

American Ensemble

Modern Men

Tetras, Iannis Xenakis's 1983 string quartet, is as knotty an example of modernism as exists. It begins with a violin solo that's halfway between a devil's trill and an ambulance siren; it ends with all four instruments fading away as if dissolving into oblivion. In an unsympathetic interpretation, *Tetras* might well seem forbiddingly harsh. But as the **JACK Quartet** performs it, the piece emerges as soulful, surprisingly playful and full of visceral intensity.

Difficult modern and contemporary music is the JACK Quartet's lifeblood. The quartet grew out of the Eastman School of Music, where all four members—Christopher Otto and Ari Streisfeld, violins; John Pickford Richards, viola; and Kevin McFarland, cello—participated actively in *Ossia*, a student-run new music group. They first got together as a group as part of a birthday celebration for Samuel Adler, playing the composer's fourth string quartet, but had no plans to carry the partnership forward.

BELOW,
LEFT TO RIGHT:
ARI STREISFELD,
JOHN PICKFORD
RICHARDS,
KEVIN MCFARLAND
AND
CHRISTOPHER OTTO



Things changed in the summer of 2004, though, when they went to Morelia, Mexico, to take part in a contemporary music festival. Composer Helmut Lachenmann was in residence, and the four musicians tackled his newest work, the String Quartet No. 3 ("Grido"). The piece was "insanely difficult," according to Streisfeld, but the quartet's mastery of it had its effect. They found an ally in Lachenmann, and they were invited to 2005 Lucerne Festival Academy to work with Pierre Boulez and the Ensemble Inter-contemporain.

There were now officially a quartet, but they needed a name. Eventually they hit upon "JACK"—an acronym for the initials of their first names. "It serves us well and it's easy to remember," says Streisfeld. "We're four American guys named 'JACK.' The music we play may be very intense and challenging, but for us as well as the listeners, it's good we have a little humor in our name."

Although the JACK Quartet made its reputation with daunting avant-garde music, its repertoire has broadened to include more tonal, neo-Romantic contemporary composers like Philip Glass and Caleb Burhans. The musicians have also reached back through the centuries to program Machaut and Gesualdo—composers whose visionary works seem to anticipate modern music. The expansion in their focus is partly a result of success.

"We started playing at a university, mainly for the composers there," Streisfeld explains. "We could program crazy avant-garde music, and the crowd would go wild. Now we're being asked to play on more mainstream series, which is wonderful for us. Those presenters are really interested in having us, but they want to make sure they don't scare the audience away.

"Our goal," he adds, "is to bring contemporary music to the greater chamber music world."

www.jackquartet.com