

## PROFILE: KEVIN MCFARLAND



Photo: 'Jumping', credit Stephen Poff

Kevin McFarland is the cellist of the JACK Quartet, formed with violinist Christopher Otto and Ari Streisfeld and violist John Pickford Richards whilst all were attending the Eastman School of Music. JACK is focused on the commissioning and performance of new works, leading them to work closely with composers John Luther Adams, Derek Bermel, Chaya Czernowin, James Dillon, Brian Ferneyhough, Beat Furrer, Georg Friedrich Haas, Simon Holt, Vijay Iyer, György Kurtág, Helmut Lachenmann, Steve Mackey, Matthias Pintscher, Steve Reich, Roger Reynolds, Wolfgang Rihm, Salvatore Sciarrino and John Zorn. Outside his work with JACK, Kevin is a member of Ensemble Signal and has made guest appearances with Alarm Will Sound, the International Contemporary Ensemble and the Wordless Music Orchestra. He also composes, and sometimes distributes electronic music under various monikers, which are only quasi-secret. He is active as a solo artist, both as an interpreter of new works for solo cello and as an improviser. His article 'Second-Generation Interpretation of Xenakis's String Quartets' can be found in *Performing Xenakis*, published by Pendragon Press.

Q. How would you define the JACK Quartet's vision?

A. JACK's vision is to foster the creation and realisation of new music for string quartet while maintaining very broad definitions of what this might mean: we wish to represent the huge diversity of composers and compositional aesthetics out there, and to cultivate a very wide audience. Sometimes the new music community can feel very insular, and within this community there can be the tendency to pigeonhole different types of music using sub-genre labels (think 'minimalism' or 'complexity') that are, I feel, ultimately divisive. Our programming tends to be all over the map, so I think we challenge these

boundaries by encouraging audiences to hear connections between really different composers, styles and eras, and I hope this leads to more enjoyment of more music by more people.

Q. What can you tell us about the new music scene in America?

A. What I said above about our vision being connective between many different kinds of musical work happening I think is very emblematic of the new music scene in the US. The press and media are good at coming up with labels to group like-minded or similar-sounding composers together, and sometimes these tags are in fact useful, especially when we are describing music with words rather than listening to it. Most of the composers and performers I know in America, however, aren't too keen on being defined by these labels, and often have interests much broader in scope than the music they prioritise writing or performing. It's really cool to see this diversity reflected in the audiences for new music concerts as well. In a place like New York City, it's very common to see musicians attending shows that are often really different from the music they are normally known for presenting. So we are a bunch of musical omnivores, but we are not necessarily what we eat. I think this cross-pollination of audiences is happening a lot too in other big cities, like Chicago and L.A., as well as in smaller cities and towns. My little hometown of Lancaster, Pennsylvania has a new music ensemble now and I've heard there is more in the works. Funding can still be a tricky issue, but I feel there is a sort of grassroots thing happening where, somehow, cool new music is still being presented all over the country, and I think it's great.

Q. In the UK, there's a lot of chat about (and pressure to prove) audience development. How has the JACK Quartet tackled this?

A. As JACK is a performing and not really a presenting organisation, we think of our audience as something very far-reaching – beyond any one city or venue – which includes everyone reached through the internet as well. So it is good first of all not to think of 'the audience' as a singular thing. When we ask, 'who is our audience?', we run the risk of stereotyping who we think this person is or what they might be interested in. This leads to the problem of thinking that the only choice is to pander to them (giving them what they supposedly want) or condescendingly to tell them what's good for them whilst assuming they won't like it ('eat your vegetables'). I think JACK gets around this simply by programming music that we feel is worthwhile and juxtaposing works that, on mixed programmes of different composers, talk to each other in an interesting way; then, we give as committed, expressive and nuanced a performance of this music as we can. It's about sharing our love. It's actually a very vulnerable place to be coming from, but if we do it sincerely I think audiences always respond positively to this vulnerability. I have been convinced many times, as an audience member, by fantastic performances of music that I wasn't so sure I would like. So, I prefer to think that audience development comes first and foremost from doing work that you love and showing a respect and commitment to the people you are sharing it with. We are all 'the audience'; it is not some separate mysterious entity that exists outside of us.

Q. There's a long and rich tradition of string quartet repertoire. What are the most exciting developments, do you think?

A. I think we get to have our cake and eat it a bit in the string quartet, in that there is a sort of time-tested appeal to the way the instruments sound and work together, but there are also always new ways to create new sounds! Multiphonics are a recent development, for instance, and have hugely enhanced the timbral possibilities of the sounds we can make together. Electronics, too, have extended the possibilities of how a string quartet can sound, and electronic music has informed how we use the instruments acoustically. For instance, bow placement effectively can function as a filter on the harmonic content of a sound, and very precise kinds of tuning can create wild acoustic and psychoacoustic effects, such as sum and difference tones, which can also be modelled and analysed using computers. I like the idea that scientific research is exploring how we can use the instruments, but that this research in turn leads to artistic innovation and an expanding of the catalogue of sounds that we find beautiful.

Q. Is the future bright for new music?

A. Well I don't have my crystal ball handy, but I'm going to go ahead and say that as long as there is music there will exist new music, basically by definition. After all, all music was new music once! Western classical music is one of the few types of music to be concerned with this distinction. As long as we think of new music as intersecting with all the other music happening in the world today, as well as with the traditions of the past rather than existing apart from them, new music is far from endangered.