



Blackheath  
Chamber  
Music  
Festival



## GOLDNER STRING QUARTET

celebrating their 30<sup>th</sup> Anniversary

Friday 19 April 2023, 7:00 pm

Phillips Hall | Blackheath Blue Mountains NSW

Dene Olding | violin

Dimity Hall | violin

Irina Morozova | viola

Julian Smiles | cello

### PROGRAM NOTES

#### *Beethoven & the Goldner Variations*

**Ludwig BEETHOVEN** [1770-1827] | Quartet in E minor Opus 59 No.2 (1808)

The Russian ambassador to Vienna, Count Razumovsky, commissioned Beethoven to write three string quartets for the Schuppanzigh Quartet in 1805. Violinist, Ignaz Schuppanzigh who formed the quartet, was also a close friend of Beethoven's and the quartet gave first performances of many of his works. There was one specific request of the commission – that Russian folk tunes be significantly featured in the music. Not only did Beethoven fulfill this request by including Russian themes, but he also redefined the traditional intimate chamber music of the string quartet by demanding an almost symphonic approach with difficult, dynamic and dramatic writing. There is a particularly sublime slow movement which Beethoven wrote, apparently, after contemplating the night sky and “the music of the spheres”.

In the key of E minor, Op. 59, No. 2, the second of the three commissioned quartets, is both dark and volatile and contains the strongest pervasive Russian component.

i. **Allegro** (E minor)

The first movement opens with two resounding chords then sudden silence. Violin and cello then speak in quiet undertones ushering in a hesitant yet hopeful theme that slowly gains confidence and dances with restless energy, stopping and starting, stepping backwards and forwards, being pushed and pulled but always driven forward, almost against its will, whilst trying to find moments of quiet repose but never quite

settling. In typical sonata form minor moves to major but can't quite settle on a central key. A second theme brings a momentary sense of calm but underlying disquiet continues to permeate throughout with accents, rhythmic changes and harmonic sequences that finally comes to an exhausted close.

- ii. **Molto adagio.** Si tratta questo pezzo con molto di sentimento (E major)  
The second movement opens with a sense of relief and recovery, lying in a bed of lush chords of familiar harmonies, almost hymn-like, that meld into reminiscent lines of sweet repose. Menacing undertones invite themselves into this newfound haven of peace and tranquillity but never take hold and pass over, like dark clouds across a clear blue sky.

“This piece is to be played with great feeling.” – Beethoven

- iii. **Allegretto – Maggiore** (Thème russe) (E minor – E major – E minor)  
This Scherzo ternary form, allegretto (A), trio (B), allegretto (A) repeats in this movement to become ABABA. The violin plays a simple melody serenely over a playful rhythm that seems to want to catch it off guard, even trip it up. However, the violin playfully joins in from time to time before going on its merry way. Almost as if the quartet was playing a game of hide and seek before joining forces in the E major Russian-themed trio.

The Russian theme Beethoven used in this movement is from the old Russian folk song *Glory to the Sun*. It was also used by Mussorgsky (Boris Godunov), Arensky (String Quartet No.2), Tchaikovsky (Mazeppa) and Rachmaninoff (6 Morceaux for Piano Duet, Opus 11).

Here again, two parts struggle with unsettled and smooth momentum, continuing the underlying disquiet that has permeated each movement.

- iv. **Finale.** Presto C major – E minor  
Once again dark versus light pervades only this time in reverse. The presto theme in the violin is propelled forward by the unyielding rhythmic march of the lower strings, both joining forces from time to time for a quick dialogue then marching onwards. Pursuing a rondo form with the violin refusing to be undermined and eventually leading the quartet on a wild triumphant chase to the end.

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**Pyotr Ilyich TCHAIKOVSKY** [1840-1896] | *Andante Cantabile* from Quartet No.1 in D major Opus 11 (1871)

“You ask how I manage my instrumentation. I never compose in the abstract; that is to say, the musical thought never appears otherwise than in a suitable external form. In this way I invent the musical idea and the instrumentation simultaneously.

As regards the Russian element in my works, I may tell you that not infrequently I begin a composition with the intention of introducing some folk melody into it. Sometimes it comes of its own accord, unbidden... As to this national element in my work, its affinity with the folksongs in some of my melodies and harmonies comes from my having spent my childhood in the country and, from my earliest years, having been filled with the characteristic beauty of our Russian folk music. I am passionately fond of the national element in all its varied expressions. In short, I am Russian in the fullest sense of the word.” – Tchaikovsky (Composers on Music, Josiah Fisk, editor, Northwestern University Press, Boston, 1997)

When approached by the Moscow Conservatory to put on an all-Tchaikovsky concert, the virtually unknown Tchaikovsky understood that this could bring him to the attention of the general musical public in Russia and perhaps supplement his modest teacher’s salary. Being poor made it impossible for him to engage an orchestra and the necessity for creating a varied program meant more than just violin and piano sonatas. An offer from his friend Ferdinand Laub, first violinist of the Russian Musical Society Quartet, to play without fee, made writing a quartet for the concert an obvious and possible choice. Hence, the Quartet No. 1 in D major, Opus 11 was written in 1871.

Tchaikovsky completed just three string quartets in his lifetime.

#### ii. Andante cantabile (B-flat major)

This second movement of the quartet, based on a Russian folk song, has become famous in its own right. Tchaikovsky heard the tune when visiting his sister’s house in the Ukraine. It was being whistled by a tradesman. The tune was called "Vanya sat on the divan and smoked a pipe of tobacco" or "Vanya one night sat sadly on the divan, a glass of rum in his hand, to drown his sorrow and forget tomorrow"

The music alternates between the folk theme, which also makes reference to “Yo, heave-ho!” from the folk tune *Song of the Volga Boatmen* (however which came first we’ll never know), and a contrasting section written by Tchaikovsky himself. Typically Tchaikovsky, but strangely not without similar harmonies we find in Borodin’s *Polovtsian Dances* written around the same time. This poignant movement starts with quietly with muted strings. There is no subject development before Tchaikovsky’s famous melody is introduced midway, played by the first violin over the pizzicato accompaniment of the cello and legato lines of the other strings.

This ‘andante cantabile’ was performed at a tribute concert for Leo Tolstoy. Tchaikovsky was sitting next to Tolstoy and later wrote in his diary that Tolstoy “did in fact weep” on hearing the movement.

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*THE GOLDNER VARIATIONS* / assorted composers on Beethoven's theme, *Ode to Joy*. [2020][revised 2024]

In 2020, at the suggestion of Artistic Director, Kathryn Stott, of the Australian Festival of Chamber Music, Townsville, commissioned 25 Australian composers to write short variations (45 seconds) on Beethoven's *Ode to Joy* to mark the 25th anniversary of the Goldner String Quartet.

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Elaborating on the concept, Kathryn Stott said: "For this very special 25th anniversary of the Goldners, I wanted to find an imaginative link to Beethoven and his 250th celebrations but with the very strong wish to create a work of longevity. *Ode to Joy* symbolises joy, hope and unity and what better way than to bring together 25 composers with whom the Goldners have very special connections. I suggested they take this glorious theme, and each write a 45 second Variation. **From this the Goldners will construct the piece into the order they think fits best.**"

The outstanding composers are: Joe Chindamo, Audrey Ormella, Maria Grenfell, Clare Strong, John Peterson, Paul Dean, Robert Davidson, Andrew Schultz, Mark Isaacs, Matthew Hindson, Olivia Diamant, Andrew Ford, Hayden Gardiner, Adriel Sukumar, Ross Edwards, Harry Sdraulig, Nigel Westlake, Liza Lim, Iain Grandage, Paul Stanhope, Jakub Jankowsk, Brett Dean, Tim Jayatilaka, Elena Kats-Chernin, Elizabeth Younan, Paul Grabowsky, Nicole Murphy, Holly Harrison, Natalie Williams, and Carl Vine.

*Goldner Variations* was AFCM's gift to the Goldner String Quartet: wonderfully varied and great fun. The Goldner String Quartet will play all of them... "and now 5 new 'babies' to make the full 30!"

| Notes by LOUISE JOHNSON