

# Acacia Quartet's 'Harbour Light' program was thoroughly fascinating and engaging

Daniel Kaan



While the rest of the world was thinking about the American election result, our spirits were being buoyed by an inspiring evening of string quartet music in the beautiful Utzon Room. I did not think of Trump once while the Acacia Quartet played.

There was not a single quartet by Mozart, Haydn, Beethoven etc in sight; in fact no music at all before 1919 and half the concert by composers still alive, two of them in the audience. How does Acacia do it? They presented a program full of music I had never heard before and all of it thoroughly fascinating and engaging. I have such respect for their courageous programming and their ability to bring the music to life. Acacia's mission (brave souls) to bring new music to audiences seems to be working. This concert was a sell-out and the audience clearly loved it as I did. The musician's professionalism is to be congratulated.

Sydney composer Nick Wales' piece "*Harbour Light*" from which the concert takes its name, is a reworking for string quartet of an earlier work for chamber orchestra. The music sparkled along, with lots of things happening at once, in the same way as the harbour greets they eye. It is tempting to compare the music to a Ken Done painting, but this would not do it justice. The music strikes much deeper emotionally. In the composer's comments before the piece was played he mentioned that arranging it for the lesser resources of a string quartet involved pairing the music down to its essentials. I have not heard the chamber orchestra version in question, but as a string quartet piece it did not feel like an arrangement. If someone had suggested arranging this quartet for chamber orchestra, I would have said "*No need. It is wonderful as it is;*" a tribute to Nick's work and the quartet's performance.

Philip Glass' String Quartet No 2 "*Company*" worked well with a mesmerising minimalism and its concomitant glacial harmonic progress. Interestingly none of the short movements finished with a cadence; they just petered out. An interesting piece, well performed.

Sally Whitwell (also from Sydney) introduced the world premier of her String Quartet No 1 "*Face to the Sun*". This is her first composition for string quartet

and she implied she had some robust guidance from the players in the drafting of the work. That said, the work was strikingly successful, not withstanding that it was a first “attempt”. Each movement was based on a flower (Banksia, Boronia, Everlasting Daisy and Gumnut flower) and the movements were all evocative and engaging. I especially enjoyed the prickly Banksia and also the Boronias, each seemingly with their own independent rhythm, swaying in the wind.

The composer employed quite thick textures on the whole; all four instruments playing nearly all the time. It is an interesting compositional choice for pieces about flowers!

This impressive work deserves a permanent place in the repertoire. Well done Sally!

The other world premier in this concert was by Joe Twist, the Brisbane born composer, resident in what is now the land of Trump. “*Spongebob’s Romantic Adventure*” is a bit of fun; a sort of latter-day Till Eulenspiegel. The piece ranges over Tchaikovsky-like romantic violin solos to jazz and a good old fashion hoedown. An entertaining piece to let the imagination run free.

Two twentieth century pieces followed interval, both rarely performed but worth hearing. Gershwin wrote “Lullaby” as an harmony and counterpoint exercise while a student and he studied Debussy and Schoenberg in preparation. There are some Debussian colourations to be found but mostly it is tending towards jazzy syncopation and not much sign of Schoenberg... There is nothing very challenging in this work but it is certainly enjoyable.

The piece “*Echoes for String Quartet*” by Bernard Herrmann (the composer of many film scores including Hitchcock’s “Psycho”) is a different matter. He wrote this late in life and it a serious and intensely introspective work. As such it is well beyond the scope of his film music. There are many slow and muted passages which require considerable concentration from performers and audience alike, but it is a work well worth the effort.

There are string quartets that engage audiences by their sheer will and force of playing. This is not the Acacia Quartet. They approach the music with humility and theirs is an invitation to the listener to engage. This is a great quality in a quartet. Long may it reign. Lets have more of this brave programming and wonderful performance.

**Review for:**

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