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Music That Blends the New and Unusual

The Kronos Quartet continues looking forward.



The Kronos Quartet performs with Mariana Sadovska. PHOTO: EVAN NEFF

By **DAVID MERMELSTEIN**

Feb. 8, 2016 6:19 p.m. ET

San Francisco

The Kronos Quartet is so often on the road that even its fans forget the group is based here. So it occurred to its members—David Harrington and John Sherba, violins; Hank Dutt, viola; and Sunny Yang, cello—that an annual festival dedicated to the unusual repertory Kronos inspires and champions might strengthen the ties between this forward-looking ensemble and its home. And so the group presented a series of concerts from Feb. 4 through 7 largely devoted to emerging composers at SFJazz Center, one of this city’s most appealing new venues.

Like Kronos’s tribute to the composer Terry Riley last year, also at SFJazz, these programs, under the banner “Explorer Series,” typically featured a bevy of guest artists and unusual instruments, to say nothing of the atmospheric “backing tracks” intrinsic to the scores the group favors. Premieres of various stripes (U.S., West Coast, San Francisco) dominated, but only the concerts on Thursday and Friday included international debuts. More important, two-thirds of the works on Feb. 4 were composed by women; half on Feb. 5.

Thursday’s concert opened with the premiere of Franghiz Ali-Zadeh’s “Reqs (Dance),” in which the rhythms of the Azerbaijani composer’s homeland sounded like music that might accompany a German Expressionist film or be played by a Gypsy band. Another premiere, Reena Esmail’s hypnotic arrangement of N. Rajam’s “Dadra in Raga Bhairavi,” successfully mimicked Hindustani music by having Ms. Yang (Kronos’s newest member and sole female) slap the body of her cello to imitate a tabla.

Mariana Sadovska’s 20-minute “Chernobyl.The Harvest” couldn’t be anything but mournful. But it suffered by immediately following an arrangement of Severiano Briseño’s “Man From Sinaloa,” with 27 instrumentalists from a local arts high school augmenting Kronos to form what sounded like a huge mariachi band. The Ukrainian-

born Ms. Sadovska also contributed her talents as a performer, singing in a strong but wounded voice and playing the harmonium to produce organ-like sonorities. Powerful as this effect-filled “pagan requiem” was, it felt overwrought and overlong.

Friday’s program began with Nicole Lizée’s gimmicky but engaging “Golden Age of the Radiophonic Workshop [Fibre-Optic Flowers],” in which each member of Kronos did double-duty on another “instrument”: Mr. Harrington on smartphone; Ms. Yang manipulating the electronic game Simon; Mr. Sherba tapping a manual typewriter (take that, Leroy Anderson!); and Mr. Dutt moving the stylus on a phonograph. Yet Aleksandra Vrebalov’s “Bubbles” topped it for innovation, with Kronos joined by the vibraphonist Andy Meyerson and 30 members of the outstanding San Francisco Girls Chorus, conducted by Valérie Sainte-Agathe. Never have buzzing lips, piercing whoops, and giggling been so beguiling, and when these singers drew out “I Love You,” it was impossible not to be moved. (The text appended a John Cage quotation to Robert Creeley’s short poem “The Language.”)

The chorus remained for the Tehran-born Sahba Aminikia’s “Sound, Only Sound Remains,” an ingenious and arresting concoction of live and recorded music that makes impressive political as well as aesthetic points. The Swedish composer Karin Rehnqvist’s “All Those Strings!” required just one guest artist, the Finnish kantele virtuoso Ritva Koistinen, and she enchanted, plucking her zither-like instrument to sound like a harpsichord at one point and a guitar at another.

Albert Behar’s five-movement “Lost Wax,” receiving its premiere, reached back in time, assimilating Bartók’s field recordings of Hungarian peasants, captured on wax cylinders, with new music for string quartet, variously evoking Debussy and Ravel, Bartók, and Stravinsky through pizzicatos, harmonics and the bow-tapping technique called col legno. A suite of tunes by Rahul Dev Burman largely written for Indian films concluded the evening on an aptly exotic and upbeat note.

Mr. Mermelstein writes for the Journal on classical music and film.

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