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COMPOSER SERIES

BRETT DEAN



testament

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COMPOSER SERIES

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TASMANIAN
SYMPHONY
ORCHESTRA



Brett Dean b. 1961

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|----------|--|---------|
| 1 | Testament | 15'05 |
| 2 | Etüdenfest
Caroline Almonte <i>piano</i> | 10'54 |
| | Shadow Music | [19'58] |
| 3 | I. Prelude | 2'54 |
| 4 | II. Forgotten Garden | 7'51 |
| 5 | III. Voices and Shadows | 9'13 |
| 6 | Between Moments
Sue-Ellen Paulsen <i>cello</i> | 6'07 |
| 7 | Game Over
Duncan Abercromby <i>clarinet/bass clarinet</i> , Gary Wain <i>drums</i> ; Ben van Tienen <i>piano</i> ,
Leonard Grigoryan <i>electric guitar</i> , Alison Lazaroff-Somssich <i>electric violin</i> , Sue-Ellen
Paulsen <i>cello</i> , Stuart Thomson <i>double bass</i> , Felix Williamson ' <i>Dwight, the game
show contestant from Surry Hills</i> ' | 14'56 |
| | Total Playing Time | 67'19 |

Tasmanian Symphony Orchestra
Sebastian Lang-Lessing *conductor*

Brett Dean is by no means alone in being a composer who plays the viola. Bach and Beethoven, Britten and Dvořák were more than proficient on the instrument; Mozart found playing the viola in chamber works an ideal way to get 'inside' the music, while Hindemith found time to premiere concertos by the likes of William Walton. Brisbane-born Dean had been a professional violist with the Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra for some years before taking up composition in his late twenties; having returned to live in Australia in 2000, he continues to enjoy an international career as performer and composer. Like those of the composers mentioned, Dean's compositions, particularly those for orchestra and string-based chamber ensembles, show a highly refined technique based on a violist's intimate knowledge of the internal workings of such ensembles.

In addition, Dean's work is almost always fuelled by ethical as well as aesthetic concerns, and a recurrent idea in his work is that of music as memorial. His breakthrough work, the clarinet concerto *Ariel's Music*, which he wrote for his brother Paul Dean in 1995, remembers a young American girl who died of AIDS in 1988, and whose mother – who had contracted the disease through a blood transfusion – became a heroic campaigner for the cause in a country which had experienced denial at the highest levels of government. Similarly, his *Huntington Eulogy* (2001) for cello and piano is a moving

tribute to a young winemaker who died well before his time, while orchestral works like *Dispersion* and *Ceremony* mourn the victims of colonisation and war.

None of which is to say that Dean's music is worthy and dour, or lacking wit or humour, as is clear from his **Etüdenfest** of 2000. The work had its genesis in a masterclass that Dean held for students at the Australian National Academy of Music – an institution of which he has since been artistic director – in Melbourne in 1997. The week involved intense study of solo and chamber music, as well as purely 'technical' work. At its conclusion Dean gathered the string players for what he calls a 'prepared improvisation' based on the technical exercises of pedagogues like Otakar Ševčík and Henry Schradieck. As Dean points out, these studies are the 'most uninspiring and mechanical examples of musical composition... [They] aren't meant to be concert caprices in the manner of Paganini. This is the very stuff of first putting hands on fingerboards and hair on strings, of changing position and getting from the heel of the bow to the tip.' The improvisation amazed everyone – especially the performers – and Dean embarked on a notated version of the piece for the Australian Chamber Orchestra, who premiered it in 2000 with pianist Imogen Cooper.

Notating the work had two consequences: it allowed for a more even spread of virtuosity (the

ability and inclination to improvise are not equally shared among classical musicians), and it invited the composer to give the material a formal shape. In Dean's words, 'in exploring different technical aspects of string playing, so too do the textures change, from high, light and airy to dark and demonic. In the course of the piece, a beginner's study in left-hand dexterity becomes a wild river of activity; later, a simple string crossing exercise turns into an impassioned song.' *Etüdenfest* begins quietly, with the gradual accretion of sound and texture, gaining energy and speed as more and more parts are added. The central passages are occasionally acerbic and vertiginously active, but give way to a more rarified quiet section. A disturbingly simple passage of open perfect intervals soon fragments into a darkly shimmering texture, but emotional equilibrium is restored by the coup de théâtre of an offstage piano exuberantly joining in the chaos.

If *Etüdenfest* finds art in the mechanical, **Game Over**, also written for the Australian Chamber Orchestra, has an altogether more disturbing intent, namely, to unmask bright shiny consumer culture as the coercive enemy of individual freedom. *Game Over*, whose title evokes the meretricious game-show culture of commercial television, grew out of an electronic installation called *hundreds and thousands* that Dean devised for the millennium celebrations in Berlin. Just as improvised material and technical exercises became the basis for a more formal

composition in *Etüdenfest*, so the electronic sounds of *hundreds and thousands* become a strand in the composition of *Game Over*. The piece is effectively a kind of concerto grosso, where the concertino group, originally tailored to the New York-based Bang on a Can All-Stars, consists of clarinet (doubling bass), electric guitar, percussion, piano and amplified violin, cello and double bass. Bang on a Can premiered the work at the University of Iowa with the Australian Chamber Orchestra in 2000. The string orchestra, sampler and multi-tracked sound design form the ripieno group. Dean regards it as 'a live tone-poem about the unrealisable desires of a flailing generation... It all starts as an innocent story – Dwight, a young game show contestant, tells briefly of his life and family background. The soloists, led by the cello, tentatively join in the game, like other competitors on the show, each with their own stories, idiosyncrasies and characters. The brash, bumptious self-confidence of Dwight's entrance slowly gives way to disillusionment and doubt as the solid, corporate edifice of the orchestral strings gradually yet irrevocably lays down the ground rules by which the game must be played.'

In *Game Over*, fragments of recorded sound coexist with moments of high lyricism, nightmarish frenzy and jaw-dropping banality. The musical design has the kind of effect identified by German philosopher Theodor Adorno in some of the scherzos of Mahler, their

empty busy-ness signifying the 'spectre of blind functioning' in late bourgeois society.

Shadow Music has, by contrast, no such explicit program. Indeed, the work's cultivation of ambiguity is an important aspect of its dramatic structure. Composed as part of Dean's residency with the Melbourne Symphony Orchestra, and premiered in the Orchestra's Metropolis series in 2002, *Shadow Music* is scored for a relatively modest, late Classical-sized orchestra and is cast in three movements, each incrementally longer than its predecessor. The first is a very short *Prelude*, characterised by a series of terse gestures often based around repeated-note figures from winds and brass which, as Dean notes, 'cast "shadows" of sustained string sounds.' The movement ends, tantalisingly, just as these begin to coalesce into more substantial thematic shapes. In the slower second movement, *Forgotten Garden*, 'reminiscence and nervous anxiety lie side by side' with themes – that often stress the tearful interval of the falling semitone – fading in and out of the texture, and recurring moments of febrile activity and harmonic collapse. The palette is further enriched by Dean's asking some of the string players to play percussion instruments, notably water gongs in this movement. A trumpet solo, which Dean says 'seems to recall the forgotten garden's former glory', appears in shadow form at the movement's end on two alto flutes. The final *Voices and Shadows* is a

passacaglia, where the repeating 'ground' is derived from harmony implicit in the *Prelude*. The effect of this movement is of creation out of nothing, beginning as it does with the sound of 'bounced and scraped' bowing from the strings which, Dean suggests, evokes a definition of 'shadow' as 'indistinct or suspect'. These gestures create a weird and unearthly backdrop for the more complex and virtuosic textures – fuelled by insistent, repeated-note motifs that recall the opening – that ensue, especially in the central section where solo strings 'shadow' the tutti.

Like those memorialised in *Ariel's Music* and the *Huntington Eulogy*, Australian cellist Cameron Retchford died far too young when he was involved in a car accident at the age of 38. Retchford and Dean went back a long way, having played alongside each other in the Queensland Youth Orchestra and later the Australian Chamber Orchestra, of which Retchford was Principal Cello for many years. In **Between Moments**, Dean has composed 'a simple memorial to Cameron. It is mostly quiet, reflective music motivated by a tragic occurrence, though I hope I may have been able to catch an aspect of that eternally youthful and somewhat mischievous twinkle in Cameron's eye here and there.' Naturally enough, the solo cello has a prominent role, singing out, in the opening minutes of the work, a high, long-breathed melody that moves most often by step,

over a quietly roiling orchestral texture punctuated by tear-drops from the piano. Short trumpet calls, first strident then muted, interrupt the work's lyrical unfolding, but the work's final pages are of a gently fading fluidity.

Loss is also a powerful motive behind Dean's **Testament**, originally for twelve violas but presented here in a new version for orchestra. In 1802 Beethoven, as was his wont, repaired to the village of Heiligenstadt (then outside Vienna) for the summer. After his death a document which has come to be known as the 'Heiligenstadt Testament' was found among his papers. It is a kind of will, addressed to his two brothers (though one is never referred to by name) but never sent to them. For Beethoven it was clearly a kind of exorcism: in it, he details the emotional collapse brought about by the realisation in the early years of the century that his deafness was permanent and getting worse. He considered suicide, but, as he famously wrote, 'my art held me back.' Dean's work, composed two hundred years after Beethoven's crisis, is a musical picture of the composer *in extremis*; various extended techniques (such as the use of unrosined bows) produce inchoate sounds to give a sense of Beethoven writing frantically to glean his teeming brain and, at the same time, trying desperately to hear. Out of the vortex of feverish activity we begin to hear recognisable fragments of Beethoven's music – notably from the first of the 'Razumovsky'

Quartets, his first 'heroic' work in that medium. (Significantly, reflecting a moment of liberation in the composer's struggle with his affliction, Beethoven wrote on the autograph score of the Third Razumovsky Quartet: 'Let your deafness no longer be a secret, even in art.')

For Dean, as perhaps for Beethoven, art is often a means of holding on to something in the face of time and chance – the memory of someone taken, or an image of what is really important despite appearances. What Dean's music understands is the need for craft to embody those ideas. When writing *Etüdenfest* Dean was aware of 'parallels between the discipline, sacrifice, passion and strict training regimen of an elite Olympic athlete and the similar sacrifices and straight out hard work that we classical musicians have to maintain in order to achieve our goals, pursue our passion, perform at our best.' Dean's is superbly crafted music about things that matter.

Gordon Kerry

Sebastian Lang-Lessing

Sebastian Lang-Lessing, Chief Conductor and Artistic Director of the Tasmanian Symphony Orchestra (TSO), is one of the most talented German conductors of his generation.

His career began at a young age with engagements at leading opera houses including the Hamburg State Opera, Opéra Bastille in Paris and Houston Grand Opera. In addition to follow-up appearances at these houses, his opera engagements have included Oslo, Stockholm, Gothenburg, Bordeaux, Los Angeles and San Francisco.

Sebastian Lang-Lessing studied conducting at the Hamburg State Conservatory. After being awarded the Ferenc Fricsay Prize, he worked as assistant conductor at the Hamburg State Opera. He was Erster Kapellmeister (First Staff Conductor) at Rostock Opera for three years and, at the invitation of renowned director Götz Friedrich, was Conductor-in-Residence at the Deutsche Oper Berlin for eight years. From 1999 to 2006 he was Music Director and Chief Conductor of the Opéra de Nancy in France. Under his direction, Opéra de Nancy was promoted to national status, becoming the Opéra national de Lorraine. In addition to opera, Sebastian Lang-Lessing's conducting duties in Nancy included full concert seasons.

In 2005 Sebastian Lang-Lessing led the TSO on a tour of Japan and inaugurated the TSO's annual Sydney season. He has released numerous CDs with the TSO on ABC Classics, including the complete symphonies of Schumann, *Mozart Arias* (with Sara Macliver) and *Romantic Overtures*. A recording of the complete symphonies of Mendelssohn is nearing completion. His discography also includes music by Saint-Saëns, D'Indy, Franck, Ravel and Bruch. His rediscovery of the music of French composer Guy Ropartz and CD releases of Ropartz's symphonies (Radio France) have been greeted enthusiastically by the press.

Guest appearances have included engagements with the Tokyo Philharmonic Orchestra, Leipzig Gewandhaus, Frankfurt Radio Orchestra, Hamburg Symphony, Orchestre de Paris, Orchestre Philharmonique de Radio France, Orchestre de Toulouse, Orchestre de Bordeaux, Orchestre de l'Opéra de Lyon and major orchestras in Australia.

Tasmanian Symphony Orchestra

Established in 1948, the Tasmanian Symphony Orchestra is acclaimed as one of the world's finest small orchestras. Resident in the purpose-built Federation Concert Hall, Hobart, the TSO presents more than 60 diverse concerts across Tasmania and mainland Australia each year. German-born Sebastian Lang-Lessing has been the orchestra's Chief Conductor and Artistic Director since 2004.

With a full-time complement of 47 musicians, the TSO's core repertoire is the music of the Classical and early Romantic periods. It is, however, a versatile orchestra, equally at home in jazz, popular music and light classics, and recognised internationally as a champion of Australian music.

The TSO presents annual subscription seasons in Hobart and Launceston, and since its inception has regularly toured regional Tasmania and mainland Australia. The orchestra appears at major Australian arts festivals and in 2005 initiated an annual Sydney Season. International touring has seen the TSO in North and South America, Greece, Israel, South Korea, China, Japan and Indonesia.

The TSO regularly records for radio, CD, film and television. Its recordings on international and Australian CD labels have garnered critical praise, and the TSO is the only Australian orchestra to have released a complete set of the Beethoven symphonies, conducted by David Porcellijn, and a complete cycle of Schumann symphonies, conducted by Sebastian Lang-Lessing.



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