

Limelight Magazine > News > Quartet's innovative concert hopes to get up some noses

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# Quartet's innovative concert hopes to get up some noses

by Angus McPherson on October 14, 2016 (October 14, 2016) filed under [Classical Music](#) | [Chamber](#) | [Comment Now](#)



The Australian Art Quartet



The Australian Art Quartet aims to appeal to an audience's sense of sound and smell with help from a leading perfumier.

Have you even wondered what Tchaikovsky's music would smell like? Or wished to sample the unique bouquet of Arvo Pärt? The Australian Art Quartet is giving audiences the chance to smell the music in a synesthetic concert experience, *Scent of Memory*, in which fragrance designer Carlos Huber will augment the quartet's playing with an olfactory experience. "I've been fascinated by scent for a long time," the AAQ's Artistic Director and cellist James Beck told *Limelight*, "especially its ability to go straight to the heart and make otherwise faintly recalled experiences fresh again."

It was this deeply affecting power of scent on the mind – in many ways similar to that of music – that inspired the AAQ's innovative performance project. "The Patrick Süskind novel *Perfume* was on the bedside table of the western world in the 1990s and I was no exception," said Beck, "so the idea that a scent can motivate, control or excite beyond rational thought has become part of a collective consciousness. But no one (to my knowledge) has explored how this could interplay with another ephemeral art form – music."



The Australian Art Quartet

The programme will feature works by Tchaikovsky, Pärt, George Ivanovich Gurdjieff and Australian cellist-composer Helen Mountfort. Huber, the mastermind behind the fragrance collection *Arquiste*, will be pairing scents with each of the works performed. "Carlos is a scent designer, but he came to this creative point after advanced studies in Architecture in Paris and Historic Preservation at Columbia University," said Beck. "He creates fragrances with the specific intention to describe a specific time and place. So he presents a unique profile of intellectual rigour that stands out against a background of mega corporation chemists that churn out product and then hand it to marketing firms to create a flimsy narrative or celebrity-for-sale. Carlos is a unique character with a big life."

What does Beck think the music will smell like? "Well, I think Tchaikovsky is never far away from tobacco smoke," he said. "In fact the slow movement of the Tchaikovsky Quartet Op. 1 No 11 that we are playing in this concert is based on a folk tune Pyotr Ilyich heard the house painter whistling at his sister's Dacha in the summer of 1871. The words translate to something like 'Vanya sat on a divan and smoked a pipe'. But then I also feel that the Byzantine-inspired world of the Christian Orthodox Church would never be far away. Think incense and oils infused with frankincense and myrrh."



Fragrance designer Carlos Huber

But in the end, it's not up to Beck. "The plain fact of the matter is that Carlos is the one choosing what scent goes with what music! He feels that the finale of the quartet evokes the 'Opera Flower', as the gardenia was known in the late 19th-century and that the slow movements recall the polished and refined world *Fleur de Louis*. The audience will have to judge for themselves!"

The logistics of delivering scents to the audience took some planning. "We put a great deal of thought into this," explained Beck. "We have vaporisers at our disposal to fill the Yellow House concert space with fragrance, but on reflection we know that everyone has a highly personal response to scent intensity and character. Of course, that is what it is all about but we don't want to overwhelm people. So there are nine movements in the total concert, a scent for each one and they shall be distributed by hand on infused strips of paper with the name of the music and scent."

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