

Fusion + Duoz present

The Danish String Quartet's

WOOD WORKS

For voices and strings

Programme

Plainscapes – Pēteris Vasks (Latvia b.1946)
(approximately 15 minutes)

-- short break – the bar is open! --

Wood Works – Traditional folk songs from Denmark, Norway and Sweden
Originally arranged by the Danish String Quartet
Rearranged for voices and strings by Bronwyn Mitchell and Jason Tong*
(approximately 45 minutes)

About the music

Plainscapes

Plainscapes, by Latvian composer Pēteris Vasks, is an extended meditation culminating in the miracle of the rebirth of nature as the sun rises and the birds sing in delight. The work is scored for 8-voice mixed choir, violin and cello and comprises three vocalises separated by little interludes. The plains are a dominant feature of the Latvian countryside, a place where one can see the horizon and look at the stars in the sky. There are many ways to think about this music and what Vasks was trying to achieve with this beautifully atmospheric composition — since the vocal parts contains no text, we like to think of the choir as creating the 'landscape', which the violin and cello then journey across. The dynamic of this diatonic, meditative composition is piano almost throughout; the mood changes, however, at the end of the third vocalise and a growing crescendo leads to the climax — to the vision of Nature awakening.

Wood Works

From the Danish String Quartet's notes on the recording:

We are in the tiny village of Sønderho on the island of Fanø. It is the westernmost Danish island, and the wind lashes the shore relentlessly. Today is the third Sunday of July – it's 'Sønderho Day', a local day of celebration, music and dance. From the village hall the sounds of fiddles can be heard, and people are dancing round and round for hours. The music is simple, yet with a touch of exotic melancholy.

In the forests of southern Sweden, we find Lasse. He is a travelling fiddler and he provides the music for festive occasions. Lasse is poor, so he will play you some music if you give him a meal. As he can't afford new strings for his violin, he tunes the ones he has down to make them last slightly longer. His claim to fame is a waltz he is always playing; a little melody that people enjoy dancing to. Sometimes Lasse plays it to himself while sitting alone in his wooden shed.

Up in Norway a young man has just returned from his Grand Tour of Europe. While passing through the Rhineland, he picked up a very popular dance that everyone danced in the elegant salons. He doesn't know the name of the dance, so he simply calls it a 'Reinlender'. Wanting to introduce it to his friends, he writes a couple of tunes to accompany the new dance.

Folk music is the music of all the small places. It is the local music, but as such it is also the music of everywhere and everyone. Like rivers, the melodies and dances have flowed slowly from region to region: Whenever a fiddler stumbled on a melody, he would play it and make it his own before passing it on. You don't own a folk tune; you simply borrow it for a while.

On this recording we have borrowed and arranged a selection of tunes that are all very close to our hearts. We perform them as a string quartet, one of the most powerful musical vehicles we know of. The string quartet is a pure construct: Four simple instruments made of wood. But in all its simplicity the string quartet is capable of expressing a myriad of colours, nuances and emotions – just like folk music. Our idea is to marry these two simple but powerful things; the folk music and the string quartet. Normally the string quartet has been reserved for the classical masters. Now we want to see what happens when we let the Nordic folk music flow through the wooden instruments of the string quartet.

Does it work? We hope so. And remember: We simply borrowed these tunes. They have already been returned.

– DSQ 2014

A note on the vocal arrangement:

"I first heard a performance of *Wood Works* in 2017 by a local Brisbane quartet that Jason Tong also plays with. From the start, I was absolutely captivated by the lyrical and sometimes wistful melodies and the Danish String Quartet's wonderful arrangements of them. One of the tunes I recognised as a Swedish folk song that I had learnt many years ago when I travelled to Europe with the Young Voices of Melbourne – at a festival in Hungary, we worked for a week with a Swedish conductor who taught us a beautiful setting of the song, and I still recalled most of the words more than 20 years later.

So I wondered whether the Danish String Quartet's arrangement of this song could work as a vocal arrangement, and from there I began thinking about the other tunes in *Wood Works* being reworked for voices as well. I approached the Danish String Quartet to see if they'd be happy for us to perform all of *Wood Works* as a special project for voices and strings, and I attached the score for a few of the pieces I'd arranged so far. Violinist Rune Sørensen replied within hours and said 'Wow! Amazing!', which was incredibly encouraging. And thus the choral version of *Wood*

Works was born. What I love about all of the pieces that collectively make up *Wood Works* is that you feel as though you're being taken on a journey around Nordic Europe and through a whole range of moods and styles in the space of about an hour.

The process of turning instrumental music into something that can be sung has been a fun but challenging adventure for Fusion. While a couple of the pieces do have words in Danish or Swedish, most of the *Wood Works* project has been an interesting exercise in finding the best way to make the music come alive as vocal music through singing syllables and experimenting with different vowels and consonants. There's a tradition in many cultures of singing without words, such as in the *yoik* of the Sámi people of northern Norway, Sweden and Finland, and also *puirt à beul*, Celtic 'mouth music' from Scotland, Ireland and Nova Scotia. It's also common for contemporary a cappella groups to arrange instrumental music for voices in a way that recreates harmonies and textures for voices alone.

Music bypasses our logical brains and speaks directly to our emotions in a similar way that this repertoire conveys its message without the need for words. The listener then has the freedom to create what is most meaningful to them, which I think is amazingly personal and special and what makes this music so worthwhile to perform and to hear. I hope you enjoy this premiere performance of the vocal setting of *Wood Works* and are also inspired to find the Danish String Quartet's brilliant original rendition."

— Bronwyn Mitchell, 2019

1. *Ye Honest Bridal Couple / Sønderho Bridal Trilogy – Part I*

We set out in the fog covering the Faroe Islands. A lonely violin — replaced here by a solo soprano — plays a traditional Faroese wedding song, *I aerlige brudefolk*. After a while we reach the Danish island of Fanø to immerse ourselves in Part I of the *Sønderho Bridal Trilogy*, a set of three *sønderhonings* that dates back some four hundred years. Fanø was traditionally a seafaring society, and the women had to accept the fact that their husbands would be away for several months at a time each year. This reality has played into the wedding rituals of the island where even today young marrying couples drink three shots of alcohol — one sweet, one sour and one bitter, representing the trials and tribulations of married life. These three elements are also reflected in the three movements of the *Sønderho Bridal Trilogy*.

2. *Sekstur from Vendsyssel / The Peat Dance*

This is a Danish version of the traditional Irish jig-reel set. A Danish *sekstur* is a lively dance that closely resembles the Irish jig. *The Peat Dance* is a Danish reel tune from

the Roskilde area. In this dance, the men would traditionally dance around pieces of peat on the dance floor. Later these peat pieces were replaced by women, who of course are much nicer to dance around.

3. Vigstamoin

Vigstamo was a small farm in the Gudbrand Valley in Norway, and *Vigstamoin* was the man who lived there. This tune is a *springleik*, a local version of what the Danes call a *polsk*.

4. Waltz after Lasse in Lyby

Lasse lived in Lyby in Sweden's Skåne region and he was a travelling fiddler playing for food. He was known for often playing this simple little waltz.

5. Ribers #8

Ribers #8 is a *polka*: a dance that originated in central Europe and, somewhat confusingly, has nothing to do with the *polsk* or *polska*. This tune is also fairly well known in the British Isles and can be found in many folk collections, the earliest published in Edinburgh in 1757.

6. Sønderho Bridal Trilogy – Part II

Notice the exotic colour of this *sønderhoning*. Some people believe that the people on Fanø learned their melodic twists from visiting sailors.

7. Five Sheep, Four Goats

Violinist Rune Tonsgaard Sørensen stumbled on this little Danish tune with its strange name and liked it so much that he came up with an arrangement for three string quartets. Our arrangement is for ten singers (including one vocal quartet) and half a string quartet. No one seems to quite know how this tune got its name, but it is unpretentious and honest, just like the melody, and lots of fun to sing!

8. O Fredrik, O Fredrik*

Cellist Fredrik Sjölin is the only Norwegian member of the Danish String Quartet. His childhood friend Johannes Rusten wrote this catchy tune and dedicated it to him.

9. Ack Värmeland, du sköna

An old Swedish folk song. The title was given in the 19th century and celebrates the beauty of the Värmland region.

10. Easter Sunday / Polsk after Rasmus Storm

The quartet have paired a *polsk* from 1989 by Danish fiddler Poul Bjerager with an old *polsk* they found in a handwritten collection of tunes from the 1760s by Danish sailor and fiddler Rasmus Storm.

11. Jässpodspolska

Here is a nice little *polska* (Swedish for *polsk*) from the region of Dalarna in Sweden.

12. Old Reinlender from Sørndala

The title indicates that this dance came to Norway from the Rhineland. In Denmark, this type of tune is called a *schottis*. Did it come up north via Scotland or Germany? Not so important, perhaps. The funky possibilities of the tune inspired this arrangement, and the cello gets to do lots of 'chops' in this one.

13. Sønderho Bridal Trilogy – Part III

This is dance music but inspired by the unique tonal colours of the music. Nikolaj Busk, a good friend of the DSQ, made a very contemplative arrangement of this final part of the Sønderho Bridal Trilogy. After all the excitement of reels, polskas, sheep and goats, we are back at the island of Fanø, disappearing into the Atlantic fog.

14. Bosse Nordin's Schottis

This lively and joyful final movement of *Wood Works* was not part of the original studio recording, but the quartet included it when they published the score. Although this one is another *schottis*, it's not technically a folk song, as it was written by Swedish composer Bosse Nordin.

Performers

David Allen, Madonna Forster, Brett Gordon, Nicki Jenkins, Alisen McLeod, Bronwyn Mitchell, Debra Shearer-Dirié, Tim Smetham, Rebecca Thomas, David Webster

Jason Tong, violin

Kirsten Tong, cello

Fusion Vocal Ensemble

Fusion Vocal Ensemble is a chamber choir based in Brisbane, singing music that is harmonically diverse, textually evocative and spiritually uplifting. Under the direction of Dr Debra Shearer-Dirié, the group brings together some of the city's most experienced ensemble singers to perform music that challenges and nourishes both their singers and their audience. The interests and backgrounds of the group's members range widely, though many are active as professional musicians, teachers, conductors, and advocates for music education.

Fusion's repertoire consists primarily of choral art music, mostly unaccompanied, with a focus on contemporary works by composers from around the world. They also perform some Renaissance and Baroque repertoire, but in all programming, they actively look for interesting music that is not often performed in this part of the world. The choir enjoys fostering relationships with other organisations and collaborating on creative or unusual projects. They have performed at the Brisbane Contemporary Church Music Festival, state and national conferences for the Australian National Choral Association, and in 2014 travelled to South Korea for the 10th World Symposium on Choral Music.

Sign up for our newsletter at <http://fusionvocalensemble.org>

Duoz

Duoz is Jason and Kirsten Tong, violin and cello, husband and wife. Established in 2018, Duoz explores the musical world for violin and cello, sharing this with audiences through concerts and collaborations. In 2019, Duoz is performing multiple concerts, undertaking international workshops, and will complete a recording project.

To keep up with Duoz, like them on Facebook: www.facebook.com/duozensemble

Debra Shearer-Dirié

Originally from Perth, Debra maintains an active career as a choral conductor, music educator, clinician and scholar. She holds a Master of Music Education degree and Doctor of Music degree in Choral Conducting from Indiana University. In her work as Musical Director of Fusion, Brisbane Concert Choir and Vintage Voices, she continually searches for opportunities to collaborate with other musical groups, composers, dancers, visual artists, multi-media experts, and cultural groups to challenge both herself as a musician and educator, and those who work with her. Debra is currently serving as editor of *Sing Out!*, the journal of the Australian National Choral Association, and also serves on the National Council. She is in demand as an adjudicator for choral festivals and eisteddfods within the Asia-Pacific region, as well as a clinician and conductor for choral festivals across the nation.

Bronwyn Mitchell

Bronwyn is originally from Melbourne and has sung with more than a dozen choirs over the past 30 years, including the Choir of Christ Church Cathedral in Vancouver, Canada, and seven seasons with the National Youth Choir of Australia. She joined Fusion in late 2009 shortly after moving to Brisbane. Bronwyn currently works as an editor at the Queensland Art Gallery | Gallery of Modern Art (QAGOMA) and loves being immersed in music, art and words, preferably all at once.

Thank you!

To Laura Haaima (Brisbane) and Emma Fagerström (Stockholm), for their assistance with Danish and Swedish pronunciation

To Somerville House, for providing our rehearsal venue this season

To the kind staff at Lightspace, for their assistance in planning this evening's event

And, of course, to the Danish String Quartet, for their stunning arrangements of these lovely tunes, and for giving us permission to reimagine them for voices.