Kronos Quartet
Alice Tully Hall

The Kronos Quartet makes its living from the new, although in past years the new has not always been the substantial. Striking about Saturday night’s program was a consistent inspiration to go along with the novelty. Throwaway flights of fancy were mostly absent.

More than half of this program had origins behind what used to be called the Iron Curtain. Franghiz Ali-Zadeh from Azerbaijan offered “Dilogy.” In its private, spiritual world, the quiet contrapuntal lines, played in a liquid legato, evolved into chattering treble figures and then high-pitched agitation. “Summa,” by the Estonian Arvo Part, gently rocked muted harmonic simplicities back and forth, while “Already It Is Dusk,” by the Polish composer H. M. Gorecki, punctuated grave, subdued chordal movement with busy attacks of repeated notes.

The most elaborate and theatrical member of this group was Giya Kancheli’s “Night Prayers,” whose somber mood and taped vocalise labored mightily to create high drama out of limited inspiration. Mr. Kancheli, a Georgian from Tbilisi, wrote “Night Prayers” for the Kronos on a Lincoln Center commission.

With elegance and energy, the four string players began the evening with Hindemith’s farcical depiction of a performance gone wrong (“Overture to ‘The Flying Dutchman’”) and also added “Sunrise of the Planetary Dream Collector,” Terry Riley’s little essay on minimalist hedonism — pleasurable, almost therapeutic in its layers of repetition.

Bob Ostertag’s “All the Rage” turned the evening on its head with a devastating roar of gay anger. A recorded text, mixed with crowd noise, recounted indignities, persecutions and the sufferings of disease; the musicians added acerbic commentary with stringed instruments and whistles. Of the recent concert pieces having to do with AIDS, “All the Rage” seems by far the most powerful example. Mr. Ostertag’s stern, purifying gaze has swept away the sentimentality and melodrama that have compromised more famous compositions in the genre.

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