



NOT THE OLD-FASHIONED SERIOSO STRING QUARTET

The Attaccas travel down roads less taken

By Corinne Ramey

During an album release show at New York City's Le Poisson Rouge, the **Attacca Quartet** had an unusual fifth member: a not-quite-metronomic track of prepared piano sounds. The track is designed for a piece by American composer John Adams, titled *John's Book of Alleged Dances*. The dances, called "alleged" because they have no actual dance steps, have such provocative names as "Alligator Escalator," "Toot Nipple," and "Pavane (She's so Fine)." They are rollicking, raucous, and highly rhythmic and the perfect demonstration of the quartet's ability to be precise—and exactly with that collaborative track—yet lively and brimming with musical personality.

"It's like we're always jamming with another person, and I think it influences how we play," says violinist **Amy Schroeder**, during an interview in the quartet's Juilliard practice room. "I feel like I'm in a band or something." Cellist **Andrew Yee** demonstrates, grinning and singing the track's descending line while moving his head from

side to side. "Do ba do doop." Pause. "Do ba dee doop." The other members laugh.

This past March, the Attacca Quartet—violinists Schroeder and **Keiko Tokunaga**, violist **Luke Fleming**, and cellist Yee—released their debut recording, a disc of Adams' complete works for string quartet, recorded on Azica Records. Titled *Fellow Traveler*, the disc includes Adams' String Quartet (2008), a five-minute showpiece called *Fellow Traveler*, and the ten *Alleged Dances*. The group celebrates their ten-year anniversary this year—the quartet formed in 2003, while the members were students at Juilliard, and violist Luke Fleming joined later, in 2009.

The group is the Juilliard Graduate Resident String Quartet.

For the Attaccas, getting to know Adams started with a fortuitous—and stressful—bit of luck. Juilliard co-commissioned the composer to write a string quartet for the **St. Lawrence Quartet**, and, in 2009, were looking for a young group to perform the piece in

a masterclass. The school called the Attaccas ten days before the performance.

"They were like, 'Guys, please?'" Schroeder says. "It was massive and really hard, but how can you pass up an opportunity like that? We just rehearsed 24/7 for a week."

Nobody showed up for the public class, except for an intimidating panel sitting all in a row: the St. Lawrence quartet members, Juilliard president Joseph Polisi, dean Ara Guzelimian, and Adams himself. Luckily for the Attaccas, Adams liked their playing, and the group began to perform the quartet "like crazy," Schroeder says.

Several years later, Adams is happy to have developed a relationship with the young quartet. "I think their CD is really terrific," says Adams, who was in the audience for the album release show. "They're rhythmically intuitive. They're not the old-fashioned template of the serioso string quartet."

Playing contemporary music fits the group's personality. "Being able to create our own textures and colors out of what we initially feel is awesome," Schroeder says. "That's what people were doing back in the day of all the famous classical and romantic composers. It forces you to use your gut feelings."

The only other recording available of the Adams quartet is by the St. Lawrence Quartet, which gave the Attaccas creative freedom, violinist Tokunaga says. "Because there is only one recording and we don't have a lot of information about what it is supposed to sound like, we were not afraid to take chances."

Sometimes taking chances means avoiding compromise. When interpretative disagreements arise, the Attaccas avoid meeting in the middle. "Sometimes that works, but more often than not it waters down the interpretations," says Fleming, the violist. "Whether consciously or unconsciously, we stay away from that."

Moving forward, the quartet is jumping back a few centuries; they'll finish performing all 68 Haydn quartets in New York City, and their next recording project will be Haydn's *The Seven Last Words of Christ*.

"When we read a slow movement we've never heard and it's so unbelievable, that makes it all worth it," Yee says. "And *Seven Last Words* is like seven of those."

"It shows our softer side," says Tokunaga, laughing. "We can be nice, too!"

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