

Quartet builds an enviable reputation

Mark Coughlan | *March 02, 2009*

Article from: The Australian

Pacifica Quartet Winthrop Hall, University of Western Australia, February 22, 28 and March 1.

THE Pacifica Quartet is building an enviable reputation as one of the great up-and-coming ensembles, with a full diary of engagements in major recital halls, the 2009 Musical America Ensemble of the Year Award and a 2009 Grammy for best chamber music performance.

The quartet's four recitals for the Perth International Arts Festival demonstrated some of the qualities driving this ascendancy. In a challenging program of Elliott Carter, George Crumb and Gyorgy Ligeti the playing was impressively committed and musically compelling.

They were at their best in Ligeti's exuberant first quartet. Each gesture was strongly characterised in a performance full of drama and good humour. The music sparkled and the contrasts were sharply etched; there was plenty of fire in the playing but also a sense of repose when needed.

Their Carter had an almost charismatic quality. This elusive, sparsely textured music was played with the utmost sincerity.

In three subsequent recitals, dedicated to the complete Mendelssohn quartets, the results were more variable. Some of the darting, bustling movements for which Mendelssohn is renowned were dispatched with impeccable technical brilliance, bristling with joyful energy.

The finale of the D major quartet was case in point, as was the exciting Capriccio in E minor. At times, however, these busy passages became musically disconnected, the frenzied note-spinning undermining the clarity of the musical structure.

The opening two movements of the great F-minor quartet were played with a beautifully judged expressiveness. The D-major's Andante was another special moment where the players found exactly the right tone and pace to maximise the musical effect.

Not all the slow movements were as successful. At times the playing was rather too straight and needed rhythmic flexibility and spaciousness. The Adagio of the F minor quartet, for example, while charming and sensitive, lacked emotional depth and dark intensity. The Adagio from Op. 44 No. 3 sounded too driven, the quest to maintain line taking precedence over expressive weight.

The quartet were joined by local musicians Paul Wright, Shaun Lee-Chen, Alex Brogan and Eve Silver to complete the cycle with Mendelssohn's Octet, his stand-out work for strings.

This was inspired programming. The increased sonority from the larger group filled Winthrop Hall with a rich sound and, despite some dangerously fast tempos, this go-for-broke performance held together to the last and had the audience on its feet.