

OPERA

presents

VENJAMIN FLEISCHMANN (1913–1941)

Rothschild's Violin

Completed by **DMITRI SHOSTAKOVICH**

after a short story by Anton Chekhov

Rescored for Chamber Orchestra by Gerhard Jünemann

English Translation by Thomas Elias

AUSTRALIAN PREMIERE

Jacob Matveievich Ivanov

Rothschild

Moses

Martha

Jerzy Kozlowski

Nick Jones

Christopher Busietta

Siobhan Stagg

IOpera Chamber Orchestra

Conductor

Producer

Peter Tregear

Stephen Moschner



Port Fairy Spring Music Festival
Reardon Theatre, Friday 10 October 2008

This performance is presented in memory of the Festival's co-founder, Michael Easton (1955–2004)

Rothschild's Violin is an adaptation and setting of the poignant short story of the same name by Anton Chekhov. Venjamin Fleischmann (1913–1941) was a Russian Jew who had joined Shostakovich's composition class in Leningrad in 1937. Shostakovich had at this time been severely criticized by the cultural commissars for his opera *Lady Macbeth of Mtensk* and had sought refuge in teaching. The suggestion of 'Rothschild's Violin' as a suitable topic for an opera was Shostakovich's, and no doubt the tale's concern with anti-Semitic prejudice, and man's casual inhumanity to man more generally, must have struck both as particularly poignant.

Fleischman left his studies in 1941 to be an early volunteer for the civilian brigades which rushed to the defence of Leningrad after the German invasion, but was also to be one of the battle's many casualties. The score of his opera remained uncompleted on his death, but as an act of homage, Shostakovich hunted down the manuscript and completed it some three years later. He was subsequently unable to promote the work, however, owing to anti-Semitic prejudice by the Soviet cultural authorities, but his encounter with Fleischmann helped inspire a fascination with Jewish music that was to stay with him for the rest of his life.

Chekhov's tale, first published in 1894 is layered with irony. The chief protagonist, we discover, is not Rothschild, but in fact one Yakov [Jacob] Ivanov. Here Rothschild is not the famed banker, but in fact a downtrodden and impoverished Jew, and, as we first meet him, is not a violinist but a flautist! And it is not Rothschild, but in fact the gentile Jacob who fulfils the anti-Semitic cliché of the parsimonious outsider. The revulsion Jacob feels towards Rothschild is, we later discover, actually a clumsy defence against his secret identification with social outcasts. Above all, we discover Jacob's 'fortune is misfortune', he is a coffin-maker, and he grumbles incessantly when business is poor, that is, when the death rate is low!

Fleischmann's score, like Chekhov's tale, is infused not only with a fascination with the grotesque, but also a deep sense of identification with the comic-tragic nature of the human condition. When Jacob bequeaths his most treasured possession, his violin, to an unsuspecting Rothschild, the music that follows is a stunning orchestral apotheosis, at once both tragic and redemptive.

Synopsis

There is a wedding in a merchant's house. A band of local musicians are playing in the street, but a quarrel breaks out between them. The old coffin-maker, Jacob, accuses Rothschild, a young flautist, of spoiling the music. But the others turn against him and eventually, in disgust, Jacob packs his violin and goes home.

Alone, Jacob laments his poverty and the lack of respect that others in the village show him. He is interrupted when his wife Marfa returns from the river with a bucket of water and collapses from exhaustion. Meanwhile, the remaining musicians go into the merchant's house while Rothschild stays in the street outside, playing his flute. Marta, now lying in bed, reminds Jacob of their little fair-haired daughter who died fifty years ago while still a child, but he denies all knowledge. He realises he will have to make a coffin for his wife this very day.

The musicians reappear and strike up a lively dance, but they miss Jacob's playing. They send Rothschild to persuade Jacob to come and rejoin them, but Jacob instead throws Rothschild out (According to the composer the musical interlude which follows depicts the moment where the terrified Rothschild runs into the street and children chase after him shouting: 'Jew! Jew!').

In the long monologue that follows, Jacob grieves for the waste of his life, for the destruction of the former woodlands around the town, and for his own mistreatment of his wife and of Rothschild. Staring at his violin, he hopes that after his death it will 'sing new songs of happiness', for he knows he cannot take it with him to his grave. At that moment, Rothschild reluctantly returns to implore Jacob once again to come and rejoin the musicians. Instead the old man, now realising that he too has not long to live, gives Rothschild his violin and the young man begins to play...

IOPERA CHAMBER ORCHESTRA

Violin William Grigg
Jess Ipkendanz

Viola Christa Jardine

Cello Judith Hamann

Bass Chloe Smith

Flute Agatha Yim

Clarinet Toby Goss

Bassoon Chloe Turner

Trumpet Rob Mattessi

Trombone Chris Farrands

Piano Stephen McIntyre

CAST BIOGRAPHIES

Christopher Busietta (Moses)

Christopher graduated with a BMus from the Melba Conservatorium of Music in 2006. He made his professional singing debut in 2004 singing the tenor arias in J.S. Bach's St John's Passion with the Scots Church choir and orchestra to critical acclaim and performs regularly as a tenor soloist in concert and in oratorio.

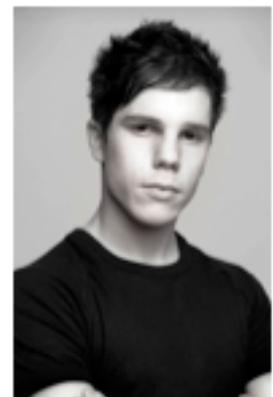
He made his operatic debut in the role of Pedrillo for Lyric Opera of Melbourne's 2006 production of Mozart's *The Abduction from the Seraglio*. Other professional operatic and theatrical roles include Thomas in the workshop of developing Australian musical, Nostradamus, and Don Ramiro in *La Cenerentola* (Rossini). In 2007 he toured Count Almaviva in *The Barber of Seville* (Rossini) with OzOpera Schools company and again in 2008 as the Prince and Wicked Stepmother in *La Cenerentola*. Chris sang the role of Erwin in *Erwin und Elmire* for IOpera and also been a member of the chorus for several productions with Opera Australia and Victorian Opera.



Christopher was the winner of the Waverley Aria in 2004. In 2005, the Australian Youth Aria, Dandenong Festival's gold medal and vocal champion in the Royal South Street Society Competitions. He was third in the German Australian Operatic Grant 2007 and has been a Liederfest finalist, RMP Aria finalist, a runner-up in the Singer of the Year Competition and a semi-finalist in the Herald-Sun aria.

Nick Jones (Rothschild)

Nick is in the second year of a Bachelor of Music Performance degree at the Victorian College of the Arts. In his first year of study Nick performed in Opera Australia's production of *Pirates of Penzance*, and was awarded the highest mark in his year for vocal performance. Awarded a scholarship by Australian Music Events in both 2007 and 2008, Nick has performed solo with chorus and orchestra at the Opera in the Market and Opera by the Lock events. Early this year, in IOpera's premiere production of Anna Amalia's opera *Erwin und Elmire*, Nick took the role of Bernardo.



Recent performances also include the tenor solo in J. S. Bach's Easter Oratorio (St John's, Southbank), and Schubert's Mass In G for the 30th Anniversary Concert for VCA's Senior School at the Melbourne Town Hall. In June, he also sang the role of *Tamino* in a gala performance of Mozart's *The Magic Flute* with conductor Marco van Pagee and the VCA Symphony Orchestra. In September of this year, Nick was awarded the Athenaeum Prize.

Jerzy Kozlowski (Jacob)

Jerzy worked regularly with the Victoria State Opera, and has performed with Opera Australia in every Melbourne season since 1996. He has also worked with OzOpera, Melbourne Opera Company, Operalive, Melbourne City Opera, and Victorian Opera in roles such as Sparafucile in *Rigoletto*, the title role in Nyman's *The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat*, Grandpa Moss in Copland's *The Tender Land* and Dr Bartolo in *Barber of Seville*.

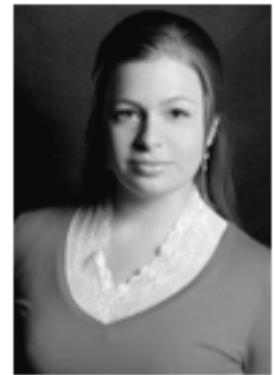


Jerzy has sung solo with all major Melbourne choral groups in repertoire ranging from Handel's *Messiah* to Verdi's *Requiem* and solo recitals include performances of Shostakovich's *Suite on Verses by Michelangelo*. He has performed in many premieres of works by Australian composers such as Richard Mills, Johanna Selleck, Helen Gifford and Michael Bertram and performs regularly with the ensemble, *Jouissance*, and the medieval group, *Acord*. Recent engagements include performances at the Canberra International Chamber Music Festival with *Jouissance*, the role of Rocco in Beethoven's *Fidelio* with Melbourne City Opera, Valton in Bellini's *I Puritani* (Melbourne Opera Company) and later in the year he will perform Shostakovich's final song cycle, *Four Verses of Captain Lebyadkin*, for the Astra Chamber Music Society.

Siobhan Stagg (Martha)

Currently in her third year of a combined Arts/Music degree, Siobhan is the recipient of the University of Melbourne's Dame Nellie Melba Prize (2007) and the Lady Turner Exhibition Prize (2006).

Earlier this year Siobhan featured as soprano soloist with The Bach Choir (of London) in the Melbourne concert of their Australian tour. In 2007, Siobhan was named as the joint "Scholar of the Year" for Australian Music Events and subsequently performed solo at Opera in the Alps, Opera by the Lock and Opera at the Market.



Siobhan also sings with the Choir of Trinity College and has been on two international tours with them, including New Zealand and the United States of America in July 2008. She is featured on the choir's most recent album, 'Mystical Songs'- a collection of works by Ralph Vaughan Williams, released by ABC Classics.

Peter Tregear (Conductor)

Currently living and working in Melbourne, Peter is a former lecturer and Director of Music at Fitzwilliam College, Cambridge and has worked extensively as a singer, conductor, and academic, in opera and music theatre in Australia and Europe.

He has particular research interests in Australian & European music between the two world wars. In 2001 he conducted the UK stage premiere of Max Brand's *Maschinist Hopkins* at the Queen Elizabeth Hall, London to international acclaim, and in 2005 he conducted the first performance in English of *Rothschild's Violin*.



Recent engagements include engagements with the Consort of Melbourne, Tallis Scholars, Victoria Opera, and Melbourne Opera, the world stage revival of the original score of *Erwin und Elmire* for IOpera, and a series of performances in the Palestinian Occupied Territories as a soloist with the Choir of London.

OPERA

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