Music

New Music From Kronos Quartet

Politics and Process

by Philip Campbell

The Kronos Quartet opened their "home" show at the Theatre Artaud last week with two world premieres and several local debuts. All of the works included taped segments to make dramatic and satiric points, but the acoustic participation of the quartet kept this from being "process"-music in the strictest sense.

Politics and current events shaped the mood of the evening and gave urgency to the more ambitious pieces. Given the nature of most Kronos audiences (who said cultural elite?), much of the concert amounted to preaching to the choir, but the anger and humor of the best pieces amply justified their inclusion.

Michael Daugherty's Sing: J. Edgar Hoover aimed at an easy target, but catchy rhythms and some good tunes made an amusing effect when played against the words of a great American monster. It might have been too grisly half, though incredibly effective. Daugherty's style is effective for a program that steadily gained in intensity.

A local group, Mr. Bungle, co-authored Success in Life. The use of video (clever juxtaposition of a television evangelist with '50s imagery) made the most of spare, often wry musical commentary. It wouldn't be much without the technology, but the feeling was spooky and, often, quite funny.

Big News

The big news of the show centered around the San Francisco premiere of Bob Ostertag's All the Rage, commissioned by the Kronos Quartet.

Ostertag has built a name with his electronic scores, working with other innovators like Fred Frith and John Zorn, pioneering the use of digital sampling in alternative music. As a composer eager to emphasise his lack of "classical" training, he appears nonetheless poised to make inroads into territory previously charted by such luminaries as John Cage, Morton Feldman, and Ingram Marshall.

The sheer ferocity of All the Rage could overwhelm some listeners, but it's hard to miss the poignancy of the text and Ostertag's expert technique. The basic element of this sound drama is an actual tape of the AB 101 riot at the State Building in San Francisco. Ostertag fragments this source, repeating key moments and emphasizing their impact. A musical logic emerges with the "live" string players developing the material and attempting a musical transcription of shouts, slogans, and at one point, the sound of breaking glass.

The text by Sara Miles, read by Eric Gunton, covers a range of emotions: "the first time someone said queer and I knew they meant me," "the first time someone I know was killed for it," "the first time I watched a friend die," and "the first time I say I love you and I haven't said it to before."

It might have been easier to react with anger - sorrow, fury, but Ostertag raises above the obvious. Rage is cleansing, but in this case, humanity remains paramount. When the members of the quartet sing, and then in unison, blow whistles donated by CUAV, the effect is wildly theatrical and, strangely enough, reassuring.

All the Rage is the middle movement of a projected trilogy about grief, anger, and joy. The first section on grief, Sooner or Later, was completed in 1990. Ostertag used tape from his extensive travels in El Salvador (becoming something of an expert on the region) to tell the story of a son burying his father. It is reportedly an intense experience. The piece on joy is yet to be completed.

The Kronos Quartet deserves high praise for their risk-taking and triumphant mastery of what must be damn near impossible material to play. Bob Ostertag must be encouraged to complete the trilogy and continue his intriguing explorations.

More Conventional

The second half of the concert was devoted entirely to Scott Johnson's The Clouds, It Raged, and Rainfall, derived from How It Happens (by LF Stone). As process music - using words and their sound (repetition, fragmentation, distortion, etc.) - this was more conventional. Johnson also through composed the music as more linear and lyrical; it could probably