

SIGNUM saxophone quartet: Australia Tour 2022

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The West Australian

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Signum Saxophone Quartet and Kristian Winther play Perth Concert Hall for Musica Viva Australia



Violinist Kristian Winther with Guerino Bellarosa, Alan Luzar, Blaz Temperle and Jacopo Taddei of Signum Saxophone Quartet on tour for Musica Viva. Credit: Sue Graham

Looking for all the world like a progressive rock band, German-based Signum Saxophone Quartet brought a dazzling light touch to Bach's Italian Concerto at Perth Concert Hall on Monday.

On tour with Musica Viva Australia, the foursome displayed an animated yet delicate style in the Allegro introduction, sinuous contrapuntal lines interweaving with organic energy the Baroque master would surely applaud. The Andante second movement dawned in softspoken alto-tenor duet (Jacopo Taddei and Alan Luzar) with rhythmic baritone (Guerino Bellarosa) giving way to an ethereal soprano lead (Blaz Kemperle) rolling over the top of understated chords with mellifluous ease. Tenor took the melody deep inside the ensemble for a more mellow impact, morphing back to soprano over mournful harmony to close. Joyful dance broke out in the Presto finale, crisp rhythm in alto and tenor sustaining soprano then taking the lead, mix and repeat, in a perpetuum mobile of polished precision.

Australian violinist Kristian Winther joined in Kurt Weill's Concerto for Violin and Wind Orchestra, arranged by Jessica Wells, modulating clarinet, trumpet, flute and drum parts for the saxophone's voice and dynamics. This was "No Mack the Knife", Winther explained; atonal yet lush melody, love songs and military marches, a jumble of 1920s Weimar German influences. A modernist canon in sax summoned violin to complement complex harmonies; dark tones interspersed with sweetness. One irresolute chord after another kept the ensemble and audience always guessing, violin feverishly bowing just above the saxes, though at times dynamically shaded. Belltones in the group paused then regathered momentum in a menacing chorus triggering even more fireworks from Winther in cadenza form; stuttering to a close, again irresolute. A nocturne portrayed the mystery of the night in bird-like squawks moving to a playful romp, violin bowing then pizzicato as febrile hoots channelled night owls. A folkloric fiddle figure flipped the sound to a dawn chorus and then a cerebral cadenza, almost Romantic in style and fiendishly challenging. A serenade to follow had violin in high harmonics over a jaunty ensemble, the lead passing to soprano over pizzicato violin and back, with lower voices redolent of plucked strings. Violin took the high ground over jagged accompaniment in the Allegro finale, with outbreaks of woodwind energy drawing a sharper attack from Winther's bow. Trills and tremolos softened the ambience for saxes and soloist then built tempo in ever more anarchic manner towards a comical conclusion.

After the interval, saxes found more familiar ground in Gershwin, Bernstein and Chic Corea.

Gershwin's Three Preludes rang in blue notes and jazz rhythms in breezy style for the Allegro introduction; a vintage sound. Mellow intonation in alto then soprano over dark tenor and bass led in a melody descending then rising through the ensemble to a soprano channelling muted trumpet then clarinet in cahoots with alto. Mournfully moody baritone set a sombre tone for alto then soprano to wail an undulating lament throwing to an almost Classical finale, though blue to the last note of the cadence.

Bernstein's Symphonic Dances from West Side Story brought a parade of stage and screen favourites, starting with the tritone leitmotif and progressing through gentle jazz themes and lilting rhythm to thrilling glissando effects in the Prelude; cheekily fatalistic as the original score. Something's Coming brought softer, breathier notes across the range; Tonight was mournfully mellow again, baritone syrupy sweet while soprano and alto warbled; America opened in claps then a rumbustious romp in broken rhythm and energy, with a footfall full of grace to belie the pace. Cool echoed the Prelude in tuneful timbre far from more recent "cool" jazz; Somewhere brought a reverie of gently rolling waves, a carillon of tender whispers, prayerful, even hymn-like in aspiration. I Feel Pretty turned playful again, the lead passed around the higher voices as baritone anchored the mix; and finally Mambo was defiantly disciplined down to a dramatic dismount.

Corea's Spain caught the timeless air of the Concierto de Aranjuez in tenor, passionate and poignant; alto and baritone joining the lament then throwing to a soaring soprano before breaking to dance and rocking out in the final flourish.

As encore, Libertango (Astor Piazzolla) first cooled the room in hushed, urgent tones, summoning a digeridoo-like howl in baritone then tolling out in the cadence.

Winther then rejoined the group for Ernest Bloch's Prayer, a soulful chorus supporting a plaintive violin lead, then soprano with violin descant; lower voices as one through to the fatalistic close.