

Continuum: Australian String Quartet review – eclectic and electric

Adelaide festival: Adelaide Town Hall A refreshed take on the past, technical innovation, and local contemporary content performed without pretence and with gusto.



The Australian String Quartet's work at the Adelaide festival with a palpable sense of joy.

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Continuum is part of the Adelaide-based Australian String Quartet's national season, an extensive, if rapid, tour of the capital cities. Slightly disorienting at first, it seems like a broad sampling of pieces, with few obvious things to unify them: Brahms' String Quartet No.1 in C minor is in the eclectic company of Luigi Boccherini, a late-baroque composer in the shadow of Haydn; Adelaide-based contemporary composer Stephen Whittington moves on to the Vietnam War-era *Black Angels* by avante garde US composer George Crumb.

The quartet has been assembled relatively recently, but there is a strong unity to its playing, and a palpable sense of joy. In the first piece, Boccherini's String Quartet in G minor, Opus 32 No.5, the slightest inhaling of first violin Kristian Winther is all it takes to create a perfectly synchronised entry. Boccherini's Quartet keeps the ensemble in a

narrow register, displaying the musicians' ability to blend. Winther shines in this piece, displaying a highly expressive tonal range.

For Brahms, the Quartet's signature Guadagninis are fitted with animal gut strings, to approach more closely the sound authentic to the time of composition (and providing an opportunity for light comic relief). The sound is audibly brighter and rounder, and the potential for scratchiness provides an interesting sense of risk.

But the highlight of the evening is the second half, with works by two contemporary composers. Whittington's *Windmill* opens with the interplay of bowed harmonics, recalling the rhythmic creaking and whining of the eponymous symbol of outback settlement. While in places rasping and ragged (yet elegant throughout), its simple understatement eschews the maximalist complexity of other contemporary composers. Only about 10 minutes long, it is clean, light and delightful. At the end, the composer stands up in the crowd, and takes a modest bow.

Crumb wrote his highly symbolic *Black Angels: Thirteen Images From the Dark Land* as a kind of parable on spiritual strife. Its three parts - *Departure*, *Absence* and *Return* - signify, in his words, "a fall from grace, spiritual annihilation and redemption", and it has become inextricably associated with the Vietnam War, in part because of the date of its composition (1970).

It employs an arsenal of unorthodox sounds, instruments and techniques (tongue clicking, shouting, glass rods used like guitar slides, thimbles tapped across the strings in place of the bow, bowed gongs and crystal glasses) to evoke, quite successfully, the sounds of hell, or perhaps the jungle. It is all skittish, rattling phrases, the buzz of insect swarms or helicopters, punctuated with moments of beauty where solace is found. It is still a pertinent musical innovation, and it was a breathtaking ending to the evening.

This is how chamber music should be presented in 2014: a refreshed take on the past, plenty of technical innovation, and local contemporary content done without pretence and performed with gusto.

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