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Black Angels brings quartet to light

MUSIC

Australian String Quartet
Continuum concert: Music
by Boccherini, Brahms,
Whittington and Crumb.
Conservatorium Theatre,
Griffith University,
Brisbane, March 4.

THROUGH its 28-year history, the Australian String Quartet has programmed few more unusual concerts than this Frankenstein affair in which nothing came in standard format. Now into its third complete personnel make-over, the Adelaide-based group's new generation of Kristian Winther, Ioana Tache, Stephen King and Sharon Draper is embarking on its first full annual subscription season.

In a program whose gut-string first half followed by amplified contemporary music seemed experimental at best, those curious to know how the new group was likely to sound as it developed could find little enlightenment.

But no one can criticise a main-stage subscription concert built around George Crumb's *Black Angels*, composed in response to the Vietnam War. This wholehearted and ultimately thrilling performance reaffirmed the work's claim to the mantle of modern masterpiece.

With the ASQ's trademark set of Guadagnini's replaced for the occasion by cutaway electric instruments, and with maracas, thimbles, gongs, vocals and bowed wineglasses supplementing them, the breathtaking playing was marred only by lighting more suited to the Spanish Inquisition than to Crumb's atmospheric, occasionally explosive, out-of-the-shadows meditation on death.

A modest-sized crowd was moved to cheering and hollering, and deservedly so. What a cracking way to finish off a concert. But it was needed.

Boccherini's String Quartet in G minor, Op 32, No 5, is a violin-heavy work, culminating in a final movement cadenza, well-played by Winther who is one of the most

animated performers in Australian music, every emotion drifting over his face as he plays.

But then Brahms's breakthrough First String Quartet on gut strings sounded strangely muddled, as if entries and mood swings were less distinct than usual, and the sense of authenticity, not to mention string tension, faltered the moment sheep gut confronted tropical humidity.

Changing centuries and instruments, Stephen Whittington's *Windmill* was an almost literal embodiment of proverbial squeaky-gate music, its depiction of rusty machinery turning in the breeze creating a hypnotic minimalist effect. By the end, its act of imitation had delighted enough.

So this was a program demonstrating more courage than sense but, for a young group beginning to make its way, that's not a bad failing at all.

MARTIN BUZACOTT

Duration: 1hr 50min, including interval. Sydney, tonight; Perth, March 10; Adelaide, March 11; Melbourne, March 13.