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**Attacca Quartet; Gregg Kallor, piano**  
The Sheen Center, New York City  
June 5, 2017



## A STUDY IN CONTRASTS

Contemplating Dr. King inspired Gregg Kallor's work with the Attacca Quartet

By *Cristina Schreil*

Composer Gregg Kallor ruminates over Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s writings every January 15. The civil-rights leader's birthday occurs just days before Kallor's own. This year, the tradition struck a new chord: Kallor turned 39, the same age King was when assassinated. This realization—underscored by 2017's disunited political climate—spurred a new piano quintet, “Some Not Too Distant Tomorrow.” Months later, Kallor stood beside the Attacca Quartet at Manhattan's Sheen Center and described how these words “nourished” him. He recited part of King's Letter from Birmingham Jail, noting the core message, that “injustice anywhere is a threat to justice anywhere,” and King's urge for peaceful protest. “I hope the music conveys the deep impact that Dr. King's

words have had on me,” Kallor stated. He pondered what King would say in this age of “fear” and “anxiety.” He also considered what his own legacy would be if he were to die now.

That last musing is initially a curious thing that, if not for Kallor's earnest, adroit treatment of his subject in the ensuing quintet, could have drifted closer to appropriation than tribute.

Amid Kallor's jazz-inflected sound world, a lyrical grace threaded through the five cohesive movements. The music seemed to distill complex ruminations into a clear vision; Kallor appearing to foreground the positive reverberations of King's legacy over the tragedies facing it.

Despite the peaceful context, the Attacca members arrived with every weapon in their arsenal. They communicated the work's pointed contrasts and jazz-classical blend through close attention to textural detail. Kallor drew from a broad palate. He wove in tenuous harmonics, peppery pizzicato, and tangy accents that the strings loaded with pouncing bow attacks. In the second movement, “The Road Ahead,” cellist Andrew Yee lent a groovy hand to a walking bass line. He

plucked with enough panache that a shock of his dark hair wagged along with the music. Lengthy chords and frangible harmonics seemed to mimic a languorous passage of time as Yee emulated a ticking clock with fine pizzicato control. The landscape felt empty—as it may have to a cell-bound King.

The Attacca Quartet formed at Juilliard in 2003. They've since embarked on a keen inspection of the art form, from both ends of the timeline. They're just as adept at charging through a radiant Haydn string quartet as revealing the evolving textures in a John Adams work. They should be; they performed all 68 of Haydn's quartets over six years and recorded all of Adams' as well.

The quartet also does educational outreach—violinist Nathan Schram directs the arts organi-

zation Musicambia, which brings music education to correctional facilities. One gets a strong impression the Attacca members are genuinely stoked to make, and spread, music.

The quintet's most intriguing moments centered on bracing juxtaposition. Floating, sun-kissed passages swam with underlying tension. A key instance is when violinist Keiko Tokunaga—switching chairs with first violinist Amy Schroeder—imbued the melodic line with a probing quality that was supple and airborne given the weighty material. She rendered pure, pellucid bow strokes with minimal vibrato as the others incised the delicate line with coarse, close-to-the-frog staccato accents.

Another example occurred in the quintet's fourth movement, “Only When It Is Dark Enough, Can You See the Stars.” The strings began stirring an inky ambience through frantic synchronized tremolo bowings. The sudden storm contrasted with the soulful character of the previous movement, which ended in a beautiful blend of evanescent tones. The Attacca members, seemingly seizing their namesake, brought to mind Haydn's claimed use of “storm and drive.” The final movement left the audience with a peaceful atmosphere, weaving an elegant veil of serene tones—a satisfying nexus between social conflict and art. ■