

MUSIC

Review: The JACK Quartet, With Instruments of Destruction

By CORINNA da FONSECA-WOLLHEIM SEPT. 18, 2015

The Miller Theater at Columbia University is known for its forward-thinking programming, but it opened its season Thursday with something truly wild: the JACK Quartet playing Schumann. Imperfectly.

In doing so, this ensemble proved that it remains one of the most fiercely adventurous and undaunted new-music groups in the business. How?

The quartet's performance of extracts from Schumann's String Quartet No. 3 was part of "Run Time Error," a dazzlingly off-the-wall evening of music, video and performance art by the visionary Danish composer Simon Steen-Andersen. His writing for strings questions every convention of the genre: A player might

run the bow alongside the wooden shoulder of a violin or drag it up and down the fingerboard. Another may hold a cello sideways, like a guitar, then sideways in the other direction, then flip it upside down so that it rests on its scroll.

Bows are often amplified, so that the resinous crunch of a note's attack results in a low growl and certain sustained tones come out sounding like a didgeridoo. For some works the bows are partially wound with tape to interrupt the grip of the hair.

It was into this unstable world of violated instruments and violently erratic sounds that Mr. Steen-Andersen parachuted the Schumann quartet. In a series of "Obstruction Studies" filmed beforehand, he had the JACK members play the first three movements under cruelly adverse conditions that introduced inevitable glitches.

Flights up the fingerboard became arduous for the violinist Christopher Otto, the violist John Pickford Richards and the cellist Kevin McFarland, who all labored with rubber restraints tied to their wrists. All four, including the violinist Ari Streisfeld, were further encumbered by gallon or half-gallon milk jugs, partly full, attached to their bow arms. For the third movement, which contains a stormy fugue, sensory deprivation was introduced. The musicians wore headphones that filled their ears with white noise, and were intermittently plunged into total darkness as they played. If the Navy SEALs were developing a special-operations chamber music team, the training might resemble this.

At Thursday's concert, live performances seamlessly blended with the video segments. Mr. Steen-Andersen also presented a specially commissioned work, "Run Time Error," in which he played with and recorded various objects inside the theater: the lobby's water fountain, for instance, an iron from a dressing room and the metal railing that divides sections of the auditorium. Together with cameo appearances by the JACK players, these sounds and images were edited into an exuberantly chaotic sequence. In performance, twin versions of the film were shown on a split screen with the composer creating a fidgety counterpoint between them, using two joysticks.

Mr. Steen-Andersen's "Study for String Instrument No. 3" became a two-part invention pitting Mr. McFarland, playing his cello eight ways to Sunday, against delayed footage of his own live performance. In "Half a Bit of Nothing Integrated," the players struggled to coordinate their movements with those of

the composer's eyelid, projected and eerily magnified on screen.

While Mr. Steen-Andersen's imagination and command of his material is often breathtaking, it would be fascinating to see him reach for a wider spectrum of emotional affects than the dark, madcap humor of this memorable program.

The JACK Quartet returns to the Miller Theater on Oct. 9 and 10 with works by John Luther Adams; millertheatre.com.

A version of this review appears in print on September 19, 2015, on Page C4 of the New York edition with the headline: Millstones, With Strings and Players Attached.