



Sydney Morning Herald
Saturday 20/03/2010

Page: 15
Section: Arts & Entertainment
Region: Sydney, AU
Circulation: 211066
Type: Capital City Daily
Size: 134.48 sq.cms.



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AUSTRALIAN STRING
QUARTET

City Recital Hall, March 18
Reviewed by Harriet
Cunningham

IT IS a big name to live up to, but the Australian String Quartet is growing into its identity more convincingly every year.

The first tour for the year, subtitled *Flight*, opened with a reading of Haydn's String Quartet Opus 33 No. 3 *The Bird*, which was shot through with nuance and authority.

You can expect impeccable intonation and finely tooled articulation from this diligent quartet, but there were also flashes of invention, as Sophie Rowell, playing the bird, threw in a cascade of trills at a cadence. The scherzo was a little less playful, but they captured the spark of Haydn's humour in the helter-skelter finale.

The Australian composer Paul Stanhope has also been known to crack a good musical joke, but

his String Quartet No. 1 started

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full of broody, heart-on-sleeve angst, which somehow never really went away, even in the tender Lullaby and funky finale.

The quartet took on his complex rhythms and melodies with assurance, making it sound as if it had been part of its repertoire for years. And it deserves to be, as it reveals Stanhope as an accomplished writer for strings, moulding the four-way sound into one reverberating instrument with skill.

The pianist Lucinda Collins joined the ensemble for Brahms's expansive Piano Quintet in F minor Opus 34 in the second half. The huge sound of the City Recital Hall's Steinway, lid open on full stick, washed over the fragile strings like a tidal wave at first, but by the development of the first movement they had negotiated a stormy but stable equilibrium.

The Andante was a graceful song among friends, each voice with its own delicate offerings, but it was in the Scherzo that it came together: five fine musicians playing loud and fast. From there it was an exhilarating ride to the end.

The signs have been good from the start, but with this concert the Australian String Quartet confirms itself as an ensemble ready to take off.