



[Listen to the story online at NPR.com by clicking here.](#)

Four centuries of Black American history are told in new Kronos Quartet performance

Tim Greiving

November 17, 2021 - 4:44 PM ET

Heard on [All Things Considered](#)



Kronos Quartet.
Jay Blakesberg

Editors note: This story includes a brief mention of racial violence.

It started with an acceptance speech: [Nikky Finney](#), a poet and professor from South Carolina, won the National Book Award in 2011 for her poetry collection *Head Off & Split*.

In her speech, Finney traced a line from an 18th-century proclamation, which decreed that slaves were forbidden from learning to read or

write, to the proud, Black literary giants in the room. Taking the stage afterward, John Lithgow, the event's host, looked stunned. "That was the best acceptance speech for anything that I've heard in my life," he said.

Another person who saw that speech, on television some time later, was violinist David Harrington, the founder of [Kronos Quartet](#).

"It was clear that I had to be in touch with Nikky after hearing that," Harrington says, "because I didn't know anyone alive could give a speech like that."

Since 1973, Kronos has been fiddling on the edge of what concert music can be, performing everything from newfangled minimalism to Jimi Hendrix. Harrington contacted Finney about a collaboration, with the initial idea of commemorating the 150th anniversary of the end of the Civil War. Finney wrote 10 pages of deeply researched poetry about the Black American story.

After a few false starts, the project finally resulted in a commission from a coalition led by the Hewlett Foundation, involving Texas Performing Arts and several other presenters, in 2019—400 years after Africans first arrived in America. *At War With Ourselves — 400 Years of You* has its [premiere in Austin](#) this weekend, performed by Kronos and Finney with the local vocal group [Inversion Ensemble](#). The creators hope to take the piece all over the country.

In it, Finney condenses those four centuries of history and 10 pages of ideas into 14 compact couplets. The text opens with what the poet describes as a "telephoto shot of the belly of a slave ship."

"I talk about 10 square feet of space to live and three vertical inches of air to breathe," Finney says. "This visual, this real thing, becomes a metaphor for what happens over those next 400



Michael Abels at the New York premiere of *US* in 2019.
Johannes Eisele/AFP via Getty Images

years. There's never enough space. That first moment is really a moment of animal husbandry, not of humanity. "I start there," she adds, "but I don't *stay* there. Because the black body is always seen, thought of, and pictured in this moment of brutality — which... it's right. That moment is a right thing to understand. But what I wanted to go to was what it takes not to be annihilated."

Finney and Kronos found a simpatico composer in [Michael Abels](#), best known for scoring the Jordan Peele films *Us* and *Get Out*. Abels is, in his own art form, a poet of the horrors and beauty of the Black

experience in America. He was immediately taken by Finney's words.

There's a goldmine of meaning and reference and allegory," he says. "For the literary layman, it's a bit overwhelming. Like, you feel all of that possibility in everything she says, and as a layman I want to, like, say: 'Wait, I need to think about that!'"

Fortunately the commission was for an 80-minute score for quartet, choir, and Finney reading her own words. Inspired by the old tradition of creating an entire oratorio from a single Bible verse, he retyped Finney's rich, visual, meaning-packed words — and added a *lot* of extra spaces.

"I started to see it not as one thing, but as about a dozen or 15, 16 different things," says Abels, who began to think of Finney's couplets as a song cycle. "I had to really get inside the emotion of each one—and not only possibly from the poet's intention, but also my own emotion about it."



Kronos Quartet performing with Nikky Finney (center) and a chorus of local artists in South Carolina on Nov. 7, 2021.
Jason Ayer/University of South Carolina

He cites a line: "'They will dismiss your wailing, inventive mouth,' and then it goes on to talk about other things they will do to keep you down. And at times in my career where things weren't going well, I really did feel like my work was being dismissed. And not for any reason—not even knowing the reason was frustrating. And so there is a long passage where the chorus just repeats the words: 'They will dismiss you.' It felt right to repeat that line again and again and again. And then I realized: because that's how / felt."

Abels cites another section of Finney's text: "'Your neck is believed to be leather, and will be stretched and tested before the eyes of their children.' Really, the most chilling part about it is not the lynching; the most chilling part is inviting the town to come watch, the *before the eyes of their children* part.

"So there's suddenly this break—the music stops," Abels says of his setting, "and then there's this what I hope is very beautiful chorale on the words 'before the eyes of their children,' which is just the chorus by itself. It's musically very harmonic, and it's a contrast to what the words represent."

He used some of each musical style that Black Americans either invented or contributed to: ragtime, bluegrass, jazz, and rock 'n' roll. And by stretching 500 words into an evening-length composition, he was able to summon a special power: repetition.

"The final line is: *the ravishing wondrous private inner bank of you never was on the auction block*," he says. "And so I had the choir sing, 'Your soul never was, never, never, never was on the auction block.'"



Nikky Finney (left) and Michael Abels in conversation during a preview in South Carolina on Nov. 7, 2021.
Jason Ayer/University of South Carolina

After hearing a preview in South Carolina — where she finally met Abels in person for the first time — that passage was what echoed in Finney's ears.

"This American novelist named A.J. Verdelle said once that repetition is holy, and that's what Michael did," Finney says. "I'm walking around my house the next day, and I'm just going 'never, never, never, never, never...,'" she continues, singing for effect. "And it's because repetition is holy, it got in my ear deeply. And it was like: *that* is the heart of this. He repeated lines or words or phrases that needed to be repeated, in order for you to make the journey of these 14 lines for this 400 years. It's really stunning what he did with it."

Finney's couplets reference everything from Harriet Tubman to Black Olympians and astronauts, and from inventions by Black Americans to horrifically racist scientific beliefs of the past. Don't call it a libretto, she says; it's a paean, a song of praise.

"They will never be disinterested in what your arms, legs, and lips can do on their well-lit screens," the words sing on the page. "The rest of you, the ravishing, wondrous, veiled interior, your vermilion quiet, your indigo jar of morning whispers, the midnight calculations of your mother, every smokey algorithm your father ever dreamed, will, right from the start, be thrown overboard with the sharks."

That harmonic tension — between words of absolute love for the rich inner life and accomplishments of Black Americans, and the pain and sadness inflicted on them for four centuries — is what Abels tried to honor.

"Some of it is really devastating, and it's amazing that she can produce such harsh images with just language," he says. "But also, there's joy, and there's inspiration, and there's persistence. I wanted to make sure that the piece acknowledged all of those, but also took the listener on a journey. I'm a hopeful person by nature, and I wanted the audience to feel that if they were confronted by some of these harsh historical facts, they were left in a place of inspiration."