

## Boston Composers and Kronos Quartets

# Fear of Symmetry

BY KYLE GANN



Kronos Quartet: saving a genre that has never been endangered

**T**he musical form most likely to survive from the 18th century into the 22nd is the string quartet. Even if the symphony were now revived, the tradition is broken; its sonata-allegro idea stemmed from a scientific model (hypothesis, experiment, conclusion) no longer compelling enough to support creative effort. Beethoven not only freed the string quartet from the formal expectations that plagued the symphony beyond Mahler, he invested it with the intellectual prestige that made its challenge irresistible. Every string quartet is a composer in his Sunday best. The Kronos Quartet's heroic feat of "bringing the string quartet into the 20th century" is shrewd marketing, albeit a melodramatic superfluity. The genre has never been endangered.

Compared to the piano quintet's cushiony, me-against-them sonority, linked to the 19th century by nature, the string quartet is structurally neutral—or so we like to think. In reality, the medium's doubly-divisible symmetry exerts a forbidding influence. Among composers, advocates of *asymmetry* are in the minority,

and write the fewest, and often most successful, quartets; think of Xenakis's *T-4*, or the Cage String Quartet. (The Arditti Quartet's February 28 performance at Merkin Hall will offer us Xenakis's latest.) Master that symmetry or subvert it, but fall into its clutches and you become a trivial expression of the medium itself. The quartet by Philadelphia's Maurice Wright that Parnassus played November 19 at Merkin Hall was an example of symmetry tamed. Nominally 12-tone, its intricate counterpoint gravitated toward a passionate D minor. Every second violin melody was matched by one in the cello, every phrase was classically constructed; lovely to listen to, yet curiously constricted by its author's fanatical search for balance.

The quartets played February 7 at Weill Hall by the Boston Composers Quartet were more in thrall to the medium. All four pieces—by Brian Hughes, Thomas Oboe Lee, Robert Aldridge, and their teacher William Thomas McKinley—were expertly written in a bitter-sweet, neoromantic style (that's no typo), and sounded like the kind of piece

that might have won the Prix de Rome ca. 1938. Almost all of the afternoon's 15 movements sported the obsessive rhythmic motives, driving dotted rhythms, and classic counterpoint that have been associated with Boston since Chadwick taught at New England Conservatory (where McKinley teaches now). Aldridge's *Ghosts* even had an honest-to-God chromatic fugue, and Hughes began one in his *Night Light Shadows* and capped out in the final movement.

Some of this conservatism can be attributed to the magnetic allure minimalism has had on the timid academic mind. "If Glass and Reich can find fame by taking us back to the Dark Ages," they might reason, "I won't jeopardize my academic standing by joining them, but perhaps it's safe to regress as far as Walter Piston." The one nonromantic moment came in McKinley's quartet's final movement, an ingratiating tremolo continuum that aspired to folk-fiddling, full of chromatic harmony changes over a solid beat. His program notes hinted at a "kaleidoscopic minimalism," and he pulled off his

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attempt at accessibility with honor. Still, if this neoneo school expands beyond Boston, look for the reputations of Sam Barber and Roy Harris to be refurbished.

If Boston had an agenda, Kronos's indiscriminate style-mixing reflects the excitements and disappointments of the international music scene with phenomenological accuracy. January 31 at Alice Tully Hall, dressed in somber black, they offered a program of welcome depth, highlighted by Kevin Volans's *Hunting: Gathering*. A South African who studied with Stockhausen and teaches in Ireland, Volans stands outside any nation's mainstream, and was free to make a quartet that sounded like no other. Dissonant, repeating melody fragments over pizzica-

to chords wandered from one earthy idea to another with medieval innocence. The hocketing interplay between instruments showed off Kronos's ensemble precision, and when violist Hank Dutt took over the chords from the others, it was clear that Volans, using the quartet as a tiny orchestra, was having his way with that fearful symmetry. More substantial than the Volans pieces Kronos has recorded, *Hunting: Gathering* was their most thrilling commission since the Terry Riley quartets.

Two other pieces used the Ligeti-ish, glissando-textured idiom that once sought to defuse the string quartet's reliance on counterpoint. Puerto Rican composer Robert Sierra's *Memorias Tropicales*, full of buzzy tremolos, sounded as though the only things Sierra remembered about the tropics were the insects. The Second Quartet by Soviet composer Sofia Gubaidulina used a similar style to far nobler ends. Slow, meditative, and cognizant of large-scale pitch connections, it plodded through Nordic silence with moving introspection. Kronos ended with the Third Quartet of Wolfgang Rihm, the 35-year-old Darmstadt disciple who is sweeping Europe with the sheer volume of his output. This was in six small, densely textured movements, full of violent collective effects that sounded as though Rihm had conceived the quartet as a piano; and indeed, the most interesting Rihm works I've heard are *Klavierstücke*. The piece's volatile moods, following thorny serialism with tear-jerking Mahler quotations, projected exactly the same insincerity one encounters in the quartets of Hans Werner Henze.

Rihm's quartet was vehemently booed by a small faction, as were Christof Dohnanyi and the Cleveland Orchestra six days later when they played Glass's *The Light* at Carnegie Hall. As disparate as the emotions behind these reactions must have been, I can only interpret such audience honesty as a sign of returning health. Support your local claque. ■

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