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Attacca Quartet Plays John Adams on 'Fellow Traveler'

By STEVE SMITH
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'Fellow Traveler: The Complete String Quartet Works of John Adams'

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Attacca Quartet. Azica ACD-71280; CD.

During much of the 1980s and '90s it was possible to think that only one string quartet in the world was devoted to expanding the genre's repertory. The [Kronos Quartet](#) then provided (and still provides) the impetus and vehicle for an explosive expansion of the canon though its aggressive approach to commissioning new works, including many from composers who had not previously worked in the form.

Today we live in a world not only enriched with music shaped by Kronos's omnivorous appetite but also well stocked with younger ensembles that have embraced the Kronos canon as part of a comprehensive repertory. The [Attacca Quartet](#), currently the graduate quartet in residence at the Juilliard School, shows the benefits of this development on "Fellow Traveler," an exhilarating new CD devoted to the complete string quartet works of John Adams.

The disc opens with "[John's Book of Alleged Dances](#)," a 1994 set of vivacious, cheeky and stylistically wayward miniatures, some accompanied by a rhythm track derived from piano samples. You won't want to discard the Kronos recording, since Mr. Adams tailored his writing to the personalities and proclivities of its members. But the Attacca musicians rearrange the movements to their liking; their playing is exuberant, funky and, in instances like the eerily creeping "Alligator Escalator," more exactly nuanced.

Attacca was the second group to embrace Mr. Adams's [String Quartet](#) (2008), and the first to play it at Lincoln Center. The work integrates the Minimalist chug of his early years into a broad, weighty span of styles and moods. It is a substantial statement, and the members treat it that way.

"Fellow Traveler," Mr. Adams's affectionate, self-referential 2007 birthday gift for his longtime collaborator [Peter Sellars](#), provides an ideal coda for this vivacious, compelling set.

STEVE SMITH

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