
Posted on Mon, May. 24, 2004

Kronos Quartet continues to captivate

By Georgia Rowe
TIMES CORRESPONDENT

A CONCERT BY the Kronos Quartet is always an involving experience, but even longtime fans had to be amazed by the enveloping sensory input of the legendary string ensemble's latest venture, "Visual Music."

Presented by San Francisco Performances Friday and Saturday at the Yerba Buena Center for the Arts Theater, the group gave a dazzling 90-minute performance incorporating video, lighting, pre-recorded sound and musical "sculpture" -- all integrated with the same seamless brilliance audiences have come to expect from these estimable musicians.

The program was an eclectic selection of short works by 20th century composers, many of whom have written specifically for Kronos. Within that selection was a wide range of musical effects and stylistic concerns, from the seminal sci-fi film music of Bernard Herrmann to the somber harmonies of the Icelandic post-rock band Sigur Ros.

Also represented were well-known Kronos collaborators Steve Reich, Terry Riley and Krzysztof Penderecki, as well as Mark Grey, Scott Johnson, Conlon Nancarrow and John Zorn.

The music was only part of the story, however. Friday's performance was a mesmerizing blend of the visual and the sonic, with the members of Kronos -- violinists David Harrington and John Sherba, violist Hank Dutt and cellist Jennifer Culp -- surrounded by the technical wizardry of Grey (sound), Larry Neff (lighting) and Alexander V. Nichols (scenic and projection design.)

The evening opened with Reich's "Pendulum Music," which uses microphones hanging from large "sound sculptures" -- one for each member of the quartet -- to produce feedback. At Harrington's count, the musicians set the parts in motion, making an arresting kind of bird chorus, with light and color projected onto four billowy panels behind the playing area.

The sculptures came into play later in the performance as well, in the eerie soundscapes of Grey's "Bertoia," Parts I and II.

The "Visual Music" concept proved most scintillating in a pair of works incorporating spoken word in sound loops. Three movements from Johnson's "How It Happens" (composed for Kronos) merged the taped voice of journalist I.F. Stone with a brisk, chugging live performance by the quartet. Riley's "One Earth, One People, One Love" (also written for Kronos) combined a beautifully elegiac score and a prayerful mantra (recorded by novelist Alice Walker) with a stroll through the solar system (imagery by NASA, produced on video by Willie Williams).

Music and image also came together with arresting results in excerpts from Herrmann's score for the 1951 sci-fi classic, "The Day the Earth Stood Still," with live video of the Kronos musicians projected behind the performance. In Penderecki's 1960 "Quartetto per archi," the quartet stood downstage with their backs to the audience, playing from a projected score scrolling across the big screen. This music is dense and difficult, with layers of lightly tapped bows, plucked strings and low-register growls; for the listener/viewer, the chance see Penderecki's score in motion added a gripping dimension to the experience.

Several thousand lighter notes were introduced with Zorn's zippy "Cat O'Nine Tails _ (Tex Avery Directs the Marquis de Sade.)" But nothing was quite as much fun as Nancarrow's "Boogie Woogie #3A," a 1942 romp composed for player piano. The quartet's briskly manic performance was considerably heightened by a barrage of video images of jumping piano keys.

concert review