

A portrait of a man with a shaved head and light beard, looking upwards and to the left. He is holding an oboe vertically in his right hand. The lighting is dramatic, with a strong blue light from the left and a warmer light from the right, creating a high-contrast effect. The background is dark and out of focus.

BARTOK IN CONTRAST

Omega Ensemble



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Thursday 6 February, 7:00pm

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Saturday 8 February, 2:00pm & 6:30pm

Sydney Opera House

Sunday 9 February, 6:00pm

Newcastle Art Gallery

BARTOK IN CONTRAST

Francis Poulenc

Sonata for Clarinet and Piano

Béla Bartók

Contrasts for Clarinet, Violin and Piano

Dmitri Shostakovich

Violin Sonata in G major

Aram Khachaturian

Trio for Clarinet, Violin and Piano

This performance will last approximately

90 minutes without interval.

Omega Ensemble

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We pay respect to the Elders both past and present, and extend that respect to all

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians.



MUSIC NOTES



Francis Poulenc

Francis Poulenc (1899–1963)

Sonata for Clarinet and Piano

COMPOSED IN 1962

- I. Allegro tristamente (allegretto)
- II. Romanza (très calme)
- III. Allegro con fuoco (très animé)

Like those of his countryman Claude Debussy, the French composer Francis Poulenc's last works are an unfinished set of sonatas – in this case for flute, clarinet and oboe, each with piano. Poulenc's earliest chamber works were infused with the slightly sardonic tones of neo-classicism which characterised much of the music written by the group known as Les Six in France between the world wars.

The late works maintain something of the deceptively simple character of such works, and retain the classical three movement design, but are at the same time deeply expressive. Poulenc was, after all, a mature artist who had experienced the full horror of World War II, and who had discovered great comfort in a return to religion. Incidentally, the *Clarinet Sonata* contains a quotation from Poulenc's well-loved setting of the *Gloria*, on which – to the annoyed frustration of his publisher – he worked during 1959 and 1960, delaying the completion of the *Sonata*. Poulenc eventually returned to the *Clarinet Sonata*, whose slow movement he had composed first, and completed it in 1962, some months before his death in January 1963. The premiere, given in April that year, took place at a memorial concert in Carnegie Hall with Benny Goodman, for whom it was composed, and Leonard Bernstein at the piano.

Poulenc was particularly good at writing music in a relatively fast tempo which still sounds melancholy, a feat he manages in the first movements of both his sonata for flute and for clarinet. Here, after a few bars of angular, energetic gestures, the clarinet spins out a



Above: Leonard Bernstein and Benny Goodman, 1940-1949.
William P. Gottlieb - Music Division,
The New York Public Library.

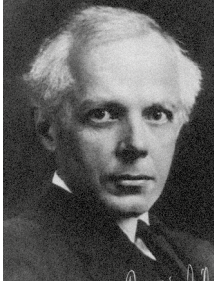
first theme that contains hints of Prokofievian harmonic sidesteps, and rhythmic patterns reminiscent of 'Non più andrai' from Mozart's *The Marriage of Figaro*. Much of the movement is given over to the elaboration of introspective slower material in 3/4 before a brief reprise of the first theme.

The slow movement of the *Clarinet Sonata* is one of the most beautiful in the repertoire. Also in triple time is replete with lyrical melodies for both instruments, punctuated by surging passionate outbursts working towards the brief promise of major-key resolution in its final moments.

Poulenc was once described as having 'something of the monk and something of the rascal' in him, and it is the rascal who comes to the fore in the finale, a work which recalls the witty burlesque of his early work (though doesn't preclude him from including one more lyrical tune that's gone as soon as it is heard).

Each of Poulenc's late chamber works commemorates a particular friend and artist. The *Clarinet Sonata* is dedicated to the Swiss

composer Arthur Honegger – like Poulenc one of the group known as Les Six – who had died in 1955, though journalist Norman Lebrecht considers that the work contains ‘premonitions of [Poulenc’s] own imminent death’.



Béla Bartók

Béla Bartók (1881–1945)

Contrasts

COMPOSED IN 1938

- I. Verbunkos (Recruiting Game)
- II. Pihenő (Relaxation)
- III. Sebes (Fast Dance)

In 1903, the young Bartók began collecting folk music in Hungary and neighbouring regions such as Slovakia, Transylvania and other parts of Romania. In 1912 and 1913, he travelled as far afield as Norway, North Africa and France, and in the course of his life he would also study and collect music from Turkey and the Balkans. His interest had begun when he and his colleague Zoltán Kodály were seeking new sounds for their own work, but soon came to realise that he was preserving something on the verge of extinction. (His rural subjects often couldn’t understand why a ‘gentleman’ wanted them to sing for him.) Later in life he described his belief in:

the brotherhood of peoples, brotherhood in spite of all wars and conflicts. I try – to the best of my ability – to serve this idea in my music; therefore I don’t reject any influence, be it Slovak, Romanian, Arabic, or from any other source.

The second half of the 1930s were the most productive years of Bartók’s career as a composer: orchestra; works alone from this time include the second *Violin Concerto*, the *Divertimento* and, arguably his masterpiece, the *Music for Strings, Percussion and Celesta* of 1936. Most of Bartók’s output at this time arose from specific commissions or invitations from specific musicians.

Jazz clarinet legend Benny Goodman instigated this work of Bartók’s. Its title refers to Bartók’s emphasis on the differences of timbre and technique between the three instruments, with no apparent attempt to blend them. It was first performed in New York in 1939, with Bartók at the piano, Goodman on clarinet, and the great József Szigeti on violin.

As a musical image of the ‘brotherhood of peoples’ the work

integrates numerous stylistic sources. The first movement is a verbunkos, a dance, related to the csárdás, used as a male-bonding exercise to recruit young men into the army in Hungarian-speaking parts of Europe in the 18th century. Such dances began with stately, grave passages in 4/4, usually in a minor key, known as lassan or lassú, danced by senior officers. These contrasted with exciting fast sections called friska or friss in which the younger soldiers, and potential recruits, took part.

After the rhythmic contrasts of the verbunkos, which ends with a florid clarinet cadenza, the Relaxation movement creates a sense of profound immobility – Bartók cultivated such states in those pieces known as ‘night music’ in the *Out of Doors Suite* or the *Music for Strings, Percussion and Celesta*. Here the melody instruments wander in simple counterpoint with isolated interpolations from the piano; later in the movement the music dissolves into trills and tremolos.

The fast dance begins with open-string fiddling from the violin, leading into a Bartókian moto perpetuo, interrupted by equally Bartókian reversals. An unexpectedly quiet passage is dispelled by Bachian piano writing and nods to Gershwin, and, balancing the clarinet’s cadenza in the opening movement, the violin has a breathtaking moment in the sun before the breakneck final moments.



Dmitri Shostakovich

Dmitri Shostakovich (1906–1975)

Violin Sonata, Op.134

COMPOSED IN 1968

- I. Andante
- II. Allegretto
- III. Largo

In early 1967, Shostakovich was recuperating after a heart attack – from which he never fully recovered – and was finding composition difficult. Writing to his friend Isaak Glikman, he noted that he, like Tchaikovsky, had lived longer than he should have, and that he had:

become disillusioned with myself... I am a very dull and mediocre composer... However, the composition of music – an affliction in the nature of a disease – haunts me.

He soldiered on, producing a number of late masterpieces like the *Violin Sonata*, composed in 1968 though not completed in time for



Above: David Oistrakh, Dmitri Shostakovich & Sviatoslav Richter, 1969, The Tully Potter Collection

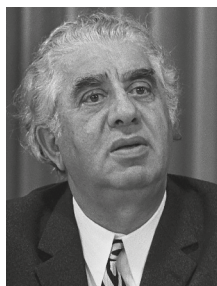
its purpose: the 60th birthday of legendary virtuoso David Oistrakh. Shostakovich had composed his two violin concertos for Oistrakh – the first in 1947 (though Shostakovich prudently waited until Stalin’s death before releasing the work) and the second in 1967. Oistrakh and composer-pianist Mieczysław Weinberg gave a rapturously received performance of the *Sonata* to the Russian Union of Composers in January 1969, and the official premiere was given later that year by Oistrakh and Sviatoslav Richter.

The *Sonata* exaggerates the tonal differences of the two instruments. The opening movement begins with a disembodied theme for piano that is answered by a more legato, searching melody for the violin. The music here is derived from a 12-note row or series, though Shostakovich, like his friend and colleague Benjamin Britten, only used the method to create melody: similar processes appear in contemporary works like the *Fourteenth Symphony* and the *Seven Romances on Poems by Alexander Blok*. Here the effect is almost one of aimless wandering through a bleak landscape. The music is enlivened briefly by a characteristically sardonic passage in gavotte

rhythm but this fails to generate much momentum, lapsing back into bleakness. When the gavotte material does return it is reduced to obsessive rhythms stated by the piano under icy shivers and flautato figures from the violin.

The second movement is a typical Shostakovich allegretto with often-abrasive violin writing and brittle upper-register piano figurations that recall xylophones, with muscular themes stated in the left hand. The movement's seemingly relentless unfolding ends abruptly and unexpectedly.

The finale is a slowly unfolding passacaglia with, again, 12-note material characterised at first by open fourths for the piano and a pizzicato response from the violin. The constant circulation of the 12 notes contributes to a sense of pervasive unease, despite the form's inevitable evocation of the Baroque. As the passacaglia's theme, or 'ground' (with hints of the 'Leningrad' Symphony's march) repeats, Shostakovich explores various textures (few of them opulent), again underlining the differences in timbre between the instruments. The movement's climax includes an extravagant passage of concerto-like writing for the piano that provokes a trill-dominated cadenza for violin. From here the music winds down gradually but inexorably. One last rhythmic gesture peters out amid the violin's inconsolable shivering.



Aram Khachaturian in 1971

Aram Khachaturian (1903–1978)

Trio in G minor for Violin, Clarinet and Piano

COMPOSED IN 1932

- I. Andante con dolore, con molto espressione
- II. Allegro
- III. Moderato

Briefly independent after World War I, the Caucasian nations of Azerbaijan, Armenia and Georgia were 'sovietised' in the early 1920s. Bolshevik governments were formed (with the Red Army suppressing any resistance) and the three countries were for a time ruled from the Georgian capital, Tiflis (now Tbilisi). Promising young people were given higher education in Moscow, but Lenin's policy of 'putting down roots' also saw the encouragement of local party membership, and the support for local languages in education and official use. This was implemented by a young Georgian ex-seminarian, Ioseb Jughashvili (later known as Joseph Stalin), who completely reversed the policy when he seized power soon afterwards.

Born in Tbilisi to Armenian parents in 1903, Aram Khachaturian was in his late teens when this 'sovietisation' happened, and was sent to Moscow to study in 1922 – his first subject was biology, but he soon switched to music, studying cello at the Gnesin Institute and composition at Moscow Conservatory, and writing music for an Armenian-language theatre directed by his brother. By 1932 Khachaturian was a member of the Composers' Union, in which he rose to become an office-holder. Like almost every Soviet composer he was obliged to produce noisy patriotic works and film scores, and was subject to the inevitable official denunciation, alongside Shostakovich and Prokofiev, in 1948.

The 1930s and early 1940s saw much of his most significant music, with pieces such as the *Trio for Clarinet, Violin and Piano* of 1932 attracting international notice for its blend of 'Caucasian' folk music and Western form. Khachaturian's design uses slower outer movements to frame a central allegro.

The first is dominated by a stately procession of chords for the piano, while the melody instruments produce a tracery of lines derived from a motif of three quavers followed by a fast flourish – the ornamentation and 'gapped' modes are derived from Armenian folk music, as is the rhythmic elasticity and occasional displacement of the beat. The central movement, effectively a scherzo with its various contrasting dance rhythms, likewise displays characteristics of local folk music: it tends to use narrow intervals and frequent repetition, with florid ornamentation of strong beats, and gathers momentum through a whirlwind of unison triplets before a full-throated reprise.

The tune that the clarinet presents, unaccompanied, at the start of the final movement is said to be of Uzbek origin, and this forms the basis for a series of variations in which Khachaturian masterfully exploits the full range of colour and expression of the ensemble.

Notes by Gordon Kerry

THE ENSEMBLE



Anna Da Silva Chen



David Rowden



Clemens Leske

Anna Da Silva Chen Violin

Orchestras Sydney Symphony Orchestra, Adelaide Symphony Orchestra, Tasmanian Symphony Orchestra, Canberra Symphony Orchestra, Göttinger Symphonie Orchester **Ensembles** Omega Ensemble, Australia Piano Quartet, Selby & Friends, Ensemble Q. **Awards/Study** BMus Performance (Sydney Conservatorium of Music, USYD), MMus (Hochschule für Musik und Tanz, Cologne), Vienna International Music Competition (Silver), Kendall National Violin Competition (Winner), National Fine Music 102.5 Young Virtuoso Award (Winner), Australian National Youth Concerto Competition (Winner), Gisborne International Music Competition (Prize-Winner), ABC Young Performers Awards (Finalist).

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 Classic); Omega Ensemble: Mozart Symphony No. 40 (ABC Classic); Play School 50th Anniversary Special (ABC3). **Awards/Study** BMus (London), LRAM; Associate of the Royal Academy of Music (ARAM).

Clemens Leske Piano

Orchestras London Philharmonic Orchestra, Moscow Virtuosi, Guangzhou (Pearl River) Philharmonic, Australian Chamber Orchestra, Australian Youth Orchestra, Australian Doctors' Orchestra, Sydney, Melbourne, Adelaide, Queensland, West Australian and Tasmanian Symphony Orchestras. **Ensembles** Ensemble O spring, Halcyon, Sydney Soloists, Moorambilla Voices, TrioKroma. **Premieres** Works of Australian composers Nicholas Vines, Graham Hair, Carl Vine, Rosalind Page, Larry Sitsky, Carl Panvino and Cyrus Meurant; works of Cuban composer Tania León. **Selected Recordings** "Powerhouse": Soloist, Graeme Koehne Capriccio for Piano & Strings (ABC Classics), "Indigena": The Music of Tania León (CRI, New York), Cool Black: Chamber Works by Rosalind Page, Halcyon (Move Records), Mao's Last Dancer OST. **Awards/Study** Juilliard School, NYC, BMus. Hons., Hattori Foundation (London), Australia Council, Marten Bequest, Queen Elizabeth II Trust, Churchill Fellowship, David Paul Landa Scholarship, ABC Young Performer of the Year.



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