

Review of Alleged Dances, 1 March 2016, City Recital Hall
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Clive Paget



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Review: Alleged Dances (Australian String Quartet)

by [Clive Paget](#) on March 2, 2016 (just now) filed under [Classical Music](#) | [Chamber](#) | [Comment Now](#)

★★★★☆ Eclectic musical mix bodes well for ASQ's latest iteration.

**City Recital Hall, Angel Place, Sydney
March 1, 2016**

It's fair to say that the Australian String Quartet has had its ups and downs in recent years, but after a string of special guest stand-ins last year, they're back with a new line-up and this first concert of their 2016 season was an exciting taster of things to come. The programme was made up of works old (Beethoven and Schumann) and new (Hindson and Adams) in an evening that was appropriately all about fresh beginnings.

Barring the Beethoven, which got off to a slightly awkward start, the sound of the ASQ's latest foursome was very impressive, matched by a keenness to communicate and looks of evident pleasure passing back and forth among the ensemble. Joining regulars Stephen King on viola and Sharon Draper on cello are the impressive Dale Bartrop and Francesca Hiew on violin, both of whom are first-rate, experienced players with much to offer, both in solo lines (Bartrop with a winning silver sheen, Hiew with an attractively warm, golden glow) and as part of the blend.

Beethoven's Sixth Quartet (the last of his first set of six) is the one that best shows his determination to go beyond the models of Haydn and Mozart. In the ASQ's hands it shot off at a very brisk *allegro* – exciting if a little challenging. The *Scherzo* and *allegretto* of the finale were rhythmically alert, but it was the *Adagio* and the famous *La Malincolia* opening to the fourth movement that really showed the mettle of the new quartet. With a beautiful sense of “Innigkeit”, and some gorgeous lo-vibrato *pianissimo* playing, the depth of feeling was palpable.

So too the Schumann, whose First String Quartet was that composer's vital attempt to put his own stamp on a genre by that stage dominated by Beethoven. The ASQ found much meaning in the searching slow introduction to the first movement and embraced the Beethovenian *Adagio* – its radiant cello melody especially well done. The tally-ho *Scherzo*, and the Mendelssohnian *Presto Finale* were contrastingly full of fire.

The newest work on the programme was the world premiere of Matthew Hindson's String Quartet No. 4. Last year the ASQ [gave dazzling performances](#) of Hindson's Third Quartet, and this new work was equally finely despatched with a good solid string sound and impressively tight ensemble playing. For this intriguing work, the composer has added a vibraphone to the mix (apparently his favourite percussion instrument), and so the quartet was joined by Claire Edwardes who gave a pitch perfect rendition of the solo part. An attractive work in Hindson's complex, yet accessible style, it's less spikey than the Third, but no less engaging for that.

The quartet is divided into two movements. Flourishes on the strings interspersed with mini-tattoos on percussion led into a winning strathspey-type rhythmic section with melodic undercurrent on vibes. A wild dancing section with percussion glittering over the top was a real toe-tapper and Edwardes was superb throughout (whichever end of the sticks she was required to play with). A page turn later and the warm slow movement was underway, its slightly jazzy vibe offset with a folkish theme on strings. A tribute to the composer's daughter born last year (another new beginning), it's a lovely meditation and featured some fine solos for all five players before closing on an ethereal final cadence.

Three of John Adams' catchy 'Alleged Dances' completed the programme in Claire Edwardes' winning new arrangements. *Judah to Ocean* is all trolley wheels and bells (a tribute to Adams' favourite San Francisco bus route!), the sultry *Habanera* is (in Adams' words) a quirky "lament for a season without baseball", while *Rag the Bone* manages to mix an Irish reel with the sounds of Mali – no mean feat! For her new arrangements, Edwardes appeared to have emptied her kitchen cabinets including a heart-shaped cake tin and a fetching yellow mixing bowl. Dolled up to the nines, as she rearranged her culinary wares for each movement, you got the distinct impression that you were watching percussion's answer to Nigella Lawson.

Classical and Romantic, Post-Modernist and brand spanking new, this was a thoroughly engaging programme with plenty of focus, yet ample room for fun. But most of all, it was a great start to a new era.

The ASQ are touring *Alleged Dances* to Brisbane, Melbourne and Canberra