

Classic strings to their bows

William Yeoman Monday, 20 February 2017 7:05PM



LA-based Calder Quartet. Picture: Autumn de Wilde

CONCERT

Beethoven and Beyond

5 stars

Calder Quartet

Winthrop Hall

REVIEW WILLIAM YEOMAN

This group of three concerts, performed across as many days from Friday through to Sunday as part of PIAF's Chamber Music Series curated by Yarmila Alfonzetti, showcased the talents of one of today's leading string quartets, LA-based Calder Quartet. It also showcased the genius of Beethoven at its most refined and intimate, alongside the unique, vital voices of three leading contemporary composers.

But few who were present at the sold-out Saturday afternoon concert will disagree that the highlight of the series was a profoundly moving performance of Brahms' Clarinet Quintet with clarinettist Ashley Smith.

That's not to say the Calders didn't extract drama and sublimity from the selection of Beethoven's string quartets. Each of the three concerts opened with one of the Old Master's early Opus 18 quartets; two closed with one of his searching, refulgent late quartets, with only the second concert including the middle-period quartet in F minor, the *Quartetto Seriososo*, before finishing with the Brahms.

Each musician — violinists Benjamin Jacobson and Tereza Stanislav, violist Jonathan Moerschel and cellist Eric Byers — played throughout with flawless ensemble, impeccable intonation and serene concentration. Yet it was the barely restrained passion which lifted these performances into another sphere.

That's also not to say the Calders didn't reaffirm their considerable facility in performing new music, with stand-out performances of, in concert order, Thomas Ades' *The Four Quarters*, Esa-Pekka Salonen's *Homunculus* and Anders Hillborg's *Kongsgaard Variations*.

All three works exhibited that multiple layering of texture, technique and emotional tone that exemplifies the best of new music — neither alienating nor anodyne. For my money, it was Hillborg's variations on a theme used in

Beethoven's Piano Sonata Opus 111, floating "aimlessly through the centuries" as the composer writes in a program note, which came out on top for sheer beauty, mystery and a blissful sense of repose as it settled on the theme itself.

That same sense of repose, this time magnified a hundredfold and tinged with an indescribable melancholy, was also present at the end of the final movement of Brahms' Clarinet Quintet, when a very different theme returned, as the sun set and the dying light filtered through Winthrop Hall's magnificent rose window to bathe the interior in an ethereal orange-yellow glow. It was a fitting end to a performance characterised by the most subtle and exquisite balance and phrasing, with Smith's floating, plangent tone and deeply expressive playing matched by the Calders' unerring instinct for that distinctive light and shade usually so jealously guarded by the heart.

The Calder Quartet perform tonight at the Albany Entertainment Centre as part of PIAF Great Southern. See perthfestival.com.au.