

The Boston Globe

Jack Returns, Bracingly Modern

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November 12, 2009

Any young string quartet that presents a complete program of music by the formidable German avant-gardist Helmut Lachenmann is, shall we say, not messing around. That was what the New York-based Jack Quartet brought to the Goethe Institute last year for a concert in the composer's presence. On Tuesday night, the Jack returned to town, this time for a bracing performance in the sleek theater at the Institute of Contemporary Art.

The Jack lists both the Arditti and Kronos quartets among its teachers, but this program seemed distinctly in the orbit of the former group, with its fierce devotion to the legacy of the European post-war avant-garde. The program itself was a nice blending of big names and emerging ones. Bookending the evening were works by Salvatore Sciarrino and Iannis Xenakis, but everything in between was written by younger composers, several from the Boston area.

Sciarrino's Seventh Quartet employs his signature language of instrumental wisps and sighs to eloquent and sometimes haunting effect. Coming right on its heels, Roberto Toscano's first quartet seemed to strive for a similar theatricality of gesture, with its muted slides, ghostly trills, crushed chords, and persuasively understated final bars. By contrast, Adam Roberts's "Tangled Symmetries" was a high-energy workout for string quartet, full of frenetically scurrying passagework offset by quiet moments of a tense, searching stillness.

Felipe Lara's "Trans(late)" leaned on sharp attacks and various extended techniques (at one point, a rubber band on strings) to convey its expressive urgency, though not without a certain episodic quality. The spaciousness and timbral delicacy of Kota Nakamura's "In-ei" made for a strong contrast, its final notes drifting off as if carried by a night wind.

The Jack's performances throughout were precise and highly committed, but nothing quite prepared you for the explosive virtuosity in the group's closing traversal of Xenakis's "Tetras" of 1983. From its caterwauling glissandi to its pounding percussive sections, this is heady music of extreme complexity and visceral charge. At least on this occasion, it was also a vehicle for superb ensemble work from a quartet with a bright future.