



Review Tempesta Sydney Concert

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Review: Tempesta (Australian String Quartet)

by [Angus McPherson](#) on July 1, 2016 (just now) filed under [Classical Music](#) | [Chamber](#) | [Comment Now](#)

★★★★½ In a programme spanning four centuries, the ASQ are masters of both the calm and the storm.

City Recital Hall, Angel Place

June 30, 2016

When [Christoph von Dohnányi spoke to Limelight](#) earlier this year, he mentioned the challenges of performing Webern. “I love Webern’s pieces, only they are very hard to play in concert,” he said, “if people turn their programmes, if people cough, and if people come in and out, it makes it hard. Webern needs total silence – the slightest noise is disturbing to the music, very fundamentally.” The Australian String Quartet’s decision to open their Tempesta programme with Webern’s *Fünf Sätze* was, therefore, a bold one, but it certainly paid off.

Primed by violist Stephen King’s introduction, the audience responded with hushed awe as the quartet swept from crunching dissonances and dramatic gestures to breathy, scurrying whispers and tiny ambient noises. The drawn out chords of the second movement were spell-binding, isolated pizzicato notes falling like drops of liquid into a dark pool. The four musicians deftly flirted with the border between silence and sound, crystalline harmonics glistening over the soft susurrations of audience breaths.

Haydn’s String Quartet in C Major Op. 20 No 2 was his 32nd quartet and the first to begin with an instrument other than the first violin. The cello not only opens the work but is really the star of the first two movements and Sharon Draper’s sound cut through the ensemble with commanding resonance. The awareness of both audience and quartet seemed heightened following the Webern, and ASQ achieved an exquisite evenness of tone in the very soft passages.

The rubato in the declamatory unison gestures of the second movement lent it an assertive gravitas, Draper again taking the lead, her sound rich and refined in the first statement of the theme. The movement also showcased the violins: Dale Baltrop’s coppery tone and Francesca Hiew’s brighter – if no less burnished – sound giving the music a polished sheen. While Baltrop’s high register notes didn’t always quite hit the mark intonation-wise in the

Menuet, the movement danced along elegantly and the final fugue movement bubbled with playful enthusiasm.

The energy was ramped up a notch in the second half of the programme with the driving, dance-like rhythms of Joe Chindamo's *Tempesta*. The jazz pianist's first string quartet was originally written for the Acacia Quartet in 2013 and was inspired, in part, by the "wild rhythms, angular melodic contours and dissonant harmonies" of Bartók's string quartets. The first movement, *Tempesta*, lurched from energetic flurries and aggressive flourishes to brief moments of peaceful reflection and chorale-like melodies. Baltrop and King's sparred across the quartet with fluid slides. The second movement, *Lament/Seduction*, introduced elements of tango, the quartet becoming a twisted, writhing folk band. It was bows down for the aptly named *Frenzy*, a cacophony of jagged pizzicato, while the final movement, *Flight*, alternated moments of furtive reprieve with Baltrop's madly dashing violin runs.

Mendelssohn's final string quartet opens with a similarly furtive intensity. The composer was incredibly close to his sister Fanny – from their childhood acting out Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* in the garden to an adult life in which Fanny was in many ways her brother's professional collaborator and advisor. This quartet was written in the aftermath of her unexpected death at the age of 41, while Mendelssohn grieved in Switzerland. The ASQ attacked the feverish opening gestures with vicious accents and a tightly restrained, shivering intensity, highlighting the stark contrasts between seething anger and despondent rocking in this tragic movement. The *Allegro Assai* was more extroverted in its impassioned lament, though rage still simmered below the surface. King's viola lines in the slow movement were touchingly pure, and delicate sighs from Baltrop adorned moments of what are almost acceptance and peace in this work before the outbursts and shuddering tremolos of the finale beset the audience in angry waves.

From Webern's whispers to the Mendelssohn's fire, this was beautifully programmed concert, bringing together quartets spanning four centuries. The ASQ's expertise as performers was on display in both their stunning virtuosity and the nuanced sensitivity they brought to the quieter moments of this turbulent programme.

The ASQ are touring *Tempesta* to Canberra, Melbourne, Brisbane, Adelaide and Perth

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