

[Kölnische Rundschau, 18.9.2010]

Homage to the Dead

Inspiring - the Australian String Quartet

By VOLKER FRIES

This evening belonged to Brett Dean: an Australian composer who is a master of the viola and who, together with the Australian String Quartet, presented his brand-new string quintet 'Epitaphs' as a German debut performance at the Cologne Philharmonic Hall. Visually alone, this was a feast for the eyes - because the composer, a kind of John Malkovich of the viola, was accompanied by four striking female artists, making him the lucky man for the evening.

Sophie Rowell and Anne Horton (violins), Sally Boud (viola) and Rachel Johnston (cello) had opened the night with an enormously passionate performance of Felix Mendelssohn String Quartet in E flat major (op. 12). The waves of the Romantic period surged in homogenous ebb and flow, and dark colours - and it became apparent very quickly that here at work were masters of their craft.

But then, the String Quintet by Brett Deans. Each of the five movements dedicated to people he had known, but who

(with the exception of György Ligeti) had died all too early between 2008 and 2009. Shattering, for instance, the homage to Jan Diesselhorst, a cellist with the Berlin Philharmonic, of which Dean himself had been a member for 15 years. Here, the way in which he told, through most subtle means, of the incomprehensibility of death simply took one's breath away.

Chromatic scales and descending glissandi imbued life on the downhill track with a compelling symbolic force while every movement, at the same time, maintained its distinct characteristic as to expression and tone. This was a chamber music masterpiece, authentically performed. After the interval, the ensemble was similarly successful with Anton Bruckner's rarely played String Quartet in F major. It revealed a near instinctive understanding between the performers who artfully shone a light on this rare piece from every angle. It was only right that it should earn them strong applause from the nicely attended Philharmonic Hall.