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Grigoryan and a swinging ASQ deliver the goods in a variety of styles

MUSIC

Australian String Quartet with Slava Grigoryan: *Migration*. Conservatorium Theatre, Brisbane, May 29.

MARTIN BUZACOTT

During its 30-plus-year existence, the Australian String Quartet has gone through more makeovers than Madonna as a veritable phalanx of prominent chamber music identities has joined and then left this most protean and doggedly resilient of ensembles.

But, musically, none of the previous incarnations could swing quite as much as this latest model.

In its first subscription concert tour for the year, showtime arrived in the form of dance and jazz rhythms of prodigious technical difficulty, tossed off with precision and style by ASQ members Dale Bartrop, Francesca Hiew, Stephen King and Sharon Grigoryan.

But it was guest guitarist Slava Grigoryan who was first into the musical wringer, his finger-dislocating runs up the fretboard demanded by *Migration*, composed by his American friend and erstwhile onstage colleague Ralph Towner — posing the question whether music really does need to be quite so difficult to play in order to communicate.

Never mind: for guitar geeks Towner is a name to conjure with,

and his sadistic *moto perpetuo* jazz licks and virtuosic quartet interjections hinting at possible musical significance won't dispel his reputation as a musician's musician.

Virtuosity for its own sake having satisfied itself, things slowed down for Iain Grandage's *Black Dogs*, a Straussian tone poem for guitar quintet exploring the nature of the mind, prompted by the mental illness of two of the Australian composer's friends.

With the two violins beginning at the opposite edges of the stage, the spatial effect was arresting, disorienting and not without musical interest.

As the ensemble came together physically, the slow movement was tense and unsettling before the finale, arriving with the urgency of a swarm of bees, became a bow-shredder, literally in the case of second violinist Hiew.

The audience cheered, but when Schubert's final String Quartet in G major D887 emerged it brought with it the welcome expectation that being impressed might now be supplemented by feeling moved.

And thus it proved, the ensemble's restraint in the opening bars setting the tone for a nuanced reading of one of chamber music's masterpieces.

The dynamic contrasts were executed without affectation, and the all-Guadagnini ensemble nailed the subdued elegance of the

slow movement.

But it was in the will-o'-the-wisp Scherzo, and particularly the dance-of-death tarantella finale, that a real and quite distinctive swagger emerged.

If they can swing like this as a new ensemble, who knows what can happen if this lot goes the distance?

Performances continue in Sydney today (cityrecitalhall.com) and Melbourne on Monday (melbournerecital.com.au).



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String
Quartet**