

## Commentary

# *Kronos is a quartet for all time*

**By Stephen Kessler**

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“Music is the healing force of the universe,” said Albert Ayler. The avant-jazz saxophonist of the 1960s would have been a good fit for the Cabrillo Festival of Contemporary Music now playing at the Civic, his screaming dissonances and aggressive attacks on the boundaries of melody resembling in some ways the more cerebral New Music composers of Cabrillo using the whole 68-piece orchestra and Maestro Macelaru to blast the building last weekend with a complex racket endlessly resonant in its shifting rhythms, its odd harmonies, unpredictable syncopations and stretches of head-bobbing melody and body-permeating percussion.

After two nights of such big sounds belted out by the whole ensemble, the smaller scale of the Kronos Quartet is like a palate-cleansing sparkling water following an eight-course international meal. Just four figures — David Harrington and John Sherba, violins; Hank Dutt, viola; Sunny Yang, cello — mount the little stage and dispensing with introductions plunge right into the program, the opening piece by Egyptian composer Islam Chipsey a drivingly catchy song whose genre is beyond category but the effect I feel is as infectious as when I last heard Los Lobos in this venue years ago, only instead of Mexican charanga-rock’n’roll it’s an irresistible sonic force mixing Arabic swing and Afro-Mediterranean bluegrass, Appalachian fiddle and Bedouin bellydance.

Music cannot be described in words but can almost be transcribed in translation, a vain attempt to replicate its medicinal and therapeutic influence on the hurt soul in hard times. Kronos means time and they’ve been at it a long time, Harrington noting that they played their first Cabrillo Festival 40 years ago, and they’re still going — and as Ben Jonson said of Shakespeare, they are not of an age but for all time — a daring band of virtuosi who have performed around the globe and brought home all kinds of sounds from everywhere, spreading their lifesaving, mind-expanding, soul-uplifting, sometimes challenging but

beautifully illuminating vibrations like transcendental evangelists speaking in tongues.

This is the kind of revival meeting that revives me — my secular synagogue, my emergency room, my psychic spa, the salon of my dreams where I can close my eyes and be carried to a place that erases history, for a few minutes anyway, casting a spell of pure contemplative bliss. Kronos mixes the familiar — “Strange Fruit,” “Summertime,” Mahalia Jackson singing “Motherless Child” — with the exotic: Russian Yevgeniy Sharlat’s “pencil sketch” played in part with actual pencils tapped against taut strings, or Colombian Mario Galeano Toro’s modern twists on his own Caribbean tradition, or Missy Mazzoli’s “Harp and Altar” attempting to translate the weird lyricism of Hart Crane’s psalm to the Brooklyn Bridge. Even Philip Glass sounds less monotonous than usual with a dreamily melodic trancelike American raga.

The intimacy and emotional resonance of strings reaches me at a deeper level than brass or reeds or percussion; it must have to do with the way the soundwaves enter one’s flesh, a kind of caress that has the calming effect of a hand. But then you are slapped out of your reverie in the third encore, which features the teenage voices of activist-survivors of the high-school massacre in Florida rallying a crowd at a demonstration to end the terrorism of out-of-control guns. Even the otherworldly artists of Kronos cannot escape current events and choose to address them, for better or worse, head on.

This is how music both engages and transforms the ambient horrors of the moment. Consummate masters of the highest artistic accomplishment remain anchored in grave reality while at the same time soaring into a more sublime realm that moves and consoles and inspires. These four playing as one are among the most ambitious and creative musicians on the planet. It is a privilege and a pleasure to witness and absorb their precisely coordinated creation.

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