

Review – Transcend

The West Australian – 5 November 2015, 10.26am

Neville Cohn

Bell and ASQ evoke Dean's weird world



Soprano Allison Bell.

CONCERT

Australian String Quartet
Government House Ballroom
4.5 stars
Review: Neville Cohn

Garbed entirely in black and with a voice of astonishing power, soprano Allison Bell was the focus of attention in Brett Dean's String Quartet No 2.

With agonised howls and shrieks of despair – and a quartet in inspired form – Dean's "And once I played Ophelia" was a fascinating focus of attention as it flashed into formidable life.

Hurling fierce, violent vocal daggers into the auditorium, Tasmanian-born Bell demonstrated the form that has catapulted her into deserved vocal prominence abroad. Utterances of unassuaged grief and creepy, lupine-like howls drew one into Dean's strange world.

Clarity of diction was not consistent – but this was largely compensated for by the sheer authority which Bell brought to bear on the vocal line.

And the Australian String Quartet was beyond reproach in giving point and meaning to Dean's score. Its playing, ranging from hushed harmonics to rasping, grainy-toned interpolations, provided sonic support for the cries and moans of the vocal line.

In the nature of things, the word "electrifying", with its connotations of exalted excellence, is only very sparingly used by critics. But in this instance, it seems barely adequate in relation to Bell's vocal offering.

Midway through the ASQ's presentation of Schubert's Death and the Maiden Quartet, one of the viola's strings snapped. It says much for the sheer professionalism brought to bear on the performance that not even the inevitable delay, while the string was replaced backstage, was allowed to lessen the authority of the performance.

Here, and throughout, one was able to savour the richness and range of tone the musicians drew from the four matched Guadagnini instruments that the quartet is privileged to play. This was gratifyingly apparent in an account of Juan de Arriaga's String Quartet No 3. What a loss to posterity was the sadly early death of Arriaga; he succumbed to pulmonary disease a few days before his 20th birthday.