

Kronos Quartet

Forgive Us For

When Kronos Quartet celebrated its 50th anniversary in 2023, founding first violinist David Harrington vowed to keep building on the group's globe-spanning repertoire and spirit of social activism, especially when it comes to premieres. Kronos's newest release, *Forgive Us For*, makes good on this pledge, with three works that address crises and troubles around the globe: by Icelandic composer Hildur Guðnadóttir, Ukrainian singer Mariana Sadovska, and the late Palestinian singer Rim Banna (in an arrangement by Jonathan Berger).

The album's title is a line from Hildur Guðnadóttir's *Fólk fær andlit* ("People Get Faces"), originally scored for a women's choir with cello, and presented here in a new string quartet arrangement. The piece concerns a troubling episode that drew little notice outside Guðnadóttir's native Iceland. In 2015, the government deported a group of Albanian families, including one with a critically ill child, in the middle of the night. Guðnadóttir treats the subject with an austere solemnity, in keeping with her experience in film and TV scoring (*Joker*, *Chernobyl*, *TAR*).

A recording of the late Palestinian singer Rim Banna is presented in an arrangement of the folk song *Ya Taali'een el-Jabal* ("Oh, You Who Are Climbing Up the Mountain"). Palestinian women have traditionally sung this to their imprisoned husbands to convey messages of



album artwork

freedom and liberation. Banna, who died from cancer in 2018, dedicated it to Palestinian political prisoners held in Israeli jails.

The quartet is also joined by Ukrainian singer-composer Mariana Sadovska in her own *Chernobyl. The Harvest*, a four-part "pagan requiem" that remembers the 1986 nuclear disaster at Chernobyl. Based on harvest songs and other folk melodies that Sadovska gathered in Ukraine's Polissia region, the song's texts are intertwined with evacuation announcements from Chernobyl. With Sadovska accompanying herself on a harmonium, she builds on a rich Slavic strain in Kronos' work.

Though each of the three works address specific events, there was a larger point to presenting them together, says Kronos cellist Paul Wiancko. "There's a unifying pain and

struggle to these stories that are otherwise very different,” he explains. “They shed light on a part of humanity that we so deeply need to focus on in 2025 and beyond.”

Indeed, Kronos has often aimed to promote global awareness when the political landscape has tilted in other directions. The quartet’s own origin story begins with *Black Angels*, George Crumb’s searing musical response to the Vietnam War. After Harrington heard it on the radio in 1973, he gathered three friends together with the plan to start a quartet dedicated to contemporary music.

More recently, after President Trump banned citizens from seven predominantly Muslim countries from entering the United States in 2017, Kronos championed musicians from each of those countries, including Iranian singers Marjan and Mahsa Vahdat (who appear on the acclaimed 2019 album *Ya Taali’een el-Jabal*). Kronos’ first Phenotypic release was *WITNESS*, featuring music by Armenian-American composer Mary Kouyoumdjian, based on testimonies of victims of the Lebanese Civil War and the Armenian Genocide.

Over the decades, Kronos brought its omnivorous curiosity to other musics, including Indian raga, Norwegian hardanger fiddling, Bollywood themes, Mexican techno, and Tuvan throat singing, to name just a few. By its own account, the quartet has commissioned more than 1,000 pieces while amassing a discography of more than 75 albums. Its stage productions have also shown chamber groups what’s possible, particularly when it comes multimedia and lighting design.

Forgive Us For marks a turning point in its membership. It is the last release with the violinist John Sherba and the violist Hank Dutt, both members since 1978, while two new additions — violinist Gabriela Díaz and violist Ayane Kozasa — make their debut in works by Guðnadóttir and Banna. Harrington and Wiancko, who joined in 2023, perform on all three selections. They tell us more about the album’s genesis.

The opening track, *Ya Taali’een el-Jabal*, couldn’t be more timely. It features a recording by Palestinian singer Rim Banna in a new arrangement by American composer Jonathan Berger. What was it about this that captured your attention?

David: Jonathan brought the idea of this song to us, and I immediately said yes. This is something we want to do. Rim Banna came to the attention of the music world by Erik Hillestad, the producer of one of our album *Placeless*. During Rim Banna’s lifetime, Erik produced seven of her albums. After she died in 2018, he stayed in contact with her family. It was with their permission that we were able to get access and record this. It was taken from a television show.

It’s a song about a woman singing outside a mountaintop prison where her husband is being held. Does that story inform your approach in some way?

Paul: I think it does. It’s only a 90-second piece but when we play, I find my mind and my heart are completely flooded with emotion and thoughts. I wish it were longer. Here’s hoping that we can continue to grow the Palestinian part of our repertoire as well, because there’s a bit of a shortage of music in this country that has Palestinian roots and influences. To be able to be a platform for Palestinian culture in music is especially important to Kronos.

Hildur Guðnadóttir’s *Fólk fær andlit* was originally scored for women’s voices and cello and featured the lyrics, “Mercy / Forgive us for.” How did this instrumental version proceed in terms of a dramatic arc?

David: When I first heard Hildur’s piece, I actually thought she wrote it especially for Kronos. It just felt like a perfect extension of our work sonically. For those people who have heard us play it, most recognize it as an earworm kind of piece. Once you hear *Fólk fær andlit* you can’t get it out of your imagination.

I've always been attracted to music like that, which has an iconic sensibility. What we discovered in the recording was that we could color each layer infinitely.

Paul: This arrangement got to maybe 50% of the way to completion by the time it got in the studio. For the rest, we would record a layer and then record on top of that and see what worked. So, we really went beyond the scope of a traditional quartet's limitations with this arrangement, and with the help of Jeanne Velonis, our fantastic producer, we filled in that last 50% of the arrangement in the studio and created that arc.

Some listeners will have been introduced to Guðnadóttir through her TV and film scores. Do you hear a "cinematic" approach to storytelling here?

Paul: I think there's a priority you can hear in her music: the directness of the emotion and how to communicate an important and disturbing historical narrative about refugee treatment in Iceland. [She understands] what kind of music might allow the listener to be able to quickly focus and meditate on that for five or six minutes. That's really something unique and amazing: just how quickly she can get someone in the right mindset to think about something so serious.

Kronos premiered Mariana Sadovska's *Chernobyl. The Harvest* in 2012, then recorded it in 2024. Perhaps an obvious question, but what compelled you to revive it all these years later?

David: When we performed the world premiere in Kyiv, that was an incredible experience, playing it for a Ukrainian audience. We've performed it elsewhere and then, of course,

Russia's invasion of Ukraine and the war happened. We were very worried about Mariana and her family. Her husband and family live in Germany, but she was going back visiting her extended family frequently. I think of Mariana as an amazing musician. She's an ethnomusicologist and deeply studies all kinds of issues that affect life and music. She's an incredible force. So, we had this concert at Stanford, and I looked at the schedule and realized she was going to get here a day or so early. I thought, now's the time to record. We need to do this *now*.

With new members joining you on two of the three pieces, does this still sound like a Kronos recording to you? And does it connect to your past in some way?

David: I think this recording is pointing towards the future. In terms of our work, every day we talk about ways that we can interact with what's going on around the world through music and with music. I feel like this album is a big step in that direction. The continuity of intense concern and 'groupness' and just inspiration is something that has always been a part of Kronos.

Paul: I think it's a really neat opportunity to get to hear different iterations of Kronos back-to-back and it makes total sense. The work that Kronos does today is only possible because of the trajectory that the quartet and the organization has been on for 52 years. I grew up with the Kronos Quartet for a couple of decades before joining. I was a huge fan and still am. There's a bit of a responsibility to the legacy and the mission and to keep honing that mission in more effective ways, which I think Kronos is really doing now. Now, we have more fire in our bellies than ever.

**For more information, please contact
Krista Williams or Carla Sacks at Sacks & Co., 212.741.1000,
krista@sacksco.com or carla@sacksco.com.**