

The West Australian

INTO A BRAVE NEW WORLD

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By William Yeoman

Sunday evenings are usually a time for unwinding after a long working week and a weekend of intensive housework or socializing. But for the brave souls attending this adventurous recital by visiting American string quartet The Pacifica Quartet it was unsettling avant-gardism all the way. Acclaimed for their performances of contemporary and classical repertoire alike, the Pacifica Quartet presented three 20th-century string quartets in ascending order of appeal and descending order of substance. This was a good strategy, as the centenarian American composer Elliott Carter's Fifth String Quartet requires almost as much concentration from the audience as it does from the players. Mirroring both the rehearsal process and the interior world of feelings and ideas, Carter's tightly constructed and, to the novice listener, all but impenetrable, work is both a conversation about and engagement with itself. The Pacifica Quartet, which has recently been touring all five of Carter's string quartets in single concerts and has recorded them for Naxos, brought both authority and spontaneity to its interpretation, each player communicating a distinctive identity not only through the supple musical mechanism but with the entire face and body.

The late Hungarian composer Gyorgy Ligeti's first string quartet *Metamorphoses nocturnes* was by contrast more accessible, more visceral and even more fun, with musical jokes freely mingling with ferocious toccata-like episodes and quieter, more mysterious passages.

Here again the Pacifica Quartet displayed an almost superhuman technical and musical prowess, delivering every phrase with a muscular certitude that swept aside any occasional suspicion of perfunctory writing on the composer's part.

Ferocious is certainly a word that comes to mind when listening to George Crumb's *Black Angels: Thirteen Images from the Dark Land*, a lurid evocation of an America plunged in the twin mires of the Vietnam war and social upheaval.

Crumb intended the work as a piece of surreal musical theatre and that's precisely what the audience got, with the members of the Pacifica Quartet, their faces often contorted with anguish, moving about the stage variously to smash tam-tams, shake maracas, scream into microphones, play water-tuned glasses — or simply to play their instruments, sometimes devilishly, sometimes angelically.