

Kronos Quartet stages Crumb's "Black Angels"

Loud, amped-up classical
By **Wes Blomster** Camera Classical Music Critic
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If you go

What: Kronos Quartet performs for CU Artist Series

When: 7:30 p.m. today

Where: Macky Auditorium Concert Hall on CU campus Tickets: \$12-\$52

More info: 303-492-8008 or cupresents.org Etc. CU violin professor Lina Bahn leads a pre-concert conversation at 6:45 p.m. Friday in Macky Room 102. At 4 p.m. tomorrow the Kronos discusses innovation in ATLAS Black Box Theater and hosts a composers' workshop at 2 p.m. Friday in Grusin Hall. At 10 a.m. Saturday the group coaches ensembles in Grusin. All three events are open to the public without charge.

For the Kronos Quartet George Crumb's "Black Angels" isn't just another score in their repertory; it's their birth certificate.

The Kronos was born when founder David Harrington heard the first recording of the revolutionary work on the radio in 1973.

"It was wild -- and scary," the violinist recalls. "It was a magnetic experience, and it felt like this was the right music to listen to."

The Kronos played "Angels" at their first concert in 1974 and it's been an essential part of their repertory ever since. They made the definitive recording of the work in 1989, and they will play it for the University of Colorado Artist Series here on Friday.

"There's nothing else like it," Harrington says. "But it's not a work that you just sit down and play.

"Take the six crystal glasses called for in the score. They're filled with water to different levels, and we play them with our bows.

"It looks simple, but it takes a while to get it right."

The dimensions of Crumb's score call for large music stands -- and for amplification.

"In '74 we used mikes from Radio Shack," Harrington says. "They were thick and heavy, and their weight on the bridge muted our instruments.

"We had to play extra loud."

And although the Kronos now has the advantage of far more sophisticated amplification, there was something about that earlier sound that was right for "Angels."

"It was piercing and loud -- and brittle," Harrington says. "It was what we wanted and we try to keep it with today's electronics."

The Kronos and "Angels" have grown together during 35 years of performances.

Although it was an essential part of their repertory, the group did not record the quartet until 1989, when they were in a position to engage a sound engineer.

They also added lighting to the performance.

When Crumb, by then an old Kronos friend and fan, saw the new version in New York, he told Harrington that he could not imagine "Angels" played in any other way.

(And that, of course, is what Boulder will see on Friday.)

Yet the recording confronted Kronos with a challenge.

"On the disc 'Angels' runs 17.5 minutes," Harrington says. "In performance up to then it ran six or seven minutes more."

The reason? The recording can ignore the "silences," the time that it took the musicians to move from one configuration of instruments to another.

"We wanted that same focus, that same intensity, on stage," Harrington says. "And now we've simplified things to achieve that."

When Crumb went to work on "Angels" in 1970, an unpopular war still raged in Vietnam.

It was only as he approached the end of the score, however, that he realized it was a reflection of that troubled era.

"There was something in the air," Harrington says. "George sensed it, and it left its mark on 'Angels.'"



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Crumb subtitled the score "Thirteen Images from the Dark Land" and called it "music in tempore belli" -- "music in time of war."

And it's more than coincidence that Kronos made its recording as Chinese were slaughtering their own on Beijing's Tiananmen Square.

Underscoring the influence of Crumb and the continuity of the program, Kronos opens Friday's concert with four works by younger composers, all of whom, Harrington says, were undoubtedly influenced by "Angels."

"What I want from composers is their response to the world," Harrington says, "something meaningful for us when we are on stage."

The Kronos' Boulder performance is something of a coda to the September festival staged at CU to honor George Crumb, early a faculty member at the university, on his 80th birthday.

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