Verdun and the WWI sketch book of Franz Marc

Australia
Tuesday 17th May 2016 at 8 pm
James O Fairfax Theatre
National Gallery of Australia
Performed by Louise Page soprano, Tamara-Anna Cisowska piano and the Sculthorpe Quartet:
  Véronique Serret and Christopher Latham violins, Tor Fromyhr viola and David Pereira cello

France
Sunday, May 6th, 2018, at 11am
Conservatoire de Lille, France (* live recording)
Performed by Simone Riksman soprano, Vincent Delage piano, Ken Sugita and Christopher Latham violins, Paul Mayes viola, Catherine Delanoue cello

Arrangements, Images and Artistic Direction
Christopher Latham

About the Program

The Battle of Verdun lasted for 303 days. It was one of the longest and most costly battles in human history with over 700,000 men killed, an average of 70,000 French and German casualties a month.

Franz Marc, the great German painter, was killed there on 4th March 1916. An enthusiastic volunteer at the beginning of the war, he served in the artillery. His letters to his wife Maria quickly revealed his disillusionment. His final works were contained in his war sketchbook, which changed from depictions of strife and conflict to images of new life and rebirth.

The projected images transform these sketches into paintings by Marc and his Blue Rider colleagues and friends, Kandinsky, Delaunay and Klee.

This program is an attempt to complete his pencil studies as a demonstration of the cultural cost of war. It was made possible in Australia with the support of the National Gallery of Australia, the Franco-German Cultural Fund, and in France with the support of the Australia Council and Chambre à Part, Lille (Paul Mayes director, Norman Smith treasurer).

The Flowers of War acknowledges the support of Dr Gerard Vaughan AM, Director, National Gallery of Australia, and the Embassies of France and the Federal Republic of Germany.
1. Louis Vierne (1870-1937)
   from Poèmes des cloches funèbres
   Op. 39 No. 2
   Le glas (The knell)
   Written in 1916 in memory of
   Alphonse Franc.

2. André Caplet (1878-1925)
   Solitude arr. for soprano, piano and
   cello*
   Caplet served at Verdun, writing
   this haunting wartime work there in
   his impeccable manuscript.
   It was never published.

3. Paul Ladmirault (1877-1944)
   La Petite bague de la tranchée arr.
   for soprano, piano, violin and cello*
   Ladmirault wrote this song in 1916
   at Verdun about the rings soldiers
   made for their beloveds out of
   shells.

4. Botho Sigwart (1884-1915)
   Christmas Sonata 2nd movement
   Son of the German Ambassador
   to Vienna, this important German
   composer and nobleman served in
   France with distinction before being
   killed on the Eastern Front in 1915.

5. Henry Février (1875-1957)
   from Chansons de la Woëvre:
   Octobre arr. for soprano, piano and
   strings*
   Février wrote his Chansons de
   la Woëvre while serving in 1915.
   Woëvre was one of the worst of
   Verdun’s battlefields.

6,7. Rudi Stephan (1887-1915)
   from Ich Will dir Singen: Kythere
   arr. for soprano, piano and strings*
   from Ich Will dir Singen:
   In Nachbars Garten arr. for soprano,
   piano and strings*
   Germany’s finest young composer
   was also killed on the Eastern Front
   in 1915.

8. Pierre Vellones (1889-1939)
   Lettre du Front arr. for soprano,
   piano and strings*
   Pierre Vellones was the nom
   de plume of the French doctor,
   Pierre Rousseau, who served in
   the medical services. The poem
   and the song were both written
   at Verdun and describe life in the
   trenches in 1916.

   from Feuillet de guerre
   Il est un air... arr. for soprano, piano
   and cello*
   Written in 1916 in the trenches
   at Vaux and Douaumont, the two
   most important Forts at Verdun.

10. Maurice Ravel (1875-1937)
    Trois Oiseaux de Paradis arr. for
    soprano, piano and strings*
    Written in 1916, while Ravel drove
    his truck ‘Adelaide’ to and from
    Verdun on the Sacred Way.

11. Albert Roussel (1869-1937)
    Light arr. for soprano, piano and
    strings*
    Roussel transported ammunition
    during Verdun. This song was the
    first thing he wrote after the war.

12. Erwin Schulhoff (1894-1942)
    from Menschheit Op 28
    Einblick arr. for soprano, piano and
    strings*
    A leading young composer and
    pianist of German-Jewish parents,
    Schulhoff served in the Austro-
    Hungarian army, was wounded in
    the hand and taken prisoner. He
    wrote this work at the end of the
    war.

    from Tod und Verklärung
    Transfiguration arr. for soprano,
    piano and strings*
    The most important German
    composer of the period, told his
    wife Alice, while on his death
    bed, that his early work ‘Death
    and Transfiguration’ had been a
    perfectly accurate depiction of the
    process of dying.

*Premieres of these arrangements
by Christopher Latham
The man who painted blue horses

The life and death of Franz Marc, who died at Verdun in 1916

I shall look as if I were dead; and that will not be true ...
You understand ... it is too far. I cannot carry this body with me.
It is too heavy...
It will be like an old abandoned shell.
There is nothing sad about old shells.

There was a flash of yellow close to his ankle. He remained motionless for an instant. He did not cry out. He fell as gently as a tree falls. There was not even any sound, because of the sand.

from The Little Prince

Antoine Saint-Exupéry was a great French pilot and writer, who crashed in the Sahara desert in 1935, while attempting to set the Paris to Saigon speed record. He suffered chronic dehydration and experienced auditory and visual hallucinations before being saved by a passing Bedouin. This experience is represented in his novella The Little Prince, which echoes the death of his brother François, who had died when they were children together at boarding school.

After the crash Saint-Exupéry returned to commercial flying and often spent the time aloft reading and writing, reflecting on the world beneath him. In WW2 he flew against the Nazis, with the French, the Free French and finally the American, Air Forces. On his last reconnaissance mission in 1944, he took off in an unarmed P-38 from Corsica and was shot down within sight of the French coast. Ultimately his final voyage home back into the heart of France’s soul was too far for his body, which was left behind like an old abandoned shell. He is the most famous soldier / artist whose creations foretold his own end, like prophecy.

Franz Marc is another. Franz Marc is Germany’s favourite painter. He bursts forth from that fantastic explosion around 1900 when painters dissected light into an orgasm of hyper-stylised colours and hues. For a decade it was constantly spring bursting into summer, with one wave after another: Impressionism, Fauvism, Vorticism, Futurism and in Germany, the Blue Rider School.

Franz Marc and Vassily Kandinsky, who wrote together the Blue Rider manifesto, aimed to create a more “spiritualised” art to depict the inner nature of things. Marc’s paintings are love poems to primary colours, nature and geometry. Blue, for the masculine, the spiritual. Yellow for the feminine and for joy. Red, for the forces of the earth, held in balance by the yellow and the blue.

Many of the Blue Rider artists lived and painted in a Bavarian paradise of lakes and mountains, just south of Munich. Marc and his wife, Maria, kept animals, which he depicted. Marc was blessed with a genius level of empathy, and more than any other artist succeeded in capturing their inner sense - their innate state of grace.

Marc’s three colours of Blue, Red and Yellow are repeated through three archetypal animal forms, the horse, the cow and the deer.

The Yellow Cow is Marc’s homage to womanhood. A crescent moon arc of power, leaping forward, pushing the trees on both sides out of her way, her feet striking fire. Her teats in full flight as she flings opens her legs, arching her back, welcoming the phallic shape beneath her. She is an uninhibited outburst of joyous expression that springs through the canvas for all time – unstoppable, womanly, exuberantly alive.

Franz and Maria kept deer, which he often painted, one of whom, Schlick, died while he was away in the war. On hearing the news, Franz wrote to his wife, “so poor little Schlick has finished its little deer dream ... when I think of the short little life of such a small animal, I cannot get rid of the thought that it was just a little dream. This time a deer dream, some other time a human dream, but to the one who dreams, its essence is immanent and indestructible.”

Marc’s most disturbing deer painting is his ‘The Fate of Animals’. His close friend, Paul Klee suggested the title ‘The trees show their rings, the animals their veins’. On the back of the painting, Marc wrote “and all being is flaming.
suffering”. Painted in 1914, before the war started, it is one of his largest and most arresting canvasses.

Sent a postcard of it in 1915 while serving as a soldier, Marc wrote “it is like a presentiment of the war, terrible and gripping; I can hardly realize that I painted it myself ... it made my flesh creep.” Later in 1916, it was damaged by fire, the right hand side being restored by Klee in sepia, rather than in Marc’s original yellows and pinks.

The painting is a juxtaposition of violent diagonals, falling trees and tortured horses. From the right, comes the apocalypse. The deer awaits its approach, offering himself as sacrifice, raising his head and exposing his throat, while to the right, four female deer, once yellow, now brown, witness his death, unable to save him.

Marc’s closest friends considered him psychic and nowhere is this clearer than in this vision of the close future, depicting not only the landscape of war, but the nature of his death, so painfully revealed to his wife through his letters.

Throughout the war he carried a sketchbook, noting images of rebirth, titles like Creation, The Birth of the Cicadas, Easter, and finally the Magic Moment. Here the mystic mountain for which the deer have been searching is finally revealed. The transformative moment has arrived. It is death itself, and through it life will begin again in new forms. His subconscious mind tells his conscious mind through his sketching: all will be reborn again.

In parallel, Marc’s wartime letters to Maria reveal the growing acceptance of death, seeing it as a welcome release. He wrote: ‘whoever strives for purity and knowledge, to him, death always comes as a saviour...there is only one blessing and redemption: death...

Curiously the longer he served, the more calm he became. “My body is unusually elastic and free of pain. I am not even nervous. There is not a trace of disturbance. ... My nerves are amazingly untouchable.’

Marc is now remembered as the painter of Blue Horses. Magnificent, powerful, they bow to us in an unmistakable gesture of gentleness. They are his archetype of male tenderness. They appear wild but seem to say, come closer, touch us, run your hands over the velvet of our flanks and we will nuzzle you in return. They create a loving embrace between the viewer and image.

This painting is a series of interlocking heart shapes, on the macro and micro scale. From the large mass, to the mingling of the individual forms, down to the scale of the bulbous shadings, the rhythm of the meeting of the heart’s two curves sings like a melody throughout the whole construction.

Simply put, an artist obsesses on an idea and makes a form of it, which we experience as an object in the world. It could be music, a book, a sculpture. We then immerse ourselves in it, project our feelings upon it, while still being
affected by the original idea: a dance between the dreamer and the witness to the manifestation of the dream.

The work is therefore both of the world and beyond it – something real in the world from the realm of ideas: a thing that can be bought or sold but also an idea – the idea of a blue horse. Something that doesn’t exist in the world, yet does.

Marc’s Blue Horses everywhere adorn mugs, t-shirts, art books and aprons, in numbers beyond estimation. The inherent peacefulness in Marc’s idea projects calm and pleasure on all who see it. People really love their Franz Marc posters. It is not a small thing for them. Something inside them becomes like a Blue Horse, resonating with the image, creating a circuit, and all that energy circulates through this idea and its form, growing in scale, each year more powerful, more valuable.

This paradigm balances an opposite, an idea and a thing, and contains paradox throughout. In Marc’s case, the peaceful man wishes to go to war, which he thinks will cleanse Europe, but which instead almost destroys it. He serves in the artillery, finds peace making images of rebirth; and is killed by an enemy shell while on horseback, the form of his most famous and peaceful idea. It is perfectly severe in its symmetry.

On the 4th of March, 1916, Marc wrote to his wife from Verdun: “amidst these awful scenes of destruction in which I am now living, the thought of returning home has a halo which cannot be described with sufficiently lovely words... Don’t worry, I will come through, and I’m also fine as far as my health goes. I feel well and watch myself. Many, many thanks for the dear birthday letter. Kisses Franz”

Alas at 4pm, that very afternoon, while patrolling on horseback, he was killed by shrapnel. The German Army, having realised his importance, had requested his withdrawal but the orders arrived too late. He left behind 244 jewel-like paintings, thus joining his friend Auguste Macke and Wilhelm Morgner, as the Great War losses of the German Art World. Their losses would largely close the door to the world of colour in German art.

The generation that survived, George Grosz, Max Beckman, Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, and Otto Dix, in order to expunge their traumatic experiences made some of the most terrifying images in history. Otto Dix’s 1924 black and white series of prints, Das Krieg containing the darkest images of all. Only Paul Klee, who had avoided the trenches, who had been instead ordered to paint Kandinsky-like camouflage on tents, remained unscathed.

Yet as we look at Marc’s images now, we see that, he, the sacrificial deer, is more alive than he could ever could have dreamt of being.

He has attained majesty.