

# HUNTINGTON ESTATE MUSIC FESTIVAL

Huntington Estate Winery, Mudgee, November 28 to December 2  
Reviewed by Roger Covell  
Sydney Morning Herald

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Cicadas supplying a distant, softly pulsing undertone to string quartets and a blue-faced honeyeater valiantly maintaining its variations on a two-note call through three movements of a Beethoven piano-violin sonata were far from disagreeable additions to this year's very well attended and hugely rewarding Huntington Music Festival. But such sounds are typical of country-based concerts; and there was unstinted pleasure but no real originality in the festival's provision of a flamenco performance under the stars after Friday night's al fresco dinner.

What makes Huntington stand out from a majority of winery-based musical events is that it is a sustained (but not solemn) exploration of established chamber music works and new compositions, performed by leading musicians in a big barrel room that happens, improbably, to possess wonderfully true and warm acoustics. Even Kim Currie's elegantly healthy catering is calculated to preserve festival audiences from the faltering attentiveness produced by too much "fine dining."

Tim Stevens, Huntington's new proprietor, has followed the example of his much-admired predecessors in giving a very free hand to his artistic director. Carl Vine doesn't come with an orchestra, as Richard Tognetti did, but brings with him his own creative flair as one of our best composers and the local and international connections of Musica Viva Australia.

These connections were able to secure as a festival guest Alina Ibragimova, a young Russian-born, London-based violinist on the edge of international fame. Aged 22 and looking 16, she introduced herself to sensational effect: seeming to relax into certainty in solos, duos and trios, maintaining supernormal bow control, even at pianissimo levels, and – a nice touch, this – playing as first violin in an ensemble of colleagues from the Goldner and Flinders quartets in Brahms's gloriously songful G major string sextet.

Elizabeth Schumann, an ultra-fine young American pianist with a new Vine sonata in her baggage, was an international guest of comparable quality. Other local contributions of spirit and flair came from karak percussion, the Australian String Quartet, the New Sydney Wind Quintet, the pianists Kristian Chong and Benjamin Martin, the double-bass virtuoso Kees Boersma and the baritone Teddy Tahu Rhodes. Ken Tribe, Musica Viva's senior guiding spirit for decades, has become a champion individual commissioner of important chamber works. At 93 years of age he lucidly outlined his philosophy of chamber music in a festival outdoor chat with Vine and Peter Sculthorpe, the two composers of his latest commissions, offered on behalf of Musica Viva and directed to the Goldner Quartet. Sculthorpe has written his String Quartet No 17 in playful awareness that with this number he goes one better (numerically) than Beethoven's tally of complete string quartets. With this in mind, Sculthorpe has drawn his work's motivic kernels from the little motto themes that Beethoven placed at the head of the final movement of his last quartet, accompanied by the words (in German): "Must it be? It must be."

Sculthorpe's most obvious references to this musical-verbal dialogue are in his prelude and postlude: book-ends around three songlike movements in which

the composer dwells on thoughts of assurance, deliverance and love in celebration of friendship. The music, seemingly rather slight on paper, generated in performance its composer's unmistakable musical personality and yearning sensibility.

In Carl Vine's new fifth quartet it is possible to hear the exact moment when metaphorical windows open on the sinister corridors of the opening section, letting in a breeze of lyrical and rhythmic contrasts and culminating in a final section in which gentle syncopations and mildly astringent chording provide an attractive, deftly managed close to a work that invites many re-hearings. Another Vine quartet, his third, was part of a later concert and confirmed its status as a masterpiece in a Goldner Quartet performance of savage brilliance that cries out urgently for permanent recording.