

Jessica Wells (1974 –) Dancing in St Petersburg

I Polovtsian Dances

II The Bolt – The Factory; The Bar; The Bolt

Jessica Wells was born in Florida in 1974 and migrated to Australia at the age of 11. She completed her Bachelor of Music degree in Composition at the Sydney Conservatorium of Music in 1996, graduating with First Class honours. This was followed by a Master's degree in Composition under Dr. Bozidar Kos completed in 1998. After teaching composition at the Conservatorium for four years, she spent time living in Antwerp and then returned to Sydney in 2003. She then completed a Masters in Screen Composition at AFTRS (Australian Film, Television and Radio School) in 2005, and was awarded the Film Critic's Circle Award for "Best Display of Technical Excellence" for her work on eight short films.

Jessica's compositions cross many genres in the classical, commercial and film music worlds. Her orchestral music and arrangements have been performed by many of the major Australian orchestras (SSO, MSO, TSO, WASO and QSO). She has worked for some of Australia's best composers as an orchestrator, arranger and copyist. As a producer Jessica can bring out the best in orchestral recordings as well as smaller ensembles and jazz and contemporary musicians. She has arranged and produced music for ABC Classics as well as many other individual artist's albums, including Divergence Jazz Orchestra's last album "Fake It Until You Make It" and the Wiggles "Meet the Orchestra" album. In 2018 she produced Alicia Crossley's album MUSE and many recordings for the Hourglass Ensemble.

Dancing in St Petersburg was commissioned by the Bowral Autumn Music Festival for Acacia Quartet. Following the Russian theme of this program it references both Borodin and Shostakovich. In homage to Polovtsian Dances from Borodin's opera Prince Igor (1890), the first movement of the string quartet explores the Polovtsians (Turkish nomads) dancing to entertain Prince Igor at the request of his captor, Khan Konchak. The music delves into elements of traditional Turkish "makam" scales which include quarter-tones and odd-metered rhythms. The central melodic section is in response to the slave girl dance used at the opening of the scene. The women in the opera chorus sing about their homeland, hence the use of traditional Turkish elements to reflect the setting in 12th century Europe.

The second movement of the quartet takes its name from the Shostakovich ballet written in 1931. Both The Bolt and Borodin's Prince Igor were premièred in the famous Mariinsky Theatre in St. Petersburg (though 41 years apart). In Stalinist Russia, artists were under scrutiny for being too "avant-garde", and unfortunately Shostakovich's ballet was banned after only one performance. Jessica's composition brings forth some of the more modern aspects of the score with a mechanical factory scene, scenes which amused audiences for their comedy and a pastiche of Western dance music. You will hear a slow drunken waltz, a tango, a Charleston, a polka and a Communist march.

Elizabeth Dalton 2022