

THE KRONOS TRADITION

BY FRANK J. OTERI

Kronos in 2006—Hank Dutt, John Sherba, Jeffrey Zeigler, and David Harrington

In one-third of a century, the San Francisco-based ensemble has proved that a string quartet can drive the creation of a repertoire.

Some people think we hate old music, but that's simply not true at all—I probably have the world's largest collection of performances of Schubert's C-major Quintet," claims David Harrington, the founder, artistic director and first violinist of the Kronos Quartet. Harrington is probably the chamber music community's most visible proponent of stretching the canon both chronologically and geographically. "In our very early days, we were playing lots of earlier European music," he explains, "but then more and more pieces of music were being written for us, and I found that my interest was always in the piece that hasn't been written yet, the conversation with somebody who might be able to write something nobody has ever thought of yet."

Now well into its fourth decade, the Kronos musicians can boast that more than five hundred works have been written for them by hundreds of composers across the globe. The repertoire first brought to life by the quartet spans works by John Cage, Elliott Carter, Philip Glass, Sofia Gubaidulina, Henryk Górecki, Peteris Vasks, and John Zorn. Many of these compositions have already entered music history. There's Steve Reich's *Different Trains* and *Triple Quartet*, Morton Feldman's record-breaking six-hour String Quartet No. 2, Osvaldo Golijov's *Dreams and Prayers of Isaac the Blind* for klezmer clarinet plus quartet, Tan Dun's *Ghost Opera* for pipa and quartet, Kaija Saariaho's *Nymphea* for quartet and electronics, and 21 works to date by Terry Riley, including a concerto for string quartet and orchestra.

So when Kronos receives the Richard J. Bogomolny National Service Award at the 2007 Chamber Music America conference this January, it will be in recognition of a unique legacy—an ensemble's invaluable contribution to an ongoing tradition. In today's chamber music landscape—where quartets ranging from

the Cassatt, Del Sol, Lark and Pacifica to genre-defying ensembles such as Ethel and Invert perform new music extensively and in some cases exclusively—it's difficult to remember the pre-Kronos idea of what a string quartet was or could be. Before the 22-year-old Harrington formed the ensemble in 1973 (he was inspired by a performance of George Crumb's Vietnam War-suffused *Black Angels*), the string quartet and its repertoire represented a pinnacle of perfection for musicians; but, for the most part, the art form was not anchored in twentieth-century culture. Among other things, the sonic mastery of quartet-playing lured Harrington to the medium—and he was compelled to do something different with it. "There's something about two violins, a viola and a cello; it's a form of perfection. The music I like best is quartet music, and it's been that way for a long time."

To make the string quartet a more contemporary idiom, and one that would appeal to a broader audience, Harrington began with new music. Conventional wisdom had once decreed that concerts devoted only to new and unfamiliar repertoire were box-office poison, but Kronos has defiantly rewritten the rules. Its hundred performances a year usually sell out, whether the group is playing in an underground club in Eastern Europe or at Carnegie Hall.

What distinguished Kronos from other quartets was not simply that it performed new music and performed it with a new attitude and image (jeans rather than tuxedos), but that it treated new music as repertoire rather than an isolated anomaly on a concert





program. The accomplishment of this goal was made easier by the long-term commitment of personnel who shared the vision. While Harrington is the only member of the quartet who has been there from the very beginning, Hank Dutt has been the quartet's violist since 1977 and John Sherba joined as second violinist only a year later. "Each new piece reveals different outlooks, emotions, and challenges. I've been fortunate to experience this with like-minded friends and fellow explorers," says Sherba. "What a fulfilling way to watch the years go by."

The role of cellist is the only one that has seen significant rotation. Joan Jeanrenaud, who joined with Sherba in 1978, performed with Kronos for twenty years before leaving in 1998. "The musician I am and have become is largely due to these wonderful years with David, John and Hank," says Jenrenaud, who in her post-Kronos years has continued to explore unusual collaborations in performance and on recordings. Jenrenaud's immediate successor, Jennifer Culp, performed with Kronos for six years before moving on (most recently to a new-music quartet called Feinsmith). Then, in 2005, Kronos signed its newest and youngest member—Jeffrey Zeigler, who had been the cellist of the Corigliano Quartet.

For Zeigler, who was born in 1973—the year Kronos was founded—it was the gig of a lifetime: "There was never really a time that I hadn't heard the name Kronos.

Over the years I'd seen the group live a bunch of times and, of course, I bought many of their CDs. But did I ever think that I would one day actually *play* in Kronos? No way." After the first flush of excitement, Zeigler was overwhelmed by the realization he had thirty-two years of new-music repertoire to master. "Everything happened really fast. A stack of music and CDs had been overnighted to me to be absorbed in the two days I had before I was to fly to San Francisco. Upon arrival, there was another stack of music and CDs waiting for me! Thirty-two years is a long time to play catch-up, but it truly has been an enjoyable and thrilling experience."

By now, of course, Kronos is an institution in every sense of the word. In addition to the four performers, an eight-person staff works in the Kronos Performing Arts Association, a nonprofit organization that coordinates the ensemble's whirlwind schedule and its myriad commissions and recordings. Managing director Janet Cowperthwaite has been with the quartet for 25 years, and production director Larry Neff for 20. Two others have been on board for more than a decade. According to Cowperthwaite, "The Kronos 'management' structure was certainly very unique three decades ago, and it remains unique today. There is no doubt that the artistic vision has greatly benefited from managerial and organizational vision. The organization is widely considered to be one of the most successful in the country and

many others seek our advice and counsel."

Dedication and perseverance also forged bonds between Kronos and its composers. In the beginning, pure persistence on Harrington's part broke down resistance among reluctant composers and engendered several important long-term musical relationships. Harrington explains: "When we first started out in 1973, a lot of composers told me that they were just never going to write string quartet music. [For them] the medium had concluded, it had done its thing, and that was about it. For me that was unacceptable. I've spent a lot of energy trying to change that perception."

Among those resistant composers were Terry Riley and Steve Reich. After Riley's landmark minimalist composition *In C*, the composer embarked on a series of solo keyboard compositions for his own performance and subsequently immersed himself in the study of classical Indian vocal music. By the time Harrington approached him, he had become far removed from the conventions of writing down music in Western notation for other musicians to play.

In a 1998 tribute to the quartet, Riley confessed: "For a year David would come up to me in the hall and say, I hear string quartets in your music. Then he simply scheduled a piece with my name on it. So I made a tentative stab at writing something, and invited Kronos up to the ranch [Riley has a ranch in the Sierras] to try it

Opposite: In *Uniko*, a 2004 commission from Finnish accordionist Kimmo Pohjonen and sampling artist Samuli Kosminen. Cellist is Jennifer Culp.

out." And today, Riley continues to beam: "They have never failed to surprise me with their exquisite insights and musical refinements and how uniquely they have fleshed out my original ideas."

Harrington's persistence and the amount of time that all the members of the quartet spent working through ideas with Riley accomplished much more than merely getting him to write a piece for them. Thanks to Kronos's advocacy, the string quartet has become one of Riley's principal means of musical expression; and through Riley's contributions, Kronos was one of the first ensembles to sail into then-uncharted chamber music waters, performing evening-length works as well as compositions incorporating chorus and multimedia.

"In the case of Steve Reich, there was a concert where we decided to do *Clapping Music*," recalls Harrington. "We opened with it, and after that we played Shostakovich. For everybody out there that thinks they should open their concert with *Clapping Music* and then play a violin, viola or cello, don't do it; it's not a good idea! The hands swell up from clapping and then you can't really feel the fingerboard. But what happened out of playing *Clapping Music* was I wrote to Steve and we told him that we'd just played his first string quartet, and so we got this connection going by a letter. The next time we met was in New York at the local premiere of Terry Riley's *Salome Dances for Peace*, and Steve brought György Ligeti that night. I think the fact that Terry had written this two-hour piece had some weight for a lot of different composers all over the place. So we talked to Steve about a new piece, and then [philanthropist] Betty Freeman commissioned it."

"Composing for the Kronos Quartet produced two of the best pieces I've ever written—*Different Trains* and *Triple Quartet*," acknowledges Reich. "Compose a piece for a specific ensemble and the

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character of that ensemble plays a significant role in the result. I had written *Different Trains* for multiple quartets, live and pre-recorded, along with sampled voices and train sounds, knowing that if any quartet could really get all this exactly right, it was Kronos. This is a piece where the viola and cello have to imitate the speech melodies of pre-recorded speakers, including my governess, a retired Pullman porter and three Holocaust survivors. Questions immediately arose about exact bowings to best capture the cadence of the speakers. They spent hours working over these details with me until they were all exactly right, and the instrument and the speaker became fused as one. The second piece I wrote for Kronos was ten years later. I remember while composing the piece I could just hear in my head how David

Harrington would play a particular line, or Hank Dutt and John Sherba another. I could almost see their facial expressions. Sure enough, that was how it was when we recorded the piece."

Riley and Reich are the distinguished seniors on the Kronos composer roster, but in recent years the quartet has also been thinking young. Its *Under 30 Project* has upped the ante on young composer competitions by offering emerging composers an opportunity to work intensely with the group as well as to create new work for it. Long known for connecting with a wide range of collaborators (with performers ranging from West African *kora* virtuoso Foday Musa Suso to the Mexican rock band Café Tacuba), the ensemble has now created a new type of performance experience with the provoca-

With Joan Jenrenaud in 1989





Top to bottom: With Jenrenaud in 1998; on *Sesame Street* in 1987; *Visual Music*, a 30th-anniversary multimedia evening of Reich, Zorn, Penderecki, Herrmann, Nancarrow, Grey, and others; hanging out in 1977.

tive *Alternative Radio*, created in collaboration with journalist David Barsamian and radical historian Howard Zinn. Modeled on Barsamian and Zinn's provocative syndicated new series, Kronos's *Alternative Radio* brings the newsroom into the concert hall.

And finally—a documentation of the legacy. In January 2007, Boosey and Hawkes will publish the first installment of *Kronos Collection*, which will make available to other ensembles the scores and parts for heretofore impossible-to-track-down works premiered by the ensemble. The first volume reflects a pretty wide range, even though it only includes three works: *Pannonia Boundless* by the young Serbian-American composer Aleksandra Vrebalov; the quartet version of *Escalay*, by the late Nubian *oud* master Hamza el Din; and *Sunrise of the Planetary Dream Collector*, one of Terry Riley's earliest pieces written for Kronos.

"It wasn't easy putting these pieces together for publication," Hank Dutt remarks. "Terry composed his piece wanting the performers to come up with their own way of playing his work: he doesn't include dynamics, bowings or any other sort of nuances. So parts will be clean and performers can arrive at their own ideas as to how the music should be played. He also created the piece out of modules, leaving it up to members of the quartet to decide in which order and how often the modules should be played. We've kept the modules in his order, though we included a chart of our own performance of the piece in an addendum. In Hamza's *Escalay*, we wanted to make sure that the many techniques derived from his masterful *oud*-style—such as slides, pizzicati, and quarter-tones—were correctly written and clearly notated. Aleksandra's was perhaps the hardest piece to put into score form. She drew on the untamed playing of Balkan gypsy musicians, which means that most of us are playing most of the time. One challenge this posed for us was finding sensible places to set the page breaks. Holly Mentzer at Boosey understood our concerns and worked hard with us until we finally found page turns that work musically. I've loved playing these works and I'll be excited to hear them played by other groups, to see them live on in other quartets' repertory."

But don't assume that the quartet is winding down. "Kronos is just getting started," Harrington states emphatically. "There are so many possibilities for the future of our music that it is staggering to contemplate. The greatest music has not yet been written, the greatest concert has not been played, and the note with the most essential human information can hardly be imagined much less played. The concerts of the future will hold much that we are struggling to find today. There is so little time but so much to learn about and to do."

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