

**John Luther Adams and JACK Break New Ground at Tippet Rise**

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By Thomas May

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John Luther Adams (center) with the JACK Quartet: John Pickford Richards, Austin Wulliman, Christopher Otto, and Jay Campbell (left to right)  
Credit: Zackary Patten

Last weekend, at Tippet Rise Art Center, I got to experience the brilliant JACK Quartet give the world premiere of *Lines Made by Walking*, the latest string quartet (No. 5) by John Luther Adams (plus a foretaste of his next quartet, whose premiere is already on the horizon in spring 2020).

Thanks to his close working relationship with the JACKs, JLA has become fascinated with the medium, though he waited until age 58 to take it up. He's now finishing his Sixth and Seventh String Quartets. My review for Musical America:

FISHTAIL, MT— The vast, roiling orchestral soundscape of the Prize-winning *Become Ocean* has served many listeners as an entrée into the world of John Luther Adams. A number of other compositions and installations cast on a large scale have similarly been spreading the composer's reputation beyond the confines of new-music circles. In September, for example, the BBC Proms will host the European premiere of *In the Name of the Earth*, filling the Royal Albert Hall with more than 600 singers.

Yet Adams has proved himself just as much at home within the intimate dimensions of chamber music. This past weekend, Tippet Rise Art Center presented the world premiere of a work it commissioned from Adams: *Lines Made by Walking* (String Quartet No. 5). The new piece was unveiled by the JACK Quartet [Musical America's 2019 Ensemble of the Year], which has developed a close working relationship with the composer.

Though he took up the genre relatively late in his career — in 2011, at the age of 58 — Adams has seized on the string quartet with a passion. His Sixth and Seventh Quartets are already under construction and will also be premiered by the JACK (with the Sixth to be performed in conjunction with choreography by Liz Gerring next spring).

*Lines Made by Walking*, which is set to receive its New York City premiere on October 21 as part of the Crypt Sessions music series, manifests the fluency of Adams's quartet writing and ranks among the most immediately affecting of the composer's achievements.

When they launched the inaugural season of Tippet Rise in 2016, founders Cathy and Peter Halstead were already determined to make music by Adams literally part of the scene. They arranged for *Inuksuit* (2009), his outdoor piece for "9 to 99" percussion players, to be performed on and around the rolling slopes surrounding one of Tippet Rise's signature large-scale sculptures (*Satellite No. 5: Pioneer*, by Stephen Talasnik — an intriguing cedar-and-steel structure that evokes a space-alien Noah's Ark).

The response to *Inuksuit* — still referred to as a magical, one-of-a-kind happening by staff members who were present — crystallized what the Halsteads had envisioned by establishing this 12,000-acre ode to the interface between art and nature in rural Montana, just north of Yellowstone, which simultaneously functions as a working cattle and sheep ranch.

"What immediately struck me is how John erases the boundaries between music and nature, between listener and musician and place," Cathy Halstead says. Her spouse Peter adds: "In his music, John has removed his ego from the equation. He puts you in touch directly with the real thing. If the Northern Lights had a voice, it would be John."

The philanthropist couple didn't meet Adams in person until Tippet Rise's second season was already in progress, during the summer of 2017. The occasion was the opening of *The Wind Garden*, an audio installation at the University of California, San Diego, that translates the real-time movements of a eucalyptus grove into musical responses.

Responding to the Halsteads' invitation to visit Tippet Rise, Adams at once fell in love with the surroundings and ended up spending the summer of 2018 in residence. He recalls a daily ritual of hiking in the afternoons and evenings, often detouring from the established trails, and composing in the mornings. "I've begun to imagine music that comes directly out of the contours of the land, from the experience of traveling on foot at three miles an hour," Adams notes.

But direct inspiration from this landscape of alternating grasslands and canyons, from following animal trails and chance encounters with a herd of bugling elk and other natural musical attractions, does not translate into a contemporary reboot of old-fashioned program music — anymore than *Become Ocean* sounds like a picturesque orchestral seascape.

The three movements of *Lines Made by Walking* trace a characteristically simple-on-the-surface trajectory: (1) *Up the Mountain*; (2) *Along the Ridges*; (3) *Down the Mountain*. "It's your mountain, your hike to make of it what you will. I don't want to tell you how to feel," Adams clarified in a pre-concert talk. That schematic disguises a complex, rigorously systematic template of multilayered tempo canons arrayed in three harmonic fields.

Like a sculptor, Adams chiseled away the dense overlay of multiple lines from his original sketches to arrive at a texture manageable for four players. The result attests to his newfound fascination with melodic line and the voice — along with their contrapuntal potential — and stands in contrast to the "atmospheric" music of place evoked by many other Adams compositions.

Performing in the warm acoustics of Tippet Rise's 150-seat Olivier Music Barn, the JACK emphasized this singing quality of *Lines Made by Walking*: from the ecstatic rising lines of its first movement through the transportive middle (at times recalling the radiance of late Beethoven) to the reflective, somewhat elegiac aura of the final movement. The distance and abstraction -- the "math," as it were — of Adams's compositional design emerged as music, emotionally compelling and heartfelt but purged of Romantic effusiveness.

The program opened with Adams's *First Quartet (The Wind in High Places)*, a memorial to one of his closest friends that imagines the quartet as a single, 16-string Aeolian harp. Its haunting sound world is produced entirely by natural harmonics and open strings. The JACK also gave a taste of the forthcoming *Sixth Quartet (Waves and Particles)*, playing a movement Adams had completed only two weeks before, opalescent and shimmering in mystery.

The summer season at Tippet Rise continues with programs of chamber music through September 7. New this season among the outdoor structures is *Xylem*, a gathering space near the bank of a creek designed by the architect Francis Kéré and inspired by the sacred shelters of Mali's Dogon culture.

<https://memeteria.files.wordpress.com/2019/08/jla-jack-lines-made-by-walking-august-2019.pdf>