

String quartets are among the hardiest and most adaptable of musical organisms. The account of the Brahms is a feast of rhythmic clarity and lyrical thrust. As part of a streaming series hosted by Cal Performances, in Berkeley, the Spektral joined the Haitian–American composer, vocalist, and flutist Nathalie Joachim to reprise material from Joachim's entrancing album "Fanm d'Ayiti" (New Amsterdam), which mixes arrangements of Haitian folk songs with Joachim's original compositions inspired by songs in Kreyol. During a tense season, the complex radiance of Joachim's musical sensibility may have the effect of palpably lowering your blood pressure. The group will soon celebrate its tenth anniversary with a virtual gala titled Keep Spektral Weird. The Spektral's major project of the benighted year 2020, though, has been an album titled "Experiments in Living," which is certain to appear on my year–end list of notable recordings. The principal work is "A Cockroach's Tarantella," for speaker and string quartet, in which Du Yun recites—in both English and Chinese—her own story about an insect who longs to be human. This inversion of Kafka's "Metamorphosis" may seem an unappetizing proposition for people who have spent an inordinate amount of time cooped up in confined spaces, but Du Yun builds a surprising degree of sympathy for her cockroach heroine, who is touchingly naive about the nobility of human existence: I want to love someone. Rapidly skittering figures in Pluta's "binary/momentary logics: flow state/joy state" pick up from Crawford Seeger's mercurial textures. A delicate interplay of short motives in Cheung's "The Real Book of Fake Tunes," for flute and string quartet—Claire Chase joins the Spektral players on the recording—is akin to the contrapuntal games of the Schoenberg. Since March, the members of the JACK—Christopher Otto, Austin Wulliman, John Pickford Richards, and Jay Campbell—have also made five in–person performances: one in a parking lot in Morristown, New Jersey, as part of the Lot of Strings festival, and the others in a canyon and along the Colorado River in Utah, as part of the Moab Music Festival, which regularly stages concerts in acoustically favorable natural spaces. Rather, the physical packing for "Experiments in Living" comes with a deck of tarot–style illustrated cards, one for each track on the album. The listener is invited to shuffle the cards, lay them out on the table, and determine the track order by flipping them. A set of smaller cards are printed with adjectives—"labyrinthine," "relentless," "frisky," "deviant," and so on—which listeners can use to tease out connections among the various pieces. In recent years, the JACK has specialized in the wide–open soundscapes of John Luther Adams, and its programs in Utah aptly included Adams's piece "The Wind in High Places." In September, the Cold Blue label released the JACK's recording of two other Adams pieces, "Lines Made by Walking" and "untouched"—hypnotic lessons in the building–out of large musical structures from economical means. To hear the fractured vocalizations of Lee's "Spinals" after the Brahms's vigorous finale risks whiplash, yet the transition from one to the other had the revelatory shock of a masterly cinematic cut. At the end of the "official" sequence comes Lewis's "Experiments in Living," from which the album's title comes. The members of the Spektral—Clara Lyon, Maeve Feinberg, Doyle Armbrust, and Russell Rolen—have kept themselves occupied by launching two absorbing live–stream programs, the Floating Lounge and New Music Help Desk, which mix music and discussion. A further breakdown takes place in Ruth Crawford Seeger's String Quartet (1931), a monument of American modernism; in its Andante, discrete thematic ideas dissolve into a continuously undulating texture. It is a tour–de–force survey of repertory, classic and modern, demonstrating in almost textbook fashion how

nineteenth-century Romanticism evolved into twentieth-century modernism and then into the all-devouring experimentalism of recent decades. Du Yun's music spans a vast stylistic spectrum, from ancient-sounding, hymnal strains to scratching, scraping string timbres. If you listen to the album in the given order, you will begin with Brahms's Quartet in C Minor, from 1873, in which the traditional process of thematic development is pursued with a kind of microscopic intensity that presages the breakdown of conventional harmonic structures. This is the heftiest of the contemporary pieces, and, in it, various strands from the older works seem to come into play, as if the composer were making a grand synthesis of string-quartet tradition even as he unleashed the devices of the post-1945 avant-garde. Small wonder that quartets have been especially visible and active during the COVID-19 pandemic.