

Contemporary Composer Writes Music For The Ages

by James Chute

Take the music of Robert Schumann. Add the works of Berg, some early Schoenberg and, for good measure, Mozart.

Put it in a blender ...

"And you pretty much get Leon's music," said Daniel Phillips, violinist with the Orion String Quartet.

LEON KIRCHNER - Pulitzer Prize-winning composer Leon Kirchner, 87, served on the faculty of Harvard University for nearly four decades. CNS Photo by Lauren Piperno. Earlier this year in San Diego, the Orion premiered Leon Kirchner's Fourth String Quartet at the La Jolla Music Society's SummerFest, which, along with the Santa Fe Chamber Music Festival and the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center, commissioned the new work from the esteemed composer.

It's Kirchner's first foray into the string quartet medium since he won a Pulitzer for his Third String Quartet in 1966.

"For a time, and I'd say, unjustifiably, Leon's music wasn't as well liked as it should have been," said Phillips. "What's nice now is that music has turned back to being more accessible. People want to hear something they can respond to, and if they heard it 10 times, they could kind of understand it."

"But he's really stayed true to his style all along."

At 87, Kirchner, who served on the music faculty of Harvard University for nearly four decades and whose students include cellist Yo-Yo Ma and composer John Adams, has gained some perspective, and a sense of humor, about his place in music history.

"One time, a conductor from the National Symphony Orchestra, Leonard Slatkin, came to Cambridge, where I was living," recalled a genial Kirchner in a recent conversation. "It was a radio interview, and they asked him how he was so interested in contemporary music, and he said: 'My parents were two members of a very distinguished quartet, the Hollywood Quartet, and they were always playing Kirchner.'

"And they said, 'You know, he lives here.' And he said, 'Is he still alive?'

"So there you are: the proof that I was a contemporary at one time."

CALIFORNIA DREAMING

Although he was born in Brooklyn, N.Y., Kirchner received much of his music education in California. He studied at Los Angeles City College, University of California Los Angeles and Berkeley, and was especially influenced by Arnold Schoenberg, who was then living in Los Angeles, and Ernest Bloch in San Francisco.

"Bloch was a magnificent actor, and a magnificent musician," said Kirchner, who relishes the opportunity to tell a story. "And he's at the piano, and he said he was going to tell us something that day about modality and tonality in the music of Bach.

"And he began to play a wonderful chorale, and in the midst of this, he said, in his very high voice - and remember, he was a great actor, so you immediately paid attention - 'One can hear the turn of the century.'

"I remember a lot of us looked for weeks for where it turned, and in the process got to know a lot of wonderful chorales."

For Kirchner, it was not so much the turning of the century as the turning of the decade - the 1960s into the 1970s. During the 1960s, he was appointed to the faculty of Harvard (1961), his Piano Concerto No. 2 was performed around the country by a young Leon Fleisher (1963), he won the Pulitzer Prize, and his "Music for Orchestra" was commissioned by the New York Philharmonic (1969).

But Kirchner wouldn't return to writing a piece for orchestra until 1990, and he abandoned the string quartet for four decades. During the 1970s and 1980s, he wrote a few large-scale works, including, as he describes it, "a failed opera" ("Lily," in 1977), but he had a decidedly lower profile as a composer, even if he continued touring as a conductor and pianist.

"For better or worse, the real 'serious' musicians like Elliott Carter, Milton Babbitt, were the people who became the most respected guys," Phillips said. "They were writing stuff that was far more atonal, and more complicated, and difficult to listen to."

"It was pretty much a no-no to write a chord that anyone could recognize. If you were to write a major triad in your piece, you were considered corny, or only good enough to write for films, or something like that."

While experimental composers like John Cage were challenging the very definition of music, and avant-gardists such as Pierre Boulez were talking about wiping the slate clean, Kirchner was concerned with the continuum of music.

His music owes a debt to Bela Bartok and especially Schoenberg, but he writes in a highly individual, emotionally charged style that is unmistakably forward looking. In his notes to the Fourth Quartet, Kirchner tells of attempting to reveal "the necessary intimacies that exist between the past and present, which keep the art of music alive and well."

Phillips, who with the Orion will perform all four Kirchner quartets at New York's Lincoln Center next year, has worked extensively with Kirchner in interpreting his music.

"He's influenced a lot of great musicians," Phillips said. "He was a huge influence on Yo-Yo Ma," who commissioned a cello concerto from Kirchner. (Ma later recorded it on the album "Premieres," which won two Grammys in 1998.)

"Leon is all about what the life of a note feels like when you are in it," Phillips said. "That's the best way I can describe it. Like, don't just play the notes, but what's it feel like? What's the activity of the note? The whole gesture, that kind of thing.

"As a musician, he really gets you thinking about that, not just playing the music well in a nice, appropriate style, but the real meaning, and the movement of the notes. So his own music is infused by that."

PUBLIC ASPIRATIONS

The life force that seems to exist within his best music creates an immediate connection not only with musicians, but with an audience. If many composers of his generation turned their backs on the public, Kirchner never saw the public as the enemy.

"Who else is there?" Kirchner asks. "Who am I talking to? I'm certainly writing for an audience. I'm not writing for myself. For a time, 12-tone composers, who were also electronic composers, found that they could control music totally, and that it would be for them and their computer.

"I never felt that way, and I don't think they feel that way now, either. When they begin to age, they begin to

hunger for the applause, and the notoriety."

As connecting with a public has become an increasingly valued aspect in contemporary classical music, Kirchner has over the last decade or so been gaining more notoriety than ever. With performers like Ma championing his works, the support of chamber ensembles such as the Orion, and major orchestras such as the Cleveland Orchestra and the Boston Symphony putting his works in their repertoires, he's back on the A list.

"His music has a true authentic value anyone can relate to, which is what all the great classical music composers had," Phillips said. "While for much of his life he may not have been in the public eye as much as, say, Elliott Carter, I think he will be remembered as the great romantic composer of the late 20th century, and the early 21st."

Kirchner said he would be delighted if his music were performed into the next century, if audiences and musicians continued to value his music 100 years from now. But there's something else on his mind:

"It would be nice if I was here 100 years from now," he said, laughing. "That would be even better."

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