

## **SIGNUM saxophone quartet: Australia Tour 2022**

**Perth Concert Hall 14/11/2022**



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# **Silence speaks volumes in sax triumph**

**European cult icons Signum Saxophone Quartet join celebrated violinist Kristian Winther for a powerhouse performance that reveals the many colours of the sax to an awestruck audience, writes Angela Ho.**



Given the excitement accompanying live music's post-COVID revival, a concert hall filled with stunned silences is surely not good news. Yet these are the silences that the Perth Concert Hall audience learns to hang onto during the Signum Saxophone Quartet's tour de force, featuring the premiere of Jessica Wells' gifted arrangement of the Kurt Weill *Violin Concerto, Op 12* with celebrated violinist Kristian Winther.

The hyped Australian debut of this ensemble, enabled by Musica Viva, comes loaded with glittering displays of artistic imagination underpinned by technical prowess and clockwork ensemble playing.

The diverse program is a test in open-minded listening, balancing the "dangerous" caricatures of Weill's modernist counterpoint (as rescored by Wells) with the classical safety of Bach's *Italian Concerto* and more familiar jazz names, such as Gershwin and Bernstein. The intention of it all — to sample the dexterity, dynamic and tonal range of the enigmatic saxophone.

The Cologne-based quartet present as laidback and casual ahead of the technically challenging first half, but there's nothing laidback or casual about their playing. Weaving through the tight lockstep of Bach's contrapuntal passages is an undeniable sense of magnetism and ensemble chemistry that holds the audience captive.

Their intense engagement with craft and intuitive familiarity with each other onstage plays out in Weill's *Violin Concerto*, written in 1924. Winther joins the quartet for a pared-down arrangement of the virtuosic work, originally scored for winds, brasses, percussion and four double basses. The half-hour-long concerto forms a core tenet of the evening's explorative programming, with its singing lines and discordant harmonic fits. The Canberra-based violinist introduces the work as a composition that holds beautiful integrity in its unique, individual parts, parts that don't necessarily speak directly to each other, but are instead reflective of the dark period of history to which Weill was responding. In rearranging the work for saxophone quartet and solo violin, Wells asks of the saxophone what new listeners probably don't even know the instrument is capable of tonally — capturing the full spectrum of colour available to an orchestra (percussion included). The rearrangement offers brilliant textural clarity, with Winther performing true to his talents as both a soloist and regular chamber musician. For a concerto, the piece is less soloist against chorus, more five parts equally responding to one another. There's so much life and magnetism in the way the Signum Saxophone Quartet collaborate onstage, and Winther's addition is effortless.

The applause welcoming Signum back onstage after the interval has scarcely ended before alto saxophonist Jacopo Taddei explodes into Gershwin's *Three Preludes*. It's another example of how the ensemble's intensity and charismatic confidence plays out in practice — a kind of assuredness that the musical adventure they're envisioning is one the audience will unquestioningly embark on, too. There is nothing to suggest otherwise this evening.

The concert's second half is filled with the energetic, jazz-flavoured showtunes most have come to associate with the instrument. The custom arrangement of songs from Bernstein's *West Side Story* delivers undeniable audience satisfaction, complete with percussive slap tongue, stomping and inevitable foot-taps and purring along to "Maria".

The varied reactions to Chick Corea's *Spain*, as well as the two encore pieces, aptly capture the mood of the evening: revelatory applause and simultaneously awed silence for what four saxophonists and a violinist can achieve in the space of two hours.

As tenor saxophonist Alan Lužar explains afterwards in the Meet the Artist talk, maybe all we require is an imagination, and a willingness to explore stories in sound. "If you can imagine the sound you want to make, you can make it. Executing it just comes with experience."

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