

SIGNUM saxophone quartet: Australia Tour 2022

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LIMELIGHT
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by Brett Allen-Bayes on 11 November, 2022

Signum Saxophone Quartet & Kristian Winther (Musica Viva Australia)

In its Australian debut, the sax quartet, with violin, performs a seamless program of Bach, Weil and Gershwin, showcasing an exemplary sense of balance, clarity and tone.

Developed in the early 19th century by its namesake Adolphe Saxe, the saxophone has held a



peripheral position in concert music, at best. The instrument was welcomed in marching bands and later jazz, where we still tend to count its finest exponents – Charlie Parker, John Coltrane, Wayne Shorter. During the last century, the French

showed a fascination for the instrument leading composers like Debussy, Ravel and Françaix to write for the instrument. Yet it has remained a specialized area. The idea of a quartet of such instruments is rarer still. In fact my only previous live encounter with this format was in an Adelaide Festival performance by the Rauschèr Saxophone Quartet in Philip Glass's Concerto for Saxophone Quartet and Orchestra.

For their first Australian tour, Musica Viva has chosen to present the Signum Saxophone Quartet with Australian violinist Kristian Winther in a diverse and attractive program of arrangements of works by Bach, Weill, Bernstein and Gershwin. **From the opening phrases of Bach's familiar *Italian Concerto*, it was apparent that here was something very special, if not unique. This acclaimed group brought to bear a seemingly endless variety**

of tonal colour and effects. The sense of balance, clarity and tone was exemplary. Here, the quartet became an Italianate 'kit o' whistles' which could have stepped out of the

Renaissance, with the baritone underpinning the architecture and counterpoint that is so central to Bach. The central *adagio* was more than smooth; it was seamless, proving an ideal pivot for the work's two outer movements. It was apparent why many such quartets have turned to this contrapuntal master.

From here it was on to Weimar Berlin and Kurt Weill's undervalued Violin Concerto (1924) where the accompaniment is provided by winds, brass, percussion and four double basses. It is a work which reflects upon his study with the esteemed contrapuntist Ferruccio Busoni and points the way towards his later stage works. This new arrangement by Jessica Wells is very fine, whilst reducing the forces to a mere quintet. Here was a performance where everything worked. All five musicians were equal collaborators, so the sense of balance was more akin to chamber music than the tussle often heard in concerto performances. Wells can be highly commended for her judicious ability to know what to leave in and out. In fact, there is a clarity of thought and purpose here that the original setting lacks. This is a transcription, which I hope to be able to return to again and again.

The latter half of the program landed in much more approachable territory – concert music which has been refracted through jazz. George Gershwin's *Three Preludes*, generally heard as solo piano pieces, capture the quintessence of his compositional style. Transcriptions for various instrumental groups are numerous. Here, the saxophone quartet, with its jazz associations and its seemingly endless varieties of instrumental tonal colour, firmly bring them to life in an affirming fashion. From Gershwin, it's a side step in a way, rather than a jump, to Leonard Bernstein. With his popular *Symphonic Dances from West Side Story*, he creates the most successful synthesis of American music, bringing together such seemingly disparate influences as Stravinsky, jazz and Latin rhythms. And all of that is caught impeccably within this joyous performance and its passion and seemingly unlimited palette of colours and instrumental effects.

The finale lay in a short homage by the recently departed jazz pianist Chick Corea to Miles Davis's and Gil Evans' *Sketches of Spain*, simply called *Spain*. Commencing with the familiar *adagio* from Rodrigo's *Concierto de Aranjuez* before breaking into a little Latin funk, the work

muses on those Spanish colours and rhythms. This provides the ideal closer with backhanded praise of 20th-century concert music, ingeniously fractured through jazz and improvisation.

LINK [Signum Saxophone Quartet & Kristian Winther \(Musica Viva Australia\) \(limelightmagazine.com.au\)](https://limelightmagazine.com.au/signum-saxophone-quartet-kristian-winter-musica-viva-australia)