This interview with David Harrington of the KRONOS QUARTET was conducted by the Library of Congress' Neely Tucker in April of 2024

David Harrington

Neely Tucker: Again, my name is Neely Tucker. I'm an editor and producer here at the Library of Congress and, one, let me just say to get us started, congratulations and welcome to sort of Audio Valhalla, where things go to live forever--the National Recording Registry. We welcome you and Kronos and "Pieces of Africa" into the Registry.

David Harrington: We are so happy and proud to be included and very happy to be here to talk to you.

NT: Just backing up, can you tell us a little bit about when and where you grew up? I know there was a seminal recording for you in the early '70s. Can you us how you got there and your musical background?

DH: I grew up in Seattle, Washington, and I was really lucky to be able to play violin. I started when I was in the public schools and by age 11, I was playing in the Seattle Youth Symphony. By age 12, I heard my first string quartet recording and--you may remember the Columbia Record Club where if you sent in a penny, you got to make a bunch of choices of LPs?--and I happened to be reading a biography of Beethoven at age 12, and I read about the late quartets. Well, in 1961, the Budapest Quartet released the first of the late Beethoven quartets, the E-flat Major Opus 127. I chose that as one of my Columbia Club choices. A couple of weeks later, I put the needle on and I had to learn how to make that opening E-flat major chord. I called another violinist, a violist, and a cellist after checking the music out of the Seattle Public Library and I'll never forget we played that chord and for about a 10th of a second, it sounded like the record. That's why I believe in tenths of seconds in music because I knew I could do it from that experience and as I grew up, I played more and more string quartets.

At age 14, I happened to look at a globe in our family home and realized that all of the string quartet music I had played or heard up to that point was written by four people who lived in the same city: Vienna. All you'd have to do is look at the entire globe and all the other cities in the world to know there has to be all kinds of music out there that I knew nothing about and so, from that age, the idea that music can be this vast world to explore and to learn from became something that I've been involved with every day since.

When I was in high school and college, the American war in Vietnam was going on and even though I, by then, had heard the music of Bartok and Charles Ives and Elliott Carter and all kinds of composers, nothing quite felt to me like the sound I was hearing inside. But then, one night in August of 1973, I heard the New York String Quartet's recording of “Black Angels” and I was so happy when I looked through the complete list of National Recording Registry awardees because their recording is in the Registry as it had totally changed my life.

I not only found my song in August of 1973, I had to form a group in order to play that song. That's why I started Kronos. And we had our first rehearsal on September 1, 1973. Stepping back a little bit, I was really lucky to go to Roosevelt High School in the ‘60s. Our music teacher, Ronald Taylor, made sure that there were recordings from all over the world that we got to listen to and some of my favorite ones were from various places in Africa. I realized as a 16, 17-year-old that there was a sound and a feel to some of the music I was hearing that I'd never heard a violin make, never heard a string quartet make and that got planted into my consciousness. Then, if you fast forward a number of years, and from the first day, Kronos was involved in expanding what we might think of as “our” music, as the music we could do as a string quartet.

I had always hoped that we might be able to find ways of playing music from various composers in Africa, in Asia, in South America, in places where the world of the string quartet maybe hadn't flourished yet.

It was in 1984 that I first heard music of Kevin Volans at the Darmstadt seminar in Darmstadt, West Germany. His music sounded like no other music I’d ever heard and I asked him to write for Kronos. The music he wrote became the first music written for us by an African-born composer, and it’s called “White Man Sleeps.” At that time more and more composers were coming to our concerts. Terry Riley, my close friend, heard “White Man Sleeps” sometime in, oh, it would've been '85 or '86, and he said, "You've got to meet Hamza El Din." Well, Hamza was living across the bay from me and Kronos and he came over one day and we became friends immediately. He played a piece for me called “Escalay.” I said, "We have to play this piece Hamza, can you figure out a way to make this possible?" Eventually, “Escalay” became a part of the work of Kronos.

So, by then, we had “White Man Sleeps,” “Escalay.” Philip Glass heard “White Man Sleeps” and “Escalay” at a Kronos concert where we were playing some of his music as well. He said to me, "You have to meet Foday Musa Suso. I've been working with Foday for a long time, he's great.” So I met Foday and within a very short time, Foday Musa Suso was writing for Kronos and we had this amazingly beautiful piece called “Tilliboyo.” That’s how “Pieces of Africa” got put together. It didn't start out as a record, it started out as one piece and then it slowly, slowly, over a period of about, I'd say seven years, became an album.

My sister who was living in Seattle introduced me to Dumisani Maraire and Dumi wrote “Mai Nozipo” and then “Kutambarara,” which became the bookends for the entire album. Kronos was on tour in Anchorage, Alaska, and I went to a record shop and there was this cassette of music by Obo Addy. I was looking at this cassette and, well, I hadn't heard of Obo Addy, so I had to get it and then found out that Obo's address and phone number were on the cassette. I listened to it and I thought, “Wow, this is really cool,” he lives in Portland so I’ll call him. I called Obo, we became friends, he wrote “Wawshishijay” for Kronos, and we got to play together.

NT: A question for all artists, particularly when you're putting this thing together, how did you know when it was done? How did you know this is it, this is what we're going with?

DH: That's a great question because knowing I was going to speak with you, I was thinking, “this album's not done.” It was released in 1992, but since then, there have been other pieces written by composers from various places in Africa. I think “Pieces of Africa” planted a seed for

our work and it is a seed that has flowered beautifully. I'm so happy people have been able to hear this music and that it's being recognized now in this way. I should tell you I looked through the Registry, I looked through every recording, and I could not be more proud that “Pieces of Africa” is a part of this Registry. It's such a cool group, and I don't know who makes the choices, but whoever they are, really thinks in the largest way about the world of music. I showed this to my grandson and he looked through the entire list himself. It was amazing what he picked out. He's 15 years old and the Registry goes back to, what is it, 2001? Is that when it started, 2001?

NT: Yeah, I believe so. Might've been 2000, but I think 2001.

DH: Yeah. So he's going to be checking out all kinds of things now, some of which he doesn't know, many of which he does know, and which surprised me. He said, "Wow, ‘Pieces of Africa’ is in such good company."

NT: Well, to answer one of your questions, the members of the National Recording Preservation Board have a subcommittee that works with the Librarian and one thing that's kind of nifty about the board is, as somebody else has pointed out, we also allow the public to participate, the public can nominate and petition, and sometimes groups get behind records and really push for a title. But it's not really a thing you can vote for. It's not something you can campaign for. It's just something that sort of floats down out of the blue and then one day you get a very happy phone call and people tell you that you're in.

DH: Yeah. Well, all I can tell you is all of us in Kronos are so happy to be included.

The founder of the string quartet, that's Joseph Haydn, back in the 1770s, or maybe a little earlier, he probably likely never heard any music from any place in Africa and he quite likely never heard music from China, or Japan, or South America. But he made this art form that Kronos has benefited from. And then Mozart and then Beethoven and Schubert, those four composers who lived in Vienna, white guys who all spoke the same language, had the same religion. They made this foundation that Kronos has been able to add to, I think.

A few years ago, we got to play at the Esterhazy Palace, which is where Haydn wrote most of his string quartets and, of course, “Are you going to play Haydn?” No, we're not going to play Haydn. We're going to play Haydn's great, great, great, great grandchildren. I have to say that “Pieces of Africa” is one of my favorite great, great, great great grandchildren of Haydn. When we toured “Pieces of Africa” in 1992, Dumisani Maraire taught the audience to sing “Kutambarara.” I remember playing at Lincoln Center in New York, and who should be in the front row, but Allen Ginsberg. I didn't know he was going to be there and I look out-- That's Allen Ginsberg. Okay. So Ginsberg is singing along with Kronos, and I met him after the show and that's when I was able to ask Allen if he would like to do a performance of “Howl” with Kronos at Carnegie Hall the next year.

The way music works, I think, is that one thing always leads to another. It's this infinite set of human variations. Everything is related. It's all related, I think, and to me, that's a really good example of, “Okay, ‘Kutambarara,’ leads to ‘Howl.’” You wouldn't think they would belong in the same sentence, but they do.

NT: They do. What do you think, because this does seem to be the foundational thing for you, is the string quartet, and obviously you listened to a lot of music from a lot of places, performed in a lot of different ways. What was it about the string quartet that just hit you that said, “This is it.”

DH: It’s the human thick multi-dimensional sound, and as you'll notice on “Pieces of Africa,” every piece has its own sound. Every composer who has ever written for Kronos has his or her

distinctive sound and that's because it's such personal music. It's made from the most private part of each composer's imagination. Dumisani Maraire told me that the first music he ever remembers hearing was the music of Bach. He learned Shona music, his traditional music after he heard Bach. So he kind of felt connected through some of his early listening to two violins, a viola, and a cello. I remember when he attended his first Kronos concert and I met with him afterwards. He said it was like he'd been a part of this tradition and maybe didn't know about it until that moment. I encountered that with Hamza [El Din], with Justinian Tamusuza, with Obo Addy, with all the composers, this kind of connection that they couldn't really define. I would say the same undefinable quality is at work with Kronos and all of the music that we've been able to play in the last 50 years.

NT: You mentioned being the great, great, great grandchildren of Haydn, Bach. That really does seem to be what you've been able to do, what the entire group has been able to do over half a century now, is to really move this particular type of music forward into being something that it wasn't the day before you started.

DH: We have had so much help from so many people from every corner of the world to make our music. I have to say that when a composer or a guest performer comes to our rehearsal, it feels like we're learning new things every time. We're learning new things about what it is to be a human, what it is to be alive now, and to have access to the world of music in ways that 51 years ago I could have never imagined. I mean, something we did the other night, there's no way we could have even imagined doing this two months ago. We're really lucky, really lucky and I want to celebrate that every day of my life. We're lucky to be able to have access to some of the most creative composers and guest performers, and they bring their experience, their traditions, their knowledge into our work and, hopefully, Kronos is getting larger and larger. That's what I'm hoping for.

NT: Can you tell us where you got the name Kronos?

DH: In October of 1973, it was clear we were going to have our first concert in November. My wife and I got out a long piece of butcher paper, a bottle of wine, and our Greek and Roman mythological dictionary and Regan, my wife, she found the name "Chronos." The idea of time and timeliness and chronicling and chronic, I thought, "Yeah, this is great." And I remembered reading as a teenager, in the "Reader's Digest," about how Kodak got its name and how they spent half a fortune paying somebody to tell them that K was a much stronger way of spelling Kodak than C-H. I just filed that away and so when Regan said, "Well, 'Kronos,'" I thought, "Well, this is great!" I love this idea, this meaning, but let's just change the spelling. So that's how Kronos got its name.

NT: That's fabulous. You were really taking me down memory lane with the butcher paper, "Reader's Digest." When I was starting in journalism, that's how I would... just before computers got everything. That's how I would compose longer stories or put them together is get the butcher paper out and I would have different colored pens. That was the fun part. Writing was, I didn't like that part, but the mapping it all out, that was great.

DH: I've been disorganized ever since computers have been here. I don't have my butcher paper anymore.

NT: I need to see it all out there. I don't know why, but that way my limited little mind can see it. Record of the Month, the Columbia thing, I joined that. You send in your little money and if you didn't send it in in time, they were going to send you their pick. So you wanted to get your money in time to get your pick. I have not thought of that in years.

DH: It was a penny. Then of course, as you know, what happens is your parents got hit up for a whole bunch of money the next month. You had to work fast. But I've talked to so many people who were part of the Columbia Record Club and, eventually, I think--this could be checked--but I think “Pieces of Africa” became part of the Columbia Record Club. I think it did.

NT: Wow. Talk about meeting your heroes, hitting the big time. How else do you know when you've made it big?... **I really liked and was interested in some of what you said about music being this worldwide connection and learning all the time from new things coming in. That's really what I think keeps artists alive is when you have new ideas coming in.**

DH: That's right. You never know where the next one might come from. You need to be ready and just awake to what you might hear next or who you might meet next. That's what I've tried to do and I'm going keep doing it for as long as possible.