

November 15, 1998

MUSIC

MUSIC; Kronos's New Order, a Quarter Century Old

By KYLE GANN

TWENTY-FIVE years ago, a young violinist named David Harrington asked his composition teacher to write a piece for the new string quartet he was forming. The teacher complied, and Mr. Harrington paid him the commission he could afford: a bag of doughnuts.

One of the remarkable things about the story is that the piece, called "Traveling Music," has taken 25 years to be recorded, for it is one of the most charming entries in a new juicily fat, 10-CD set, "Kronos Quartet: 25 Years" (Nonesuch 79504-2). The teacher was Ken Benshoof, and the quartet, as new-music fans already know, became the Kronos, which is now celebrating not only 25 years of existence but also 399 new works commissioned since that first venture. Considering how far the Kronos has come, one can only imagine how many doughnuts their commissionees get paid today. Entire cases of them, I suspect.

From those 400 works (plus a few more that the quartet found lying around), "25 Years" does an impressive job of documenting the group's history while also doing justice to a wide range of musical styles of the last quarter of the 20th century. George Crumb's electrifying (literally and metaphorically) "Black Angels" is here: the piece for amplified strings that inspired Mr. Harrington to form a quartet in the first place. "G Song," the first piece the Kronos commissioned from Terry Riley, who had abandoned notated music, is here. So are Philip Glass's "Mishima" Quartet, which the group recorded for the soundtrack to the film of that name, and Steve Reich's "Different Trains" for quartet and sampled voices, probably his most popular work of recent years.

And yet, with 31 works by 17 composers, the set isn't just Kronos' Greatest Hits. (One merciful omission is the version of Jimi Hendrix's "Purple Haze" that used to be the group's inevitable encore.) The set gives a fleshed-out picture of late-20th-century music, and what's exciting is that it's not neutrally representative. Twentieth-century music is generally thought to be complex, atonal, dissonant and expressive of modern anxiety; no music here fits that bill. Nor is any of it mindlessly pandering or New Agey, in what is often alleged to be the only alternative.

Instead, there is a vision: a vision of a new musical world order after Minimalism. The Kronos -- in addition to Mr. Harrington, John Sherba, violinist; Hank Dutt, violist, and Joan Jeanrenaud, cellist -- has been criticized for many things: insufficient rehearsal; bizarre costumes and theatrical props that distract from the music, and shattering the melancholy of hourlong "pianissimo" works by Morton Feldman with that blasted "Purple Haze." Its search for a mass audience for new music has sometimes sunk to a race for celebrity.

The Kronos has vied for first place in new music with the Arditti Quartet of England, often conceded by

composers and critics to play better. But the Arditti has a bad habit of playing only its more mainstream modernist works on American tours, and the Kronos so far runs circles around it in terms of diversity and, well, fun-ness of repertory.

Moreover, "25 Years" makes the point that these players have, after all, not only eclectic but also excellent taste in music, and that they have detoured way outside the well-worn ruts to find a new mainstream just as relevant to our time as the old, but without cliches. The pieces in this repertory give the impression that the late 20th century might after all have been, to reverse Debussy's comment on Wagner, a glorious dawn mistaken for a sunset.

It may all be string quartet music, but strings aren't all you hear. The Kronos is joined by didjeridus in a work by the patriarch of Australian music, Peter Sculthorpe; a vocal quartet in the "Missa Syllabica" by Arvo Part; clarinet in music by Osvaldo Golijov; the pianist Aki Takahashi in an 80-minute piano quintet by Feldman; taped prepared piano in music by John Adams; taped bouncing balls in a work by Sofia Gubaidulina; sampled voices in the Reich, and accordion in tangos by Astor Piazzolla. The bulk of the collection is reissued from earlier disks, but there is also a smattering of pieces newly rerecorded as well as works previously unrecorded.

Minimalism is everywhere alluded to but not central; it is the starting point for the Kronos's esthetic, not its goal. Perhaps the group's most enduring achievement will remain the masterpieces it elicited from the seminal West Coast Minimalist Terry Riley. The new recordings include "G Song" and Mr. Riley's "Cadenza on the Night Plain," which I still think of as the archetypal Kronos piece. Its plaintive tonality comes from Minimalism, but it is far too complex and wandering for the term to apply; neither does it give any hint of European forward-looking musical logic. One can only imagine how the feminist musicologist Susan McClary would interpret its leisurely, sensuously circuitous melodies as a distinctly nonaggressive image of masculinity.

The only piece excerpted from an earlier recording is Mr. Riley's epic "Salome Dances for Peace," originally a two-disk set. Two of the most immediately likable of the five sections are included: Part 3, which challenges the players to perform a credible imitation of Riley's tape-delay music in pitch-bending gestures, and Part 5. It's also nice to have "G Song" back; an arrangement of a work from a little-known early 1970's film score, "La Secret de la Vie," it was omitted from the CD reissue of the Kronos's original LP.

The sleeper in the collection is the disk of four Glass quartets (Nos. 2, 3, 4 and 5), which have grown on me tremendously with repeated listening. The Fifth, in particular, contains some of Mr. Glass's best music since "Koyaanisqatsi." His ear for sumptuous string sonorities is undeniable, and while the Fifth is propelled by his familiar repetitions (less relentless than usual) and simple syncopations, they culminate in passages of tremendous grandeur: a grandeur all the more compelling because you've quit expecting it.

Meanwhile, the post-Minimalist John Adams, in "John's Book of Alleged Dances," descends from the thorny expressionism of some of his recent music into a funkier vernacular idiom, with the strings sometimes backed by prerecorded rhythm tracks produced on a prepared piano. In delicate dances like No. 4, Mr. Adams achieves the most heartfelt and engaging of his recent music. In other dances, he tries too hard to be liked; the jazz tunes and folk-fiddling arpeggios seem calculated to convince you that he's not really one of those stuffy classical-string-quartet-type composers.

But it is Mr. Benshoof's "Traveling Music" that shows the most comfortable relationship to vernacular music of any work in the set, even though it dates from 1973, a decade before the classical-vernacular friction reached its crisis point. Not since Gershwin's "Lullaby" for string quartet, perhaps, has a blues idiom been so lovingly transferred to a classical chamber medium.

Another new work is "Tragedy at the Opera" by the Vietnamese composer P. Q. Phan, a bit of hectic fun. Reeling violin glissandos over pizzicato and percussive textures evoke Chinese opera, though whatever tragedy befalls at the end seems tongue-in-cheek.

Mr. Sculthorpe has provided two new works. His brief Quartet No. 12, "From Ubirr," offers a lush melodicism over the bracing drone of two didgeridus, energetically blown by Michael Brosnan and Mark Nolan.

In fact, Mr. Phan and Mr. Sculthorpe represent the most intriguing sector of the Kronos's repertory: composers who stand outside either the American or the European mainstream. A high point of the Kronos's career was its collection "Pieces of Africa," for which it commissioned works by African composers, some of whom had never before used notation. Only one piece from that disk reappears here -- Kevin Volans's superb "White Man Sleeps" -- but the inclusion of composers from South America, the Middle East, Vietnam and Australia makes for a multicultural cornucopia.

Perhaps symbolically, Mr. Golijov's Jewish-tinged "Dreams and Prayers of Isaac the Blind," with David Krakauer adding a wailing klezmer clarinet, occupies the same disk as Franghiz Ali-Zadeh's haunting evocation of Muslim chanting, "Mugam Sayagi." Thus, in the Kronos's world, the lion lies down with the lamb, or vice versa -- though admittedly, with Ms. Gubaidulina's Fourth Quartet between them as a buffer.

At a time when so many Western European composers are still dealing with the complex and expressionistic aftermath of Serialism, even the European works Kronos selects -- all from the eastern periphery -- breathe an air cognizant of Minimalism. The set's closest approach to European tradition is a disk of three works by Alfred Schnittke, although even his Quartet No. 2 can burst passionately into walls of arpeggios not distant from the repetitions of Mr. Glass and Mr. Part. The Kronos's tone color in these dour, pessimistic works is especially rich, as though the rare opportunity to play thick dissonances elicits a special care for sound.

Completely different, and quite American-sounding in its conceptualism, is Ms. Gubaidulina's Fourth Quartet, which features background tapes of rubber balls bouncing on strings to create a nocturnal ambiance distinguished by weirdly prickly textures.

PART fans will cheer their umpteenth recording of "Fratres," but the real gem by Mr. Part is a little five-minute piece of modal polyphony called "Summa." Odder is an extremely simple, five-movement Mass, the "Missa Syllabica," which indeed sets the entire Mass text in syllabic style, sparsely accompanied by the Kronos and sung by Ellen Hargis, Suzanne Elder, Neal Rogers and Paul Hillier.

Works by the lately popular Henryk Gorecki are more acerbic than his widely loved Third Symphony. The Second Quartet finds Kafkaesque humor in a relentlessly pounding chord, but the poignantly slow bitonal cadences of its Adagio seem heavily indebted to Messiaen's "Quartet for the End of Time."

The only music on all 10 disks that I don't care for is the five tangos the Kronos plays with the Argentine-born tango phenomenon Mr. Piazzolla. The harmonies are cloyingly saccharine, but they will undoubtedly find their way into the hearts of those with a higher tolerance for schmaltz.

It all sounds like panoramic variety, and it is. But that variety is a tribute to the breadth of the overall esthetic that comes through. A simple reason all this music is so attractive is that the string quartet is the Rolls Royce of musical genres. As K. Robert Schwarz points out in the liner notes, composers have for 250 years confided many of their most intimate impulses to the string quartet medium, and several of these composers -- one thinks of Mr. Crumb, Mr. Riley, Mr. Glass, Mr. Volans, Mr. Schnittke -- have written nothing more beautiful than the works here.

Beyond that, there is a general non-European feel to this music (even when it is European) due to an absence of cathartic climaxes and tight compositional logic, a laid-back indifference to urgent forward motion. Not only does the music breathe an American atmosphere; in a subtle way that is hard to pinpoint, it sounds Californian as well, meandering unpredictably but comfortably down the open road. Mr. Benshoof's title, "Traveling Music," might have served nicely for the whole set.

Whether longtime Kronos collectors will pay even a bargain rate for 10 disks to get the two hours of new works and new recordings offered here is perhaps a relevant question. Nonesuch made a similar gamble last year in packaging a 10-disk set of Mr. Reich's music.

A larger question looms as well: Will the ballyhooed repertory of 400 quartets that the Kronos has created be picked up by other groups? Or has the Kronos led composers down a path that will lead to a dead end with its own demise? One condition of a Kronos commission is that the group get two years' exclusive performance rights; that isn't unusual, but it does tie up the pieces temporarily, and some performers have held it against the Kronos.

However all of that may be, if anyone is looking for a survey of recent music that will make the supposedly thorny genre sound positively benign -- even cozy, bracing and fun, by turns -- this box will fill the bill elegantly. If you can't find much to like in this set, you might as well go back to Brahms and kiss the 20th century off for good.

Photos: The Kronos Quartet: from left, Hank Dutt, Joan Jeanrenaud, David Harrington and John Sherba; eclectic good taste, and strings aren't all you hear. (Caroline Greyshock)(pg. 15); Kronos's Joan Jeanrenaud performing in "Black Angels." (Catherine Ashmore)(pg. 28)