

CONTEMPORARY MUSIC REVIEW
Kronos & Riley,
Uncomfortably Crowded Together

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Kronos Quartet
By Thomas Goss

Is it possible for a group to be too good? This was a question I asked myself at the Saturday night performance of Kronos Quartet at the Yerba Buena Center. Certainly these performers have been the frustration of many a reviewer by presenting very little to take issue with, at least in their quality of tone, command of interpretation, and sheer excellence of performance. The years have only improved them. Hank Dutt's warm, powerful viola playing is still a rock upon which the ever-more-intense relationship of violinists David Harrington and John Sherba can build. With Jennifer Culp completely at ease in her role as cellist, they have never sounded better.

And yet, the nonconformity and drive for esthetic individuality that make Kronos unique also have their risks. The quartet's rapacious omnivorousness has somehow passed by the best of the current generation of emerging composers in Kronos' own home town of San Francisco, producing a kind of isolation locally that is certainly at odds with their musical persona. And there is also the sense that the group's programming decisions have created a set of expectations that preclude astonishment.

This was brought home in their performance of Latvian composer Peteris Vasks' Quartet No. 4. Created specifically for the group, this work somehow seemed to suggest that the group had been specifically created to play *it*. In some ways, this is true. Kronos' immersion over the past decade in ancient music, folk traditions, and elegiacs created the most perfect set of resources to tackle the emotional and idiomatic demands of the score. Yet this brilliant fulfillment of their direction showed none of the genius for reinvention for which they are best known.

Icy Bitterness, Incredible Sweetness

The work itself was a perfection of form. The icy bitterness of the first movement, Elegy, called to mind the work of Finnish composer Einojuhani Rautavaara in its arching, unsettled loneliness. Sherba and Harrington were one voice in the treacherous doubling of flutters and artificial harmonics. The second, third, and fourth movements presented a complete work within the larger structure. The outer Toccata movements were both composed of a single idea, a scurrying bustle of octatonics over pouncing strokes that developed into a titanic fugato conversation, serving to bookend the passionate cantando of the Chorale

movement. The final Meditation had Harrington playing in the absolute upper range of the violin with enormous conviction and sweetness, leaving us utterly spellbound.

Alas, it was too much, too good. Left on its own as a final concert set, the work would have been utterly compelling and would well have complemented the material with which it appeared. I would have floated home in a dream state. But it was instead presented as the third work in the first set, followed by a concluding set of Terry Riley on piano. Consequently, it overshadowed the works that introduced it, and was dulled by the improvisations that followed it, as well as leaving me completely exhausted, emotionally and aurally, before the evening was half over.

To their credit, Kronos put everything into all three works. They could easily have skated through Sy Johnson's arrangement of Charles Mingus' "Myself When I Am Real," an oft-transcribed piano improvisation from the 1960s. Instead they approached it with caution, grace, and real heart. The opening Terry Riley piece, *Sunrise of the Planetary Dream Collector*, was executed with all the enthusiasm and freshness of its original debut in the days of minimalism's ascendance, back when the group was just starting out in the early '80s.

An Improvisational Journey, from New Age to Lutoslawski

Riley himself has come a long way since then. His piano set was a series of six improvisations, each a complete thought and stylistic exploration. The first sally combined deep, soulful chanted vocals over an unsettled chord with playful riffing across a blues scale. Other improvs took us into realms of minimalism blended with romanticism — New Age greeted Lutoslawski, cocktail piano collided with Copland. He played a jazz hymn with such depth and melancholy that it suggested a whole approach and outlook to that style of music in and of itself.

Yet it was all worthy of the energy that we could have devoted to it unencumbered by the exhaustion of the previous set. Here were two concerts uncomfortably crowded into one, though they might have had a complementary conclusion. The argument for simplicity always surfaces. Ask a boxer. Impact is one sharp blow. I was punch-drunk.