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Promising start for a reconstituted quartet after a time of discord

MUSIC

Alleged Dances.
Australian String
Quartet. Adelaide
Festival. Adelaide Town
Hall, February 29

GRAHAM STRAHLE

The Australian String Quartet's bad times finally seem to be over. With incoming violinists Dale Barltrop and Francesca Hiew, the group has essentially reinvented itself — which can only be a good

thing given its instability over the years caused by internal division and numerous player changes.

The new line-up was impressive in its first concert, sounding well matched and already responsive as a single unit.

Barltrop makes a wonderful first violinist who plays with neatness, generosity of tone and a natural sense of line. In a program full of contrasts, he seemed to intuitively find the music's heart and unite his colleagues through the flowing ease of his playing.

Hiew is a strong second violinist who doesn't hide away into the

overall texture like some of her predecessors. Meanwhile, existing members violist Stephen King and cellist Sharon Draper add authority and energy.

The result is an ASQ with real promise. In Beethoven's String Quartet in B flat major op 18 no 6, they worked hard to characterise each movement in sharpest relief and remained true to the music's intent. Some wide intonation and the odd missed note didn't

matter too much: these are clearly early days.

The new ASQ also feels firmly in the saddle playing modern repertoire. Its world premiere of Matthew Hindson's String Quartet no 4, with Claire Edwardes on vibraphone, was a brave and bold move for a group so young.

What boisterous fun it proved though. Hindson pits the vibraphone and strings up against each other and combines them in various ways to create jazzy sounds and rolling, glistening arpeggios that flew along like a steam train — thanks particularly to powerhouse playing from Edwardes.

This work's wistful second

movement, reminiscent melodically of the opening theme in Elgar's Cello Concerto, saw some of the loveliest playing from Barltrop.

ASQ might want to cultivate a bit more of a disciplined but loose rhythmic feel when approaching works like *John's Book of Alleged Dances* by American composer John Adams.

A performance of three of these, with Edwardes on percussion, sounded almost as good but not quite idiomatic.

ASQ also gave a fluent account of Schumann's String Quartet no 1 in A minor op 41 no 1 that made ample sense of this work's intimate lyricism, changeable character and occasional rustic elements.

Brisbane, March 2; Melbourne, March 3; Canberra, March 6; Perth, March 14. Tickets: \$30-\$83. Booking: 1800 040 444 or online.