

Review: Calder Quartet (Utzon Room Series)

★★★★½ Cutting edge Beethoven from La La Land foursome.

Utzon Room, Sydney Opera House

February 26, 2017

Sydney's crème de la crème Utzon Series chamber music season got under way in stylish fashion with a beautifully structured and compelling performance of Beethoven's own favourite of his 16 quartets, the C sharp minor Op. 131, by the American Calder Quartet.

Making their Sydney debut, and fresh from their appearances at the Perth Festival, the Los Angeles-based ensemble was without its regular second violinist, Andrew Bulbrook, who is on paternity leave and was replaced seamlessly by LA Chamber Orchestra assistant concertmaster Teresa Stanislav.

Nothing was lost in the transition with tight ensemble work and intuitive interplay very much features of this 70-minute recital.

Led by Benjamin Jacobson, the ensemble gets its name from American sculptor and father of the mobile artwork, Alexander Calder, and like their namesake they too pride themselves on being innovative, mixing up the old mainstream repertoire with interesting new works.

For this recital they found the perfect complement to the Beethoven in Swedish composer Per Anders Hillborg's *Korngsgaard Variations*. This 2006 work was dedicated to a couple who co-founded the Arietta winery in California whose label features a reproduction of a snatch of Beethoven's

autograph score for the arietta variation theme from the final movement of his Op. 111 Piano Sonata.

Tonal and accessible, the 15-minute work nevertheless includes some enjoyable experimental effects, including “rewind” passages where rapid sweeping bowed chords give the impression of a reel-to-reel tape played backwards, and at one point there was a skeletal feel as the four players played interweaving harmonies *sul ponticello*.

At other times Jonathan Moerschel’s viola and cellist Eric Byers were given some lovely lyrical solos over a hazy harmonic chorale.

Beethoven’s theme only becomes recognisable near the end when it is played in quartet before evaporating into a puff of high slides and harmonics.

The 14th quartet was a treat from start to finish with Jacobson’s naturally sweet tone balanced by power and passion when needed throughout the extraordinary seven interlinked movements.

These qualities were well matched by his colleagues from the fugal opening movement, which so impressed Wagner as “the saddest thing ever said in notes”, through to the relentless surging momentum of the finale.

This was a reading hewn from granite but which, nevertheless, captured the poetry and nobility of the slow sections and the misplaced accents and mercurial emotional shifts of the quicker movements.

As cream on the cake for the afternoon program the Calders performed the delightful and witty final movement from Beethoven’s Op. 18 No 4 Quartet.

Subscribe to *Limelight* Magazine (only \$16 for 3 issues)