

ACACIA QUARTET PRESENTS HARBOUR LIGHT @ THE UTZON ROOM, SYDNEY OPERA HOUSE

NOVEMBER 13, 2016 PAUL NOLAN

Acacia Quartet's most recent concert, **Harbour Light**, flowed with luminous success around an appreciative audience in the Utzon Room space. The audience were given no less than two commissioned world premiere works by Australian composers. The concert's title work, *Harbour Light*, was performed for the first time in a shiny new intimate guise for string quartet, pared down from its original orchestration for larger string ensemble.

The innate skill of Acacia Quartet to create and convey layered atmosphere came to the fore to unify the programme of six diverse works. The sprawling concert sequence evolved with successive and separate styles of light. Works with extra-musical hues and unique structures were finely wrought by the quartet. Regardless of compositional character, the communication to the audience was clear, beautifully balanced and evocative.

On a daylight-savings evening so close to our beloved Sydney Harbour, Australian composer **Nick Wales'** *Harbour Light* was a textural treat linking us to our immediate surroundings with which to start. As we listened, sitting close to the water, the piece shimmered, shone, moved fluidly and offered much in the way of colour and compact sentiment. In the guardianship of Acacia Quartet, it did not suffer in the process of reduction from larger forces.

Compact sentiment and exquisite minimalist rendering followed in the quartet's interpretation of **Philip Glass'** *String Quartet No 2 'Company'*. Well nuanced and never overplayed, it was an accurate salute to Glass' aesthetic and intricacies of revolving thematic minutiae.

Prior to interval, we heard Acacia Quartet present two very distinct voices in contemporary Australian composition. The world premieres of two Australian compositions were effectively juxtaposed with the individuality of Philip Glass. The new works were as arresting for their sonic effect as well as the impact on a concert environment in the way Glass introduced listeners to a new concert experience.

A highlight of the evening was the premiere of **Sally Whitwell's** *String Quartet No 1*, the rewarding local soundscape with the subtitle *'Face to the Sun'*. Each of the four movements sketches aspects of Australian flora. Time periods which once inspired emblematic transfer of these qualities to people's names, such as in the

time of Whitwell's grandmother, named Beryl Boronia, are celebrated via this fine musical illustration.

This clever writing draws on a legacy of lush quartet sound from yesteryear as well as effects from the very modern arsenal of string playing. Both styles of playing were capably offered up by Acacia Quartet, as the shapes and character of banksias, boronias, everlasting daisies and gumnuts were brought to life via charming and exciting vignettes from shifting time periods.

In a real shift of character prior to interval, the second premiere work was by the Australian-born **Joe Twist**. It was an exciting caricature and romp through stock standard musical styles. *Spongebob's Romantic Adventure* continued the crescendo in boldness and momentum of colour which this concert programme's first half was providing. Melodrama, stylistic tongue-in-cheek proximity and ultimately an hilarious hoedown variation of the Spongebob TV theme were played vibrantly, ensuring the work's impact in a formal audience setting. The piece has many future performance possibilities for the quartet. Families and children would love it.

Following interval, larger works from American composers brought the listening experience into a new dimension with evocative music from Gershwin and film score composer **Bernard Herrmann**. These sustained works were a satisfying way to conclude the evening's diversity. *Lullaby* (1919) by **George Gershwin** goes a long way past its original purpose as an exercise in harmony for the student. From its opening, the challenging and delicate exchange between quartet members created a seamless fabric under a high but hushed first violin. The inclusion of this piece was an extension of the calibre of string quartet blend and atmosphere heard in the rest of the concert. It also introduced the beautiful work and Gershwin's output in this genre to many.

The sprawling and fantastic *Echoes for string quartet* by Bernard Herrmann led us through filmic, intense and purely beautiful soundscapes which filled the Utzon Room space. The complex and segmented work with shifting inflection and mood was well negotiated by Acacia Quartet.

The excited reception of this and all works from the audience was proof of Acacia Quartet's effective gifting on this night to us of delicate narratives, intensities, colours and shapes found in compositions for the string quartet from last century to now.