

FANTASTIQUE!

7.30PM, Thursday 16 October
Auckland Town Hall

Programme Notes

Louise Webster (b.1954)

Proof Against Burning (2008)

- I. *Cauldron and stone*
- II. *Floating on water*
- III. *Spectral evidence*
- IV. *Ordeal of the Cross*

DURATION: c.11'

Louise Webster lives out a double career in medicine and music, working as a composer and as a child psychiatrist and paediatrician at Auckland's Starship Children's Hospital.

During her music study at the University of Auckland, Louise gained many musical distinctions and prestigious composition prizes.

Much of the music she has written has been publicly performed in New Zealand and Australia. Her inspiration invariably has roots in her own experiences and convictions, for example *Cries of Kathmandu* (2015), which grew out of her time as a volunteer in Sir Edmund Hillary's Himalayan Trust hospitals in the foothills of Nepal.

This evening's work *Proof Against Burning* is in many ways an indictment of the historical treatment of prisoners, especially of women, during the many days of witchcraft trials (1450-1700). Very contemporary in sound yet immediately intriguing in effect, *Proof Against Burning* weaves colourful and thoughtful suggestions of four of the amazingly bizarre trials that were brought to establish (or disprove!) witchery.

Franz Liszt (1811-1886)

Totentanz (1849; revised 1864)

DURATION: c.16'

In 1838 Liszt embarked upon an extended visit to Italy, where he and his mistress Marie d'Agoult launched themselves into an in-depth study of Italian art. One of the paintings that made a permanent impression was *The Triumph of Death*, a 14th-century fresco by Andrea Orcagna, who depicted the torments of the damned along with the rapture of the saved.

A decade later, Liszt decided to turn his impression into music, using the chant *Dies Irae* (Day of Wrath) from the *Mass for the Dead*. He made the chant into a theme, on which he built six variations, the whole work becoming a *Totentanz* (Dance of Death) between two partners, one diabolic and the other angelic.

These polarities are easy to spot in the music, especially in the opening section. Stabbing piano chords accompany the *Dies Irae* theme in the brass, followed by 'diabolic' piano runs, before the sun breaks through (but only temporarily). The following variations present a struggle between the emotions of menacing fear against episodes of consolation and peace.

INTERVAL

Conductor Pierre Bleuse

Piano Sylvia Jiang

Hector Berlioz (1803-1869)

Symphonie fantastique (1830)

- I. *Reveries, Passions*
- II. *A Ball*
- III. *Scene in the Country*
- IV. *March to the Scaffold*
- V. *Dream of a Witches' Sabbath*

DURATION: c.54'

Only three years elapsed between Beethoven's death in 1827, and Berlioz' *Symphonie fantastique*, yet the music of the two composers seems worlds apart. Beethoven's 'classical' aspect kept his Romanticism in check through epic symphonies of logic and pattern, while Berlioz' 'romantic' intensity exploded into a symphony of unrestrained personal passion where dreams, nightmare and hallucination propel the action.

Yet Beethoven's influence is not hard to find in the music of this eccentric French firebrand, especially in *Symphonie fantastique*, which pumps up the four-movement form to five, adds its own colourful 'programme' to each movement, and even includes a 'storm', just like Beethoven's Pastoral symphony – one of Berlioz's all-time favourite works.

Another inspiring element for this symphony happened in 1827, when Berlioz witnessed a performance of *Hamlet* and was captivated by the actress Harriet Smithson, with whom he fell immediately and desperately in love. *Symphonie fantastique* became the musical document of Berlioz' infatuation. It was an attempt to compose a symphony where Beethoven-like music played itself out against Shakespeare-like scenes.

Harriet appears in the symphony's main theme (*idée fixe*) which is heard after about five minutes on the violins, and keeps returning throughout the work. 'Reveries, Passions' form the title to the first movement, while the second movement's ballroom scene has the artist catching a time-freezing glimpse of his beloved before everything vanishes.

The countryside setting of the third movement has an unsettled close that ushers in the linked nightmare of the fourth and fifth movements. In the fourth, the artist dreams of his execution, and the following 'Witches' Sabbath' finale is a ghoulish death-dance on his tomb, with the *idée fixe* mixing with sacrilegious quotations from the requiem chant *Dies Irae*.

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