

**About the Music notes – Australian String Quartet
Elysian Fields concert, May 2008**

It's a hundred years old, but I still find it very useful. Not quite a hundred years ago, when I was in the grip of adolescent passion for Debussy's music, I came across it in a second-hand bookshop. One of the Living Masters of Music series, it is simply titled *Claude-Achille Debussy*. Its author, Mrs Franz Liebich (Louise to her friends, but not her readers), was an active critic at the turn of the last century, and part of her mission in life was to bring to the notice of English audiences the best of contemporary European music. Her monograph on Debussy is a wonderful mixture of technical discussion – in lay-person's language – and flights of poetic fancy. Thus, at the end of her perfectly accurate account of how Debussy's string quartet is put together, she notes that while it is in many respects a classical piece, it nonetheless 'conveys a feeling of enchantment such as is suggested by Keats' distant haunted meres and faery seas forlorn.'

Debussy probably didn't mind such a description, especially the confluence of magic and the sea. After all, it suffuses the 'Sirènes' movement from *Nocturnes* where the sirens' call threatens death to unwary sailors, or the piano prelude *La cathédrale engloutie* with its vision of a drowned Breton city, bells and pipe organs sounding beneath the Atlantic waves. He would no doubt have understood, though probably with wry amusement, Arnold Bax's epiphany on the Irish coast when 'the Celt in me stood revealed' – Debussy's opera *Pelléas et Mélisande* takes place in a Celtic dream-world of castles and coastlines. And of course Bax and Debussy had a couple of things in common, most notably the fact that they independently wrote works for flute, viola and harp and around the same time; while those works are quite different, they share a wonderful deftness in making music from that so evanescent a combination.

The Top End coastline around Darwin is a world away from the shingles and bluffs and grey-green sea of the north Atlantic, but it is that amazing tranquil turquoise stretch of water that inspired the central movement of Ross Edwards' *Arafura Dances*, that and the image of Red Bud Mallee in flower against a blue sky. Edwards' palette is, not surprisingly, quite different from Debussy's or Bax's substituting bold planes of colour for the subtler shadings favoured by the other two. And let's not forget the outer movements, where two of Edwards' other great loves – the polyphony of Australian insect life and the joyous rhythms of ritual dance are brought together.

In much of Edwards' music, joy and tranquillity are revealed as two sides of the same coin. The same could be said for Beethoven's 'Harp' quartet. Despite difficult political and personal times, Beethoven produces something quite new in this piece. Strangely enough,

it's in E flat, a key in which Beethoven is at his most serious and often Promethean, but the classical serenity of the 'Harp' quartet is miles away from the high style of, say, the Emperor Concerto. It is profoundly beautiful and has a status comparable to the fourth symphony in Beethoven's work: it seems to withdraw from the formal innovation of the Razumovsky quartets and to return to a classical sense of form and a lyrical surface and demonstrates a kind of utopian or Arcadian aspect of Beethoven's work. In that regard it is a perfect stable-mate for the three other works on the program, dealing as it does in serenity, and often in understatement.

But Beethoven, like Debussy, was operating undercover: within the seemingly clear limits of classical form both composers were experimenting in ways that would change their music, and everyone else's for a long time to come. The 'Harp' quartet makes possible some of the transcendental beauties of the Beethoven's late quartets; Debussy's ability to spin a whole quartet out of one constantly evolving, but always recognisable theme, laid the foundation for those deceptively ephemeral later works.

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