

MSO

CONCERT PROGRAM

VASILY PETRENKO CONDUCTS ELGAR

14 July / 7:30pm

15 July / 7:30pm

16 July / 2:00pm

Arts Centre Melbourne, Hamer Hall

Artists

Melbourne Symphony Orchestra

Vasily Petrenko conductor

Jack Schiller bassoon

Program

VAUGHAN WILLIAMS *The Wasps*: Overture

MATTHEW LAING *Of Paradise Lost*, Bassoon Concerto
(WORLD PREMIERE OF AN MSO COMMISSION)

ELGAR *Symphony No.2*

Duration: approx. Approximately 110 minutes, inc. 20-min interval.

A musical Acknowledgement of Country, *Long Time Living Here* by Deborah Cheetham AO, will be performed before the start of this concert.

Melbourne Symphony Orchestra

The Melbourne Symphony Orchestra is a leading cultural figure in the Australian arts landscape, bringing the best in orchestral music and passionate performance to a diverse audience across Victoria, the nation and around the world.

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The Melbourne Symphony Orchestra respectfully acknowledges the people of the Eastern Kulin Nations, on whose un-ceded lands we honour the continuation of the oldest music practice in the world.

Vasily Petrenko *conductor*

The 2021/22 season marks the start of Vasily Petrenko's tenures as Music Director of the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra, and as Artistic Director of the State Academic Symphony Orchestra of Russia (where he held the position of Principal Guest Conductor from 2016–2021). He becomes Conductor Laureate of the Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra, following his hugely acclaimed fifteen-year tenure as their Chief Conductor from 2006–2021, and continues as Chief Conductor of the European Union Youth Orchestra (since 2015). He has served as Chief Conductor of the Oslo Philharmonic Orchestra (2013–2020), Principal Conductor of the National Youth Orchestra of Great Britain (2009–2013), and Principal Guest Conductor of St Petersburg's Mikhailovsky Theatre, where he began his career as Resident Conductor (1994–1997).

Vasily Petrenko has worked with many of the world's most prestigious orchestras and has a strongly defined profile as a recording artist. Amongst a wide discography, his Shostakovich, Rachmaninov and Elgar symphony cycles with the Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra have garnered worldwide acclaim. With the Oslo Philharmonic Orchestra, he has released cycles of Scriabin's symphonies and Strauss' tone poems, and selected symphonies of Prokofiev and Myaskovsky.

Jack Schiller *bassoon*

Born in Adelaide, Jack Schiller began playing the bassoon at the age of 12. From 2008 Jack spent four years under the tutelage of Mark Gaydon (Adelaide Symphony Orchestra), including two years of study at the Elder Conservatorium of Music. In 2012 he took up a scholarship position at the Australian National Academy of Music, studying with Elise Millman (Melbourne Symphony Orchestra). During his time at the academy Jack won the ANAM Concerto Competition, performing the Mozart Bassoon Concerto with the Tasmanian Symphony Orchestra. He also won the in-house chamber music competition and was awarded the Director's Prize for outstanding achievement by a leaving student.

After completing his studies at ANAM, Jack took up a contract with the Sydney Symphony Orchestra as Associate Principal Bassoon and a position in the orchestra's Fellowship program.

Program Notes

RALPH VAUGHAN WILLIAMS

(1872–1958)

The Wasps: Overture

Aristophanes' comedy *The Wasps* was first performed in 422 BC in the drama competition in Athens' Lenaia Festival. It was a satire aimed specifically at Cleon, the then dominant figure in Athenian politics, and more broadly at those who abused the court system for financial gain. As the play opens, Bdelycleon and his two slaves are trying to restrain his father Philocleon who has developed a problem addiction, not to wine or gambling but to litigation. As Philocleon tries to escape through a chimney (disguised as a puff of smoke), Bdelycleon and the slaves are beset by a chorus of elderly jurors who swarm about like, and costumed as, wasps. The play involves various other madcap episodes: for instance, as a kind of therapy for Philocleon, Bdelycleon stages the trial of a dog accused of stealing cheese, who is testified against by kitchen utensils. There is a long debate, and, after the reconciliation of father and son, the play ends with a dance contest with the sons of a rival playwright.

In 1909 *The Wasps* was chosen for that year's Cambridge Greek Play, and Vaughan Williams was invited to compose incidental music. (In the dog's trial scene the score calls for a bag of crockery, representing the kitchen utensils, to be shaken. Vaughan Williams assured his mother's relations, the Wedgwoods, that only the family china would do!)

The score for the Cambridge performance was necessarily for a modest-sized theatre orchestra, and in 1912 Vaughan Williams scored the Overture and four of the other movements as his *The Wasps*: Aristophanic Suite for symphony orchestra. The music makes no attempt to sound ancient or Greek, but in a couple of respects it reminds us that Vaughan Williams had recently studied privately with Ravel in Paris. (Ravel, as it happens, praised Vaughan Williams as the only student who didn't end up mimicking his teacher.)

After an attention-grabbing trill and some musical onomatopoeia depicting the buzzing of the wasps, Vaughan Williams states his first theme which sounds, at first, like something derived from English folk-song, which the composer had dedicated much time to recording and preserving. The theme's contour, however, is distorted by the use of the whole-tone scale, much loved by Debussy. The theme is stated quietly by winds and then by the full orchestra, leading into a more conventionally English-sounding march. After this material there is a Ravellian dissolve which introduces a fragmentary theme on solo horn, passed to solo violin. This fragment then blooms as a long, heartfelt melody which, similarly, is given out quietly at first and then again with the full orchestra in all its richness. In the score this theme represents the ultimate reconciliation of Bdelycleon and his father. A passage of French languor follows, with woodwind solos tracing fragments of the whole-tone scale.

The spell is broken by a return to the opening trill, and a building of momentum and noise until the first themes are restated and then combined in joyful counterpoint with the reconciliation theme.

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MATTHEW LAING

(born 1988)

Of Paradise Lost, Bassoon Concerto (World premiere of an MSO Commission)

Jack Schiller bassoon

There's something about the sound of the bassoon that lends itself to a mythological setting, probably crystallised by famous orchestral examples in Dukas' *Sorcerer's Apprentice* and Stravinsky's *The Rite of Spring*, but also that it's an instrument that seldom takes centre stage; the kind of personality that when it speaks invites you in.

"Better to reign in Hell than serve in Heaven" is probably the most famous line from John Milton's epic poem of 1667 *Paradise Lost*, written during a period of enormous social upheaval, and is the text from which this concerto takes its name. The piece isn't programmatic, but reflects a relationship of the bassoon as an imperfect protagonist/antagonist in relation to the orchestra.

The concerto casts the role of the bassoon in two ways over two movements; a first movement as subjected to heaven, a second movement at peace in a hell of its own creation.

© Matt Laing

EDWARD ELGAR

(1857–1934)

Symphony No.2 in E flat

Allegro vivace e nobilmente

Larghetto

Rondo (Presto)

Moderato e maestoso

No matter how eloquently the Elgar symphonies may be championed, there will always be those listeners for whom the pieces act too potently as musical memoirs of the British Empire at its sunset. In the 1940s and 50s, when these works were not much played in Britain, they were programmed regularly by the ABC, in concert and on radio. The idea that they represent a musical branch of official Imperialism is not helpful if we are to listen to them again without prejudice; even less so now, in Australia, as we have passed the centenary of the Federation that united six separate colonies to create a single nation.

In Britain by the 1920s, the opulence that forms so crucial a component of Elgar's musical language had already become a victim of musical fashion. From the distance created by the First World War and the subsequent toppling of empires and dynasties, Elgar's music was seen as symbolic of post-Victorian complacency. The symphonies came in for particularly harsh criticism for their 'triviality and tawdriness' (in Cecil Gray's words) and perceived structural weaknesses.

It may be facile to note that every generation hears what it wants to hear in the music of the past. Perhaps it is more useful to realise that Mahler's symphonies were also in eclipse in the years Elgar's lay in the darkness; that Elgar's feelings of isolation within his society – by virtue of his working-class origins, his Catholicism, his disdain for the academic musical establishment – were akin to, if less severe than, Mahler's sense of alienation.

The reputation of Elgar's first symphony had quite some journey to make to the dark side. It is – and was – recognised as the

first great English symphony, and its popularity surged quickly after its premiere in 1908. Within 15 months, the work had been played 100 times, in places as far-flung as St Petersburg and Sydney. Elgar hoped the Second Symphony would be equally successful. On his completion of it, Elgar's devoted wife Alice noted in her diary: 'It seems one of his greatest works, vast in design and supremely beautiful...It is really sublime...it resembles our human life, delight, regrets, farewell, the saddest mood & then the strong man's triumph.' Elgar himself wrote to a friend: 'I have worked at fever heat and the thing is tremendous in energy.'

That this symphony failed to make the impact of its predecessor is due to the more emotionally complex world it inhabits and the circumstances of its first performances. Elgar conducted the premiere during the glittering London 'season' of 1911, to an audience mindful of the symphony's dedication to the late Edward VII, and filled with excitement at the prospect of the forthcoming coronation of the new king, George V, less than a month away. No doubt many in the audience that May night at the Queen's Hall were expecting a grand symphony of loyal tribute, perhaps even a paean to Imperial splendour. What they heard was epic in scope and wild in its emotional extremes, doubting its own exuberance, exploding its own vivid tales of conquest, battling to regain ground lost in a tumult of its own devising.

That in itself probably flummoxed the symphony's first listeners considerably. But what sort of performance did they hear on the evening of the work's debut?

It has been said that Elgar, among the greatest of all writers for orchestra, writes to the limit of a good musician's technical capacity and never beyond it. But some commentators have questioned the extent to which this limit was successfully reached by the British orchestras of the era in which this symphony was new. The

work did not really begin to have any success with audiences until after World War I, but by then it sounded to the younger British critics like music from another planet.

The passionate expressiveness of Elgar's music inevitably suggests a play of personal meanings at work. But Elgar often used musical red herrings to shield his inner purpose. (The movement headings to the Enigma Variations are a good example.) His dedication of this symphony to the late King, for example, should not be taken as an explanation of his musical purpose. To his friend Alice Stuart-Wortley Elgar referred to this work, the Violin Concerto and the Ode *The Music Makers* (all completed between 1910 and 1912) as works in which 'I have written out my soul.... and you know it...in these works I have shewn myself.' To another friend, he described his feelings about this symphony by amending a quotation from Shelley's *Julian and Maddalo* to read:

I do but hide

*Under these notes, like embers,
every spark*

Of that which has consumed me.

Finally, we have the enigmatic extract from Shelley's *Invocation*, which Elgar wrote at the end of the score:

Rarely, rarely, comest thou,

Spirit of Delight!

The beginning of the first movement at once proclaims the 'tremendous energy' Elgar described. The viola player Bernard Shore likened the first bars to a dive off a high springboard. The wide-ranging restlessness of this music is born of the swift sequence of short, bounding themes presented with a virtuoso orchestrator's panache, and a plethora of detailed expression and tempo markings.

The very first theme contains a two-bar melodic cell that acts as a presence throughout the work's four movements; sometimes called the 'Spirit of Delight', it gives way to three equally short themes. All four are then modified and

juxtaposed, leading gradually to the tenderly lyrical ideas that form the movement's second melodic group. Passion soon overcomes the music, particularly when Elgar enfolds these new ideas with themes from the first group. The strong element of fantasy in the writing is already apparent; one of the lyrical themes, played by the cellos, features a gentle accompaniment on violas and then woodwind. This seemingly incidental motif later figures heroically, even gaudily, in the movement's climax.

It is possible to talk about this movement in conventional sonata form terminology, but for Elgar the recapitulation, resplendent though it is, is not as crucial as the beautiful and sinister episode that haunts the centre of the movement. 'I have written the *most extraordinary passage*,' he wrote to Alice Stuart-Wortley, '...a sort of malign influence wandering thro' the summer night in the garden.' Eight bell-like notes on the harp, muted strings and horns introduce a theme, high in the cellos, to which the surrounding accompaniment lends an almost supernatural glow. In a completely different guise, this theme returns in the third movement to devastating effect.

When the climax does come, Elgar dangles the 'Spirit of Delight' theme over the precipice of a Mahlerian Luftpause. The elaborate recapitulation that follows allows for a brief moment of calm, almost like someone on a long trek resting briefly by the side of the path, but we are then thrown tumultuously on to the movement's conclusion, a dizzying upward rush for the whole orchestra.

The grief of the second movement – a funeral march in the manner of another great symphony in E flat, Beethoven's *Eroica* – is immense and, until the last bars, inconsolable. A yearning introduction gives way to a solemn and beautiful theme scored to give the effect of public mourning –

the melody, on flutes, clarinets, trumpet, trombone and first violin, is played over the muffled tread of bassoons, horns, tuba, timpani, harp and strings. In the movement's central episode, this theme's return is embellished by an improvised-sounding oboe lament, as if the cries of one person might be heard over the murmurs of a vast crowd. At this point Elgar used to tell the Principal Oboe in rehearsals: 'Play your lament entirely free...Don't worry about me or the rest of the orchestra. It must sound as if it belonged outside somewhere.' The final climax, scored passionately high on the violins, is almost feverishly sad, the benediction-like appearance of the 'Spirit of Delight' theme offering some consolation before the movement shudders to a close.

The scherzo is feverish music requiring tremendous virtuosity. The movement opens with apparent jollity, but the darkening harmonies and darting cross-rhythms together produce a feeling of impending danger. After a more lyrical section, introducing a wistful new woodwind theme, a pulsating version of the 'unearthly' theme from the first movement is given out by the violins with insistent timpani commentary. Suddenly the music takes on an aspect of thundering terror. At this point the percussion, according to Elgar's instructions at rehearsals, should 'completely overwhelm everything'. The composer wrote to a friend, explaining his thoughts on this section by way of a quotation from Tennyson's *Maud*, which included the lines:

*Dead, long dead...
And my heart is a handful of dust,
And the wheels go over my head,
And my bones are shaken with pain,
For into a shallow grave they are thrust...
And the hoofs of the horses beat,
beat,
Beat into my scalp and brain...*

The passage disappears with

the swiftness of waking from a nightmare; the movement then hastens to a brilliant coda.

The finale begins as if it is going to be the most conventional movement of the four, resolving the tremendous conflicts depicted in the earlier movements. There is a Brahmsian inflection to the stately first theme played by cellos, horns, clarinets and bassoons, and to the grander second one given to the violins. These themes are given majestic, rhetorical treatment; we then hear a new, gentle theme for the strings, which carries Elgar's characteristic direction, *nobilmente* [nobly]. The *poco animato* section that follows contains some of the most concentratedly virtuosic writing of the symphony. We are plunged into the thick of battle, a piercing trumpet cry leading the charge.

The introduction of a more peaceful theme high on the violins at the conclusion of this episode does not settle the music for long. The mood is restless, and although the martial atmosphere gradually recedes to make way for a return of the main theme, the recapitulation makes us realise that the likelihood of a Brahms-like darkness-to-light symphonic outcome is remote. Just as Elgar seems to prepare us for a victorious peroration, the music quietens, we hear the finale's main theme again on the cellos, the 'Spirit of Delight' appears once more and all is radiantly still. At the close there is hope, consolation perhaps, but not triumph.

The last lines of Shelley's *Invocation*, surely known by Elgar, form a fitting postscript to the Symphony's complex emotional journey:

*Spirit, I love thee –
Thou art love and life! Oh, come,
Make once more my heart thy home.*

Phillip Sametz © 2001 revised 29/3 and 20/11 2001, 3/10/03

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