

Wiping the floor

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TEMPESTA

Australian String Quartet
Melbourne Recital Centre
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Australian String Quartet

And then there are the nights when everything pans out – the playing is as close as live performance gets to flawless, the works programmed combine (despite appearances) to offer a solid display of prowess and musical intelligence, any defects are swamped by the context in which they momentarily rear up. The latest subscription series recital from this ensemble was exemplary: four performances that should have had the Murdoch Hall audience roaring for more.

Violinists Dale Barltrop and Francesca Hiew again impressed for the unusual nature of their upper-layer combination. Both seem to read each other like performers with an inbuilt agility resulting from decades passed in shared experience, their partnership generating lines rich in fine synchronicity and balance. At the same time, each has a distinctive colour: where Barltrop produces a finely spun, athletic line, Hiew offers a sturdier heft to the combination with a vitally pronounced lower register. Further to this, violist Stephen King and cellist Sharon Draper collaborate in similar style, King's trenchant output a fine match for one of the fiercest bass lines at play on the local chamber music scene.

Not that this harnessed aggression came to the fore straight away; the group opened with Webern's *Five Movements for String Quartet*, that ground-breaking suite of atonal wisps and blurts that somehow manages to make a set of individual statements that cohere to present its listeners with a coherent sound-world, despite those sound-production techniques that still have the power to startle, especially the lavish use of *sul ponticello* directions and the application of mutes. What took you aback about this reading was a tenderness given to the disjunct strands of sound that permeate each page; in the ASQ's hands, Webern's *pp* markings were barely audible and the expressionist suggestions of the opening movement and later the restless ostinati and unison eruption of the third came over with a veiled drama that satisfied much more than the galvanic spasms of action that other ensembles favour.

A rigorous respect again emerged in the following Haydn, Op. 20 No. 2 in C Major. Draper's cello set the scene with an impressive firmness as the composer begins jockeying with his force's contrapuntal interplay, and the group's determination was sustained up to the jaunty fugue/finale. What you noticed was a lack of over-simplification, so that the *Menuet* came across with an unexpected grittiness; not that the reading lacked bounce, but the chromatic fall of the movement's second half impressed for its dourness after the high-flying skittishness of Barltrop's G major ascent to a high B immediately beforehand. And the unison opening to Haydn's *Adagio*, in its purity of articulation, brought back memories of the Webern's more dramatic bars.

Joe Chindamo's 2013 String Quartet No. 1 is cast in the traditional four movements: *Tempesta*, *Lament/Seduction*, *Frenzy* and *Flight*. An amiable work, its emotional statements avoid extreme expression; the promised storm is a pretty well-controlled outpouring and the frenetic pages later on show up surprisingly balanced and well-proportioned. For all its moderate temper, the piece enjoyed a deft, enthusiastic exposition from these players who ensured that the composer's expression markings and tempo shifts were given full measure, from the oscillations between storm and momentary calm in the opening movement, through the pizzicato-heavy vibrancy of the *Frenzy-scherzo*, to the psychologically ambivalent finale. Chindamo employs lucid melodic and harmonic structures, looking back on the quartet's accepted heritage rather than employing the lingua franca of the post-Webern school; a blast definitely back to the past, but none the less attractive for that.

Just in the right program position, the ASQ came to Mendelssohn's last in F minor which is inextricably linked with the death of his sister Fanny. The score is a moving revelation of the composer's profound reaction to this loss, an essay in a quality that rises above gentlemanly despair, where the composer's craft is subsumed in an atypical and sustained tragedy. Here the performers gave another sterling interpretation, maintaining the tension from the first *Allegro's* urgent rustlings onward. Despite the intensity of attack, each musician maintained a consistent dynamic level in the ensemble, the work reaching its climax at the change in key signature in the core of the *Adagio* where the delivery of Mendelssohn's fortissimo outburst with Barltrop riding the blast was both emphatic and dangerously intense, the sort of risky straining at the bit that you rarely hear from more temperamentally circumscribed ensembles.

In this powerful piece, the ASQ capped off a generous and redoubtable stretch of playing where memorable passages remain in the memory long after, like the insistent syncopations disrupting the even pulse during the first part of the *Allegro assai*, and the beneficence of those two melting passages where the quavers and triplets stop for the first movement's placid interludes.

In fact, the only complaint you could make about this night would have to do with the audience. It amazes me that some concert-going individuals will insist on giving full vent to their adenoidal or catarrhal problems at inopportune moments mid-performance. Even more startling is the dual practice by such recital hall offal of continuing to inflict their medical drawbacks at large for extended periods, at the same time making no effort to muffle their all-too-audible mucous movements. You can sit in the Recital Centre's Salon for a solid hour and not experience any of this unpleasantness; up in the Hall, it seems, anything goes. An experienced usher once told me that elderly people are often unaware that they are acting offensively; maybe, but more than a few of these clowns look suspiciously middle-aged. Some old adages make good sense – like, if you're sick, stay home.