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JACK Quartet Offers New Music and Dynamic Variety

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The string quartet might be a 250-year-old contraption, but with a clutch of young, enthusiastic groups like the JACK Quartet, the form seems to be experiencing a boom.

The JACK musicians, looking about age 30 or less, perform and commission new music. They're comfortable appearing in trendy nightclubs or fancy concert halls, like the Library of Congress, where Friday night they played three new pieces, and one avant-garde holdover, for a regrettably small audience.

Two audience members were actually the composers Jeff Myers, whose microtonal and vaguely minimalist "Dopamine" began the concert, and Caleb Burhans, whose "Contritrus" received its world premiere.

A Library commission for the JACK Quartet, "Contritrus" contained more melody than the other pieces combined. Even so, it was sparse. Its forlorn, rocking notes and spacious harmonies evoked a satisfying Arvo Pärt-like timelessness. But when an earnest tune surged high in the violin, the piece veered uncomfortably close to film music.

The young German composer Matthias Pintscher's Study IV for "Treatise on the Veil" must be about the quietest music composed for string quartet. Equally fascinating and bewildering, Pintscher's drastically muted ("veiled") techniques made the music sound like it was being

played inside a glass jar. Wisps of barely audible tones fluttered by like puffs of air.

Conversely, “Tetras” by Iannis Xenakis (from 1983), is about as loud as a string quartet gets. It’s hard not to be in awe of this electric guitar-like shred-fest for strings. It’s jagged, raw and violent, pivoting instantly from one startling sound to the next, and yet not without humor, with its quacks, grunts, barks and slithering sirens.

The JACK Quartet, in terrific performances, proved that the quaint old string quartet, stretched to its limits, remains vital and entertaining.