

THE AUSTRALIAN STRING QUARTET RECENT EUROPEAN REVIEWS

Beethovenfest 2009 - String Quartet Project III: Australian and Haas Quartets, Sat 19th Sep at Beethoven-Haus, Bonn

Stadt-Anzeiger Bonn, 21.09.2009 by Guido Krawinkel

'High Tension Wires' was the subtitle Australian composer Nigel Westlake (born 1958) gave his first string quartet. It was this work in four movements, written in 1994, which the Australian String Quartet had chosen to open the third edition of the ambitious string quartet project in the chamber music hall of the Beethoven House.

Sophie Rowell and Anne Horton, violin, Sally Boud, viola, and Rachel Johnston, violoncello, have been playing together since 2000. The former Tankstream Quartet was officially granted nobility status by being named the Australian String Quartet in 2007.

And, through their unleashed energy, the four women produced high tension indeed. At times, the voices blended into an planar sound whose individual components - even at their most varied pitch - could no longer be differentiated. Even in passages dominated by individual notes, a dense network of highly musical interactions formed.

There was also an exuberant musicality in Mendelssohn's Quartet in D Major from Op. 44.

Beethovenfest 2009 - String Quartet Project V: Australian, Pacifica, Hass and Kuss Quartets, Sat 20th Sep at Beethoven-Haus, Bonn

Stadt-Anzeiger Bonn, 22.09.2009 by Guido Krawinkel

Together, the Pacifica and the Australian String Quartet followed with Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy's String Octet Op. 20. This, too, provided a musical high pressure area in the chamber music hall.

The scherzo breathed an enchanting lightness, the final movement was marked by an intense arc of suspense spanning to the very last bar. A luscious sound of near orchestral abundance provided a more than worthy finale to this exciting string quartet project.

Music full of joie de vivre in this commemoration year

Wed 23rd Sept, Helmstedt, Germany

Braunschweiger Zeitung, 26.9.2009

Coxless four on course for success - the Australian String Quartet opens the Culture Circle's Juleum Concert series.

When competing for the favours of audiences and critics, it surely cannot be easy to make it to the very fore in the highest of all chamber music arts. In that process, homogeneity is always the key measuring stick by which string ensembles such as the Australian String Quartet make their mark. Where this is concerned, these four well-travelled ladies demonstrated in their performance for the opening of the Juleum concerts that they are up there with the best. Not without reason, the Australian government made the ensemble ambassadors for the conquest of the world's concert stages.

In their suitcases, the four young women also brought a work by Australian composer Richard Meale, whose 'Cantilena Pacifica' with its transcendental melodic theme entranced the Helmstedt audience into absolute silence.

The program of the 152nd Juleum concert opened with Mendelssohn's String Quartet in D Major. The fiery start of the Molto allegro vivace was met with an ebullient temperament by the Australian String Quartet. Yet, at the same time, they managed to bring out the rich nuances of the songlike second theme.

In the warm-hearted swaying of the minuetto they emphasised surprising aspects while, in a similar fashion, lifting the lower voices against the singing of the first violin in the third movement. The presto finale was presented in a flamboyantly orchestral manner.

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This was Mendelssohn full of joie de vivre and brightness, performed with an impressive closeness which, on this night, led one to be amazed time and again. What these four musicians manage to convey in terms of playful understanding, perfect balance and sensitive beauty of tone is simply unique. It is therefore no wonder that the Australian String Quartet gave already its second guest performance at the Juleum.

After the interval, a completely different world of sound was to open up with Schubert's last string quartet. Full of abrupt tension between drama and lyricism, between major and minor, always extremely tight yet painfully extended, this String Quartet in G Major is a work which places enormous demands in terms of technique and emotion on the performers. Nearly 50 minutes are to be experienced, always trailing the edge of an abyss and hidden fears. The allure of symphonic colour and force to be captured by only four string players was a task the Australian String Quartet confronted with the highest intensity of expression. In the wonderful trio of the third movement, with its idyllic dialogue between violin and cello, it was hard to believe that a Guarneri (on loan from the Australian government!) and a literally new (being only four years old) violoncello were holding a conversation. The four musicians closed this great late opus by the only 31-year-old Schubert with a capricious air. Bravo to this achievement of the Australians!

The continuous and enthusiastic applause of the Helmstedt audience elicited an encore of another movement by Haydn from Sophie Rowell as first violin, Anne Horton on second violin, viola player Sally Boud and Rachel Johnston on the cello. Mendelssohn to begin with, Haydn at the close - what lovely framework for a program in this commemorative year.

Unending applause for string quartet

Thursday 24th Sep Eberbach, Germany

Eberbacher Zeitung, 29.09.2009 by Karlheinz Mai

Utmost virtuosity and delightful violin improvisations mark the start of the Arts Appreciation Society's chamber music series, Eberbach, Germany

The Eberbach Arts Appreciation Society commenced this year's chamber music series with works by Haydn, Mendelssohn and Schumann, performed by the Australian String Quartet - in front of what looked like a recordbreaking full house in the Protestant community hall. Eberbach. In view of the enthusiastic reception of the works - the performance covered Haydn's Fifth Quartet, Mendelssohn's Quartet Op. 44/1 and Schumann's Piano Quintet Op. 44 - one could not help but think of an, admittedly exaggerated, comment by Richard Wagner who once said about theatrical/musical presentation 'that the only true artist is the performer': 'All our work as poets and composers is mere hopeful pursuit, not ability. Only in performance is there ability - and hence art.' The young Australian quartet musicians Sophie Rowell and Anne Horton (violins), Sally Boud (viola), Rachel Johnston (cello) and the Belgrade pianist Mirjana Raji also possessed that hope - and the ability.

Sophie Rowell played the role of first violinist as 'first among equals' with confidence. This was especially noticeable in those high positions of the Fifth Quartet which are not uncommon in Haydn. It was even more apparent with Mendelssohn who, in the trio and finale of his minuet movement, demands the highest and, as regards intonation, most difficult positions for a dominating violin. Rowell managed to make these appear light and effortless. As an example of a successful musical performance, and representative of the whole program, there were the first movement - exquisitely pronounced in its artful presentation, the Hungarian-tinged final movement with its occasional charming violin improvisations, and the elegantly arranged Andante of the quartet by Haydn.

For the achievement of the naturally somewhat understated second violinist, the viola player and the cellist, Beethoven's concept of the 'obbligato accompaniment' springs to mind: just imagining it without the sophisticated accompaniment would reduce the effect - without its perfect execution the whole movement would suffer.

What would Mendelssohn's 'Song without Words' be without the continuous chains of semiquavers played so gracefully by second violinist Anne Horton? And something similar can be said for viola player Sally Boud and cellist Rachel Johnston.

After these musicians had demonstrated perfect technical mastery of their instruments and accomplished

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ensemble playing through racy triplets and transparency of sound in Mendelssohn's first and last movements, the time had come for the Schumann Piano Quintet - a showpiece for young pianist Mirjana Raji. In her playing, she united accuracy and precision, sweetness and brilliance of sound, as well as distinctiveness. In the slow movement 'in the manner of a March', the ensemble also provided an example of its musical creativity: shrouded, muffled (funeral) march rhythms, billowy quaver triplets in the piano accompanied by friendly string cantilenas. Then - right in the middle - verve and eruption, an opportunity for the pianist and the quartet to demonstrate their rhythmic stability, their reliability and their skill. The Scherzo, which was performed with an overpowering sound, and the calming Finale were followed by enthusiastic, unending applause.

The ensemble thanked the audience by playing an encore of the piano quintet version of a tango by Argentinean composer Astor Piazzola.

Top-class and breathtaking: Australian String Quartet opens KiB season

Sunday 27th Sep Buchholz Chamber Music, Hamburg

Harburger Anzeigen und Nachrichten, 29.09.2009 by Traute Scheurmann

While the prize winners of the 1. International Chamber Music Competition gave a concert at the NDR in Hamburg, the Buchholz Chamber Music Initiative (KiB) commenced its season with a quartet evening of illustrious visitors. The four ladies from the other side of the world would surely have stood a good chance at the competition: Sophie Rowell and Anne Horton (violins), Sally Boud (viola) and Rachel Johnston (violoncello) are the Australian String Quartet. That name was bestowed upon them for their outstanding performances. And rightly so, because what these musicians had to offer was top-class and breathtaking. The audience in the sold-out assembly hall of the Albert Einstein School in Buchholz listened with rapt concentration.

For the String Quartet in D Major Opus 44.1 by Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy, the musicians gave the first movement a highly dramatic arrangement, with the second marked by flowing legato and the last by furious virtuosity.

Franz Schubert's last String Quartet in G Major D 887 is among the most substantial and difficult of its kind. In a captivating and sophisticated, yet energy-sapping interpretation, these women were not afraid to bring out the sharp edges. For the most part, they dispensed with all romantic sentimentalities. In the trio of the third movement, however, they exuded Viennese melodiousness.

Halfway through the program, the Australian String Quartet introduced an Australian composer. 'Cantilena pacifica' from the 2nd String Quartet by Richard Meales is the requiem for a dead friend. Under the wonderfully singing violin part, played with great emotion by Sophie Rowell, lies a gentle ostinato of the remaining parts which is slightly modified in the harmonies.

Such perfect ensemble playing, where all entries and transitions were performed without even the hint of a wobble, can only be achieved to this exceptional degree where there is continuous eye contact - always accompanied by a mutual smile.

By the way, the KiB has signed the winners of the International Chamber Music Competition in the piano trio category for a concert on 13 March 2010.

Tashmina Artists handles the UK management of the Australian String Quartet and would be delighted to hear from promoters wishing to discuss possible projects.

Please also see the ASQ's website:

www.asq.com