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At Ease in T-Shirts or Suits, and with the Medieval or Modern

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The young, hip JACK Quartet has proved it can play a gig at a club. The first time I heard this brilliant ensemble was in October 2008 at [Le Poisson Rouge](#) in Greenwich Village. That night the players — young men in jeans and T-shirts — gave viscerally exciting performances of the complete works for string quartet by the thorny modernist composer Iannis Xenakis. The mostly young listeners, seated at tables sipping drinks, were eager to experience what must have seemed completely out there, modern music.

Can the quartet transfer this energy to a formal setting? Indeed it can. On Wednesday the JACK Quartet, in dark suits and ties, played at Merkin Concert Hall in a program sponsored by the Washington Square Contemporary Music Society. For this occasion the quartet offered an eclectic, thoughtful program, “From Ars Nova to New Arts.”

They began with three works by the 14th-century composer Guillaume de Machaut: a rondeau, a ballade and a motet, arranged by Ari Streisfeld, one of the JACK’s violinists. “Ars Nova” refers to the stylistic movement embodied by Machaut that brought greater expressivity and daring into medieval music. By beginning its contemporary program with Machaut, the quartet was claiming him as a pioneering ancestor.

Playing with appropriately thin vibrato and soft-spoken delicacy, it captured the stunning mix of restless counterpoint, ravishing modal harmonies and expressive austerity in the music, which, in this context, sounded almost modern.

David Dzubay’s “Threnody” (1987/1993) was an ideal follow-up. The music is a parody, “in the respectful sense,” the composer writes, of “Mille Regretz,” an alluring chanson by the Renaissance master Josquin des Prez. Mr. Dzubay fashioned musical layers, juxtapositions and riffs around the frame of the Josquin work. Some elements of the original are only glanced at; others are musically magnified.

In his brilliantly realized “Tran(slate)” (2008), the composer Felipe Lara transforms an earlier work for string quartet and electronics into a completely instrumental piece. All the bleeps, rings, loops, time delays and such of electronic music are evoked by the string players in a technically formidable, wildly varied work that evolves in sputtering sections. The performance was a tour

de force of intensity and color.

In the German composer Matthias Pintscher's "Study IV for Treatise on the Veil" (2009), a sustained exercise in quietude, the instruments play softly plucked pitches, melodic fragments, occasionally an abrupt chord, sometimes a rumbling arpeggio or almost inaudible riff, and so on. Yet in this riveting performance the minimal elements of this austere piece hung together to make something organic, even urgent.

Alex Ness's "Ideomania" (2009), in its premiere, baffled me. The piece is all spurts of fitful, spiraling music. Reconciling musical sound and noise was the plan. The players stood in the dark onstage and seemed to take their cues from a video of scrolling shapes and colors.

Zach Browning's 2008 String Quartet provided just what was needed to end the program: a propulsive, giddy, rocking piece, a rush of cyclic riffs and fractured meters. Was it just the context the JACK Quartet provided, or did the strange, chorale-like harmonies in the piece recall Machaut?