
Postmodern Eclecticism and the World Music Debate: The Politics of the Kronos Quartet *

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For all their questioning of the continuing 'relevance' of high-modernist musical aesthetics, musicologists have tended to take at face value the twentieth-century avant-garde's assessment of its output as 'pure' or 'absolute music,' formally introspective, disengaged from any ideological or social agenda. For example, Susan McClary's much-cited article, 'Terminal Prestige' (1989), which famously called for the opening-up of university music departments to 'the teaching of popular and postmodern music' and the stripping of prestige from academic avant-garde composers protected from market forces by university salaries, observed of modernist aesthetics:

Perhaps only with the twentieth-century avant-garde ... has there been a music that has sought to secure prestige precisely by claiming to renounce all possible social functions and values ... This strange posture ... is but the *reductio ad absurdum* of the nineteenth-century notion that music ought to be an autonomous activity, insulated from the contamination of the outside social world.¹

McClary cited as exemplary of this attitude unashamedly elitist statements by Schoenberg (in 'How One Becomes Lonely' [1937]), Roger Sessions (in 'How a "Difficult" Composer Becomes that Way' [1950]), Milton Babbitt (in 'The Composer as Specialist,' or 'Who Cares if You Listen?' [1958] and 'The Unlikely Survival of Serious Music' [1987]), and Pierre Boulez (in 'Contemporary Music and the Public' [1985]), which equated popularity and marketability with aesthetic debasement, and complexity, impenetrability and public indifference with high aesthetic value. What is often missing in both defences and critiques of modernist musical aesthetics (which, in Clement Greenberg's words, demand that 'the work be

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¹ Susan McClary, 'Terminal Prestige: The Case of Avant-garde Music Composition,' *Cultural Critique* 12 (Spring 1989): 60.

judged as a hermetic, internally related world where the meanings are self-referential²) is an acknowledgment of the ideology invested in the notion of an aesthetically or technically 'autonomous' art. Nelson Rockefeller described abstract art as 'free-enterprise painting,' a view perfectly consonant with Lenin's critique of 'art for art's sake' as a 'bourgeois-anarchist individualist' doctrine in his 1905 essay, 'Party Organisation and Party Literature.'³ And there is no doubt that the aesthetics of Western modernism during the Cold War decades derived its impetus and appeal as much from its opposition to Soviet Socialist Realist aesthetics, and hence to Communism, as from its scorn for the commodified mass-entertainment culture being manufactured in the West itself. When the capital of modernist art shifted from Paris to New York after World War II, the modernism most strongly promoted from New York was the antithesis of Socialist Realism: namely, Abstract Expressionism in painting and serialism in music—the least figurative, seemingly most aesthetically self-absorbed of art-forms. But the extent to which even the most 'autonomous' of modernist arts performed straightforwardly propagandist functions during the Cold War has been emerging since the 1970s in a series of exposés of the CIA's generous hand in promoting modernism through its lavish funding of journals, festivals, conferences, competitions and touring exhibitions.⁴ The doctrines of Soviet Socialist Realism against which the CIA marshalled modernism were spelled out in directives such as the following one, issued by the Central Communist Party to the All-Union Congress of Soviet Composers in 1958:

The method of Socialist Realism demands from Soviet composers a systematic struggle with aesthetic over-refinement, lifeless individualism and formalism ... Soviet musicians are called upon to reflect reality in moving, beautiful, poetic images, permeated with optimism and lofty humanness, the pathos of construction and the spirit of collectivism—all that distinguishes the Soviet people's perception of the world.⁵

Four years earlier, the CIA's lavishly funded cultural propaganda machine, the Congress for Cultural Freedom, had organised its International Conference of Twentieth Century Music in Rome (1954) to consolidate the anti-Soviet propaganda triumph of its 1952 Masterpieces of the Twentieth Century festival in Paris—for which it had co-opted the music of such canonical modernists as Stravinsky, Schoenberg, Copland, Hindemith and Berg and staged performances of a hundred musical works intended to broadcast the festival's message that aesthetic freedom was synonymous with a free-enterprise society, that modernist art owed its survival and future to the United States, and that 'the Twentieth Century must ... become an American Century.'⁶ The 1954 Rome 'conference' was in fact a CIA-funded competition for new

² Quoted in David Brackett, "'Where's it at?': Postmodern Theory and the Contemporary Musical Field,' *Postmodern Music/Postmodern Thought*, ed. J. Lochhead and J. Auner (London and New York: Routledge, 2002) 209.

³ Nelson Rockefeller, quoted in Frances Stonor Saunders, *Who Paid the Piper? The CIA and the Cultural Cold War* (London: Granta Books, 1999) 258; V. I. Lenin, 'Party Organisation and Party Literature,' *Lenin Collected Works*, vol. 10 (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1965) 44–49.

⁴ The exposés have been comprehensively documented by Saunders in *Who Paid the Piper*, and elaborated upon in Ian Wellens, *Music on the Frontline: Nicolas Nabokov's Struggle Against Communism and Middlebrow Culture* (Aldershot, Hants.: Ashgate, 2002), and Mark Carroll, *Music and Ideology in Cold War Europe* (Cambridge: CUP, 2003).

⁵ C. Vaughan James, *Soviet Socialist Realism* (London: Macmillan, 1973) 88.

⁶ Saunders, *Who Paid the Piper*, 119–24.

composers, designed to announce America's commitment to vanguard musical experiment of the kind expressly forbidden by Stalin, namely, atonal, dodecaphonic composition, which the conference sponsors believed was imparting 'a clear political message' by doing away with all hierarchies and declaring its 'liberation from previous laws about music's inner logic'⁷—by analogy, presumably, with Marxism's laws about history's inner logic.

In short, for its CIA sponsors, serialist music was no less the bearer of a grand political narrative than was a Soviet Socialist Realist work such as Vishnevsky's *Optimistic Tragedy* or the unromantic Stalinist novels about industrial development known generically as 'Boy Meets Tractor' fiction. Some conservative US press commentators may have accused modernist art of being a Communist conspiracy, even claiming that some 'abstract paintings were actually secret maps pinpointing strategic United States fortifications,' but aesthetic abstraction of Pollock's or Schoenberg's kind was systematically promoted by the Congress for Cultural Freedom as the embodiment of a specifically anti-Soviet ideology of free-market competitive individualism, unencumbered by state dictat.⁸ In other words, the Congress pursued its anti-Communist agenda by charging non-representational art with representing the very political messages that it appeared to have evacuated from art.

All of which is a salutary reminder of the Wittgensteinian insight that the meaning of a sign is not inherent or given in the sign itself, but a function of its uses: an insight that is no less applicable to postmodern musical aesthetics—with its accommodation of bricolage, polystylism, pastiche and disunity—than to Cold War modernism's Kantian aesthetic of self-referential purity and autonomy. As we shall see, the 'self-contextualising' tendencies of much postmodern music—its self-conscious intertextuality, or explicit allusions to other works, styles and extra-musical 'texts'—can no more 'fix' its political or ideological meanings than high modernism's putative self-sufficiency and transcendence of political concerns can insulate it from ideological message-bearing.

An opportunity to reconsider the nexus between politics and aesthetics in contemporary music debates was provided by the Kronos Quartet (dubbed 'the first postmodern quartet' by the *Los Angeles Times* music critic, Mark Swed) with the Australian tour of its 'Visual Music' concert in March 2005, and by the mixed audience responses that it elicited during the Question and Answer sessions staged after each concert. As its title suggests, 'Visual Music' employed the staging techniques and gadgetry of pop-concert spectacles, including rapid-change lighting effects, video-projection and magnification of players' body-parts, to give its music what the quartet called 'bizarre and unexpected' visual settings that were designed to 'allow our audience to ask the same questions we ask – what is an instrument, what is a note, what is a quartet, where does music start and stop?'⁹ The pieces performed in these continuously unfolding visual settings ranged stylistically from John Zorn's *Cat O'Nine Tails* (*Tex Avery Directs the Marquis de Sade*) (1988), comprising some fifty-one sound-bites suggestive of Warner Brothers cartoon soundtracks, illustrated visually with projected cartoon footage and comparable in its aural effect 'to rapidly pressing the pre-set buttons on a car radio,'¹⁰ to Krzysztof Penderecki's

⁷ Saunders, *Who Paid the Piper*, 22.

⁸ Saunders, *Who Paid the Piper*, 253–54.

⁹ David Harrington, programme note, Musica Viva *Visual Music* concert series, Australia, 2005, 10.

¹⁰ Harrington, programme note, 10.

Quartetto per archi (1960), whose bewildering score was projected onto a screen and continuously scrolled across the stage, with a bar of red light indicating where the performers 'were' at any moment.¹¹ In the public discussion following the Melbourne performance of 'Visual Music,' it emerged that the concert had been perceived by some members of the audience as excessively abstract, formalistic and emotionless, and by others as passionately politically engaged. One Q&A audience-member expressed the kind of incomprehension and alienation that were staple public reactions to high modernism in the mid-twentieth century when he told Kronos that he and his partner had found the concert:

a very strange experience ... In those pieces you played, where was the emotion? We were struck very much by the absence of emotion and of melody, and of a continuity of exploration that would have taken us into the music ... In the end it was not challenging enough—to us, anyway.

Another audience-member focused on the anti-war pieces in the programme: three movements from Scott Johnson's 'How it Happened (The Voice of I.F. STONE),' with its message for Christian fundamentalism that 'Nothing in human history is more unholy than holy war'; a new arrangement of the soundtrack of the Cold War sci-fi film about US paranoia and fear of the 'alien,' *The Day the Earth Stood Still*; and Terry Riley's prayerful, elegiac intersplicing of live quartet parts and extra-terrestrial recorded noises, 'One Earth, One People, One Love,' with its title's implicit reference to the atrocities of September 11, 2001¹²—and she asked the quartet 'how political the concert as a whole was intended to be?' David Harrington, the quartet's founder and leader, received spontaneous applause from a large section of the Q&A audience when he responded:

We meant this to be *very* political, actually ... the world premiere of this concert took place in Los Angeles, on the night of the largest anti-war demonstration that was ever had in Los Angeles, and the review the next day in the paper carried the best headline the quartet has ever had. I was so proud of it! ... [It said] we had staged an anti-war concert after the biggest demonstration ... Sometimes reviewers don't even notice things like that, but in this case the guy did, and we were very pleased!¹³

The day in question was 15 February 2003, when mass public demonstrations of anti-war sentiment were relayed around the world by the global media, from Sydney to Baghdad to San Francisco, as the Bush regime prepared its illegal invasion of Iraq.

Most critical commentary on Kronos to date has focused on its radical renovation of the string quartet's repertoire and cultural image through its commissioning of new works, its programmatic collaborations with non-classical and non-Western musicians, and its use of

¹¹ The complete programme of the 'Visual Music' concert is available on the Kronos Quartet's web site: <http://www.kronosquartet.org/VM/index.html>.

¹² The 'Visual Music' concert programme notes explain the source of the piece's title: 'Riley heard poet and novelist Alice Walker on the radio talking about how she had made up a September 11 mantra—"One Earth, One People, One Love". It suddenly occurred to him that contemplating outer space could be a way to put the problems on Earth into perspective ... Walker's mantra not only gave Riley the inspiration to continue—it also provided a title and focal point for *Sun Rings'* concluding movement, the excerpt performed by Kronos in the present programme. Furthermore, the sound of Walker's voice intoning the words "One Earth, One People, One Love" became an integral component of the movement itself.'

¹³ 'Visual Music' post-concert Q&A session, Hamer Hall, Melbourne, 2 March 2005.

staging and marketing techniques derived from post-1960s popular music culture.¹⁴ And much of the critical debate has been preoccupied with questions of classification: should Kronos's aesthetic be labelled 'minimalist,' 'crossover,' 'modernist,' 'postmodernist' or 'world music'—or some combination thereof? As Harrington says, many reviewers either appear not to notice the politics in its work or they regard the politics as an extra-musical imposition on what should be the 'proper' object of critical and audience attention, the 'music itself.' (A *Weekend Australian* review of the Perth performance of 'Visual Music' managed to avoid all mention of war, peace or politics while cryptically complaining that: 'It was a shame that the overly loud voice track in Scott Johnson's *How it Happens* obscured the piece's finer points.')¹⁵

Political position-taking has coloured Kronos's career since its founding in 1973, when Harrington, recently returned to the USA from draft-dodging in Canada, heard a broadcast of George Crumb's Vietnam War piece, *Black Angels (Thirteen Images from the Dark Land)* (1970), and decided to form an ensemble that could perform its haunting sounds, so evocative of the anger and incomprehension of the Vietnam War.¹⁶ Kronos's efforts to align art-music with social-justice agendas range from its collaboration with the political activist and sound-artist Bob Ostertag on *All the Rage*, based on Ostertag's recording of a 1991 gay-rights riot in San Francisco following California Governor Pete Wilson's vetoing of an anti-sexual-discrimination bill (as Ostertag explained, 'my objective was to have the quartet *play* the riot'),¹⁷ through to the quartet's dedication of its 2005 Womadelaide performances to refugees and Australia's dispossessed indigenous peoples, and its recent commissioning of a quartet by Alexandra du Bois, meditating on the build-up to the Iraq War and entitled (in Latin) 'An Eye for an Eye Makes the Whole World Blind.' However, the most substantive critical engagements with Kronos's politics have focused on its contributions to World Music, so called, through its many collaborations with African, Asian, Indian, Latin American and other third-world composers and performers. The question often posed by these commentaries is whether Kronos's collaborations might constitute a form of cultural appropriation or neo-imperialism

¹⁴ One of the best such commentaries is James Porter's 'The Old, the New, and the Postmodern: Kronos and the Transformation of the String Quartet,' in Bernd Edelmann and Manfred Hermann Schmid (eds), *Altes im Neuen: Festschrift Theodor Göllner zum 65. Geburtstag* (Tutzing: H. Schneider, 1995) 419–26.

¹⁵ Paul Hopwood, 'Astonishing Rhythmic Vitality, 30 Years On,' *Weekend Australian*, 28 February 2005, reproduced on the web site of *Chamber Music New Zealand*, <http://www.chambermusic.co.nz/reviews/354.php> (accessed 20 September 2005). Hopwood's review also described the quartet's performance of Penderecki's *Quartetto* as 'crucial to the balance of the show, adding intellectual substance to a programme that, for all its highlights, felt at times like a collection of party pieces.' Asked for his response to this comment, Harrington replied: 'It reminded me of the press that we have in our country [America] and how exclusionary they are and how they don't want concerts to deal with events, they don't want music to be taken out of a rarefied context' (David Harrington, personal interview with David Bennett and Linda Kouvaras, Melbourne, 1 March 2005).

¹⁶ *Black Angels* has come to be closely associated, in performers', critics' and audiences' minds, with the anti-Vietnam War movement, but in a 2005 interview Harrington suggested that this association, or at least its persistence a quarter of a century after that war, was as much his own doing as Crumb's, reporting that Crumb had 'shied away' from linking the piece directly with the Vietnam War when asked about it by Harrington in 1989 (Harrington, personal interview with Bennett and Kouvaras, Melbourne, 1 March 2005).

¹⁷ Bob Ostertag, 'All the Rage,' in John Zorn (ed.), *Arcana: Musicians on Music* (New York: Granary Books/Hips Road, 2000) 193–202. In this essay, Ostertag recalls: 'I took a portable tape recorder to the riot and recorded everything I could. I came home and decided what the project would be: I would have a string quartet play a queer riot' (193).

at odds with its commitment to what one critic terms 'the preservation of world musics and the empowerment of peoples from around the world.'¹⁸

World Music (or, in US parlance, World Beat) has been defined variously as: the generic hybridism resulting from Western appropriations of non-Western folk and traditional musics; as the soundscape of the decentred global cultural marketplace; as progressive multiculturalism in the music industry, indicating postcolonial 'feedback' in the previously 'one-way' flow of cultural influence in global communications (a case of the Empire singing back, as it were);¹⁹ or as an early 1980s marketing concept and signifier of a Western taste-culture disaffected with the hype of global corporate culture and looking to non-western music for local tradition and 'authenticity.'²⁰ Two discourses have tended to dominate debates about the ethics and aesthetics of World Music since the early 1990s: on one hand, a discourse of authenticity and ownership, theft and appropriation; on the other, a discourse of fluidity, hybridity and collaborative exchange. The first discourse is typically informed by neo-Marxist analyses of imperialism, and the second underpinned by postmodern anti-essentialist theories of the performative, dialogical and porous nature of all cultural identities. These two discourses, in turn, have generated two kinds of narratives of World Music, which I will follow Steven Feld in characterising as 'anxious narratives' and 'celebratory narratives.'²¹

Celebratory narratives treat World Music as a politically progressive development and a synthetic genre signalling international collaboration, in which the patronage roles played by Western star musicians such as David Byrne, Peter Gabriel, Paul Simon and the Kronos Quartet have the positive effect of validating musics that have been historically marginalised and promoting the careers and cultural interests of their composers and performers. For its celebrants, World Music is an agent of cultural democratisation and a concept that contests the tacit Eurocentric equation of capital-m 'Music' with Western European and American art-music, and insists that musics originate from all world regions, cultures, ethnicities.²² Complaints that World Music not only commodifies third-world traditional and folk musics but contaminates them with Western pop influences have been countered by commentators such as David Byrne, who has deconstructed what he terms 'the authenticity bugaboo' which polices purity and ownership of musical forms and styles. In a *New York Times* article in which he disavowed the

¹⁸ Timothy Taylor, "'Nothin' but the Same Old Story: Old Hegemonies, New Musics,' *Global Pop: World Music, World Markets* (New York: Routledge, 1997) 39.

¹⁹ See B. Ashcroft, G. Griffiths and H. Tiffin, *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-colonial Literatures* (London and New York: Routledge, 1989).

²⁰ See, for example: Viet Erlmann, 'The Aesthetics of the Global Imagination: Reflections on World Music in the 1990s,' *Public Culture* 8 (1996): 468–87; Andrew Goodwin and Joe Gore, 'World Beat and the Cultural Imperialism Debate,' *Socialist Review* 20.3 (July–September 1990): 63–80; Steven Feld, 'Notes on "World Beat"' and 'From Schizophonia to Schismogenesis: On the Discourses and Commodification Practices of "World Music" and "World Beat",' in Charles Keil and Steven Feld (eds), *Music Grooves: Essays and Dialogues* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994) 238–46, 257–89; Martin Roberts, "'World Music" and the Global Cultural Economy,' *Diaspora* 2.2 (1992): 229–42; Jocelyne Guilbault, 'Interpreting World Music: A Challenge in Theory and Practice,' *Popular Music* 16.1 (1997): 31–44; Simon Frith, 'The Discourse of World Music,' in Georgina Born and David Hesmondhalgh (eds), *Western Music and its Others: Difference, Representation and Appropriation in Music* (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 2000) 305–22; Timothy Brennan, 'World Music Does Not Exist,' *Discourse* 23.1 (Winter 2001): 44–62; and Jack Bishop, 'Building International Empires of Sound: Concentrations of Power and Property in the "Global" Music Market,' *Popular Music and Society* 28.4 (October 2005): 443–71.

²¹ See Steven Feld, 'A Sweet Lullaby for World Music,' *Public Culture* 12.1 (2000): 145–71.

²² Feld, 'From Schizophonia to Schismogenesis,' 266.

label 'World Music' while celebrating the phenomenon, Byrne made the familiar postcolonialist point that 'What is considered authentic today was probably some kind of bastard fusion a few years ago,' and cited examples of the decentred, culturally hybrid provenances of the putatively local and authentic, including the theory that the famous Balinese monkey chant was actually coordinated and choreographed by a German.²³ For postmoderns such as Byrne, the discourse of authenticity—which is the other side of the coin of Western anxieties about the moral hollowness and aesthetic worthlessness of global consumer culture—easily folds into Orientalist and racist discourses that exoticise and essentialise cultural difference as inherent otherness.

I have already hinted at some of the elements of 'anxious narratives' of World Music, which focus on processes of appropriation and alienation of non-western musical forms and skills as cultural and economic capital for first-world performer-entrepreneurs and their recording companies. In this discourse, the economic analysis typically underwrites the cultural analysis, if only implicitly, allowing the rewriting of aesthetic 'tribute' and cultural 'collaboration' as 'appropriation' of 'capital.' Much 'anxious' writing about World Music thus consists in plotting where its profits go, and demonstrating that—despite CD liner-note acknowledgements and career-boosting concert tours for its non-western contributors—economic control through copyright, and hence the lion's share of profits, invariably remain with the Western star-vehicle and their recording company—for example, with Paul Simon and Warner Brothers, not the Senegalese Youssou N'dour or South African Boyoyo Brothers, in the case of Simon's *Graceland* (1986) album, or with the Kronos Quartet and Nonesuch Records, not the Moroccan Said Hakmoun or the Ugandan Justinian Tamusuza, in the case of Kronos's *Pieces of Africa* album (to cite two key examples given in Timothy Taylor's 'anxious narrative' of World Music, in his book *Global Pop*).²⁴ 'Anxious narratives' tear away the veil of intercultural admiration and collaboration to reveal the processes of appropriation—of both cultural and economic capital—actually at work in World Music. And their critique often boils down to the argument that the non-Western participants deserved a fairer share in 'Western' capitalism, a larger slice of the profits from the commodification and export of their regional musical styles and skills. While this critique of neo-imperialism is often coupled with complaints about the contamination, dilution and commodification of third-world musical and cultural traditions, rarely does the 'political' analysis extend beyond documenting the inequities among shareholders in the means of musical profit-production, in a way that almost inevitably pitches capitalism against cultural authenticity, Western modernity against third-world traditionalism, and an image of westerners as at home with 'postmodern' fluidity, (ex)change and invention, against an image of third-world musicians seeking to preserve essentialised identities invested in timeless traditions.

²³ David Byrne, 'I Hate World Music,' *New York Times*, 3 October 1999, available at <http://www.luakabop.com/david_byrne/cmp/worldmusic.html> (accessed 22 October 2004).

²⁴ See Taylor, 'Nothin' but the Same Old Story.' While careful to weigh the benefits and costs for non-Western musicians of collaborating with performers such as Gabriel and Kronos, Taylor's 'anxious' argument is that the latter 'make assumptions about the subalterns they work with, or whose music they appropriate, assumptions that are deeply rooted in metropolitan and colonial ideologies,' and while they may 'attempt to advocate the preservation of world musics and the empowerment of peoples from around the world ... their positionality as westerners, and, in Gabriel's case, a male star in the music industry, means that their resulting musics are always appropriative in some ways' (39).

It would, of course, be a mistake to equate the East-to-West, or South-to-North, trajectory of musical 'influence' or 'appropriation' with a necessary transformation of 'authentic' folk music into 'inauthentic' commercial music. As Simon Frith has shown in the case of jazz in the 1930s, a given musical genre can change its perceived status and 'proper' cultural locale, sometimes rapidly and unpredictably, moving between the taste-cultures of folk music (valued for its integration with everyday life, as an agent of sociality), art-music (valued for its promise of transcendence of the everyday), and commercial music (its value defined by the charts, alias the market).²⁵ Such metamorphoses are characteristic of the aesthetic economy of World Music, where Eastern folk music can arrive as art-music in the West, or Northern commercial pop music can be appropriated for local activist causes in the South. The Kronos Quartet is clearly 'postmodern' to the extent that it has strong investments—cultural, economic and ideological—in contributing to the unpredictability of such metamorphoses, at one moment treating Mexican commercial TV soap music as the stuff of classical concert performances in its *Nuevo* album, at another moment lending its Western classical performer credentials to jamming sessions with third-world folk musicians at Womadelaide.

There are ways of defending Kronos against the charge of imperialist appropriation, such as by pointing to its policy of commissioning new works from many of the composers with whom it collaborates rather than simply buying up the existing intellectual property of music-makers in the countries it tours. However, this policy has not prevented Timothy Taylor charging their bestselling *Pieces of Africa* (1992) album with reproducing 'the old subordinating structures of colonialism' in its unconscious repetition of colonial stereotypes of Africa and Africans.²⁶ In Taylor's view, the album continues 'the western mythologizing' of Africa by treating the continent 'as a monolith'; peddles misleading stereotypes of African village culture as timeless tradition terminally threatened by modernity; and constructs Kronos's central role as curator and mediator between composers and audience in a way that presents them as 'four intrepid U.S. musicians [who] have journeyed to darkest Africa and come back with ... a few ethnographic goodies'—a 'curatorial stance' that effectively 'silences the [other] musicians' involved.²⁷

Pieces of Africa was the first album to top both the Billboard classical and World Music charts. A decade later, Kronos's album of new arrangements of Mexican traditional folk music, popular commercial music and original art-music, *Nuevo* (2002), received a Latin Grammy Award nomination as 'Best Classical Album.' Nonetheless, *Nuevo*, too, evoked the usual dichotomous responses from praisers and blamers of World-Music collaborations between prominent Western performers and third-world music-makers. The case for the prosecution was put by Adam Baer in a review entitled 'Kronos Crashes: The Quartet Butchers Mexican Music,' in which Baer deplored the 'disc's pervading mediocrity and weak world-music shtick' and singled-out for scorn Kronos's version of Alberto Dominguez's 1930s standard,

²⁵ See Simon Frith, 'Playing with Real Feeling—Jazz and Suburbia,' *New Formations* 4 (1988): 7–24; and Simon Frith, 'What is Good Music?' *Canadian University Music Review* 10.2 (1990): 92–102.

²⁶ Taylor, 'Nothin' but the Same Old Story,' 40.

²⁷ Taylor, 'Nothin' but the Same Old Story,' 55. Taylor's commentary on the album is nonetheless ambivalent and sometimes sympathetic: 'while it is clear that U.S. musicians possess a lingering colonialist ideology, they do collaborate in important ways with their colleagues from the African continent. Kronos clearly learned from the African musicians, and the collaborating composers clearly wanted to participate in the project' (56).

Perfidia, in a new arrangement for an ivy-leaf-playing street-musician with a lush '101 Strings'-style accompaniment, overdubbed with Mexican street chatter 'to make the rendition more "authentic", more marketably world music.' Baer equally deplored Kronos's use of overdubbing 'to make four string instruments sound like cheap brass horns' in an arrangement of Severiano Briseno's famous bawdy drinking song of 1943, 'The Man from Sinaloa'—an arrangement that Baer judged 'offensive cultural caricaturing.' 'In the end,' wrote Baer, 'if I want traditional Mexican brass-band music ... I'll get it from the people who know how to do it right: Mexican band musicians, not anglicized wannabes with conservatory degrees, computers, and the bankrolling of a hip record company.'²⁸

The case for the defence was put by Sylvia Pfeiffenberger in a review that stressed Kronos's extensive background research for the album; Harrington's 'long-time obsession' with Mexico's 'densely layered musical landscape'; the album's carnivalesque mixing of 'play with high seriousness'; its manifest reverence for Mexico's religious traditions and its nose-thumbing at the classical musical establishment; and its 'general theme of transformation,' including the transformation of one sound or instrument into another (pizzicato strings into cathedral bells, for example), one cultural influence or musical style into another, and the power of Art in general to transform pain into joy. Though probably 'too postmodern for Mexico purists,' Pfeiffenberger suggested, *Nuevo* 'taps deep into Mexico's foundational myth of *la raza*, a story in which races and cultures mix in often violent, but always compelling ways. Like Mexico's attempts to forge a positive identity out of an ambivalent past, Kronos has always sought music that describes violence and loss while transforming it into something beautiful.'²⁹ In short, where Baer found inauthenticity, appropriation, hints of cultural neocolonialism and exploitative stereotyping, Pfeiffenberger found sensitivity to cultural difference, creative exchange, postmodern hybridism and homage, plus an old-fashioned faith in the power of aesthetic value to transcend all borders.

It should go without saying that the two discourses I have been distinguishing in World-Music debates—the discourse of authenticity, ownership and appropriation, and the discourse of hybridity, pluralism and intercultural cooperation—are not just two contradictory ways of describing the same phenomenon. The discourses are complementary as much as contradictory, fitting together like classical Marxism's economic base and ideological superstructure. The celebratory narratives can provide the ideological legitimation for the very processes of appropriation, exploitation and alienation that are plotted in the anxious narratives. At the same time, an insistence on creolisation and hybridity as a sign of health and growth, not of contamination and weakening of stock, can function as a critique of ethno-essentialism and cultural purism as well as an argument for the endless expansion of world markets and market-niches. The persisting tension between the two discourses is a reminder that the political meanings of an aesthetic practice are always context-dependent, and since contexts are never unitary, nor are political meanings.

One of the contexts of Kronos's 'postmodern' pastiches of World Music is the corporate structure of the global recording industry in and for which they work. In 1985, Kronos signed

²⁸ Adam Baer, 'Kronos Crashes: The Quartet Butchers Mexican Music,' *Music Box*, 22 July 2002, available at <<http://www.slate.com/?id=2068054>> (accessed 26 January 2005).

²⁹ Sylvia Pfeiffenberger, 'Music as Friction,' *Independent Weekly*, 18 September 2002, available at <<http://indyweek.com/durham/2002-09-18/music.html>> (accessed 26 January 2006).

with Nonesuch Records, which pioneered World Music *avant la lettre* with its Explorer Series of ethnomusicological field recordings from Asia, Africa and the Caribbean in the 1960s and 1970s. Harrington has explained that Nonesuch was alone in offering Kronos the 'artistic freedom,' or freedom from commercial imperatives, that it wanted; but the company has investments in more than World Music's stylistic diversity. Nonesuch is a subsidiary of Warner Brothers, owned by Time Warner, one of the so-called 'Big Four' record companies that now own seventy-five per cent of the world's music and that, as Jack Bishop has pointed out, form an *oligopoly* in relation to the music-buying public (that is, a few sellers control a market of many buyers) and an *oligopsony* in relation to the world's composers and musicians (that is, a few buyers control a market of many sellers).³⁰ The 'Big Four' record labels are organised globally under the International Federation of the Phonographic Industry (IFPI), which has branch offices in forty-eight countries and, as the representative of an industry with a thirty-two billion-dollar annual turnover, it has sufficient political lobbying-power to influence national and international copyright laws and media regulation. As part of even larger media empires such as AOL–Time Warner, Disney, Viacom and News Corp, which form a global media cartel controlling most of the music, films, TV, radio and print media that reach the world's public, the Big Four have effectively extended copyright ownership in US law to well over a century, and since 1995 they have globalised copyright protection through the World Trade Organisation and the TRIPS Agreement. (The WTO Agreement on Trade-Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights was added to the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) treaty in 1994 after intense lobbying by the United States, supported by the European Union, Japan and other first-world states). In short, an equitable distribution of musical capital and profits to third-world composers is probably not a Time Warner priority. Meanwhile, Nonesuch's own market ambitions would appear to be galactic as well as global: in 1977 some of the recordings from its Explorer Series were sent into outer space aboard the Voyager spacecraft, in an aluminium container designed to last a billion years.

But there are other defining contexts for the politics of Kronos's World-Music aesthetic, even if some of them, as Harrington complained, go unnoticed by reviewers. No reviewers of *Nuevo* (to my knowledge) interpreted as *political* this album by a San Franciscan string quartet celebrating the underrated music culture of a neighbour-nation behind the so-called 'Tortilla Curtain' and associated in many Californians' minds more with 'wetbacks' and 'coyotes' (to use the ethnic slurs), border-breaching illegal immigration and smuggling, third-world poverty, crime and cheap labour, rather than with a densely-layered and richly inventive musical history.

Then there was that moment in Los Angeles in 2003 when the cultural authority of four of Western art-music's most virtuosic exponents was allied with opposition to the Bush White House's plans to defend Western democracy and respond to the spectacle of terrorist destruction of the key symbols of U.S. economic and military might by visiting spectacular destruction on the state and people of Iraq. If meaning is use, as Wittgenstein proposed, what are we to make of Kronos's use of their prominence in the high-prestige (if low-sales) 'classical' sector of the Western music industry as a platform for galvanising political opposition to the neo-

³⁰ See Jack Bishop, 'Building International Empires of Sound: Concentrations of Power and Property in the "Global" Music Market,' *Popular Music and Society*, 28.4 (October 2005): 443–71.

imperialism of US foreign policy in the oil-rich Middle East? (Since the US's invasion of Iraq, Harrington claims to have followed the radical historian Howard Zinn's advice to him not to let a day pass without voicing his protest to someone new—a policy that found him shouting 'Fuck Bush!' one night in Carnegie Hall.³¹) Granted, Kronos's decentred global imaginary is primarily an aesthetic one, which celebrates difference and diversity without hierarchy within its own relatively narrow taste-culture, but its postmodern crossover version of World Music nonetheless signals a way of imagining the world that is radically different from the hegemonic, neoconservative view of the West's relations with 'the Rest' as a 'clash of civilisations.' As Andrew Goodwin has illustrated, the hierarchies of value and meaning(fulness) supposedly dismantled in the postmodern implosion of high/low, elite/popular cultural distinctions are in fact constantly re-inscribed within popular music culture itself as distinctions between art-rock and pop, or between modes of modernism (characterised by self-conscious, ironic, 'knowing' artifice) and modes of realism (with investments in authenticity and sincerity);³² and this is no less true of the forays into popular music of a concert-hall act such as Kronos. The quartet's populism notwithstanding, its arrangements and performances of pop music such as Hendrix's 'Purple Haze' or the Icelandic band Sigur Ros's *Flugufrelsarinn* (the culminating piece in the 'Visual Music' concert) re-inscribe their music within an art-house frame that reaffirms distinctions between 'serious' and 'popular' styles of performance, staging and listening. (Without this 'defamiliarising' re-inscription of popular music in a 'high-art' space, what would be the point? Kronos would merely be 'repeating,' not reinventing, the music to which it is here paying tribute.) However, this is not a reason to dismiss, as impotent, their efforts to re-inscribe explicit political position taking in 'serious' music culture. At a time when political elites and the corporate-owned media have been marginalising repudiations of US foreign policy as 'unpatriotic' (in Australia no less than in the US), Kronos's commitment to forging public spheres for voicing dissent in those spaces where cultural elites gather to hear music and reproduce their cultural capital should command respect from all who are inclined to suspect that the 'autonomy' of art is a discredited myth.

³¹ Harrington, personal interview with Bennett and Kouvaras, Melbourne, 1 March 2005.

³² See Andrew Goodwin, 'Popular Music and Postmodern Theory,' in Nigel Wheale (ed.), *The Postmodern Arts: An Introductory Reader* (London/New York: Routledge, 1995) 82–100.