

Review *Music*

The JACK Quartet, experimental and then some

By David Patrick Stearns

INQUIRER MUSIC CRITIC

Is it time to redraw the perimeters of music?

Apparently so, judging by the JACK Quartet's concert Saturday night in the Kimmel Center's Fresh Ink series.

The quartet, named for the first initials of its members, has a repertoire that makes the better-known Kronos and Arditti Quartets look traditional. The group emerged (from the Eastman School of Music) as perhaps the single most intrepidly experimental quartet on the horizon.

JACK's program in the Kimmel's underground Innovation Studio often had only a passing interest in typical notes of music: Jeff Myers' 2007 *dopamine* had the instruments retuned for the sake of achieving microtone chords



JUSTIN BERNHAUT

JACK Quartet (from left): Violinists John Pickford Richards and Christopher Otto; cellist Kevin McFarland; violist Ari Streisfeld.

amid chugging, minimalist rhythm.

Aaron Cassidy's 2002 *String Quartet* was a slippery net-

work of glissandos and scribbling effects from cello — all used to highly picturesque effect. Here, as in the JACK's

Mode label disc of Iannis Xenakis' complete string quartets, performers resourcefully sought the sense behind what might normally seem like noise — one reason the full audience (in a co-promotion with the experimental arts presenter, Bowerbird) had only one walkout.

More extreme were works by Wolfgang Rihm and Matthias Pintscher that use sound sparingly. Rihm's seven-movement 1976 *Quartet No. 3* sometimes showed its age with a lot of Germanic flailing. However, the long final movement was worth everything. A backdrop of extremely soft string-quartet sound set off foreground gestures consisting of only a few notes, bursting with significance while slashing through the relative silence. An anguished outburst

of Mahlerian melody had no typical beginning, middle or end. It just continued. The piece ended with scratching sounds suggesting a dying radio transmission.

Pintscher's 2009 *Study IV for Treatise on the Veil* had the daring to embrace complete silence — in a work that made his *Osiris*, played last season by the Philadelphia Orchestra, seem as lush and outgoing as Ralph Vaughan Williams. The new piece is inspired by the Cy Twombly painting of the same name — a huge, dark-gray canvas with only minimal, horizontal-line shapes drawn in crayon. Pintscher's expanse was achieved through silence that was defined and colored by the sounds that frame it, often faint sound shapes.

Pintscher's canvas is a lighter gray than Twombly's, suggesting a snowstorm white-out at dusk with a few plaintive lights, fitful foreground activity, and objects, possibly real, probably hallucinatory, in the background — often seeming to pick up where Luigi Nono's late-period, boundary-pushing *Fragmente-Stille* left off.

Pintscher's underlying logic wasn't discernible but surely was there, given how much I want to hear the piece again. Unfortunately, it may not be recordable: Just as Twombly's canvases require in-person inspection, so does this music. The JACK Quartet will simply have to be stalked.

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