

LARRY SITSKY

De Profundis

for double string quartet with percussion and baritone

Gurdjieff: Violin Concerto No. 2

plus the piano works Fantasia No. 2 and Petra



Petra String Quartet / Canberra School of Music Quartet / Lyall Bevan / Graeme Leak
Tasmanian Symphony Orchestra conducted by Omri Hadari / Jan Sedivka

De Profundis

- for double string quartet with one percussion player and solo baritone voice -

The idea of setting sections of Oscar Wilde's De Profundis was first suggested to me by the Australian musicologist Elizabeth Wood, some years ago. She even began work on a possible libretto, but it never got any further than a first sketch. I was fascinated by the concept, however, and when the opportunity presented itself, suggested it to Gwen Harwood. Gwen's realization of the project was to use Wilde's words exclusively, but to lift them out of context and arrange them into new coherence, to give clarity to that cleansing of the spirit that overcame Oscar Wilde during his prison years. Furthermore, I wanted to compose a work that could be presented as a concert piece at one end of the spectrum, to a totally produced theatre work at the other, with all the possible shades of interpretation between these two extremes. It seemed to me, too, that whether the work is done one way or the other, I would wish to have the accompanying orchestra of 2 string quartets and one percussionist on stage with the baritone, the quartets separated stereophonically. The music is set out in 7 sections (7 parts of a song-cycle in concert parlance),

but there is no reason why action should not occur in the silences. Even a concert performance should not deprive the audience of the opportunity of visualizing Oscar in prison dress, remembering his past glory and finding a new peace. To this end, the words are to be reproduced in any performance of the work.

Larry Sitsky

1 The bitterness of disgrace

The day no less than the night is set apart for tears. Lacrimae Rerum: the tears of which the world is made, the sadness of all human things. It is always twilight in one's cell, as it is always twilight in one's heart. For us there is only one season, the season of sorrow. Motion is no more. The supreme vice is shallowness. The final mystery is oneself. To know oneself: that is the first achievement of knowledge. Terrible as was what the world did to me, what I did to myself was more terrible still. I have come from an eternity of fame, to an eternity of infamy. The hard bed, the loathsome food, the harsh orders, the dreadful dress, the solitude, the shame. Motion is no more. For us there is only one season, the season of sorrow. The day is no less than the night is set apart for tears.

2 The letter

Where you will receive this letter, I don't know. Rome, Naples, Paris, Venice, some beautiful city on the sea or river holds you. You must read this letter right through, though each word may become as the fire or knife of the surgeon that makes the delicate flesh burn or bleed. The supreme vice is shallowness. I have had to look at my past face to face. Look at your past face to face. The real fool is he who does not know himself. I was such a one too long. You have been such a one too long. Your pale face used to flush with wine or pleasure. If, as you read what is here written, it becomes scorched as though by a furnace blast with shame, it will be all the better for you. Do not forget in what a terrible school I am sitting at my task.

3 Oscar reflects on his former greatness

The Gods had given me almost everything: genius, brilliancy, daring. I made Art a philosophy and philosophy an art. I altered the minds of men and the colour of things. I treated Art as the supreme reality and life as a mere mode of fiction. I summed up all systems in a phrase and all existence in an epigram. I used to live entirely for pleasure. Sins of the flesh are nothing. Sins of the soul alone

are shameful. Desire, at the end, was a malady, or a madness, or both. I became the spendthrift of my own genius. The scraps of a banquet grow stale, the dregs of a bottle are bitter.

4 The rebuke (Melodrama)

Brightest of gilded snakes! Fleur de Lys! Your choice of name reveals you. In you, hate was always stronger than love. You forced your way into a life too large for you. You demanded without grace and received without thanks. Great passions are for the great in soul. I should have shaken you out of my life as a man shakes from his raiment a thing that has stung him. Out of the reckless dinners with you nothing remains but the memory that too much was eaten and drunk. You knew what my art was to me, the great primal note by which I had revealed, first myself to myself, and then myself to the world. The great passion of my life, the love to which all other loves were as marsh water to red wine. The sorrow you should have shared you have doubled, the pain you should have sought to heighten, you have quickened to anguish. I spent on you my Art, my life, my name, my place in history. You yourself walked free among the flowers. Ah, had you been in prison do you think that I would have allowed you to eat your heart away in

darkness and solitude? The scraps of a banquet grow stale, the dregs of a bottle are bitter.

5 New understanding

I have lain in prison for nearly two years. Out of my nature has come wild despair, terrible rage, bitterness, scorn, anger, misery, sorrow. Our very dress makes us grotesque. We are clowns whose hearts are broken. Now I find, hidden away in my nature, like a treasure in a field, humility. It is the thing left in me, and the best. At the close of each meal I carefully eat whatever crumbs may be left so that nothing should be wasted of what is given to me. So one should look on love.

6 Suffering: The other half of life

For us there is only one season, the season of sorrow. The very sun and moon seem taken from us. There are times when sorrow seems to be the only truth. Out of sorrow have worlds been built, and at the birth of a child or star there is pain. Sins of the flesh are nothing. Sins of the soul alone are shameful. The thing that lies before me, the thing I have to do, is to absorb all that has been done to me, to make it part of me, to accept it without fear, to free myself from any bitterness against the world. The

supreme vice is shallowness. I know that for me, to whom flowers are a part of desire, there are tears waiting in the petals of some rose.

7 Resolution

Everywhere I turn, my name is written on the rocks in lead. The hard bed, the loathsome food, the harsh orders, the dreadful dress, the solitude, the shame - all these I must transform into a spiritualizing of the soul. There is no prison in any world into which love cannot force an entrance. The past, the present and the future are but one moment in the sight of God. Merely to look on the world will be always lovely. On the day of my release I shall give thanks to many people. The supreme vice is shallowness. I have become a deeper man. On the day of my leaving prison the laburnum and the lilac will be blooming in the gardens. I have a strange longing for the great, simple, primeval things, such as the sea. Nature will have clefts in the rock where I may hide, and secret valleys in whose silence I may weep undisturbed. She will hang the night with stars, she will cleanse me in great waters, and with bitter herbs make me whole. Do not be afraid of the past. The final mystery is oneself.

Gurdjieff: Violin Concerto No. 2

8 Dolce, rubato

9 Allegro

10 Allegretto

11 Andantino-allegro

12 Andante con moto

13 Allegretto-allegro

14 Larghetto

When the University of Tasmania approached me with a commission for a new concerted work for Jan Sedivka, a decade or so had gone by since the composition of my massive *Mysterium Cosmographicum*: Violin Concerto no. 1. Since then, various changes had occurred in my style and thinking, and this second concerto is clear witness to those changes. Instead of a Mahlerian orchestra and choir, we now have a chamber-like ensemble, featuring strings, percussion, flute, clarinet, trumpet, and horn. In place of a highly structured and organized melodic and harmonic scheme, we have in this new work fairly simple modal-like melodies and treatments; instead of a single great movement, seven short ones. The treatment of the violin itself is also direct and straightforward.

The title of the work needs some explanation. Both Jan Sedivka and myself have been interested in the

writings and teachings of Gurdjieff, that fascinating and enigmatic figure that emerged from Armenia early in the 20th century. What few people know is that Gurdjieff was interested in very ancient melodies from central Asia. I have drawn on the rich fund of ancient music as material for this concerto, but of course my treatments of these melodies have nothing to do with musical archaeology. The choice of seven movements, and the placement of the cadenza as the fourth movement have at least partially something to do with Gurdjieff's teachings concerning the Octave, the Law of Seven, and the Law of Three.

Larry Sitsky, 20 February 1983

“Take the understanding of the East and the knowledge of the West,” said Gurdjieff, “and then seek.”

In Sitsky's Gurdieff concerto, long paragraphs of Central Asian melody are joined by networks of dissonant counterpoint. Droning basses, exotic drums, and gongs evoke sacred ceremonies like those of the Sufi, in which dervishes move in mystic dance. A solo violin winds through the score: sometimes – as in the throbbing *Allegretto* – as a respondent to the melody; and sometimes as a third, neutralizing force.

George Ivanovitch Gurdjieff

(1877-1949), born of Armenian Greek parents, spent twenty years travelling in Tibet, India, and Arabian countries in search of esoteric truths. From his first group, formed in Russia in 1912, to his Institute for the Harmonious Development of Man at Avon, near Fontainebleau, established in 1922, he exercised a profound influence on his followers, who included such well-known figures as Frank Lloyd Wright and Katherine Mansfield. Larry Sitsky came to his teachings in the early 1960s at the Queensland Conservatorium of Music; the violinist Jan Sedivka, then principal violin teacher at the Conservatorium, was intensely involved with Gurdjieff groups. Consequently, when Sitsky came to write his second concerto for Sedivka, on commission from the University of Tasmania, their mutual interest in Gurdjieff came to figure prominently in the project.

“Humanity,” said Gurdjieff, “is the earth's nerve-endings, through which planetary vibrations are received for transmission.” Here Gurdjieff gave voice to an ancient concept, common to both Eastern and Western thought, of the relation between the motions of the planets, the activities of man, and the vibrations that produce musical tone. In Sitsky's concerto, the number of movements and placement of much of the material have a similarly symbolic

meaning. Seeking to understand Gurdjieff's meaning, Sitsky was drawn to the system of Peter Demianovitch Ouspensky, who saw the vibrations of the universe as illustrating a Law of Seven, which might be expressed as a seven-tone musical scale. Ouspensky, who studied mathematics at Moscow University, became the leading Gurdjieff disciple in 1915, and broke with him in 1924.

Breaking with musical habits, Sitsky places the Cadenza at the midpoint of the work. Punctuated only by conga drums, the soloist whirls through Phrygian passages, which finally dissolve into tonal ambiguity. It is as if a shock forces us on: as if orderly completion of the seven movements follows by chance. A stream of unfamiliar thoughts confronts the listener, now bemusing, now enervating, until at the end of the Larghetto, a fresh consciousness is won.

The melodies come from a four-volume collection assembled by Gurdjieff himself; the concerto manuscript is dated February 20, 1983, and dedicated to "my good friend Jan Sedivka." It calls for flute, clarinet, horn, trumpet, kettledrums, 3 gongs, 3 tom-toms, xylophone, 3 conga drums, bongo drums, 3 tam tams, vibraphone, side drum, glockenspiel, solo violin, and "a small body of strings."

12 Fantasia No. 2

Towards the end of 1980, I was working on two separate commissions for piano works: one was a test piece for the Sydney International Piano Competition, and the result of that commission was Arch: Fantasia No 4 (dedicated to Geoffrey Lancaster). Arch was a fairly simply structured neo-romantic piece, based on the tritonal pull between Eb and A, which two notes feature quite prominently in it.

When I completed Arch, it seemed to me that various ideas embodied in it had further possibilities. And so Fantasia No 2, in memory of Winifred Burston, came into being. It amused me to use the same basic materials as in Arch, but resulting in quite a different work.

Winifred Burston, foundation member of the NSW State Conservatorium of Music and noted Australian pianist, was my teacher for a number of years.

Fantasia No. 2, In Memory of Winifred Burston, was commissioned by the Australia Council.

Larry Sitsky

13 Petra

The printed score (1971) bears the imprint: "We had at last reached the mysterious city of Petra, a city deserted and lost to history for fourteen hundred years." The work was commissioned by the Victorian Music Teachers' Association, and an interesting feature of the piece is the fact that the sustaining pedal is kept down throughout, creating a sort of impressionistic effect in contemporary terms. The piece is dedicated to my daughter Petra.

Larry Sitsky



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De Profundis

Libretto: Oscar Wilde,
arr. by Gwen Harwood
Petra String Quartet
Canberra School of Music Quartet
Baritone: Lyall Bevan
Percussion: Graeme Leak
Producer: John Crocker
Recording Engineer: John Davies
Digitally recorded at the world
premiere performance in the Llewellyn
Hall, Canberra School of Music,
October 1982

Gurdjieff: Violin Concerto No. 2

Tasmanian Symphony Orchestra
Conducted by Omri Hadari
Violin: Jan Sedivka
Producer: Robert Smith
Recording Engineer: Wes Grubb
Mastering: Vic Holloway, Max
Absolom, Ian Phillips
Recorded in the ABC Hobart studio,
December 1984
The piano works were performed by
Larry Sitsky at the Canberra School of
Music.
Digital recording and post-production
(Dolby SR) by John Davies and Martin
Wright.
Cover painting: Vera Sell-Ryazanov
Photo: Canberra School of Music
This project was assisted by the
Australia Council, the Federal
Government's arts funding and
advisory body.
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LARRY SITSKY (b. 1934)

De Profundis

for double string quartet with
percussion player and solo baritone
voice 22'52"

Oscar Wilde, libretto
Petra String Quartet
Canberra School of Music Quartet
Lyall Bevan, baritone
Graeme Leak, percussion

- | | | |
|---|---|-------|
| 1 | The bitterness of
disgrace | 3'33" |
| 2 | The letter | 3'14" |
| 3 | Oscar reflects on his
former greatness | 2'09" |
| 4 | The rebuke (Melodrama) | 2'26" |
| 5 | New understanding | 2'23" |
| 6 | Suffering: The other
half of life | 2'38" |
| 7 | Resolution | 6'05" |

In the spirit of the mystic Gurdjieff,
sacred dervish melodies collide
with streams of Western thought ...

Gurdjieff: Violin Concerto No. 2 22'55"

Tasmanian Symphony Orchestra
Conducted by Omri Hadari
Jan Sedivka, violin

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|----|--------------------|-------|
| 8 | Dolce, rubato | 4'33" |
| 9 | Allegro | 1'34" |
| 10 | Allegretto | 4'17" |
| 11 | Andantino–allegro | 3'14" |
| 12 | Andante con moto | 3'58" |
| 13 | Allegretto–allegro | 1'41" |
| 14 | Larghetto | 3'15" |

15 ***Fantasia No. 2*** 9'38"

Piano: Larry Sitsky

16 ***Petra*** 4'48"

Piano: Larry Sitsky

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