

review music

this week's essential reading

'Constant vacation: inside Amsterdam's dance scene' by Andy Beta, Pitchfork

It'd be kind of cheesy to say it comes from import culture – like this seafaring and tradesman thing – but that's a real factor ... There's a lot of guys doing very different stuff'



Notes of a new era

Kronos Quartet brings its well-honed and genre-busting sound to NYU Abu Dhabi, where audiences will be the first to hear the group's latest collaboration, writes [Andy Battaglia](#)

The kind of classical music championed by the Kronos Quartet is not classical at all. Much of it could be characterised as such, to be sure, but the tag is not quite right if by "classical" we mean stuffy, stilted, or in some self-regarding way walled-off from all the many other kinds of thrilling, clashing music in the world.

Case in point: during a three-day series next week at the new Arts Center at NYU Abu Dhabi, the group will perform a programme calling on a wild mix of sources, from composers of elegant means to old ethnic folk tunes and even a curious arrangement – for a string quartet, remember – of the classic rock jam *Baba O'Riley* by The Who.

That last one was conceived in part as a present for Terry Riley, one of the many interesting composers who Kronos Quartet has worked with since its founding in 1973. The Who's Pete Townshend, who wrote the bubbling synthesiser part at the start of the song, is a professed fan of Riley's ethereal, experimental composition *A Rainbow in Curved Air*, so the Kronos Quartet thought the gesture of rearranging it would please its creator on the occasion of his 80th birthday. They played it at a special Riley birthday tribute festival they threw this summer, to an audience that included a significant mix of listeners who wouldn't know a cadenza from a divertimento.

It went over well – enough for Kronos to enlist it once again to play in front of a new crowd in just a few days. The question we all might come to ask of such a cross-genre exercise: why not?

Kronos Quartet has made a career of examining that abiding line of inquiry while cultivating a spirit of restlessness and inventiveness in a realm where faithfulness and workmanship are often enough to get by. Classical music abounds with capable and even virtuosic ensembles, but Kronos is rare in imparting vision and spirit, too. And there is much of both to go around.

"It's always of great interest to us to be in a society and a culture that we haven't visited yet to find out more about how our music translates in a new place," Kronos quartet founder David Harrington told *The National* in advance of the group's first visit to Abu Dhabi. They have played in Lebanon, Israel,

and Turkey, but not in the UAE. "All of us are very interested because we've never played before an audience from that far east," he said, noting the group's many adventures in Asia have involved travelling west from their home base in San Francisco.

The strategy remains the same, no matter the locale: "hoping to give the audience", in Harrington's words, "a sense of the diversity of the music we play and different kinds of sounds and musical colours."

Some of those will come by way of pieces from artists with internationally familiar names (Laurie Anderson, Terry Riley, Krzysztof Penderecki); others owe to composers from different segments on the stature and recognisability spectrum. All of them, together, make for a list that is proudly and pointedly international.

Running down the roster, Harrington lit up at mentions of origins including Palestine, Mali, Mexico, the United States, Iran, Turkey, Egypt, Kazakhstan, Lebanon, Azerbaijan, Iraq, Sudan, and Serbia.

The range of styles is dizzying, too, including rearranged music by Syrian crossover star Omar Souleyman (usually an adherent of sizzling keyboards and antic rhythms) and Nicole Lizée, a Canadian composer whose work in the series addresses old German music of an electronic tinge.

"It's amazingly imaginative," Harrington said of Lizée's piece *Death to Kosmische*. "Each of us plays vintage electronic instruments in addition to our normal instruments, so it takes on a new sound. There's nothing quite like it in our music."

All of the musical offerings will be divvied among five concerts over three days, including a private opening morning showcase for children and a private event to kick it off. The occasion will be ripe as the new Arts Center at NYUAD, under executive artistic director Bill Bragin, continues to introduce itself to audiences in Abu Dhabi.

Kronos Quartet has worked with Bragin for many years, going back to his programming work in New York at small clubs such as Joe's Pub and much larger institutions like the Lincoln Center. The relationship has been fruitful and has also helped prime the machine for the Arts Center at NYUAD joining on as a partner in Kronos Quartet's ambitious project *Fifty for the Future*, an initiative to commission 50 new musical works, 10 per year for the next five years.

Other partners include Carnegie Hall in New York, Holland Festival in Amsterdam, Serious/Barbican in London, and Aga Khan Music In-

itiative in Geneva. The composers solicited will include 25 women and 25 men, and part of the premise is to use the commissioned works as a sort of open-source resource for education around the world.

Kronos Quartet will premiere all the new pieces in performances at different venues, and materials related to all will be available for free online, including scores, rehearsal videos, recordings and more.

"We want the music that we play to be available to the next generation of quartet players from every possible corner of the world to be able to do the kind of work that we do," said Harrington. The classical-music world has been widening excitingly, he said, and to make sure the trajectory continues, emerging players need to be incubated and encouraged to venture out beyond classical music's traditional bounds.

The first results from *Fifty for the Future*, in fact, will make their premiere in Abu Dhabi, by way of the first two completed commissions from the programme. One, by Fodé Lassana Diabaté from Mali, is a five-part suite just recently finished and ready for rehearsals a few days before being performed live on stage. The other was written by Wu Man, a Chinese composer with whom Harrington had been rehearsing via Skype before taking a break to talk about plans for Abu Dhabi. "Wu Man is probably the foremost pipa player in the world," he said of the musician and her Chinese string instrument, sounding as much like a fan as the director of a major classical-music institution.

Other new pieces have been commissioned, and more will come in the next few years – but the focus for now is entirely on the first two. "Abu Dhabi is getting the world premiere of the whole idea," Harrington said. "When I started playing quartets when I was 12 years old, music like this did not exist for string quartets."

It certainly does now, in large part due to Kronos Quartet's tireless activity as post-genre crusaders over the past three decades. "It's going to be fun and challenging and colourful – we're going to learn a lot," Harrington continued. "It's a very active and experimental time. I think people around the world are catching on that it's fun to explore the world of music."

Andy Battaglia is a New York-based writer and regular contributor to The Review.



The Kronos Quartet will be in Abu Dhabi next week. In performance above, from left: David Harrington, John Sherba, Hank Dutt and Sunny Yang. Hiroyuki Ito / Getty Images; top, courtesy Kronos Quartet

● Kronos Quartet will perform at NYUAD on September 16 and 17. If tickets are sold out, standby tickets will be available to those who turn up 30 minutes before the performance begins. Visit www.nyuad-artscenter.org.