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ARTS

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Small audience treated to refined listening

CONCERT

Australian String Quartet

Perth Concert Hall

REVIEW **NEVILLE COHN**



Empty galleries and row on row of vacant seating in the stalls were depressing evidence of indifference to homegrown product. Had the Australian String Quartet been billed as, say, the Antarctic Quartet or as an ensemble visiting from Outer Mongolia, there would probably have been a much bigger turnout. But for those who made the effort to attend the event, the listening rewards were immense.

Playing on a matched set of superb Gaudagnini instruments (the earliest dates from about 1743), the ASQ demonstrated its ability to sound entirely in control — stylistically, tonally and emotionally — in music by Boccherini and Brahms.

In Boccherini's Quartet in G minor, the ASQ, playing on gut strings, gave a matchlessly radiant, refined and lucid account of the music. I could not fault it in any way. The playing was beyond criticism in the conventional sense. Throughout, apart from the cellist, the players stood while performing.

George Crumb's Black Angels, inspired by the Vietnam War, inhabits an entirely different world. It is performed on electronic, cutaway instruments with brief

forays on gongs and clusters of goblets filled with water to various levels.

Crumb's masterpiece is the apotheosis of grief and despair, utterances that come across as a succession of moans, shrieks and groans. It makes for intensely disturbing listening. At one point, a theme from Schubert's Death and the Maiden makes a fleeting, phantasmagoric visit. Earlier, we listened to Australian composer Stephen Whittington's Windmill which, as the composer mentions in a program note, was written to sound like a piece of rusty machinery. It was a rather gentle musing on the importance of such machinery in a dry land. Also on the program was a finely considered account of Brahms' String Quartet in C minor. 