

Kronos Quartet at 50: Hunger for the new

11 OCTOBER 2023

Kronos Quartet has been at the vanguard of contemporary string quartet performance for 50 years. Founder David Harrington and former cellist Joan Jeanrenaud speak with Thomas May about the legacy of innovation that the ensemble is celebrating with an ambitious series of projects this season



Photo: Lenny Gonzalez

The current Kronos line-up: (l-r) violist Hank Dutt, violinists John Sherba and David Harrington, and cellist Paul Wiancko

Discover more [Featured Stories](#) like this in [The Strad Playing Hub](#).

Read more premium content [for subscribers here](#)

Ask violinist David Harrington what he's listening to these days, and you'll get an instant glimpse into the insatiable hunger for discovery that defines and fuels Kronos Quartet, the trailblazing ensemble he founded in 1973. With Kronos Quartet, it's the ears that are the window to the soul.

'I just heard an absolutely amazing radio programme from 1953. It was Studs Terkel interviewing Lorenzo Dow Turner, the first great African American linguist,' Harrington says during a Zoom conversation from his home in San Francisco. 'It was incredibly beautiful. This is leading me into an entirely new, major work as soon as I can do it. I'm as on fire as I can be right now.'

In genuine Kronos style, Harrington's enthusiasm is infectious – notwithstanding my ignorance of Turner's achievements. In the historic Terkel programme, I later discover, Turner discusses music along with his breakthrough research into the Gullah language of the American coastal south and his travels in Nigeria. An encounter with the Kronos Quartet can be relied on to ignite one's own curiosity, whisking it off in multiple directions at once.

This open-eared attitude has sustained Kronos's stature as an influential force for innovation for half a century now. The astonishing scope of the quartet's commitment to contemporary music is evident from the sheer variety and breadth of its programmes marking the 50th-anniversary season now under way, which the group has dubbed Kronos Five Decades.



Kronos in 1979 (l-r) Hank Dutt, cellist Joan Jeanrenaud, David Harrington and John Sherba

For the year-long celebration (July 2023 to June 2024), Kronos – whose members, along with Harrington, include violinist John Sherba, violist Hank Dutt and cellist Paul Wiancko – is undertaking a global tour and will appear at 50 events, among them concerts at London’s Barbican Hall (21 October) and at Carnegie Hall in New York (3 November). A residency at the Paris Philharmonie during the String Quartet Biennial (12–13 January 2024) will feature Kronos together with other participating ensembles in a marathon performance of the entire body of its ‘50 for the Future’ repertoire. These 50 works were created between 2015 and 2021, a series of commissions from well-known as well as emerging composers which have been made available through an open-access library intended to aid quartets and students in honing techniques essential for 21st-century repertoire.

The Kronos Five Decades tour juxtaposes music by composers with whom the quartet has been closely associated for most of its history, such as Terry Riley and Philip Glass, with a series of ten works newly commissioned for the anniversary from composers across the globe (some of them long-term partners with Kronos, others collaborating for the first time) and premiered on various programmes throughout the season.

‘I’m as on fire as I can be right now’ – David Harrington, violin

Recording is also central to Kronos’s artistic work. It is hard to overstate the role that the group’s discography of more than seventy albums has played in establishing its reputation. Kronos has sold more than four million CDs, which is widely believed to be more than any other string quartet in history – a fact that challenges the myth that audiences find new music ‘inaccessible’. Kronos Five Decades therefore encompasses five releases, three of which are brand-new recordings (*Campaign Songs* by Michael Gordon; *Songs and Symphonies: The Music of Moondog*, a collaboration with Brooklyn-based Ghost Train Orchestra and various guest vocalists; and an album of remixes of music by Sun Ra curated by Harrington). The other two are vinyl reissues of their classic *Black Angels* and Glass recordings.

Commitment to the contemporary

Not to be found on the menu is standard classical repertoire – its absence a longstanding signature. Joan Jeanrenaud, who was the group’s cellist for more than two decades (1978–99), points out that during its first years the ensemble was still playing a mix of contemporary and older repertoire, but that around 1980, two years into her tenure with the group, ‘We collectively decided that we should stop playing things like Mozart or Beethoven quartets, because there were a lot of ensembles that did them – and a lot better than we did. And we weren’t terribly interested in it.’



Courtesy Musical Instrument Museum

Kronos at the Musical Instrument Museum in Phoenix, Arizona

Kronos shifted its focus to 20th-century classics by composers such as Debussy, Schoenberg and Bartók alongside new works written for the group. 'And then we started working even more with composers and learning new techniques so that we expanded our knowledge and our repertoire,' says Jeanrenaud. 'It was wonderful to be in Kronos at that point, when we developed a lot of the ideas of how Kronos would tour and how the organisation would be run.' She and Harrington both emphasise the indispensable role played by Janet Cowperthwaite, who was hired as the ensemble's managing director in 1981 and is now executive director.

Jeanrenaud was only 22 when she joined Kronos following a year in Geneva studying with Pierre Fournier. She'd been urged to consider playing with the ensemble by Dutt, who had been a fellow classmate at Indiana University's Bloomington music school and who became Kronos Quartet's violist in 1977. Violinist Sherba came on board in 1978, the year Jeanrenaud joined. Since that time, only the cellist has changed, with Jeanrenaud's successors being Jennifer Culp, Jeffrey Zeigler, Sunny Yang and now Wiancko, who joined earlier this year.



Photo: Catherine Ashmore

Kronos Quartet performing Crumb's *Black Angels* in 1998

Concert organisers initially tried to get the ensemble to agree to include at least one classical piece on their programmes, recalls Jeanrenaud, 'But we just kept insisting we wanted to play only contemporary music. And they came to accept that – and even began commissioning more composers for us to play.' She adds: 'There was always this desire to be really interesting and provocative. We even applied that to how we dressed and used the stage and lighting to engage the audience.'

After leaving Kronos all that time ago, Jeanrenaud has been able to see more clearly the significant impact the ensemble has had on music. She later went on to focus on composing and improvising and is among those commissioned to contribute to the 50 for the Future series.

Black Angels epiphany

Not only has this intense interest in contemporary music been there from the very beginning, but also it was responsible for the birth of Kronos. A serendipitous hearing of Crumb's experimental *Black Angels: Thirteen Images from the Dark Land* inspired the 24-year-old Harrington to found Kronos in 1973, near the end of the Vietnam War era. That summer, after finishing a contract playing with the Victoria Symphony, the violinist and his wife returned from

Canada to his native US. One night he chanced on Black Angels being played on the radio and was transfixed: 'My life was changed for ever,' he later said. 'It was scary. It was beautiful. It was wild. It had crystal glasses. It had Renaissance music. It had all kinds of instruments. It was electric.'

Crumb avoided tying his 1970 work to a specific event in that turbulent era, describing *Black Angels* as a 'threnody' for electric string quartet and percussion that represented 'a kind of parable on our troubled contemporary world'. But it struck Harrington as being exactly what he had been seeking in his quest for a genre of music that seemed meaningful in the aftermath of the horrors of the Vietnam War. 'The string quartet music

I'd grown up with provided a kind of foundation and solidity, but it didn't feel like the right music for me to be playing,' Harrington told me in another conversation earlier this year.

'If something is wonderful, let's continue and try to go even beyond that' – David Harrington

This wasn't so much a rejection of the familiar repertoire as a recognition of new priorities. Indeed, a deep connection to Beethoven had set Harrington on his path as a professional musician. He often recounts the story of the impact of hearing a recording of the Budapest Quartet playing the opening chords of op.127 when he was a teenager: 'I can hear that sound right now, as I'm talking to you. It just entered me, and I needed to try to make that sound myself.'

Harrington recalls a few years later wanting to know more about what music sounded like beyond the epicentre of Classical Vienna. Combine that curiosity with the fact that 'quartet playing was my favourite sound in the universe' and you have the secret behind the long history of exploration that has characterised Kronos. Harrington modestly remarks that starting a quartet 'became an opportunity to fill in some of the blanks'.

It's useful to recall that the new music scene of the 1970s differed radically from what it is today. Boulez pronounced the string quartet to be 'dead' (though he later admitted he had been wrong), but for Harrington, *Black Angels* opened up the limitless potential of the medium – not only in the sense of new sounds, but also as proof that music 'can address feelings that are happening right now and can be pivotal to the way we think about life. That's what *Black Angels* gave us right away.'

A focus on commissioning

Already with Kronos Quartet's debut concert in November 1973 in Seattle (which attracted an audience of only nine), Harrington determined to make presenting brand-new music central to their mission. He asked Ken Benshoof, who'd been his composition teacher at the University of Washington, to write something for them. A bag of doughnuts was offered as payment for the new piece, *Traveling Music*.

'I just listened to it again yesterday, and I still think it's so beautiful,' says Harrington, who's been reviewing past releases to compile five playlists (one for each of Kronos's five decades) as part of a special anniversary bonus that the ensemble's label Nonesuch began releasing monthly in September, the last appearing in January. 'What Kronos had to learn in order to play Ken's music was central to the work that we've done ever since,' he remarks. 'It allowed us to know how to work with Terry Riley later. And we've learnt so many things from Terry. Those two relationships in that first decade were absolutely critical.'



Photo: Jay Blakesberg

Pipa virtuoso Wu Man (centre) performs *A Chinese Home* with the quartet in 2009

Jeanrenaud remembers the quartet first getting to know Riley at the end of its residency at Mills College in Oakland, California, whose faculty Riley had joined to teach Indian classical music. 'At that time, Terry had not written any music down for quite a while because he was focused on singing. We went up to his ranch, and David convinced Terry to write some music for us.'

Riley has written around thirty pieces for Kronos ('Each one of them has its own special look at the universe,' notes Harrington), including *Sun Rings* (2002) for quartet and chorus, the 2019 recording of which earned the group one of the three Grammys that have distinguished its prolific discography to date. One of three works commissioned by Carnegie Hall for the New York programme in November is a new version for 50 musicians of Riley's 1980 quartet *Sunrise of the Planetary Dream Collector*.

Riley epitomises the value the Kronos musicians have found in cultivating continuity and relationships with composers with whom they develop a mutual sympathy – as does Glass. (Ironically, they never succeeded in persuading Crumb to write a new work for them.) 'Working with all these composers was so great – to be involved with how this music developed over those years,' says Harrington. 'My feeling about maintaining those relationships is really simple. If something is wonderful, let's continue and try to go even beyond that. I believe it's important for people to keep challenging themselves.'



Photo: James M. Brown

Kronos Quartet and Terry Riley (centre) in 1983

A similar phenomenon applies to performers with whom the group has repeatedly collaborated. The relationship with the pipa virtuoso Wu Man, who is part of the all-star line-up scheduled for the Carnegie Hall concert, has been especially significant and productive, beginning with the commission of the ritualistic *Ghost Opera* (1994), a landmark work for string quartet and pipa by Tan Dun. Riley's *The Cusp of Magic* (2004) is another work inspired by the collaboration between the quartet and Wu Man.

The best teachers

Harrington's admiration for the artists Kronos has taken to heart runs deep. He describes them as great teachers who continually draw the musicians beyond their known limits to make new discoveries. 'Ken Benshoof is a marvellous teacher, still active at the age of 90. So is Terry Riley. So is Franghiz Ali-Zadeh. When Sofia Gubaidulina wrote her Fourth Quartet [1993], she showed us how to do all the techniques to play it, including the bouncing of balls on the string. These people are cut out of the essence of humanity. They give us the best teaching.'

The process works in both directions. Composers in turn learn from their interaction with Kronos when given the challenge to write a new work. Górecki is a favourite of Harrington's. The Polish composer completed three quartets for Kronos - the last of which was to have been premiered at Carnegie Hall in 1994 but was mysteriously withheld for another decade by the composer. Each of his quartets represents a radically different approach. 'Henryk told me all

about his String Quartet no.4,' says Harrington. 'We were talking about all kinds of things for the future. That's what I do with every composer. He said it was going to be a shorter piece, wild and upbeat. And then after he died, nobody could find a note of that piece. But he had it very clearly in his mind.'

'I'm incredibly optimistic about the hands that hold the future of the string quartet' – David Harrington

In a memorial following news of Górecki's death in November 2010, Harrington wrote: 'When we rehearsed with Henryk, the experience was as close as we have ever been to witnessing the raw, impassioned core in the heart of Europe's great invention: the string quartet... Górecki represented a totally independent voice. He only listened inward.'

There is no end to these lessons – they all feed the unassuageable curiosity that has been driving Kronos across its long lifespan. During that half-century, the ensemble has commissioned more than a thousand works representing cultures, styles and philosophies of making music from all around the planet. Harrington says that a new piece can still stretch the musicians to their limits in unexpected ways, as does *Segara Gunung* ('Ocean Mountain') by the Indonesian composer and singer Peni Candra Rini, one of the ten anniversary commissions being premiered throughout the season; it will be performed at the November Carnegie Hall concert.

Candra Rini's previous collaboration with Kronos, *Maduswara* (2020), was commissioned for the 50 for the Future project, and Harrington recalls: 'It felt so natural and so beautiful when we collaborated on Maduswara, so we wanted to keep this relationship growing.' *Segara Gunung* is one movement from a four-movement work she is currently writing for Kronos. 'There has never been any music like Peni's for us before. We have to learn how to play using a different, non-Western tuning and to create a gamelan-like sound that can be totally fluid with rhythm and also ultra-lyrical. You run into these kinds of challenges in all music, but something about Peni's work takes us to a new place.'

Another of the new commissions that particularly impresses Harrington (and has been programmed for the Barbican and Carnegie Hall concerts alike) is by American composer Gabriella Smith for amplified string quartet and electronics. Like *Segara Gunung*, Smith's (still unnamed) work addresses climate change concerns.

Working with composers who are 'the best teachers', across generations, Harrington suggests, is the secret to Kronos's uncanny ability not just to adapt to such diverse musical languages and ways of making music but also to inhabit them.

What does he foresee as the future of the art? 'I'm feeling incredibly optimistic about the hands that hold the future of the string quartet. What's happening is that more composers, more performers, more audiences are expecting concerts to be wonderfully varied and to tell stories that can only be told through music.'

Read: The Kronos Quartet: Out of this world

Listen: The Strad Podcast Episode #39: Kronos Quartet's David Harrington on musical activism

Discover more Featured Stories like this in The Strad Playing Hub.

Read more premium content for subscribers here