

Classical Voice of New England

JACK Quartet's Program at ICA Pleasing to the Eye, Challenging to the Ear

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This evening featured a concert at the new Institute of Contemporary Art on the waterfront by the acclaimed JACK string quartet, comprised of music by Iannis Xenakis, Salvatore Sciarrino, and four young composers; Felipe Lara, Adam Roberts, Kota Nakamura, and Roberto Toscano. The ensemble, so named for its members, John Pickford Richards (viola), Ari Streisfeld, Christopher Otto (violins), and Kevin McFarland (cello), has been making a name for itself across the country and internationally for its powerful and fluent executions of some of the most complex and demanding works in the modern repertoire. Their performance last night did not disappoint.

As the quartet's young virtuosos, dressed in sharp suit jackets, walked confidently yet unassumingly to center stage of the ICA's modern theatre, audience members at once sensed the intimacy and universality of the space. The simple set-up of 4 stands and chairs illuminated by a spotlight seemed almost miniature in the center of the relatively large stage, which was left mostly in darkness. The tiered seating placed the viewer in a position to look both at and look down upon the action on stage, yet the brightly colored orange chairs reflected vividly in the opposite wall of glass (which also provided a magnificent view of the harbor, quiet and serene at night).

The program order had to be changed, which was a shame because the original order would have flowed much better and been better balanced, but the reason for the change was admirable – one of the young composers was running late, and the quartet wanted all 4 of them to be present as their pieces were performed. Because of this, the concert opened with Salvatore Sciarrino's (b. 1947) String Quartet #7, a piece better suited for its original second slot, and the weakest piece on the program. Such a statement requires justification, and it seems that, in order to arrive at this justification, we must take a quick side trip to the nearest border of that realm of monsters that is modern music.

The JACK quartet is one of those ensembles from which one can expect to hear some of the most adventurous new music (and 'classics' like Xenakis), and that often means performances fairly deeply steeped in the avant-garde. Extra-musical effects, electronics, and explorations of sound itself are not uncommon in this realm, where so often the unifying elements of Western music of the Common Practice Era such as easily recognizable forms, repetition, and relatively simple harmonies are either avoided, purposely lampooned, or employed in a 'micro' level which results

in a complexity that even a trained ear may not be able to dissect upon 1st hearing. This in itself is not a bad thing; many of the classics of today (including some of the quartets of Haydn, Beethoven and Mozart) were the impossible-to-play noise of the past; without today's avant-garde we will never have tomorrow's traditions. But within any style, a question not only of craft but also quality arises. This is always a prickly subject because, good or bad, 'craft' can normally be agreed upon while 'quality' remains hopelessly subjective. Still, let us return to the concert to see these principles applied to the works on the program.

Sciarrino's composition (all works except Nakamura's were in single movements) opened with a gesture of a glissando, or a moving of the finger on the string to produce the violin equivalent of a trombone slide. It is very common for modern pieces, especially short ones, to focus on a specific element of sound or gesture rather than a theme or melody; here, Sciarrino chose the glissando. The problem was, glissandi were passed around, here long, there short, and the quartet started to sound like an awkward conversation. The piece became a lexicon of sorts, 13(hundred) ways of looking at a slide. Form was completely indistinguishable amid the content, and the only guarantee the audience had was that when one of the players raised his bow, it was a good bet he was about to play a glissando. This single-mindedness makes the piece a great one for a composition student to study to see the possibilities of the effect, but the content ended there. It's like in a great film, every detail combines to communicate the whole; even the costumes must be meticulously selected. But in the end, a film can't be comprised only of costumes, or it becomes a fashion show.

But enough negativity – the other works on the program, while equally challenging to the ear, exhibited high craft and quality. Their brevity allowed the intense sounds and passionate playing to remain fresh throughout the entire evening (although a 'down' piece would have been welcome). Roberto Toscano's (b.1982) String Quartet #1 reminded one of Ravel's "Noctuelles" from *Miroirs* – excited, fleeting sounds slipped in and out of existence, and the quartet maintained a strong level of continuity even through what seemed a section of group improvisation, that it might just as well have been a composed section of the piece. Both the quartet's and Toscano's voices shared the stage for a moment of intriguing musical conversation. The multi-sectional form within a single-movement structure was an interesting solution to writing a relatively substantial work in a constrained form.

The *Tangled Symmetries* and *Tran(slate)* of Adam Roberts (b. 1980) and Felipe Lara (b. 1979) respectively managed to gain coherency by presenting and then uniting many diverse elements. In Lara's work, a kaleidoscopic unity was arrived at by the contrapuntal juxtaposition of its myriad sonic effects. I was suspicious of the Roberts piece, because I felt reading the program note would take more time than listening to the piece (a threshold usually broken by composers who have a lot to say for pieces which say little on their own), but an additional (!) note by Jon Forshee touched upon an interesting and true point: he said that at the end of the piece he felt he wanted to listen again, and indeed Robert's composition established a cyclical feel through

which one felt arrival and departure as one and the same, and would have been completely open to the notion of starting the piece from the beginning after the last note had sounded.

Kota Nakamura's (b.1979) *In-ei* (which he indicates can be translated as "the state of subtlety") was cast in 3 miniature movements, which managed to establish a unity and a structure within each and across the entire work. Through various techniques, such as using extremes of range, sustained tones, or assigning each instrument certain melodic, textural, or rhythmic ideas, Nakamura created great diversity within an inherent unity which made the piece intensely satisfying and a perfect lead-in (Nakamura was 2nd to last even in the original program order) to the final work, Xenakis' (1922-2001) classic quartet *Tetras*.

At the risk of sounding curmudgeonly or ignorant, I can't help but write (with a little glee) what was my honest first impression of the piece, jotted down in the dark on a blank page of the program – this work definitely wins the award for the most generous use of extended performance effects, a statement which would seem decidedly less glib to anyone who had heard the other 5 pieces on the program. At this point, that bar had been set quite high, and Xenakis showed everyone how it was done with this work from 1983, a seemingly ancient time for this evening. It was an intelligent way to bring the concert to a close; the work and the composer obviously influenced everything else we had heard previously, and here at the end we were hearing the last word – which was ironically the first word – from the master orator himself.

The JACK quartet performed everything with mastery and confidence – to use an old cliché, they made it all look easy. The group is a formidable force for new music, raising our awareness of the cutting edge in music, while raising the bar for other ensembles out there. The setting of the ICA, with its ultra-modern theatre and equally entertaining view of the waterfront, was a nice compliment to the program and the ensemble.

One final note on something I found particularly satisfying, the graceful navigation of a pet peeve of mine – while the quartet graciously acknowledged all applause and dutifully bowed after each piece, it stayed on stage for nearly the whole program, exiting to the wings only at intermission and once in the 2nd half while a stage hand added another stand. At the end of the concert, we clapped, and they bowed. Once. And then they walked off stage – and stayed there. Yes, the well-deserved applause continued, but their decision not to return to the stage to bask yet again in the limelight was not a slight to an appreciative audience, but rather respect for the fact that there were only about 50 of us and the level of applause sustained, while lively, did not warrant another trip out. Contrast this to any other classical chamber concert in Boston, where the norm has become exiting and re-entering between every piece (to obligatory applause both times), and a minimum of 2 curtain calls afterward, often following in artificially rapid succession so as not to allow the applause to die out. There was no such pretense here – they played wonderfully, and we appreciated them. They were there to play, and we to listen; when both of our jobs were done, we went home satisfied, not feeling used but genuine.