

Review – Transcend
The Clothesline, 3 Nov 2015
Matt Saunders

Australian String Quartet Closes Its 30th Anniversary Year With “Transcend” At Adelaide Town Hall – Review



Adelaide Town Hall, Mon 2 Nov.

With sights firmly on the future, the Australian String Quartet debuted their new second violinist while captivating the audience at Town Hall with a lesser-known gem, a chilling premiere, and a cornerstone of the string quartet repertoire.

Once the welcoming applause died down, cellist Sharon Draper sounded almost apologetic as she thanked the audience for their support through what has been something of a transitional year, with a number of guests filling in at violins I and II. With that she introduced new member Francesca Hiew at violin II, and guest artist Sophie Rowell at violin I, a returning familiar face who performed with the ASQ from 2006 to 2011.

The evening's performance began with Juan Crisóstomo de Arriaga's third String Quartet. One of his few surviving works, it was published two years before his untimely death at age 19 in 1826. To produce a quartet of this quality would be an impressive feat for a composer of any age, and it was a pleasure to watch the quartet work through the *Allegro* first movement, with eyes trained on one another for the pauses, and melding beautifully through the alternating legato melody and dramatic ensemble response.

The *Pastorale – Andantino* second movement was introduced by sustained cello in a slow waltz, with the quartet building vibrato harmonies up from a whisper to forte and back

again, with the vibrato increasing in intensity until the music began to evoke the feeling of falling, tumbling over and over in mid-air, perhaps suggesting a passionate romance.

The third movement *Menuetto* offered a study in dynamic contrast as violin runs would quietly collide with the sharp answer of the cello, before the fourth movement *Presto Agitato* impressed with its staccato violin runs and spritely, flowing ensemble eighth note triplets.

Next, the Adelaide premiere performance of Brett Dean's *And Once I Played Ophelia*. Out strode guest soprano Allison Bell, whose gasping opening lines launched the audience headlong into a challenging work by the contemporary composer, who was also in attendance. Bell's virtuosic and dramatic delivery matched the quartet's interpretation of Dean's often dissonant and inventive score.

The piece overtly references the character from Hamlet with text excerpts as lyrics, but the music is modern and technically demanding. At one point, Sophie Rowell's lone violin was nearly silent, sounding as though it was being played at the end of a long hallway or backstage. To my eye, she was fingering sixteenth note patterns and maybe her bow was moving; it was hard to tell. The effect was spellbinding and spectacular.

At other times, Bell's voice could have been mistaken for a Theremin, while Draper's cello and Stephen King's viola would glissando ever so painstakingly downward before snapping to attention for startling sixteenth note runs. The performance increased in intensity with viola and violin exchanging syncopated accented pizzicato eighth notes in the lead-up to a climax of murderously Hitchcockian stabs of violin, before the quiet final section found (spoiler alert) Ophelia slowly descending into the void amidst a wash of quietly abrasive harmonies.

After a brief interval, the quartet returned to present Franz Schubert's fourteenth String Quartet in D minor, *Death And The Maiden*. The Allegro first movement was marked by sweet violin harmonies and later on, duelling runs between viola and cello. The second movement, *Andante Con Moto*, featured Draper's pizzicato cello with Hiew and King's sustained tones supporting Rowell's solo violin. The third movement, *Scherzo: Allegro Molto – Trio*, featured Rowell's violin in the trio between iterations of the main motif, before the quartet delivered a precise and dramatic reading of the rousing *Presto* finale.

Overall, the Australian String Quartet presented a varied and entertaining evening of music that draws their 30th Anniversary 2015 season to a close and hints at a promising new beginning in the year to come.

Matt Saunders