

## **FOUR HUNDRED CANDLES: THE CREATION OF A REPERTOIRE**

### **Kronos Quartet Marks 25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary in 1998**

“I’ve always wanted the string quartet to be vital, and energetic, and alive, and cool, and not afraid to kick ass and be absolutely beautiful and ugly if it has to be. But it has to be expressive of life. To tell the story with grace and humor and depth. And to tell the whole story, if possible.”

—David Harrington

Twenty-five years represents a milestone for any musical ensemble. For the Kronos Quartet, the anniversary also celebrates the creation of a repertoire—400 new string quartets, from composers spanning six continents and at least four generations—commissioned and premiered since 1973.

After a year playing violin in a Canadian orchestra to avoid the draft, David Harrington crossed back over the border to his native Seattle. “The war was still very present in everybody’s mind. One night I turned on the radio and heard something wild, something scary. It was *Black Angels* by George Crumb, his musical response to Vietnam. I didn’t even know it was quartet music at first, but it was a magnetic experience. All of a sudden it felt like this was absolutely the right music to play.” The 22-year old Harrington picked up the phone and called Ken Benshoof, with whom he had studied composition as a teenager. “I’m starting a group,” he announced, “because I have to play that music.” Benshoof answered with a piece of his own, *Traveling Music*, which Harrington commissioned with a bag of doughnuts. The Kronos Quartet began with performances of these two works—along with Bartók’s Third Quartet and Webern’s Six Bagatelles—at North Seattle Community College before an audience of friends and family.

Harrington hasn’t stopped calling composers since, and 25 years later Kronos is responsible for the creation of 400 new string quartets—more than twice the number by Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven, Schubert, and Brahms combined. They have played at Carnegie Hall and Central Park, at La Scala and the Montreux Jazz Festival. Their over thirty recordings have received Grammy, Deutscheschallplatten, and Edison awards. And they have introduced new music and new composers to an international audience numbering in the millions.

A double dedication—to quartet playing, and to the vitality of the form—is shared among violinists David Harrington and John Sherba, violist Hank Dutt, and cellist Joan Jeanrenaud. Add to this a sense of collaboration, with which Kronos brings pieces of music to life in rehearsal with composers, and craftsmanship, their view that each work is literally handmade, and you have the ingredients that have created a legacy that is as personal as it is prolific.

Based in San Francisco with its own staff and organization, the Kronos history reads with a seeming degree of inevitability. But the members’ decision to concentrate exclusively on new music; their work with hundreds of composers, including some of the most significant of this century, to emerging voices; and their responses to 20 years of playing together offer another side: that their achievement, like their repertoire of over 600 works, has been made the old-fashioned way—piece by piece.

## SETTING THE SCENE

*“The Sherbas need some duets”*

When John Sherba was 16 years old, this phrase was heard often in the composition department of the University of Wisconsin at Milwaukee, where he and his brother had established themselves as an ensemble in need of new music. At the same age, growing up in the 1960s and connecting with the immediacy of Bartók and Stravinsky, David Harrington began working with composer Ken Benshoof, who not only had a classical training but “was connected to American music, writing with elements of folk music and rhythms you would hear on the radio.” In Quincy, Illinois Hank Dutt put down the violin and picked up his high school’s newest instrument acquisition, a viola, which eventually earned him a scholarship to Indiana University and a place in new music performances. And in Memphis, the 16-year old Joan Jeanrenaud joined the union at the urging of a composer friend before she went on to study jazz, composition, and cello at Indiana.

In addition to hands-on experience with composers, they grew up with a love for small ensemble performance. When the opportunity to work in a quartet came their way, about five years after Harrington founded the group, they jumped:

“When I got the call to fly out to San Francisco and audition with Debussy and Bartók No. 4—which I didn’t know—my teacher Leonard Sorkin was supportive as always, but said, Well, good luck. I had a great time at the audition—even though I didn’t know a lot of the music, it felt natural.”—John Sherba

“I had just spent a year studying with Pierre Fournier in Switzerland, and I was thinking, You know, it’s time for me to go into the real world and get a job. At best I thought I might play in a chamber orchestra—I didn’t dare hope I could be in a quartet. But when Hank called me to fly to San Francisco, I trusted it immediately.”—Joan Jeanrenaud

“Once the four of us sat down, it was pretty clear that this was it. There was a wonderful respect, seemingly without ego...we could talk to each other.” —Hank Dutt

For his part, Harrington says: “The music that has attracted me most, since I was 12 years old, is quartet music. It’s this elemental experience of playing with other people. For me the violin is something that I wouldn’t do if I wasn’t playing in Kronos.”

## BEGINNINGS

*“I had a book where I would list every composer I had ever heard of”—DH*

Between 1973-78, Kronos went through various incarnations, each offering experiences that focussed its mission. At first, they operated out of Harrington’s one-room apartment, securing concerts throughout Washington, and commissioning works from Benshoof and other composers. In 1975, Harrington buttonholed visiting violinist Rostislav Dubinsky of the Borodin Quartet and went through a three-hour session on Shostakovich’s Quartet No. 8. Kronos played the work two days after Shostakovich died, and right before Kronos (Jim Shallenberger, Tim Killian, and Walter Gray) travelled to the legendary Quartet Program training residency at the State University of New York, directed by Peter Marsh and the Lenox Quartet.

From 1975-77, Kronos was in residence at the University in Geneseo, New York, where a range of composers passed through—from Lejaren Hiller and Morton Feldman, to Elliott Carter and Iannis Xenakis. The Quartet played Berg's Lyric Suite and the Carter Second Quartet, in addition to standard repertoire. As various players moved through—violinists Roy Lewis and Richard Balkin, and violist Michael Jones—Harrington and cellist Walter Gray decided that the Quartet needed an environment of freedom and experimentation that would encourage exploration into new work. They settled on San Francisco.

## **MILLS COLLEGE**

*"Oh David," said Margaret Lyon, when Harrington called Mills to report that the quartet she had hired was now a duo, "I know you'll figure this out."*

Shortly after arriving in California in 1977, and having recruited Hank Dutt on viola and Gray's wife Ella as second violin, Kronos presented a program of all 20<sup>th</sup> century music. The concert was attended by Margaret Lyon, chair of the Mills College music department, where both the Budapest and Pro Arte quartets had been in residence. Lyon came away impressed, and secured a residency grant from Chamber Music America to support Kronos joining the rich Mills tradition. In the meantime she handed the Quartet's tape to faculty composer Terry Riley, who heard the group for the first time on a car stereo in the college parking lot. But shortly before the residency was to begin, the Grays realized that raising two children and being in a full-time concertizing and teaching quartet was a physical impossibility.

"So all of a sudden it was Hank and me," says Harrington. "And Hank pulled me through, as we went through the process of auditioning all these violinists and cellists."

"Friends said, You have a chance to mold a quartet here, to find people who you can feel really good with," recalls Dutt. "Before we had played on the street in Ghiradelli Square, at weddings, and whatever we could scrape together. But with the Mills funding I realized we could attract a certain level of player. So I thought of Joan, who had been part of my quartet recital at Indiana, and called her mother, who called her in Switzerland, and before we knew it she was in San Francisco."

Harrington continues, "That same week, I was on the phone with a musician in Milwaukee, and my wife overheard and yelled out from the bathtub, 'Ask him if he knows a violinist!'" He did. Fortuitously, John Sherba arrived around the same time as Jeanrenaud, and the group was set.

Almost immediately, in the Fall of 1978, Kronos settled in at Mills, concertizing regularly and "learning four new pieces every month", according to Sherba. "We went through all the major 20<sup>th</sup> century literature—all the Schoenbergs, all the Bartóks, Debussy, Ravel, Ives, Shostakovich #7-15, Prokofiev, Carter. It was great."

"At that time, most composers weren't writing quartet music any more," recalls Harrington. "It had lived its life as an art form, and was going quietly off to die. But I decided that there was one guy at Mills who just had to write for us. At the time he was studying Indian music with Pandit Pran Nath, and hadn't notated anything since 1965."

## TERRY RILEY—COMPOSERS AND COMMUNITY

*“For a year David would come up to me in the hall and say, I hear string quartets in your music,” says Terry Riley. “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 to try it out.”*

Riley works in a remote studio in the Tahoe forest, several hours drive from San Francisco. Kronos set out to obtain one quartet, and ended up finding in this collaboration a spirit and rehearsal method that serves as the basis of their ongoing work with composers.

“It was just notes and measures, without expression,” says Riley of *G Song*. “I didn’t even put in phrasing marks. Because I wanted to leave it open. Kronos was really great about this. They wanted to dig into the music and find out what was there.”

“It’s a community kind of feeling,” says Jeanrenaud. “With Terry, we could try things out, without being judgmental at all. He created modular bars for us to play, and we would try these together, in different combinations. We even ended up making our own parts. It’s the foundation of how we work together, this whole process of trial and error.”

Riley also had ideas about pitch and expression that pushed the Kronos players beyond their training and into a new realm of experimentation. “He didn’t want vibrato, but he wanted it expressive,” says Harrington. “It was very hard for us as a group, but eventually we arrived at a sound that was different from anything we had ever done before. There was a magical moment when the bow, rather than vibrato, became the major expressor of color. That was one of the first times when Kronos really came together as a group. I think of composers as teachers, who can provide us with first-hand information in exploring the mysteries of their pieces.”

## WE BECAME OUR OWN INSTITUTION

*“Looking back, being in on the creation of how the group developed was an incredible opportunity. There wasn’t anyone to tell us what to do. That’s a great feeling. Nobody knew about us, or cared a hoot about us. We were very free.” —JJ*

In 1980, Kronos expanded its activities around the Bay Area. They played Penderecki at San Quentin Prison, the Star-Spangled Banner at Candlestick Park; and *The Rite of Spring* and *Purple Haze* at the Great American Music Hall. They finished out their Mills College residency with a program including James Brown’s “Sex Machine”, and a performance with a robot named Elvik.

“We used to play a standard work on every concert for the first two years, but then it became clear we really enjoyed doing the new music more,” says Jeanrenaud.

“Some people would come only to hear new stuff, and others only for the old stuff,” adds Dutt. “Consequently it wasn’t a very good atmosphere for the audience. So we said, Why not try to make a varied program of new music and see if that flies?”

Kronos began to produce its own concert series at the Green Room, a 300-seat hall above Herbst Theater in San Francisco's Civic Center. They rehearsed in a print shop, which was cheap, noisy, and convenient for xeroxing. They divided the tasks necessary to keep the operation going: David created the programs and solicited bookings, along with Joan, who also wrote grant proposals. John took care of the tape library. Hank was the bank.

They also created a neighborhood board of directors, led by a bookstore owner who lived down the block from Harrington on Irving Street. When a young woman who was a student at San Francisco State applied for a job, she got referred to Kronos instead.

"I don't think I'd ever heard a string quartet, or seen one," says Janet Cowperthwaite, who started working with Kronos for minimum wage in 1981 and is now its Managing Director. "I was raised on folk music and the Beatles. I was a perfect candidate because I had no preconceptions. I just thought, Have it be interesting and have it be about music." Eighteen years later, David Harrington calls her "our Colonel Parker and Brian Epstein".

## **12 HOUR DAYS AND THE WORLD OF COLLABORATION**

*"We were always short on time, learning as much as we could right up to curtain. And we often became publishers —helping each other with parts and where page turns should be." — HD*

*"We used to rehearse eight or nine hours before a concert. When we premiered Feldman's second quartet we rehearsed the whole day. A lot of what Kronos does now is the result of having built up concentration and endurance over all these years".—DH*

*"It was great being involved with every aspect. Driving to the concert, meeting the presenters for the first time, and then establishing an ongoing rapport. Often they would hear how the group was evolving better than we did."—JS*

By the mid-1980s, Kronos had begun a regular commissioning structure that opened the group to a world of relationships that has grown and expanded with each passing year. They established a residency at the Schoenberg Institute in Los Angeles, where they not only premiered numerous works, but also worked with composers ranging from Elliott Carter, to Morton Feldman, to Witold Lutoslawski. This close contact with composers became something Kronos would seek out in their travels throughout the world.

"One of the great things about having a composer there is to get a sense of their music through their physical character," says Harrington. "When Lutoslawski sang the opening of his quartet, which is a solo for me, he gestured with each note. With some notes he wilted in sadness, and with others there was a great deal of energy and dance. This is valuable performance information you can't get any other way."

Sherba agrees: "Just talking to Morton Feldman helped me know what pizzicato was."

Fanning out from their base in California, Kronos began receiving invitations to perform in Europe, and in 1985 they gave their first major New York concert, a Composer's Forum event at Carnegie Recital Hall, with music by African-American composers including Muhal Richard Abrams, Anthony Braxton, and Leroy Jenkins. The headline of John Rockwell's enthusiastic review in the New York Times read —"Unconventional is the Word for This Quartet".

## RECORDINGS, REVIEWS, AND A REPERTOIRE

*“How was Kronos back then? They were the same as they are now. But because they had a flair for presentation, they were misunderstood. They were just trying to wake up a world that was a little bit asleep.”*  
-- Terry Riley

*“They’re up onstage and they’re playing the right instruments, but these people do not look like the members of a string quartet. Instead of wearing tuxedos or evening gowns, they’re dressed in black spandex. They’re the Kronos Quartet—classical music’s own Fab Four.”*  
-- Rolling Stone

Kronos signed its first recording contract with Nonesuch in 1985, and the resulting collection of music from Peter Sculthorpe to Jimi Hendrix was voted Best of the Year by the New York Times. Harrington’s book of composer names began to bulge, as word about Kronos spread. Among the composers they met next was South African Kevin Volans, whose *White Man Sleeps* became the title of Kronos’ next recorded collection (nominated for a Grammy Award in 1988) and introduced the element of non-Western musics into the repertoire.

Newspapers and magazines across the country began to take note of an ensemble that seemed to be challenging the orthodoxies of a tradition-based form. “There was a time when I noticed that every single review had to do with clothes and haircuts,” says Janet Cowperthwaite. “And the fact is that they were just being the young people that they were. At a certain point we started not to answer those ‘image’ questions anymore. And talk about the work itself.”

In the meantime, concert bookings regularly numbered over 100 per year, and Kronos was reaching out to a public much like themselves and “playing composers who had never before dreamed of writing chamber music, and attracting audiences that were once listening to synthesizers and amplified guitars.” (Washington Post)

## STEVE REICH AND TECHNOLOGY

*“We took 8 or 9 hours per day for 9 days to record Different Trains, definitely one of the hardest things we’ve ever done. But it opened us up to a whole new world of sound.”—DH*

Winner of the Grammy Award for Best Composition of 1990, Steve Reich’s *Different Trains* represented a musical, emotional, and technological breakthrough for Kronos. Layers of quartets blended with layers of voices in an evocation of America and Europe in the 1940s. Despite its demands, the work was so strong Kronos took it on tour. Soon it became clear that for the piece to achieve its full effect, a sound engineer was essential. Around the same time, Kronos produced its first staged concert, *Live Video*, designed by Larry Neff. This opened up a world of visual possibilities for many new works, including lighting and other dramatic devices. By 1991, Kronos had hired a two-man road team—unheard of in classical music—that enabled them to expand the musical and dramatic spectrum of the Quartet in a wide range of venues. In addition, composers writing new works for Kronos could create prerecorded sound tracks to be integrated into touring performances, and some commissions began to call for fully stageable works.

## PIECES OF AFRICA

*“The standard string quartet configuration always has the first violin with the melody, the cello with the bass, and the 2<sup>nd</sup> violin and viola as filler. In African music every single part is equally important. If you take one away, it completely falls apart. That was a revelation.”—JJ*

*“Every one of the composers on Pieces of Africa used different words to describe their music than I had heard before. Dumisani Maraire talked about ‘gluing’ when we were putting the four voices together, and Kevin Volans told us we should sound the way an elephant sways.”—JS*

One of Kronos’ ground-breaking projects, “Pieces of Africa” drew the Quartet together into collaboration with seven African composer-performers, from the Egyptian Hamza El Din to the Gambian Foday Musa Suso. The double #1 classical and world music recording prompted engagements at the Montreux Jazz Festival and Central Park in 1992, and went on to sell more than a quarter-million copies worldwide.

## 400 CANDLES, AND COUNTING

*“Writing a quartet is hard. You have to have the right texture, the right balance, the right length. I’m very proud of not just playing one piece and then it’s over. Kronos is about taking the relationship further. Composers not only know us better --they write in the form better.”—JS*

*“All these great composer-teachers set the stage for making us feel we need to learn more.”-- DH*

More than half of the composers who have written for Kronos have contributed more than one work. In addition to the cultivation of new composer voices, which is an ongoing pursuit, Kronos is constantly commissioning, rehearsing, and performing new and better quartets. At any point in the past 10 years, more than 30 quartets have been in preparation for a Kronos performance or recording somewhere in the world. In the past few years, second quartets have been commissioned from Franghiz Ali-Zadeh, Osvaldo Golijov, P.Q. Phan, and Steve Reich, to name but a few. Recent recordings have featured second quartets by Philip Glass, Henryk Górecki, Scott Johnson, and Steve Mackey, among others. They have collaborated in performance with Astor Piazzolla, Dawn Upshaw, Huun-Huur-Tu, Wu Man, Eiko and Koma, The Modern Jazz Quartet, Don Walser, and composer-performers from Africa, in addition to many others. New composers writing for the first time for Kronos include Diamanda Galas from New York, Gabriela Ortiz from Mexico City, and Guo Wen-Jing from China. And numerous quartets, choreographers, and other artists regularly have made Kronos commissions part of their repertoire. It is this literal creation of a repertoire that Kronos celebrates this season, shared with all who are a part of it.

## ABOUT 4

*“When you’ve been associated with a group for as many years as I have been, you know them well. And there has been such a support by everyone to one another, and a respect, that makes us very close. That is important to keep, and it is why we are together.”—HD*

*“It’s been a great life experience to work with Kronos. Each of us brought something to the relationship, and we have learned things together. I’ve just sent them three more quartets.”—TR*