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## Barltrop charts path from levity and optimism to depths of despair

### MUSIC

Melbourne Symphony Orchestra and the Australian String Quartet  
Elisabeth Murdoch Hall,  
Melbourne Recital Centre, March 30

#### EAMONN KELLY

Partnerships and collaborations are increasingly common in Australia's creative landscape. Artistic considerations inform such resource pooling but, for many organisations, co-operation is also a survival response to ever more challenging governmental and philanthropic funding environments.

In this context, the Melbourne Symphony Orchestra hosting the Australian String Quartet as ensemble-in-residence is not as odd as it may sound, particularly when the quartet's first violinist and the orchestra's co-concertmaster are the same person, Dale Barltrop.

In this jointly presented chamber concert, Barltrop offered a program that looked skittish on paper but, in performance, coa-

lesced: charting a path from levity, elan and optimism to soul-searching, turmoil and despair.

Opening with the eccentric, neoclassical wit of Stravinsky's *Dumbarton Oaks* concerto, Barltrop led a bright, crisp reading, alert to the work's thieving magpie snippets: from Bach's Brandenburg concertos to late-romantic lyrical blooms and the biting post-tonal textures of early 20th-century Vienna. Often, this work receives hacksaw interpretation, but not here: superb balance, sound quality and unity of expression underpinned astutely timed doses of relaxed delicacy, jovial zest and zany subversion.

Similarly blending canonical veneration with contemporary irreverence, Australian composer Matthew Hindson's *The Rave and the Nightingale* (2001) is tribute to, and deconstruction of, Schubert's final quartet. Opening with several minutes of unadulterated

Schubert — rendered by ASQ with lush perfection — the work then transforms its source material into a thrusting toe-tapper, with devices borrowed

from electronica and all-night rave dance euphoria. Culminating with foot-stamping and a coda of false final cadences, the work's humour was warmly embraced by the combined ensemble.

A weighty rendition of Schubert's penultimate quartet, *Death and the Maiden*, in Mahler's arrangement for string orchestra,

drew the evening into a more reflective space. With the ASQ fronting the MSO strings, Barltrop offered a sonorous interpretation that realised both the work's agonising intensity and its moments of whimsy. What Mahler's arrangement loses in raw clarity it gains in the power of its roaring tutti passages: a trait fully explored in this MSO-ASQ endeavour. The second movement's painful swells and the scherzo's explosive rage engulfed Elisabeth Murdoch Hall in a sea of unconstrained emotion.