatched, but loving couple ('with unrecognized accents'), in music of vaguely Baroque dotted rhythms that supports a long vocal line.

In the *Chansons villageoises*, settings of poetry Maurice Fombeure (1906-1981), Poulenc evokes various outdoor settings; originally the cycle was for voice and orchestra, but he rethought it for his long-time

collaborator, Bernac. Here he remembers 'Lads going to a party' in a mood that reminded him of summers spent near Autun, the town he depicts in the Chanson d'Orkenis.

### Sergei Rachmaninoff (1873-1943)

## Selections from 14 Romances, Op.34

- I. Vocalise (No.14)
- II. Muza (No.1)
- III. Arion (No.5)
- IV. Voskresheniye Lazarya (No.6)
- V. Kakoye Schast'ye (No.12)

In the West, we think of Rachmaninoff as primarily a composer of instrumental, and especially piano-based, music; paradoxically, his best-known vocal work is the wordless Vocalise from his Op.34, originally for voice and piano but transcribed for numerous instrumental combinations. He was, however, a prodigious composer of songs and ranged widely across Russian literature for his source material.

The 'Vocalise' was composed in 1915, but the bulk of the set comes from 1910-12, a period that also saw a number of major choral works such as the Liturgy of St John Chrysostom and the Vespers. The rapturous 'Vocalise' is, of course, wordless, though the composer did say that such a piece could in effect be more expressive of human emotion than anything bound to a specific meaning.

Op.34 sets a variety of poets, but today we hear two settings of Pushkin, Russia's best-loved poet, whose work had inspired Rachmaninoff's early opera, *Aleko*. 'The Muse' begins with a solo line all in fifths and octaves to represent a kind of pre-lapsarian innocence, where the muse gives the infant poet a set of pan-pipes on which he learns to play solemn hymns and shepherd songs. These and the muse's own music are brought vividly to life in Rachmaninoff's ecstatic vocal line and colourful accompaniment.

'Arion' is a version the legend of the young poet of that name, aboard a boat that founders at sea. The

original story has him returning triumphant from a poetry competition, but having fallen into the hands of murderous sailors, is saved by Apollo, who sends a pod of dolphins to carry him to land. In Pushkin, the boat merely encounters a storm and only the young poet reaches dry land, singing as he dries his garment in the sun. Rachmaninoff responds with surging waves of sound, a cascade of triplets under the singer's top notes at the storm's height and a long soft postlude.

Immediately following 'Arion' in Op.34 is Rachmaninoff's setting of 'Voskresheniye Lazarya' (The Raising of Lazarus) by devotional poet Alexei Khomyakov (1804-1860), where the miracle of Jesus' raising his friend from the dead is construed as a metaphor for conversion.

The song was dedicated to the great bass, Feodor Chalyapin, and, in contrast to the liquid energy of 'Arion', is accompanied largely by full chords, frequently in the bass register. Only in the last few bars does the piano admit to the possibility of new life.

The singer of 'Kakoye Schast'ye' (What Happiness!) by Afanasy Afanesyevich Fet (1820-1892), is fully sensate, revelling in the beauty of the starlit river, though insisting, like a good Romantic, that he is sick with love. The accompaniment of unrelenting triplet rhythms, and a vocal line that repeatedly soars to the highest register, convey his passion, which continues in the piano part even where the singer falls silent.

### Ian Munro (1963 - )

## Letter to a Friend (Words by Judith Wright)

- I. I have sat down by the river \*
- II. The small waves vanish endlessly
- III. Black is the night \*
- IV. The light falls from the sky \*
- V. In the depth
- VI. The sun moves to be born of the sea.

This collection of songs had its first incarnation as a shorter work (\* denotes original movements) that Ian Munro wrote for Elizabeth Campbell to sing at the Kangaroo Valley Arts Festival in 2009. He subsequently

arranged them for piano and, as piano pieces, they won the Jean Bogan Prize at the University of Newcastle, premiered by Daniel Herscovitch. For this performance by Lee Abrahamsen and Maria Raspopova, Munro has finished the final three songs to make the cycle complete.

Like a number of his previous works, the piece is the result of an ongoing interest in the poetry of Judith Wright, whose perception of both the beauty and spirit of the Australian country, as well as the dark tragedy of much of its colonial history, is always expressed in language of piquant and economical lyricism.

In 'The Light Falls from the Sky', the composer uses the fall of delicate chords in an attempt to capture an ethereal melody. 'I have sat down by the river' is a tender reflection on the shared joy and sadness of real friendship, and the tragedy of its loss. The composer writes, "The toccata in the middle is actually much more effective without the voice. I was writing 'Black is the night' when the ACO asked for a piece to celebrate Richard Tognetti's twentieth anniversary with the orchestra, so it now exists in three versions. In a way, the solo piano version is the one I like best. The song, naturally, is able to express the delicate precision of Wright's dark thoughts; the string orchestra version has a luminescence due to the depth possible in the part writing and the quality of such exquisite playing as the ACO's."

Like many of Munro's recent works, these pieces have a lot to do with friendship, and he has dedicated each one to a particular friend. 'The light falls from the sky' is for Howard Penny, 'Black is the night' is for Richard Tognetti and 'In the depth', is a lullaby for his old friend and music teacher Adrea.

**Franz Schubert (1797-1828)**

## **Der Hirt auf dem Felsen (The Shepherd on the Rock), D. 965/Op. 129 (1828)**

Just months after completing *Auf der Strom*, Schubert wrote *Der Hirt auf dem Felsen* (The Shepherd on the Rock). The two works may have been intended as the basis for a larger collection, but Schubert died – shortly before his thirty-second birthday – before completing any further songs.

In *Der Hirt auf dem Felsen* the clarinet features as the obbligato instrument. Here the overall effect is pastoral, as the work traces the emotional journey of a shepherd who, separated from his lover, contemplates his mountaintop perspective before being struck by loneliness: his grief soon abating as he anticipates the rebirth of spring.

Although the song's protagonist is a male, the work was in fact written for the operatic soprano Anna Milder-Hauptmann. She had long been admired by the composer, and had previously performed several of his works. This work was written in response to her request for a work that would showcase her technical and emotional brilliance while appealing to a popular audience – providing 'a treat for the ear'.

Poulenc and Rachmaninoff notes by Gordon Kerry, 2018.  
Munro notes based on a blog written by the composer.

# Musicians

## Lee Abrahmsen, Soprano

Hailed as “a rising star” by Limelight Magazine (July 2016), Australian soprano Lee Abrahmsen is a multi-award winning soprano both on the operatic stage and concert platform.

Lee has appeared as principal artist in over 20 roles including Countess in *Le Nozze di Figaro* (Opera Australia), Isolde in *Tristan und Isolde*, Marschallin in *Der Rosenkavalier*, Elisabeth in *Tannhäuser*, CioCioSan in *Madame Butterfly*, Mimi in *La Bohème*, Konstanze in *Die Entführung aus dem Serail*, Marguerite in *Faust*, Micaëla in *Carmen*, Elvira in *I Puritani*, Leila in *The Pearl Fishers* and Valencienne in *The Merry Widow* (all for Melbourne Opera); title role in *Tosca* (Australian Discovery Orchestra), Violetta in *La Traviata* (CoOpera), title role in *Stella* by Marshall-Hall (Lyric Opera), Clotilde in *Norma* (Victorian Opera), Lisa in *La Sonnambula* (Bel Canto Festival in Holland) and Fifth Maid in *Elektra* (Sydney Symphony).

Recent concert engagements in Australia include the title role in *Tosca* with Australian Discovery Orchestra, Richard Strauss *Four Last Songs* (chamber version by James Ledger) with Omega Ensemble at City Recital Hall, Richard Strauss *Elektra* singing *Fifth Maid* with Sydney Symphony Orchestra at the Sydney Opera House; *Mahler Fourth Symphony* (chamber version by Klaus Simon) with Omega Ensemble at City Recital Hall, Richard Strauss *Four Last Songs* with Queensland Symphony and Berlioz *Les Nuits D'été* with Melbourne Sinfonia. Internationally she has sung recitals at St Martin in the Fields (London), Edinburgh International Festival (Scotland), in China and Japan.

Her many Australian Awards include the 86th Herald Sun Aria, 2013 MOST Opera

Awards Royal Over-Seas League Prize, 2014 MOST Opera Awards 3MBS prize and the 2012 Acclaim Awards Italian Fellowship. In 2012 Lee was nominated for a Green Room Award for her performance as Valencienne in Lehar's *Merry Widow* for Melbourne Opera. Lee has been heard regularly in performances recorded by ABC Classic FM and appeared on Qantas In-Flight Entertainment singing Richard Strauss *Four Last Songs* with Omega Ensemble.

Raised in Geelong, Lee graduated from the University of Melbourne with honours degrees in Music and Education. She furthered her studies as a full scholar at the Lisa Gasteen National Opera School and abroad with Antonio Moretti-Pananti (Florence), Daniel Ferro (Tuscany) and at the Bel Canto Festival (Holland).

In 2019 Lee sings Senta in *Der Fliegende Holländer* by Wagner under the Baton of Anthony Negus for Melbourne Opera, and sings the soprano solo in *Ein Deutsches Requiem* by Brahms with Melbourne Symphony Chorus.

## David Rowden, Clarinet

**Orchestras** Sydney Symphony Orchestra, Australian Opera and Ballet Orchestra, The Queensland Orchestra, New Zealand Symphony Orchestra, Seoul Philharmonic Orchestra, Adelaide Symphony Orchestra.

**Ensembles** Omega Ensemble, Australia Ensemble, Sydney Soloists. **Premieres** George Palmer: Clarinet Concerto, Ian Munro: Clarinet Quintet. **Selected Recordings** Omega Ensemble: Mozart—Munro—Palmer (ABC Classics), Play School 50th Anniversary Special (ABC3). **Awards/Study** BMus (London), LRAM, Associate of the Royal Academy of Music (ARAM)

## Maria Raspopova, Piano

**Ensembles** Omega Ensemble, Regional tour with Paul Meyer, Recital in AGNSW, Government House performance with Emma Matthews **Premieres** Mark Grandison: Riffraction; Andrew Ford: Contradance; Mark Issacs: Chamber Symphony **Recordings** Prokofiev: Visions fugitives (Omega Classics) **Awards/Study** Khabarovsk College of Arts Scholarship, Masonic Youth Welfare Fund scholarship, Sydney Conservatorium of Music, BArts (UNSW) **Masterclasses** Beijing Central Conservatory, JiLin College of Arts, Dalian University

# Omega Ensemble

## The Ensemble

Alexandra Osborne, violin  
Veronique Serret, violin  
Catalin Ungureanu, violin  
Airena Nakamura, violin  
Neil Thompson, viola  
David Wicks, viola  
Paul Stender, cello †  
Howard Penny, cello †  
Alex Henery, double bass  
Sally Walker, flute  
David Rowden, clarinet  
Lloyd Van't Hoff, clarinet †  
Nicola Bell, oboe  
Celia Craig, oboe  
Josh Oates, oboe  
Todd Gibson-Cornish, bassoon  
Michael Dixon, horn  
Clemens Leske, piano  
Maria Raspopova, piano  
Samuel Hogarth, piano †  
Lee Abrahmsen, soprano †

† = Guest Artist

Founded in 2005, Omega Ensemble is one of Australia's finest chamber groups. With a dedication to presenting the finest Australian musicians, as well as engaging international guest artists, Omega presents outstanding musicians in an intimate and stimulating chamber setting. Its mission is to showcase outstanding artists who captivate and excite audiences through a revelatory program of chamber music.

Ranging from large chamber orchestras to duos, trios and quartets Omega performs a diverse range of repertoire; whether it is an iconic gem, a neglected beauty or a world premiere. The passion and commitment to the highest level of craft is still deployed.

To date, Omega has commissioned and performed over twenty new works from notable Australian and International composers, including Daniel Rojas, Mark Isaacs, Cyrus Meurant, George Palmer, Elena Kats-Chernin, Anne Boyd, Matthew Hindson, Christopher Gordon, John Peterson, Margery Smith, Stuart Greenbaum, Paul Stanhope, Ben Hoadley and Andrew Ford.

As well as performing premiere works, Omega also endeavours to uncover works that have been lost to time. Omega's ability to find these pieces and bring them to life spells out a deep love and passion not only for well-known chamber music, but also for exploring gems that delight, entertain and enrich their audiences.

In addition to concert performances, Omega also maintains a growing digital concert hall in which audiences can relive the magic of a live performance. Beyond these videos, Omega Ensemble's performances are now included as part of Qantas's inflight entertainment.

In addition to performances in Sydney the Ensemble regularly tours to country towns including Newcastle, Orange and Bathurst. The Ensemble toured to China for the first time in November 2017 performing and giving masterclasses at the Beijing Central Conservatory, Chang Chun's JiLin College of Arts and Dalian University. In March this year, the Ensemble returned to China to perform in the Sanya International Festival of Arts in Haitang Bay.

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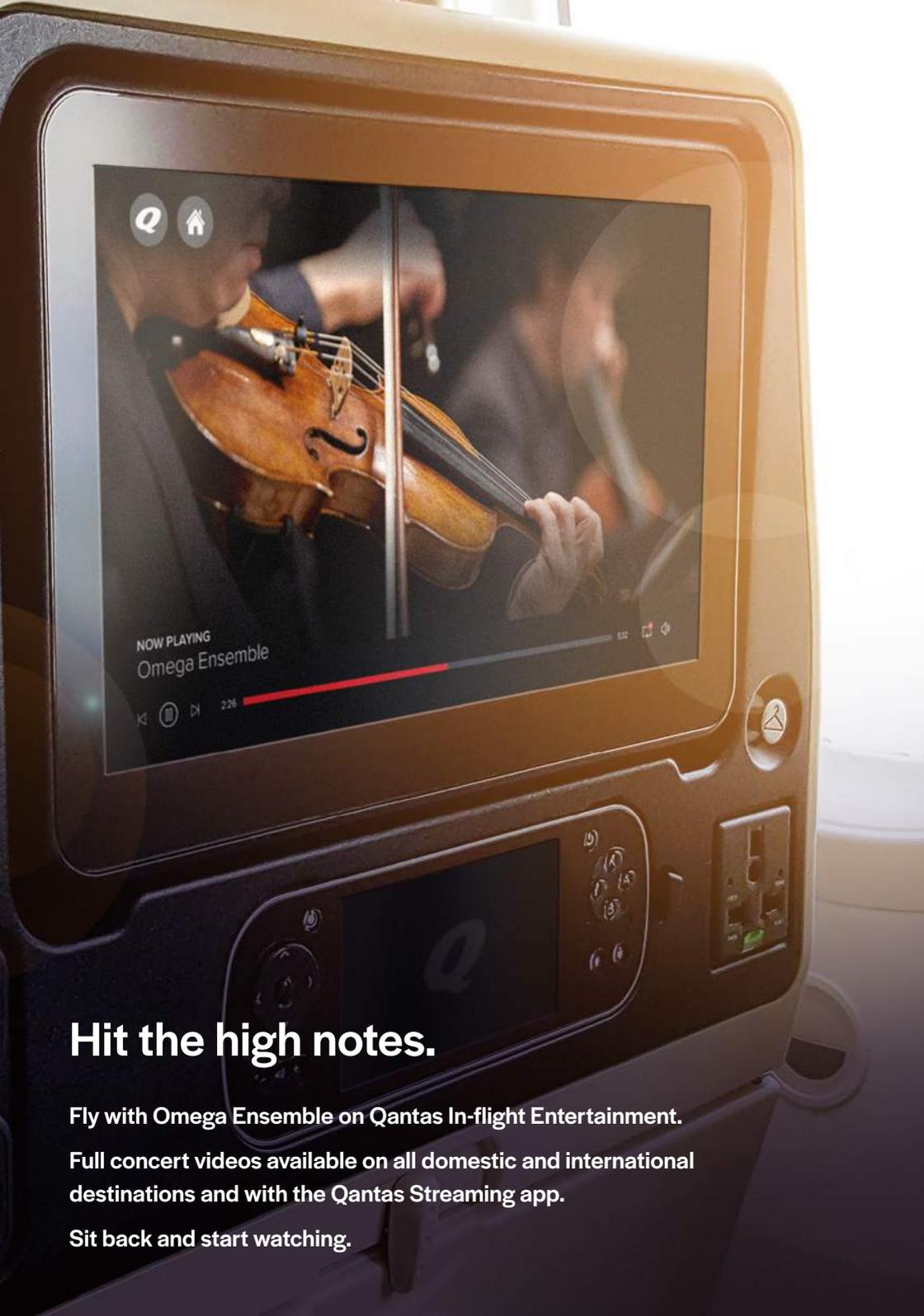
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