

Kronos Quartet
Sunday, October 28, 8pm
Chan Centre for the
Performing Arts
by Colin MacDonald

As one of the few classical music groups to achieve the status of international superstar, the Kronos String Quartet has made a career out of breaking down barriers between popular and academic music. Their program at the Chan ranged from medieval monody to film music to avant-garde abstraction, and with theatrical lighting cues and amplified instruments the performance had a flavour more of a rock concert than of traditional chamber music. The overall feel was one of synthesis: high art and pop culture, live performance and recorded music, acoustic instruments and electronic effects, familiar sounds and unexpected music.

Many of the compositions on the program were themselves characterized by forms of synthesis. Yugoslavian composer Aleksandra Vrebalov brought together sounds from the crossroads of Northeast Europe and the Mediterranean in *Pannonia Boundless*, as mournful gypsy melodies transformed into a Greek wedding song and a Turkish belly dance. Mexican composer Silvestre Revueltas recreated an Afro-Cuban exorcism ritual in his intense and aggressively rhythmic *Sensemaya*.

In Revueltas' work a pre-recorded percussion ensemble accompanied Kronos, a kind of karaoke performance that was employed throughout the evening, and which expanded the sound world beyond the four string instruments. Using technology in this way made it necessary to amplify the strings to blend and balance with the tape, but the natural warmth of the

instruments and of the hall itself were missed during a show that was completely electrified.

Clint Mansell employed more electronic effects in *Requiem for a Dream Suite*, soundtrack music from the film by Darren Aronofsky. Mansell, a rock guitarist and keyboardist, drew on the pounding rhythms and repetition of dance club electronica, but the sounds were tired and plodding without the shocking visuals of the movie. New Yorker Michael Gordon added electric guitar distortion to the quartet in his *Potassium*, but balanced the typically energized sound with a slow pulse and sliding pitches. Simultaneous rising and falling glissandi brought to mind a star that was both expanding outward and collapsing inward.

A Triple Quartet by Steve Reich, one of the fathers of American Minimalism, had Kronos playing with two pre-recorded copies of itself. Reich's trademark rhythmic canons were marked by an exotic and dissonant modality with a Middle Eastern flavour, and there was an abundance of melodic activity. Unfortunately, the recorded track dominated, and the live performers seemed secondary in what came across as more of an electroacoustic work.

A compositional highlight was Franghiz Ali-Zadeh's *Oasis*, a dreamlike landscape of Arabic melodies, water-droplet pizzicati, and restless chromatic textures. An arrangement of Charles Mingus' *Myself When I Am Real* was also fascinating and avoided being simply derivative, covering territories of French impressionism, expressionist atonality, and gypsy figuration, with writing that was strongly idiomatic for strings.

While their program avoided the extremes of intellectual abstraction that affects much new classical

music, Kronos Quartet's programming revealed trends of experimentation that embrace our technologically based society. Purists may be uncomfortable with this "plugged-in" incarnation of the traditional string quartet, but there is no denying that Kronos is appealing to a more youthful audience, and planting the seeds for an appreciation of rich and complex musical expressions.