

American Ensemble

Three Decades, Four Saxes

Nobody tells the **Rova Saxophone Quartet** what to do. The ensemble sprang up from the Bay Area improvisation scene in 1977 and has remained true to its musical vision ever since. Rova's steady focus is partly attributable to its astounding continuity: Three of the four are founders; Steve Adams, "the new guy," joined in 1988. "Just the fact that we're still *alive* is amazing—not to mention that we continue to talk to each other," jokes tenor saxophonist Larry Ochs.

Rova's provocative, resolutely avant-garde music draws on influences as disparate as John Coltrane and Iannis Xenakis, Anthony Braxton and Olivier Messiaen; Ochs describes it as "this nether region

tions, and New Music on the Mountain is a concert held at a Marin County mountaintop amphitheater. Perhaps the most ambitious is *Rovaté*, a two-day cross-disciplinary event. This year's outing, dedicated to Buckminster Fuller, was a collaboration with Lillevan, the German digital animation artist.

Propelling these events is Rova:Arts—a nonprofit umbrella organization fueled by contributions and a portion of the quartet's own fees. Rova:Arts also pays for a small office and a part-time administrator. "The hardest thing for any arts organization is to get general operating money to keep the office open," says Ochs. "Foundations are interested in doing something really cool, rather than keeping things going on a day-to-day basis."

Given the uncompromising nature of the quartet's music-making, the economic ballast of Rova:Arts is all but a necessity. "Day to day, month to month, it's a struggle," Ochs admits. "That's a way of saying the income does not match the effort. We feel great about the respect of our peers; we feel we're well-supported by foundations. But has it been easy? No. Everybody's always trying to figure out a way to make ends meet. That's the story. It's not an uncommon story. But I feel really lucky we've been able to continue to do this." www.rova.org



THE ROVA QUARTET:
(L-R) JON RASKIN,
BRUCE ACKLEY,
STEVE ADAMS,
AND LARRY OCHS

between composition and free improv." The quartet improvises in rehearsal, but the music is notated before it reaches the performance stage.

Given the quartet's configuration, Ochs says, compositional guidelines are a necessity. "If you have four instruments with different sounds playing free, you've got one problem licked: whenever anyone's playing, you know who it is," he says. "With four saxes, though, you can step on each other's space. You have to think about composition and hierarchy."

Aside from a busy performing and touring schedule, Rova stages a number of annual events in the Bay Area. *Improv:21* is a series of lecture/demonstra-

The Lark Ascending

When the **LARK Chamber Artists** assemble on a concert platform, the scene

on stage tells much of the story. Musicians playing Western and world-music instruments are arrayed across the stage; in their midst sit the four string players of the Lark Quartet. "It's reflective of New York itself—a melting pot of all the people in the world," says Kathryn Lockwood, the Lark's violist. The New York-based ensemble, whose core members include the quartet plus percussionist Yousif Sheronick, baritone Stephen Salters, and clarinetist Todd Palmer, launched in 2008.