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Bridging Classic and Modern Tunes

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Dominating the contemporary world of music, the JACK Quartet is a four-man super squad armed with bows and strings. Whether it is decoding 700-year-old musical scripts for a modern-day audience or distorting the vibrations of their stringed instruments bowing with metal springs, these young musicians remain dauntless.

“They have tackled a really difficult repertoire that is unlike anything being done in the U.S.,” JACK Quartet collaborator Aaron Cassidy said. “I could talk for 10 minutes straight about this quartet without any trouble.”

The UI Center for New Music will host a performance of the JACK Quartet at 7:30 p.m. Nov. 15 in the Riverside Recital Hall (formerly St. Thomas More Church). Admission is free.

Cassidy, a UK-based composer and conductor, is as passionate about this dynamic group of musicians as the musicians themselves are about experimenting with new approaches to music.

The members of the quartet met while attending the Eastman School of Music in Rochester, N.Y., where they discovered in one another a fervency for contemporary music. The group officially formed in 2005, but only began full concert schedules two years ago. Ari Streisfeld, the “A” in JACK and accomplished violinist, had not anticipated the quartet would so swiftly become the vogue ticket at concert halls in both North America and Europe.

“People have been responding really well to [JACK’s music],” Streisfeld said. “We play a lot of music people haven’t heard before or maybe have heard before but don’t get many opportunities to [experience] it because the music is very difficult to play.”

As a former professor of Streisfeld’s at Northwestern University, in Evanston, Ill., Cassidy recalled the piece he gave Streisfeld to play with such bizarre requests as wrapping his bow stick with tin foil and playing his violin with two A strings. He praised Streisfeld’s work as nothing less than brilliant.

“[The quartet’s] attention to detail is really impressive,” Cassidy said. Many ensembles often

settle for playing a difficult piece at a rudimentary level. But Cassidy said JACK consistently achieves unparalleled clarity and precision in its performances regardless of difficulty.

The core ambition of JACK is to promote the vast spectrum of modern music. Whereas many contemporary artists often find a certain aesthetic to submit to, the quartet members are continually trying new, interesting sounds unbound by any specific genres.

“Something they do really well is play all sorts of music, whether it’s wildly experimental, or European festival traditional music, or pop world-influenced music,” Cassidy said. “They can definitely shift their style; they’re very flexible.”

The JACK Quartet is awash with projects and collaborators.

At the UI, the ensemble will resuscitate a medieval piece of music — once a riddle of archaic musical script but now transcribed and arranged by Streisfeld with a polish of modern-day effects.

Other commissioned works on the JACK program promise to either ruffle rhythms into a state of pandemonium or dress sounds in beautiful textures.

“With our music, we want to open people’s minds to new ideas and new ways of hearing music,” Streisfeld said. “You shouldn’t go into a concert with the idea that you are going to relax. You should really listen and be involved, and you’ll find you will listen to things in whole new ways.”