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# FLINDERS QUARTET

CAMERON HILL guest violin

WILMA SMITH violin

HELEN IRELAND viola

ZOE KNIGHTON cello

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# MUSICAL PORTRAITS

Saturday 21 October 2023 • St John's Church, Flinders

Saturday 28 October 2023 • Bonegilla Migrant Centre, Wodonga

Sunday 29 October 2023 • Montsalvat Barn Gallery

Monday 30 October 2023 • Melbourne Recital Centre

Wednesday 15 November 2023 • FQ Digital premiere

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*Flinders Quartet is based on Wurundjeri land in the Kulin Nation, and acknowledges that we live, work, and make music on unceded lands. We are privileged to play on land where music has been made for thousands of years. Flinders Quartet acknowledges the sovereignty of First Nations peoples of this continent and pays deep respects to their Elders past, present and emerging, and to all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples.*

## MARIA GRENFELL 1969-

### "Silhouettes" for string quartet (composed 2023)

*Commissioned by Flinders Quartet with support of FQ Syndicate #5: Nicholas Garnham, Linda Herd and Canny Quine Foundation, Sieglind D'Arcy, Peter Kingsbury, Sharon Nathani and Michael Cowen, Dr Garry Joslin and Prof. Dimity Reed AM*

In the creation of this concert program, we became fascinated with the idea of a musical portrait, and we wondered what Flinders Quartet would sound like if it was painted in sound. Composer Maria Grenfell commented on Flinders Quartet as having its own identity, apart from the individual players (and indeed, the players have certainly changed over the years). In writing this piece, we feel she has highlighted our optimism, and love of counterpoint and musical conversation. On the first page of the "Silhouettes" score, Maria writes:

"A string quartet is one of the most challenging genres for a twenty-first century composer to write with a weight of history behind it and a repertoire that demands both virtuosity and musicality at the highest level. Achieving a blend of instrumental timbres within a group of four presents an opportunity to write a musical portrait of the individuals and the whole ensemble.

Silhouettes is a one-movement piece in four sections. The main theme is a harmonic progression that reappears in different guises, playing through a range of moods, timbres, textures, and expressive contrasts. The sections are both conversational and contrapuntal, gradually building to a rapid finale."

Maria Grenfell was born in Malaysia, and completed composition studies in Christchurch, New Zealand. In 2013, Maria won 'Instrumental Work of the Year' for Tasmania at the Australian Art Music Awards for her septet *Ten Suns Ablaze*, commissioned by the Australia Ensemble, and in 2017 her double concerto *Spirals* won the Tasmanian award for 'Orchestral Work of the Year.'

Maria is an Associate Professor at the University of Tasmania Conservatorium of Music and co-ordinates the composition stream. She has given guest lectures at the University of Houston, Auckland University, Yong Siew Toh Conservatory (Singapore), and the University of Melbourne. In Spring 2013 Maria was Visiting Professor of Composition at Stephen F. Austin State University in Nacogdoches, Texas. In Fall 2019 Maria was Kerr Composer in Residence at the Oberlin Conservatory in Oberlin, Ohio. She lives in Hobart with her husband, guitarist David Malone, and they have two children.

## BEDŘICH SMETANA 1824-1884

### String Quartet No. 1 in E minor, "From My Life" (composed 1876)

I. Allegro vivo appassionato

II. Allegro moderato à la Polka

III. Largo sostenuto

IV. Vivace

Born in Litomyšl, Bohemia (now the Czech Republic), we often think of Smetana as inherently Czech in his compositional style, yet he spent most of his upbringing speaking German and even calling himself Friedrich.

Unlike his fellow countryman, Dvořák, Smetana was not interested in integrating folk music into his compositions. Instead, he created his own voice, inherently and authentically Czech and earning him the title of "the father of Czech composition". Jan Branberger's 1904 statement on Smetana's "Czechness" explains how he earned that title:

"When he began to write Czech folk operas, Smetana could not rely on any theory of Czech song, for he did not know its characteristics. He was, however, a great genius, a musician in whose soul slumbered unconscious sources of melody delightfully and faithfully Czech. He had no need to develop his Czechness, and with his first operatic note, he at the same time created a Czech dramatic style. Smetana grew out of his Czech inner self, thereby solving at a stroke all questions of style: he wrote just as his enormous instinct led him."

Heavily influenced by Liszt and his romantic tone poems, Smetana took the trend towards programmatic music to heart with this quartet, writing his own musical portrait depicting pivotal moments of his life. Until this point, chamber music had been seen as "absolute" (or as Shostakovich would say "pure") music, so using it as a vehicle for his own life story was a novel idea.

By the summer of 1874, Smetana was completely deaf, suffering greatly from tinnitus, and had retreated to his daughter's house where he immersed himself in composition. The original manuscript was deemed too difficult to perform in public (a problem often encountered by Beethoven in his later years), and a private performance was held with Dvořák playing the viola.

Smetana wrote to his close friend Josef Srb-Debrnov in 1878:

"The first movement depicts my youthful leanings toward art, the Romantic atmosphere, the inexpressible yearning for something I could neither express nor define, and also a kind of warning of my

future misfortune... The long insistent note in the finale owes its origin to this. It is the fateful ringing in my ears of the high-pitched tones which in 1874 announced the beginning of my deafness. I permitted myself this little joke, because it was so disastrous to me.

The second movement, a quasi- polka, brings to mind the joyful days of youth when I composed dance tunes and was known everywhere as a passionate lover of dancing.

The third movement . . . reminds me of the happiness of my first love, the girl who later became my first wife.

The fourth movement describes the discovery that I could treat national elements in music and my joy in following this path until it was checked by the catastrophe of the onset of my deafness, the outlook into the sad future, the tiny rays of hope of recovery, but remembering all the promise of my early career, a feeling of painful regret.”

**DMITRI SHOSTAKOVICH** 1906-1975  
**String Quartet No. 8 in C minor, Op. 110** (composed 1960)

- I. Largo
- II. Allegro molto
- III. Allegretto
- IV. Largo
- V. Largo

A few years before his death, Shostakovich is quoted as saying: “You ask if I would have been different without Party Guidance? ... Yes, almost certainly. No doubt the line I was pursuing when I wrote the fourth symphony would have been stronger and sharper in my work. I would have displayed more brilliance, used more sarcasm, I could have revealed my ideas more openly instead of resorting to camouflage. I would have written more pure music.”

Living under Stalin in the middle of the twentieth century in an oppressive regime which curtailed individuality and creativity, this “pure music” could be explored in his fifteen string quartets as they were far less publicly profiled than his other compositions. Wendy Lesser wrote a riveting book (“Music for Silenced Voices”) on his fifteen string quartets, and she suggests: “If the best of Shostakovich’s symphonies are comparable to a full scale theatrical production of King Lear, the quartets are much more like Shakespeare’s sonnets.”

The eighth string quartet, written in 1960, is in five movements and is played without a break. It opens with Shostakovich’s musical

signature using the initials DSCH, which comes from the German transliteration of his name (Dmitri S**H**ostakovich). In musical notation, these letters spell a four-note musical motive: D (D); E-flat (S); C (C); B (H).



This motif is transformed from primary material into accompaniment, ostinatos, and even a bizarre and macabre waltz before coming back tragically in the finale. The other identifiably Shostakovich motif is the three stabbing chords which occur in a number of his compositions.

Shostakovich wrote this quartet in just three days while he was procrastinating from writing a film score on the bombing of Dresden. He wrote to his friend, Glikman:

“As hard as I tried to rough out the film scores which I am supposed to be doing, I still haven’t managed to get anywhere. Instead I wrote this ideologically flawed string quartet which is of no use to anybody. I started thinking that if some day I die, nobody is likely to write a work in memory of me, so I had better write one myself. The title page could carry the dedication: To the memory of the composer of this quartet.

The themes from my own work are as follows: from the first symphony, the eighth symphony, the second piano trio, the cello concerto and Lady Macbeth. There are hints of Wagner and Tchaikovsky. Oh yes, I forgot to mention that there is something else of mine as well, from the tenth symphony. Quite a nice little hodge podge really. It is a pseudo-tragic quartet, so much so that while I was composing it I shed the same amount of tears as I would have to pee after half-a-dozen beers. When I got home, I tried a couple of times to play it through, but always ended up in tears. This was of course a response not so much to the pseudo tragedy as to my own wonder at its superlative unity of form. But here you may detect a touch of self glorification, which no doubt will soon pass and leave in its place the usual self-critical hangover.”

Cellist of the Borodin Quartet, Valentin Berlinsky, remembers playing the work to him. Shostakovich apparently listened in silence and then left the room without saying a word. He didn’t come back. The quartet eventually packed up their instruments and left. The next day he rang up and said “I’m sorry, I just couldn’t face anybody. I have no corrections to make, just play it the way you did.”

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