Ensemble Q

Program

Claude DEBUSSY (1862–1918)
***Syrinx* (1913)** **4 min**

Ludwig van BEETHOVEN (1770–1827)
Variations on *Là ci darem la mano*, WoO 28 (1795) **10 min**

György LIGETI (1923–2006)
Six Bagatelles for Wind Quintet (1953) **13 min**

I Allegro con spirito
II Rubato: Lamentoso
III Allegro grazioso
IV Presto ruvido
V Adagio: Mesto
VI Molto vivace: Capriccioso

Benjamin BRITTEN (1913–1976)
***Ciaconna* from Cello Suite no 2, op 80 (1967)** **6 min**

Samuel BARBER (1910–1981)
***Summer Music*, op 31 (1955)** **12 min**

I Slow and indolent
II Faster
III Lively, still faster
IV With motion, as before
V Joyous and flowing
VI Tempo I

Paul DEAN (b 1966)
Concerto for Cello and Wind Quintet (2018) **24 min**

I New paths
II Under the canopy
III Homage to Les Six

About the Music

Claude DEBUSSY (1862–1918)
***Syrinx* (1913)**

It is almost impossible to find a classical flute player who hasn't performed *Syrinx*, or a music-lover who hasn't heard it. Claude Debussy's four-minute masterwork is widely acknowledged as the most influential solo flute piece of the 20th century. Its origins, however, are charmingly humble. Debussy wrote it in 1913 as incidental music to accompany Gabriel Mourey's play *Psyche*, and called it *La flûte de Pan*. Fourteen years later, it was published under the title *Syrinx* – that ravishing nymph who, pursued by the lustful satyr Pan, is transformed into reeds. Heartbroken, the goatly god cuts them down and uses them as pipes, and plays a lament to the object of his desires.

Claude Debussy

We might expect a work as omnipresent as *Syrinx* to have become stale over the years; it is a mark of Debussy's genius that it has stayed as vibrant as the day it was composed. In terms of instrumental writing, it is near perfect. Debussy keeps the flute in its low and middle registers throughout; the acoustics of those registers give the performer the greatest scope to play with the colour of the notes. Phrases rise and fall naturally with the breath and are combined in such a way as to be grandly rhetorical, creating the impression of a freely improvised monologue, as waves of colour wash over the listener's ears. Debussy's markings are obsessively precise, but in their detail they provide the performer with freedom and the ability to appear spontaneous. Perhaps it is this paradox that continues to fascinate flute players and listeners the world over, and allows Pan and Syrinx to speak to us fresh across the years.

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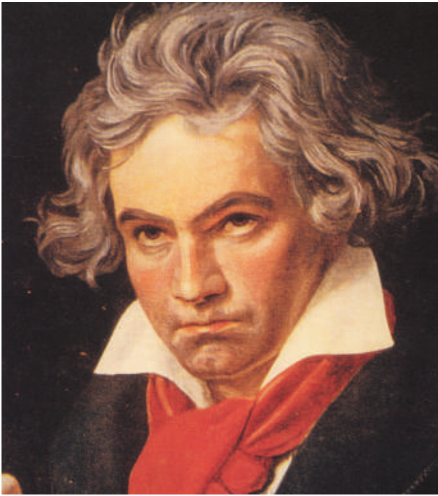
Ludwig van BEETHOVEN (1770–1827)
Variations on *Là ci darem la mano*, WoO 28 (1795)

Musical folklore casts Ludwig van Beethoven as an immensely serious figure, a mythical hero who struggled against hearing loss, inner demons and social isolation to create art of epic scope and unmatched profundity. On listening to his Variations on *Là ci darem la mano*, however, it is hard to credit that they came from the mind of the same man who has glowered down at us from



Ludwig van Beethoven

mantlepieces for the last 200 years. The Variations spring from a mostly sunny period in Beethoven's life. In early 1792 the fresh-faced 22-year-old came to Vienna to study with Joseph Haydn, the dominant musical figure of the time. Beethoven then set about establishing himself as a composer, publishing several works in a variety of different genres, theme and variations being chief among them. That particular form enabled him to take popular tunes of the day and apply his own stamp, showcasing his inventiveness and craft.

The Variations on *Là ci darem la mano* were never published in Beethoven's lifetime. They are self-consciously, unashamedly populist and were likely composed for the Teimer brothers, a trio of oboists who were very much in vogue at the time. They are based on an aria which was then, as now, well-known, from Mozart's opera *Don Giovanni*. From the opening setting of the theme, through the eight variations that follow, the tone is wonderfully light, frivolous and fun. Heretical as those adjectives might sound in the same breath as 'Beethoven', they suggest an unexpected dimension to his life and character.

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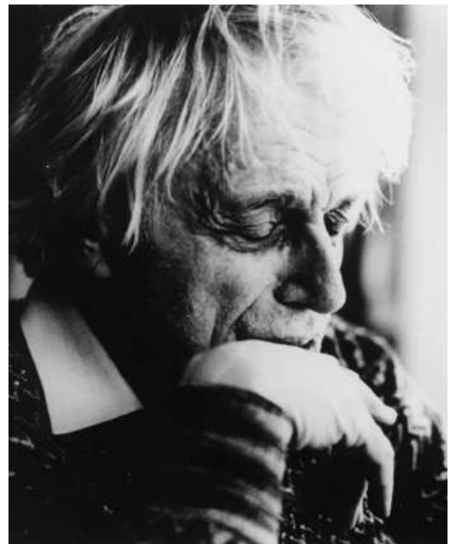
György LIGETI (1923–2006)
Six Bagatelles for Wind Quintet (1953)

I *Allegro con spirito* (Fast, spirited)
II *Rubato: Lamentoso* (Flexible in tempo: Lamenting)
III *Allegro grazioso* (Fast and graceful)
IV *Presto ruvido* (Very fast and rough)
V *Adagio: Mesto* (Slow: Sad)
VI *Molto vivace: Capriccioso* (Very fast and lively: Playful)

The oppression and suffering György Ligeti faced in his early years was so extreme as to be utterly inconceivable to most Australians today. By the time he was 33, he had survived a Nazi regime that took the life of every member of his



György Ligeti

family save his mother, and a Stalinist administration that ruthlessly policed thought and artistic expression. That he emerged from this turmoil as an accomplished and skilful artist is wholly remarkable; the fact that he pushed against established creative boundaries with works such as these Six Bagatelles is even more so. In fact, the Bagatelles' chromaticism was deemed so 'dangerous' by the Soviet authorities that they censored its last movement at its premiere.

Fresh and daring as they still sound, the Six Bagatelles are hardly criminally dangerous to modern ears. They were arranged by Ligeti from his *Musica Ricercata* for solo piano (1951–53), a work that uses a very simple organising principle: its first movement is constructed using only two notes, its second using three, and so on until the eleventh movement, which uses all twelve tones of the chromatic scale. The Six Bagatelles correspond to movements 3, 5, 7, 8, 9 and 10 of *Musica Ricercata*; Ligeti chose to enhance them using the colours of the wind quintet. The most striking example of this colouring comes at the end of the second bagatelle: in barely ten seconds, Ligeti takes the listener on a journey from a brooding unison through frenzied dissonance to peaceful consonance by simply adding and subtracting instruments. From the glittering tapestry of the third bagatelle, where glorious melodies soar over interlocking septuplets, to the raucous, topsy-turvy antics of the sixth, Ligeti's endless creativity and playfulness, miraculously conjured from a life of such hardship, are on full display.

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Benjamin Britten

Benjamin BRITTEN (1913–1976)
***Ciaconna* from Cello Suite no 2, op 80 (1967)**

The chaconne and its sibling the passacaglia are musical forms of weight and power that first emerged in the 1600s. Their underlying structure is simple enough: continuous variations played over a repeating, 'ground bass' line. Such a structure creates a sense of slow-building inevitability that has allowed composers to make some of their most profound emotional statements.

Chaconnes and passacaglias are at the core of much of Benjamin Britten's output. His fondness for these forms echoes their appearance in the great works of his English predecessor Henry Purcell, whom Britten greatly admired. Purcell often used the ground bass in a way that was central to the musical drama he depicted, such as in the heartbreaking 'Lament' from *Dido and Aeneas*; so too did Britten. In his opera *Peter Grimes*, Britten combines a seven-note bass line with a haunting

viola theme, then displaces them from each other, signalling the eponymous character's descent into madness and his impending death. Other examples abound: the epic, multidimensional 'Chacony' of his second string quartet; the dramatic, lamenting passacaglia following Lucretia's death in *The Rape of Lucretia*; and the subject of this note: the final movement of his Second Cello Suite.

Entitled *Ciaccona*, the movement takes as its theme a stumbling, tripping, tumbling five-bar figure, whose rhythm constantly changes and falls back in on itself. This sets the tone for a series of twelve variations which rapidly and unexpectedly shift in character, then diverge into a section of development and reflection, before the theme returns in a stirring climax. Britten wrote this work in 1967 for legendary virtuoso Mstislav Rostropovich; accordingly, he pushes the cello to its technical limits. Extended passages of double stops fly over the fingerboard, notes jump between non-adjacent strings to create the effect of multiple voices, and sequences of trills and harmonics race by – demonstrating once again the innovative spirit Britten brought to this ancient form.

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Samuel BARBER (1910–1981)
***Summer Music*, op 31 (1955)**

In the summer of 1954, Samuel Barber attended a concert given by the New York Wind Quintet in the sleepy seacoast village of Bluehill, Maine. Immediately enamoured with the sound and dynamism of the ensemble, Barber asked whether he might attend

Samuel Barber

their rehearsals in New York to draw inspiration for a commission he had received a year earlier. It had been slumbering in the back of his mind, unwritten, but their playing had woken it up. In the weeks that followed, Barber sat with the players and absorbed their musical discipline, especially their practice of playing the chordal studies devised by the horn player, John Barrow, which were based on an extensive survey of the most challenging notes on each instrument. Eight months later, *Summer Music* was complete.

The finished work is extremely technically demanding. The virtuosic opening flourishes in the flute and clarinet require lightning-quick fingers; the fast, tongued unison middle passage must be precisely matched by all players; and its juicy chords, clearly inspired by Barrow's studies, need delicate balancing. After the first rehearsal, the New York Wind Quintet's flautist Samuel Baron wrote: 'We were completely gassed!' Critics of the time

raved that Barber had created a piece both fresh and modern in its 'clever rhythmic shifts and sharp-sounding harmonies', but still possessed of an attractive, Romantic language. While not explicitly programmatic, the work channels an indolent, hazy summer afternoon, particularly in the central oboe melody. But the spirit of the work was best described by the composer himself: 'It's supposed to be *evocative* of summer – summer meaning languid, not killing mosquitos.'

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Paul DEAN (b 1966)
Concerto for Cello and Wind Quintet (2018)

- *I New paths*
- *II Under the canopy*
- *III Homage to Les Six*

The composer writes:
The cello is without doubt my favourite instrument – I even tried, unsuccessfully, to learn it in high school – so when that coincided with the fact that it is played by my favourite person, it was a no brainer that I wanted to write a piece such as this.

I have written quite a few pieces that feature the cello but this one was a wholly different process and a work of pure indulgence and love. Coming straight after finishing my opera *Dry River Run*, I found a new need for melody and its reaction to the harmony in my writing. There is nothing like spending two years writing two hours of libretto-based music to liven up your sense of drama and cohesiveness and learn about your harmonic language.

It is more than possible that no such work of music as a concerto for cello with wind quintet exists, and now that I have written it, I hope that others will follow suit. The interplay between the solo string instrument and the mini orchestra of winds was enormous fun to play with and I have often thought that it wouldn't be the last time I write for this combination.

Much of my music has a theme or story behind it, yet this piece is pure music for music's sake, and whilst it contains images of some of Trish's and my favourite things, there is no underlying story behind the music.

The first movement, *New paths*, is a reflection of my compositional changes following the time spent bunkered down writing the opera. And I guess in a subliminal way, it reflects Trish and I moving to Brisbane and finding new dog walks and the like. It's dense and exploratory in a way that such a new combination deserves and highlights the virtuosity of all the players on stage.

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Paul Dean

The second movement basically just laid itself out in front of me one morning on our daily constitutional with our two dogs Mia and Bear. Over our local park there is a phenomenal collection of leopard trees and in the early light of the Brisbane summer day, they create a canopy and explosion of light and colour that takes my breath away every morning. As one of our favourite places, my musical picture of that image had to appear in this piece.

The third movement was my attempt to write music that, while complex, was and is also fun to play and to listen to. I have been obsessed with the music of Les Six for over three decades and in particular, the music of Francis Poulenc. Whilst the second Viennese School were strutting their stuff and the post-Wagner and post-Debussy world were also battling it out, Poulenc and his friends made remarkable music that enticed, entertained and moved audiences in a way so entirely their own that no other group or school of composers ever achieved. The playfulness between the instruments and the complex and intricate rhythm are central to the drama and humour and virtuosity of the combination of friends on stage performing it together (which is the true essence of chamber music).

The work is, of course, dedicated to Trish Dean, the love of my life. Her patience and encouragement throughout drove the course of the drama and the mood. The piece is a simple and honest gift of love and friendship and companionship.

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