

## FLINDERS QUARTET JUNE/JULY 2011 PROGRAM NOTES



### **PYOTR ILLYICH TCHAIKOVSKY (1840 – 1893)**

*String Quartet No. 1, Op. 11*

1. Moderato e semplice
2. Andante cantabile
3. Scherzo - Allegro non tanto e con fuoco
4. Finale - Allegro giusto

Composed in 1871 and subtitled “The Accordion” (the reason why will be plainly obvious when we begin playing!) this quartet has an unusual story. Even though Tchaikovsky was gaining notoriety and reliably employed, he was in need of some cash. His friend Nikolai Rubinstein suggested putting on a concert of his own music. To save on costs, he decided to make it a solo and chamber concert, but he didn’t have any chamber works in his repertoire so he sat down to write this quartet. In fact, it is the first major piece of Russian chamber music (preceding Borodin), and even though this was Tchaikovsky’s first chamber work, it is arguably his finest. His other chamber works (two other string quartets, a piano trio and a sextet plus some minor violin and piano pieces) are often criticised for being over-written and with textures far more suited to larger forces. Indeed, his sextet *Souvenir de Florence* does work extremely well in its transcription for string orchestra. The concert was a huge success, Tchaikovsky could eat again and his first quartet has become one of the great Russian works of history.

Tchaikovsky treats this piece in a truly classical way, with an almost Schubertian approach to texture and the treatment of melodic material. The first movement is a true study of sonata form. The main attraction of this piece is the second movement, *Andante Cantabile*. Tchaikovsky famously wrote in his diary: “Perhaps I was never so flattered in my life nor was my pride as a composer so stirred as when Lev Tolstoy, sitting beside me listening to the Andante of my First Quartet, dissolved in tears.” Funnily enough, this movement is inspired by some perfunctory material: based on the folksong *Sidel Vanya*, the song begins with the unremarkable line, “Vanya sat on a divan and smoked a pipe of tobacco.” The scherzo and finale further exploit the use of folk material with a distinct Russian Peasant flavour.

It doesn’t often happen that a composer’s first attempt at a medium is so overwhelmingly successful, but beginner’s luck certainly favoured Tchaikovsky here.

### **PHILLIP HOUGHTON (1954 - )**

*In Amber*

1. Dance
2. Dream
3. Initiation

Phillip Houghton is widely regarded as one of Australia’s leading composers for the guitar. His works are today performed and recorded by leading soloists and ensembles around the world. The wonderfully evocative *In Amber* is amongst Houghton’s early compositions, the original version written in 1982. This current version is the result of revision made completed in 2008 and below are some of the composer’s own notes on the piece:

“The working title of this work was *a Fossil in Amber* in which I drew parallels between a fossil “frozen/suspended” in amberstone and the sound frozen/suspended inside the

stringed instruments waiting to be brought to life. A beautiful amber “tree of life” pendant made by and given to me by master jeweller Tim Benson ignited the musical ideas, and the fact that the physical colour of the instruments is similar to amber further played on my imagination.

The first movement *Dance* is made up of a series of tableaux, with connected motifs and rhythms switching constantly between various keys and simple/triple time. I also had an image of rocks and pebbles on the bed of a river, sparkling through layers of rippling texture and light. The second movement *Dream* is notation of actual music that I heard in a dream. It was written quickly so as to “record” the dream before it vanished. In this sense, the music is much like “sonic memory” (or “dreamscape”) in which drones and melodies entwine and flow organically...like perfumes in a jungle.

The last movement, *Initiation*, originally from “Suite of Six Trios” (1981) is a short and driving ostinato which I’ve adopted and included into this revision.”

### **MAXIMO DIEGO PUJOL (1957 - )**

#### *Tangata de Agosto*

1. Allegro
2. Andante
3. Allegro Ritmico

Maximo Diego Pujol may not be well known to Australian audiences, but he is certainly Argentina's premier guitarist and pedagogue. Born in Argentina, he graduated from the Jose Castro Provincial Conservatory. He studied with many Argentinian guitarists and composer Leonidas Arnedo, and his guitar compositions have won awards at competitions in Colombia, France and the World Festival in Martinique, and in 1989 he was awarded the Argentine Composers' Union prize as Best Composer of Classical Music.

Even though the name may be unfamiliar, his compositional style will immediately resonate. He is strongly influenced by the great Argentine musician, Astor Piazzolla, and like Piazzolla, Pujol uses the tango as a basic style for much of his composition. One of a rare breed of composer/performers, Maximo Diego Pujol can be heard on many recordings and still performs live, however you may have to take a trip to South America!

His *Tangata de Agosto* for guitar and string quartet has three movements following the traditional slow-fast-slow formula, with each showing different aspects of the tango. The tango can be full of fire, languid, sultry, and energetic at different moments. Interestingly called a *Tangata* rather than tango, there seems to be little difference between the two terms.

### **LUIGI BOCCHERINI (1743-1805)**

#### *Guitar Quintet No. 4 in D Major “Fandango”*

1. Pastorale
2. Allegro Maestoso
3. Grave Assai - Fandango

Following in the footsteps of Domenico Scarlatti, the virtuoso Italian cellist and composer Luigi Boccherini moved to Spain as a young man. Spain's cultural status in Europe had lowered due to the mix of cultures and the barbarous behaviour it was known for in other countries. In an effort to become more European in character, Spanish musicians were sent

to study in other countries and foreign composers like Luigi Boccherini, who arrived in Spain in the 1760s, were welcomed with open arms. Employed at first by Don Luis, King Charles' younger brother, Boccherini undoubtedly felt somewhat superior to the Spaniards and felt the need to "tame" the savage Spanish musicians.

Boccherini wrote some 250 quintets, most for violin, viola and two cellos, with one cello often having a concerto-like part reaching into the high registers. He also loved the guitar, however, and even wrote concertante guitar parts into some of his symphonic works. He is best known to guitarists today for his numerous Guitar Quintets and of these, No. 4 in D major, often called "Fandango" after its third movement, is undoubtedly the most loved. Indeed, it is today perhaps one of the most often played pieces of chamber music written with an original guitar part.

Finished in 1798, the work borrows all its movements from two of the composer's previous quintets. The opening *Pastorale* has an unmistakable purity moving only between piano and pianissimo and this leads to the charming *Allegro maestoso* featuring the grand, distinctive Boccherini cello sound. Following the *Grave assai*, the work throws itself with abandon into the spirited *Fandango*, drawing freely on the rich guitar culture of Spain and leaving behind the more "serious" style of Boccherini's own cultural heritage.