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MUSIC

Classical Music's High Commissioners

The Kronos Quartet Has Commissioned More Than 800 New Works Since Its Founding



The Kronos Quartet (John Sherba, Hank Dutt, David Harrington, Sunny Yang) has commissioned more than 800 new works. JAY BLAKESBERG

By *Corinne Ramey*

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In the middle of Mary Kouyoumdjian's "Bombs of Beirut," which the Kronos Quartet premieres Thursday in San Francisco, the quartet stops playing for an uncomfortable moment, and a recorded track takes over. Bombs and missiles, recorded in the late 1970s during the Lebanese civil war, blast through the air.

"I hope it's a little difficult to sit through, because they're hearing actual attacks," says Ms. Kouyoumdjian, 30 years old.

"Bombs of Beirut" is the latest commission from Kronos—violinists David Harrington and John Sherba, violist Hank Dutt and cellist Sunny Yang—a San Francisco-based quartet that has built its career on unconventional new music, ranging from George Crumb's Vietnam War-inspired "Black Angels" to collaborations with pipa (a Chinese stringed instrument) virtuoso Wu Man.

What distinguishes Kronos today isn't its genre-bending ways, but the sheer quantity of music the group has added to the string quartet repertoire. In its four decades, Kronos has commissioned 827 new works and arrangements. Other ensembles have since played hundreds of these pieces, including now-standard Kronos commissions like Steve Reich's "Different Trains" and quartets by Polish composer Henryk Górecki.

"At first I thought, 'That's ours!' " Mr. Harrington, who is also the group's artistic director, says of hearing other groups play works commissioned by Kronos. "But slowly I've realized that's the biggest compliment we could possibly get."

The cost of a new work ranges from less than a thousand to several hundred thousand dollars. In recent years, an increasing percentage of the pieces Kronos has commissioned are by non-Western composers, and the group has recently played with pop stars including Paul McCartney and Bryce Dessner of indie rock group the National. A growing number of pieces, like "Bombs of Beirut," are engaged with political issues, says Mr. Harrington. The group has also played for film scores, including recent Golden Globe winner "The Great Beauty" and Darren Aronofsky's upcoming "Noah." While most of Kronos's works come from other composers, Mr. Harrington did compose music for the recent documentary "Dirty Wars."

Ms. Kouyoumdjian's "Bombs of Beirut" composition comes from the "Under 30 Project," which Kronos launched in 2003. Mr. Harrington, 64, says the group had lost touch with what young composers were writing. The quartet reviews applications from entrants under the age of 30, and chooses one composer from whom to commission a new work. This year, the group received 398 applications.

Because many of the applicants have yet to write a string quartet—and send in samples of orchestral or solo works instead—Mr. Harrington says selecting composers involves intuiting entrants' creativity. "It's a leap of imagination," he says.

Composer Dan Visconti, who was selected to write a piece for the quartet several years ago through the young composers project, recalled going to a former Tower Records in Manhattan with Mr. Harrington. "It was literally like going with a kid to a candy store, rushing to all these different displays," says Mr. Visconti. "He had a very strong opinion about each of them." (Likes included world music. Dislikes included Justin Bieber.)

"I've never met any individual in the music world who knows more music of all different kinds."

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