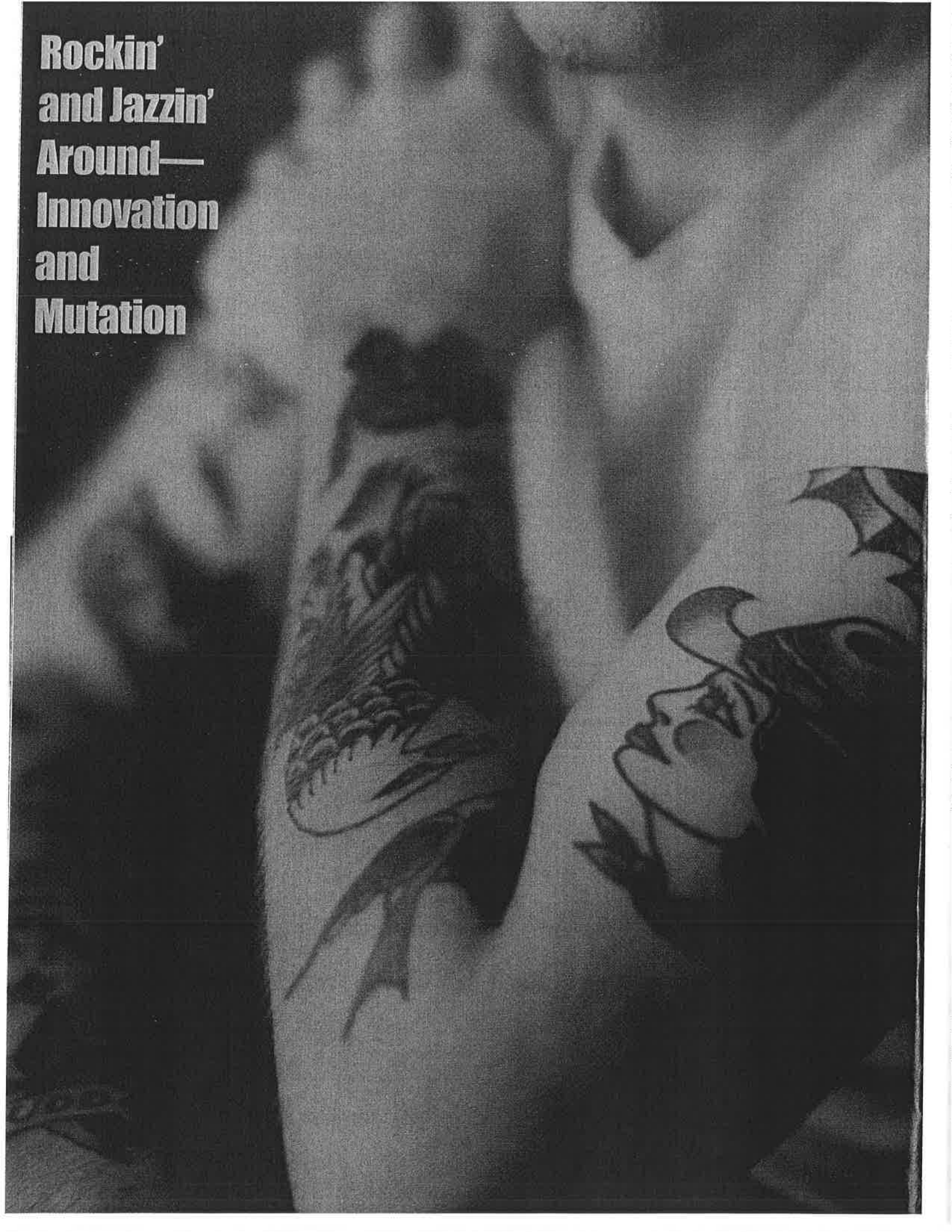


**Rockin'  
and Jazzin'  
Around—  
Innovation  
and  
Mutation**



By Kyle Gann

I remember being at a string quartet concert in a little space in New York several years ago. The drummer was so athletically noisy that you could hardly hear the double bass player, who was plucking as energetically as he could. The violist kept time by chewing gum, and each improvised cadenza, more shrieking in its glissandos than the last, drew bursts of applause from the listeners. The climax of the concert came, I guess, when the first violinist went break-dancing, spinning around on the floor on her back, still bowing away.

I guess it's not everyone's typical experience of string quartets, but as someone who frequents the more experimental spaces in Downtown Manhattan, it's typical of mine. The string quartet has mutated, sort of like a sweet little bird who unexpectedly sprouted barbed antennae and huge metallic wings. String quartet players now bow tuned water glasses and strike tam-tams. They wear strange costumes and perform in front of theatrical props. Amplified to the max, they improvise jazz riffs and pound out rock songs, sometimes with, indeed, a drummer banging away behind them. They add double bass, voices, synthesizers, samplers. And once in awhile, when they're in the mood, they even dance.

You realize, I suppose, that I'm not speaking of the prestigious LaSalle Quartet, nor of the elegant Quartetto Italiano, but of younger groups, baby boomers who grew up closer to rock than to an Old World chamber tradition. The Kronos Quartet were the ones who started it, of course. Founded in 1973 by violinist David Harrington, they shocked the chamber music world by wearing odd custom-made outfits and spiky haircuts (except for second violinist John Sherba, whose hair just wasn't spiking material). They performed in front of ominous hanging nooses for effect, and projected on the wall the scores they played from. Most notoriously, they amplified themselves and played a raucous string arrangement of Jimi Hendrix's Purple Haze, using it for years as their drop-of-a-hat encore.

Some of these innovations were merely cosmetic, and threatened to swamp the more important work the Kronos was doing, such as the commissioning of four-hundred new opuses (so far) from major minimalist composers, unknown



# The String Quartet Ain't Over 'Til the Drummer Solos



*KRONOS QUARTET* has commissioned some of the most important new works in quartet literature, such as Terry Riley's *Cadenza on the Night Plain*, Steve Reich's *Different Trains*, and Kevin Volans's *White Man Sleeps*, and, in their twenty-fifth anniversary year, the commission count stands at four-hundred new works

approach to quartet literature, they operate more like a jazz ensemble, playing works by members of the quartet and sometimes improvising. They have added drums and bass at times, they play standards by jazz greats Wayne Shorter and Muddy Waters, and they've played homemade string instruments sculpted from junk materials by Ken Butler. Rather than spruce up the old image of the string quartet for a postmodern world, they have challenged the most basic assumptions of chamber music itself.

Soldier was an unlikely candidate; born David Sulzer

Americans, and unconventional musicians from across Africa, Asia, and the Middle East. Issuing more than two dozen discs, the Kronos has succeeded in getting new music across to a mass audience, though sometimes at a cost that left a bad taste in the mouths of music lovers. They have done so much new music that they have often been under-rehearsed, and composers have complained of assembly line treatment. Still, the Kronos commissioned some of the most important new works in the quartet literature: Terry Riley's *Cadenza on the Night Plain*, Steve Reich's *Different Trains* (with sampled voices), and Kevin Volans's *White Man Sleeps*.

If the Kronos brought a new image from California, another foursome formed in New York in 1985 enacted a more radical change in the string quartet's way of life: the Soldier Quartet, formed by Dave Soldier, the one I describe in the opening paragraph above. Abandoning the usual repertoire



*SOLDIER QUARTET* challenged the most basic assumptions of chamber music itself, rather than sprucing up the old image of the string quartet for a postmodern world



The new quartets just might be returning us to a  
freer, more authentic performance style that  
Mozart would have felt at home with

(pronounced almost the same), he is assistant professor of psychiatry and neurology at Columbia University, and began performing under the name Soldier so that his science professors wouldn't find out what he was doing on the side. Laura Seaton, the group's other composer, was the lithe and athletic first violinist who sometimes took to the floor, and cellist Mary Wooten has sometimes been known, in wild onstage moments, to spin her cello around like an old-time vaudeville bass player. In the nineties, Seaton and Wooten broke off from the Soldier to continue their spirited hijinks in a new, parallel quartet, the Sirius.

New York wasn't the only city jazzing the string quartet. In Oakland the Turtle Island String Quartet, also founded in 1985, became known for a stylistic fluidity that allowed it to spice up Vivaldi with bossa nova rhythms and enrich Thelonious Monk with Mozartean figurations. Turtle Island refers to itself as a "band," records on the popular jazz label Windham Hill, and plays jazz festivals all over North America.

Other even younger quartets held to a more conventional concert presentation but moved away from tradition in the style of repertoire they championed. The Balanescu Quartet,

founded in 1987 by its Romanian composer/violinist Alexander Balanescu, also calls itself a band, but is more tied into rock than jazz, cultivating a highly energetic performance style. The group has worked with David Byrne, saxophonist John Lurie of the Lounge Lizards, and the Pet Shop Boys, playing in Wembley Stadium to 10,000 of that rock group's fans. They've also specialized in minimalist works by the important British composers Gavin Bryars and Michael Nyman.

The all-women Cassatt Quartet has championed women composers such as Joan Tower, but also premiered a string quartet by the noted inventor of multiple-electric-guitar symphonies, Glenn Branca. The length and slow-moving development of such works often demands a different, sometimes more casual performance situation than the usual formal dress-cum-proscenium stage, and the Balanescu and Cassatt both perform in New York at non-concert-hall spaces like the Knitting Factory and La MaMa.

What does it all mean, this vernacularizing of the string quartet?

The end of civilization, perhaps. The unavoidable results of a dumbed-down TV culture. The pitiful final stage of a once



*SIRIUS STRING  
QUARTET—an offshoot of the  
Soldier—began their spirited  
hijinks in the early nineties. These  
1996 members are Laura Seaton,  
Mary Rowell, Ron Lawrence, and  
Mary Wooten*



*TURTLE ISLAND STRING QUARTET* spices up Vivaldi with bossa nova rhythms and enriches Thelonious Monk with Mozartean figurations

We no longer  
acknowledge  
visible, sharp  
class distinctions  
in America.

On any given day,  
Bill Gates and a  
homeless person  
are both likely to  
don blue jeans.

great tradition.

Maybe. But let's consider for a moment what these young string quartets are actually rejecting. The traditional string quartet is expected to perform in formal attire, for people sitting in rows of chairs, in a ritual as quiet and formalistic as an Episcopal high church service.

Why the formal attire? Because American society used to be sharply divided along class lines. The working classes went to see vulgar theatrical shows, while the leisure class wore their best, most opulent clothing to go hear the great classical performers. Why quiet and formalistic? Because 19th-century critics like John Sullivan Dwight created a perception that listening to "the great composers" is, in virtually a religious sense, an elevating experience. It elevates one, specifically, above the common herd. We no longer acknowledge visible, sharp class distinctions in America. On any given day, Bill Gates and a homeless person are both likely to don blue jeans. And for those of us who love classical music and who are not wealthy, America's continuing association of classical music with the upper class sticks in the craw. We do not, generally, live in a tuxedo culture; why are tuxedos so often mandated for the very music we feel most intimate with? Why are classical radio stations the only ones that carry Saab ads and invitations from chummy little banks that offer free checking with a minimum deposit of only \$500,000? The old, hoary, 19th-century perception that one proves one's high social status by attending classical music concerts is still very much with us.

But why would a young string quartet, composed of people who grew up in the freedom-loving sixties or afterward, continue the trappings of those old class distinctions? Why wear fancy clothing and force your audience to do likewise as though we're all pretending we're trying to look rich for an evening? Why observe a reverent decorum while playing for an audience that would rather relate to the music by

*Continued on page 64*

*BALENESCU QUARTET* has worked with David Byrne, saxophonist John Lurie of the Lounge Lizards, and played in Wembley Stadium for 10,000 Pet Shop Boys fans

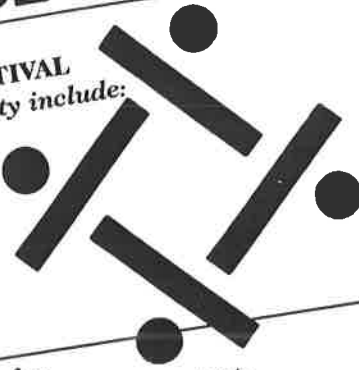


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*It Ain't Over from page 36*

moving with it than by treating it as an object of religious reflection?

Part of the rejection of conventions is also intended to reverse the ill effects of our being such a notation-dependent musical culture. While notation has allowed the European tradition to build up a polyphonic complexity unparalleled by other

Some of Haydn's and Mozart's quartets were premiered at private gatherings by a quartet consisting of composers Dittersdorf, Vanhal, Mozart, and Haydn

musical traditions of the world (while also keeping it somewhat limited in the areas of rhythm and micro-tonality), it has also encouraged a page-oriented performance aesthetic that de-emphasizes rapport with the audience. Given that we do not want to abandon notation—I've never met a musician who seriously advocated that—can't we encourage a performance practice that overcomes the dulling effects of playing from the page? Especially since we are now surrounded by the freer examples of so many African and Asian musicians.

But what of quartets like the Soldier, Sirius, Turtle Island, and



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*It Ain't Over from page 64*

Balanescu playing their own music instead of the repertoire? Well, as I recall, some of Haydn's and Mozart's quartets were premiered at private gatherings by a quartet consisting of composers Dittersdorf, Vanhal, Mozart, and Haydn. On one hand, composers have been forced to form their own groups by the difficulty of getting their music sympathetically played by existing ensembles. On the other, the return of the performer-composer brings a certain liveliness back into music, and many of the pieces that result make a better impression than most quartets written by composers who don't know the medium intimately.

What happens, though, to the tradition of performing the great repertoire

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*It Ain't Over from page 66*

of the past? Evidence suggests that it will remain intact. Our musicologically sensitive age is less forgiving of anachronism than the nineteenth century was, and the young quartets have not shown a tendency to desecrate the past under the guise of preserving it. When Laura Seaton dips and gyrates while playing, she's doing it in her own music, which has that kind of freedom built in—not in Beethoven's Grosse Fuge. The mix-and-match stylistic blending that the Turtle Island Quartet enjoys is part of a larger postmodern phenomenon of fractured consciousness, not a superficial attempt to update the classics. It's true that Charles Ives fans felt betrayed when the Kronos overdubbed themselves onto a

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treasured recording of Ives playing the piano and singing, but such experiments remain rare.

Besides, performance of older music was not characterized by the sedate reverence that we retroactively project onto it. Clapping not only between movements but even in the middle of them was common in Mozart's time; when I see people clap between movements now, I say to myself, there are the traditionalists, and also the ones who are reacting spontaneously to the music. We

*Continued*



*Cyrus Forough*  
*Professor of Violin*

Mr. Cyrus Forough is a Laureate of the Tchaikovsky International Competition, First Prize winner of the Milwaukee Symphony Violin Competition, and winner of the USIA National Violin & Piano Duo Competition with pianist Carolyn McCracken. His teachers were Arthur Grumiaux, David Oistrakh, and Josef Gingold.



He met acclaim as both a recitalist and orchestral soloist, appearing throughout North and South America, Europe, the Middle and Far East, and the former U.S.S.R.

Representing the United States as an Artistic Ambassador, Mr. Forough concertized and presented master classes in the Far East and throughout South America.

Students of Cyrus Forough have been winners in national and international competitions and are members of the Cleveland Orchestra, Houston Symphony Orchestra, and the Milwaukee Symphony. Mr. Forough is in residence at the Indiana University Summer String Academy and the International School for Musical Arts in Ontario.

Mr. Forough's faculty colleagues include violinists Joseph Golan, Yuko Mori (1999), and Albert Wang, violists Li-Kuo Chang and Richard Ferrin, cellists Natalia Khoma and John Sharp, and bassist Stephen Lester.

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*It Ain't Over from page 69*

have no CDs of live eighteenth-century concerts to guide us, but the new quartets just might be returning us to a freer, more authentic performance style that Mozart would have felt at home with.

The swing of the great pendulum of music history is broad and slow. The classical period was not called classical for nothing, and it began with a period of intense experimentation, with composers forming quartets to try out their own new works in intimate settings at which the audience felt free to express pleasure and displeasure. If music swings back that way again, we can at least savor the phenomenon, and perhaps realize that the nineteenth-century aesthetic of sitting dead still before the majesty of the great masterworks was, after all, just one historical construction among many.

Does this mean that break-dancing will become part of the violinist's standard curriculum? I think not (although the image is, I must say, delightful to contemplate). In this period of transition, we have no new tradition yet. Every one of these quartets is a group of pioneers. The exciting prospect is that the string quartet is cutting, forever, the strings that tied it to the nineteenth-century upper class. It is—to put it in a flowery way—returning to the bosom of the common people from whence it originally came. Someday no one will ever again be able to use string quartet concert attendance to exhibit or prove their social status.

That means that every person in the audience will be there just because they love the music. How big a cultural tragedy is that? ■

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