

Music

Scent of Memory: smell and classical music prove an intoxicating combination

In the Australian Art Quartet's experimental new project, the group taps into a wider movement: bringing the sense of smell to performance

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In their latest performance, Scent of Memory, the Australian Art Quartet pair the sounds of Tchaikovsky, Gurdjieff, and Mountfort with the smell of handpicked perfumes. Photograph: AAQ

Even now, when I get an unexpected whiff of the perfume my mother once wore, I am transported - suddenly, violently almost - back to childhood.

I'm back there, hanging around her dressing table, getting in the way, picking up things I shouldn't, watching longingly as she gets ready to go out. Her special night-time perfume for me meant fresh, blow-dried hair, hot tongs, pots of blush, and the heady promise of an adult world that seemed impossibly far away.

The Australian Art Quartet knows the power of smell. In Scent of Memory, which ended on Thursday after three sellout shows at the canary-coloured [Yellow House Sydney](#), the waft of handpicked perfumes are mixed with the sounds of Tchaikovsky, Gurdjieff, and Mountfort.

Since launching its 2016 season, the Art Quartet has aimed to jolt classical music fans out of their shell. Past events have included the [Butt Naked Salon](#), featuring composer Andrew Batt-Rawden in nothing but his birthday suit, and [Shocking Cliches](#), in which the musicians were hooked up to electric shock pads.

Scent of Memory is a gentler, softer, but no less sensual experience.

Creating the smells is Mexican-born, Paris-educated, New York-based perfumer Carlos Huber. Also a historic preservationist and architect, Huber sees ingredients in a scent "like the colours in the painting".

He is an accomplished storyteller: before every piece of music begins, Huber describes how his smells were conceived and constructed, each one designed to evoke particular historical moments or moods.

"Scents have the ability to bypass rational thought - it's pure emotion," the Art Quartet's artistic director James Beck explains. "That's very powerful: the way it can trigger long-lost memories. The idea of locked parts of our mind."

Beck wants us to "withdraw from our devices" to provide all-encompassing recitals that celebrate the here and now, and which, crucially, are able to take classical music to a new, wider audience. "We can't just sit here in black clothes" and expect concertgoers to come to us, he says. "It's about responding to those people who don't necessarily have academic or classical [music] knowledge."

Incorporating smell into performance is challenging: it is hard to bottle and harder to distribute. But the Australian Art Quartet is tapping into a wider movement. Last year saw a [revival of Smell-O-Vision in cinema](#) and we are [closer to having scented messages on our smart phones than ever before](#). When it works - and that's a big when - it's a surefire way to saturate the senses.

Tonight, however, there's no flashy devices to distribute the smells: just paper scent sticks that we hold up to our noses. Behind the stage a small stall from Potts Point home décor store Becker Minty sells Huber's perfumes - yours for just \$249. Such bottled luxury might sit uneasily if the music wasn't so moving, performed with passion and zest by Beck on cello, Dan Russell on violin I, Anna Albert on violin II, and Alina Zamfir on viola.

For Estonian Arvo Pärt's *Fratres*, the quartet takes us on a journey not to the 1970s, when the piece was composed, but to a 17th century Japanese galleon on the Pacific. It's loaded, Huber tells us, with rare cargo: spices, black pepper, Spanish leather, frankincense. Handing out his woody, earthy perfume *Nanban*, with its notes of Malabar black pepper, Persian saffron, black tea, myrrh and sandalwood, Huber conjures up "roasted coffee, smoky, dark" that plays on Pärt's sounds.

Others smells follow: the soapy, fresh scent of sage, cinnamon, orange flower water and Moroccan rosemary in the perfume *Él*, evoking the naked skin, and matched to *Danzón No 2* by Mexican composer Arturo Márquez. *Coco* and *chilli* represent the riches of the New World in the fragrance *Anima Dulcis*, paired up with George Gurdjieff's *Chant from a Holy Book*.

Then there's the formal masculinity - with its faint champagne hint and floral flourish - of *Bouttonnière No 7* released to Tchaikovsky's *Scherzo & Finale from Quartet No 1*. It evokes a past era of black tie operas frequented by men wearing white gardenia, and flirtatious grand dames.

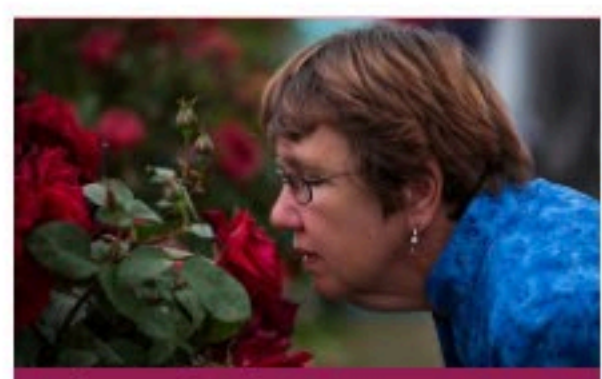
Scent and music together are a intoxicating combination, potent and overpowering. On Wednesday night rain rattled wildly outside as the concert unfolded. Hours earlier Trump had won. But in this small corner of Potts Point, [Sydney](#) - in the hues of the Yellow House - it felt like another world.



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Carlos Huber of Arquiste, who collaborated with the Australian Art Quartet for Scent of Memory. Photograph: Kevin Tachman



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