

**Fellow Traveler: The Complete String Quartet Works of John Adams**

**By James Manheim**

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When it comes to composers broadly categorized under the heading of minimalism, it's rare to find works grouped by genre in the conventional way. But the Attacca Quartet, a young group out of New York's Julliard School, shows what can be done with this set of three pieces by John Adams, entirely different in tone but clearly the products of the same composer. The best-known work on the program, John's Book of Alleged Dances (1994), has been recorded several times. It's a madcap work, full of humorous or satirical images and references to styles of music from the Baroque to rock, yet very tightly constructed. Its ten movements may be played in any order, and they do seem to suggest dance interpretation, even though Adams referred to them as "alleged dances" because the dance steps for them had not been invented yet. The String Quartet of 2008, by contrast, is in keeping with the general greater seriousness of the music of Adams' middle age. Its giant 20-minute first movement manages to weave sections of traditional sonata form together with a progression from the composer's basic minimalist style into more jazz-inflected music, and it's one of Adams' most ambitious structures. The Attacca Quartet does well with both these contrasting emotional worlds, and they are undaunted by the considerable technical challenges in the music. The small Fellow Traveler (the work is dedicated to opera director Peter Sellars and refers to his interest in the physicist J. Robert Oppenheimer, suspected of being a Communist or "fellow traveler" by the U.S. Federal Bureau of Investigation) closes out the program with melodies related to those of Adams' operatic works. Adams operas like Doctor Atomic and especially Nixon in China are better known than any of the music here, but this crackling release might carve out a place for the two larger works in the general quartet repertory.