

KRONOSQUARTET

KRONOS PERFORMING ARTS ASSOCIATION

The Rhythm of Language

At War With Ourselves and bulletproof creation

By D. Scot Miller

It takes a special kind of courage to confront the white supremacy and anti-Blackness woven into the fabric of American history. Many have feared that the tugging of those particular threads in our national tapestry could unravel the entire thing, but in light of the latest racial awakening that has followed the murder of George Floyd in 2020, and the subsequent protests highlighting decades of unarmed Black Americans dying at the hands of the police with zero accountability, we all must summon the courage to do so. In *At War With Ourselves*, Kronos Quartet joins together with composer Michael Abels, poet Nikky Finney, and choral director Valérie Sainte-Agathe to lend voice and vision to the necessary conversation every American must have.

Though *At War With Ourselves* is contemporary and urgent, the seeds of the project were planted a decade ago. “One night in 2011, I was watching the National Book Awards, and they were honoring the winner of the poetry award, Nikky Finney,” recalled Kronos’ Artistic Director, David Harrington. “I had never heard of Nikky. I was all by myself watching her acceptance speech, just weeping.” In her opening remarks, Finney pays homage to “the ones who longed to read and write, but were forbidden, who lost hands and feet, were killed, by laws written by men who believed they owned other men. [...] If my name is ever called out,” she says, “I promised my girl-poet self, so too would I call out theirs.” Harrington knew Kronos needed to find a way to work with this voice. So, when shortly thereafter, the Clarice Smith Performing Arts Center at the University of Maryland invited Kronos to create a piece commemorating the 150th anniversary of the end of the Civil War, Finney immediately came to mind.

“David got in touch with me, and *The Battle of and for the Black Face Boy* was made out of our residency with the University of Maryland,” Finney said of her 2013 poem that would eventually inspire the text for *At War With Ourselves*. A “radical libretto made of Civil War history, Black history, and modern American headlines,” *Black Face Boy* examines how “the question of who gets to move like a free person and who gets to move in chains remains ensconced in our everyday American lives one hundred and fifty years later.” Indeed, throughout the development of the project and beyond, the number of Black lives stolen by American law enforcement has continued to surge. Harrington remembers a particular meeting in Maryland that happened to coincide with yet another police killing of a young Black man: “Just as we were right in the middle of thinking about how this project would take shape as an experience, it seemed like, ‘Here our society goes again and again...’” An urgent matter continually becoming more urgent still.

*

David Harrington founded the Kronos Quartet in Seattle in 1973, in part to address and protest the Vietnam War. Since relocating to San Francisco in 1977, Kronos has remained committed to

social justice and protesting war and inequality, while tackling a broad range of musical genres through more than 1,000 commissioned works written specifically for them. Now, even with almost 50 years of boundary-pushing collaborations behind them, Harrington still sees this partnership with Abels, Finney, and Sainte-Agathe as one of the quartet's more momentous achievements.

"I've said before that I want to create bulletproof music," reflected Harrington. "I would love to be able to make a piece of music that we could wrap around those that we love, those that need protection in any way that they need protection. Well, we haven't succeeded yet, but I will say that *At War With Ourselves* feels, to me, like it will be the closest Kronos has ever come."

*

After the initial planning phase, the project went into hibernation as the University of Maryland stepped out and the Kronos Performing Arts Association (KPAA)—the non-profit that manages all aspects of Kronos' work—took over as producer. Years went by, but KPAA's Executive Director Janet Cowperthwaite kept in touch with the collaborators, each one committed to someday bringing the project to life. Finally, in 2017, it was moved off the backburner when KPAA was awarded a significant grant from the Hewlett Foundation, enabling the piece to move forward. Nikky Finney had since published *The Black Face Boy* in *Oxford American* in 2015, but when the group came together again, she condensed and reimagined the poem into the smaller piece, *At War With Ourselves – 400 Years of You*.

"The first version was so long but also deeply cinematic," Finney says. "As I wrote, I kept falling into this desire to speak in long, punctuated waves about neglected and profound American history. My history. I wanted to catch and ride the electricity that was and is the African American presence in America for 400 years. There are movements in that longer piece that you don't have time for when you're trying to do a 90-minute concert production. It needed a compression of all of that energy." It's always easier, Finney explained, to go on and on and fall in love with all the words you've written, but as James Baldwin teaches us, "You want to write a sentence as clean as a bone. That is the goal."

*

"The poem is only a single page long. How do I turn this into a complete song cycle?" composer Michael Abels wondered. "I broke down the lines and found the rhythm of Nikky's language, and in doing so, I found myself turning to Google to learn about the references in her lines about 'traffic lights' and 'ironing boards' to find elements of Black American history I didn't know before." By going line-for-line, Abels was able to compose music that captured the spirit of each one. "It incorporates Dixieland and Jimi Hendrix, and I was especially drawn to the sounds of *The Great American Songbook* coming out of Broadway, Hollywood, and the music writers of Tin Pan Alley in the 20th Century."

As a Black male composer, Abels exists in a rarefied space that made composing music for Finney's text a personal experience. "When Nikky used the word 'indefatigable,' I thought it was the whitest word I'd ever seen," he said, "but I had a better understanding of her excavation too."

Right now, some Americans are trying to make history illegal in the guise of being against critical race theory. There's an anger that needs to be addressed, but I feel the piece is rooted in hope and change. Looking directly at 400 years of white supremacy and anti-Blackness is an uncomfortable conversation, but necessary if we ever expect this nation to heal."

Mirroring David Harrington's dream of "bulletproof music," the ideas of healing, protection, and confronting an uncomfortable and brutal history was echoed by all of the artists. Finney's poem, however, is also focused on the causes—both physical and metaphysical—that have created the conditions which allow for anti-Blackness and white supremacy to continue to thrive today. "As Black people in the 21st century, some of us love to say it was so long ago and none of this terrorism exists anymore," Finney said. "Some of us join the chorus of, 'Why do we have to talk about this? We don't study it. We haven't been taught it. Why do you keep talking about it?' And the answer is: because it's still happening."

*

For choral director Valérie Sainte-Agathe, the project took on a scope that reached beyond America's shores. Paired with her primary role working with young voices at the San Francisco Girls Chorus, *At War With Ourselves* has inspired her to reflect on her youth, the global Black struggle for equality, and her personal history.

"This project actually pushed me to look for more Black history in the Caribbean," she said. "I was born in France, and my parents are from Martinique. I lived in Martinique when I was a teenager, and we did not learn of slavery in Martinique or the history of resistance behind Aimé Césaire. We didn't learn any of that. In Martinique, looking at that history is still really new. I think that with projects like this, people are encouraged to look and search and make sure they know what really happened and what is really happening. It's difficult to face that history and I understand that for probably the previous generation, it was easier to just not talk about it."

"Everybody needs to know this history," Sainte-Agathe continued. "It's not only for African Americans or white people. It's not about accusing anybody. We need to have the knowledge to share with future generations, not just to show what happened, but to say that we can do better. It's not about placing blame or accusation. There is something very hopeful about recognizing it and acknowledging it, and then asking what can be done about it. You must begin by looking at a history of victimization without walking through it feeling like a victim. You're not, you never have been, you're powerful."

D. Scot Miller is the Managing Editor of the East Bay Express, author of The AfroSurreal Manifesto, and Founder of The Afrosurreal Arts Movement. He lives in Oakland, CA.

Edited by Reshena Liao

At War with Ourselves - 400 Years of You was commissioned by the Kronos Performing Arts Association, funded in part by a Hewlett Foundation 50 Arts Commission and the MAP Fund, in partnership with ASU Gammage at Arizona State University, Hancher Auditorium–The University of Iowa, Krannert Center for the Performing Arts/University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, SFJAZZ, Texas Performing Arts at the University of Texas at Austin, and the University of South Carolina.

The World Premiere of At War With Ourselves – 400 Years of You took place at Texas Performing Arts at the University of Texas at Austin, November 2021.