

Program Notes

And Whether Pigs Have Wings...

Holly Harrison is a Sydney based composer, drummer and percussionist who first composed *And Whether Pigs Have Wings* back in 2016. Despite being written by an Australian, it has never been performed in Australia. Reorchestrated for VCASS in 2023, it is a melting pot of contrasting styles, exploring and testing the boundaries of rhythm, musical character, and so much more. The first 2 pages of the drum part alone contain over 20 time signature changes which highlights Harrison's humorous and almost comical approach to rhythm. Beyond the metre changes the rhythmic palette is highly syncopated and complex, requiring the listener (and musicians) to continuously readjust their sense of pulse to the ever changing, stylistically juxtaposed music.

VCASS is very fortunate to have the opportunity to perform an Australian premiere, and even luckier to do this with such a wonderful piece. As a player, 'Pigs' (as we affectionately call it) is both challenging and interesting, with musical passages that go against mainstream music intuition. When I first heard 'Pigs', I was excited to audition for it because of how rhythmically sophisticated it sounded. I haven't played anything like it before - it is unique! However, when we were first given the piece, we were faced with a wall of sticky notes, each one representing a challenge. Through focused practice and rehearsals, the sticky notes of challenge gradually started to disappear. To say our sight reading has been tested is an understatement, and with it our sense of pulse and our ensemble skills. We hope you enjoy tonight's performance as much as we will!

Notes | **Sebastian (Sebi) Starr**
(Drum Kit)

Symphony No.4 in A Major Op.90 'Italiani'

Felix Mendelssohn first started writing *Symphony No. 4 in A Major*, also known as the *Italian Symphony* after his tour of Europe in 1829-1831. Inspired by the vibrant colour and atmosphere of Italy he finished in 1833 and then conducted its premiere with the London Philharmonic Society that same year. However, endlessly unhappy with his work, Mendelssohn went on to write and rewrite multiple revisions, none being published prior to his death in 1847.

The first movement 'Allegro Vivace' is in Sonata form and opens the exposition with a bright, tutti A Major chord played by pizzicato strings and continued as quavers in the woodwind. This quickly establishes the lively character likened by Mendelssohn as a 'blue sky in A Major' and reminiscent of the clear, blue skies of Rome. The violins then introduce the main theme of the movement, which is fragmented and subjected to numerous repeats and modulations throughout the exposition until the beginning of the development. It is here that Mendelssohn implements a transition section in which he modulates, initially into D minor, then exploring a large number of tonal centres whilst the woodwind teases fragments of the theme in major tonality over the strings' minor passage. From here the piece builds down to just the strings playing broken thirds whilst gradually building in dynamics. The opening major third fragment of the main theme is passed between the individual woodwind and brass instruments before the texture thickens and the music swells back into the recapitulation. We are thrust back to the beginning of the excerpt, this time the thematic material from the development is stated again, before breaking into new thematic material, finally ending with perfect cadences and ending on a strong, A major chord.

The second movement 'Andante Con Moto' serves as a significant change of pace compared to the fast and lively first movement. This melody is now in simple quadruple time and serves as Mendelssohn's recollection of the processions he witnessed in Rome. The feeling of these processions is evoked through the slow, sombre melodies in the oboes, violas and clarinets over a constantly moving bassline providing rhythmic drive throughout the movement. Be sure to listen out for the alternating flowing, major sections played mainly in the violin part providing a contrasting character to the more subdued opening.

A common feature of the classical symphony is the triple metre movement, usually written as a minuet and trio, each in binary form with two repeating sections. The third movement 'Con Moto Moderato' is no exception, starting with a gentle, legato minuet for strings and winds as a homage to the architecture of Rome. The beauty and symmetry that Mendelssohn saw in this architecture is reflected in this movement through the smooth, flowing character created through the legato and repeated phrases. The trio section however is played as a contrasting, more militaristic fanfare, with sharper, staccato articulation and features the french horns and the bassoons.

The fourth and final movement is inspired by and named after the Neapolitan dance; The 'Saltarello'. Wild and swirling, abundantly energetic (bordering on frenetic), and unquestionably Italian, the fourth movement almost races itself to its own conclusion. The piece seems to have pretty much danced itself into exhaustion with the orchestra reduced to nothing more than first violins whispering the rhythmic motif softly over the cellos and basses before suddenly rebounding with a sudden crescendo for a punchy, forte ending. For the finale, Mendelssohn presents an oddity by beginning in the major and ending in the minor, a highly unusual treatment of tonality.

Notes | **Hugh Leibel**
(Violin)

Le Bœuf sur le toit | The Ox on the Roof

Darius Milhaud's *Le Bœuf sur le toit* is a piece which captures the soul of Brazil while bearing the signature of European 20th century sophistication.

In 1919, while residing in Brazil as part of his diplomatic duties, Milhaud was introduced to a tapestry of musical motifs and themes that would greatly influence his work. *Le Bœuf sur le toit* stands as an emblem of that period, echoing the heartbeats of over 30 Brazilian songs, interwoven to bring forth a composition that is as exhilarating as the streets of Rio de Janeiro during a carnival.

But the piece is not just a straightforward nod to Brazilian music. As a prominent member of the avant-garde group 'Les Six', Milhaud had an inherent desire to challenge the conventional musical paradigms. The composition's movement into polytonality, where we hear two or more simultaneous tonalities or musical scales, is testament to this spirit. Such merging of harmonies can be likened to a chef experimenting with contrasting flavours, and in Milhaud's case, the result is both startling and deliciously captivating. So, if some sections feel like an audacious dance of notes, remember it's all part of the intended experience, aiming to intrigue and challenge our musical palates.

Originally conceptualised as 'fifteen minutes of music, rapid and gay, as a background to any Charlie Chaplin silent movie', the musical piece metamorphosed into a ballet under the creative persuasion of French artist, Jean Cocteau. He visualised a bustling bar scene, where a series of eccentric characters, from a pugilist to a flirtatious widow, from a watchful policeman to the iconic ox, come to life, each with their own tales and tantrums. As the music plays, it seems as if each note and rhythm represents these personas, creating an imagery-rich narrative that delights both the ear and the imagination.

Milhaud invites listeners to embark on a musical journey where, as the melodies are passed to differing instruments, one can almost feel the bustling streets, the sultry dances, and the laughter, all rendered through the strings, brass, winds and especially percussion (listen to the guiro!) of the orchestra.

So tighten your harnesses folks - this is going to be one exuberantly tumultuous ox ride you'll not soon forget!

Notes | **William Poon** (Violin) and **Riley Hogan** (Flute)

Ceremony of Carols

During the midst of the Second World War, Benjamin Britten fled to the United States to find new experiences. During his trip, Britten was acquainted with many other creative minds such as Aaron Copland, Leonard Bernstein, and his future partner and poet, W.H. Auden. By 1942, Britten became homesick and upon boarding the MS Axel Johnson on his five-week-long voyage back to the UK, Britten became inspired by his new found inspiration in America, and began composing Christmas carols based on a poetry book he acquired in Nova Scotia; *The English Galaxy of Shorter Poems*, a collection of medieval texts.

Utilising his iconic English 'roots', Britten originally composed the 10 movement piece for treble choir and harp. Why harp you may ask? Well, Britten was in the depths of studying the harp with a view to writing a concerto and although it would be another 27 Years before its realisation, we are pleased it sparked the inspiration for the accompaniment of his *Ceremony of Carols*.

Navigating its way through an array of tempi and characters, the movements of *Ceremony of Carols* stand alone as worthy works, however are best enjoyed as originally imagined by Britten. From a slow and sonorous opening, to lively cannon's fired off in quick succession, Britten achieves a lot with a choir, a harp, and some very good acoustics.

Notes | **Sienna Couzens** (Soprano)