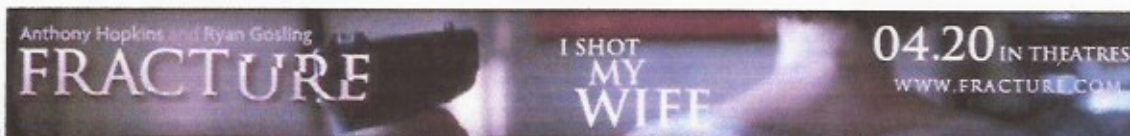


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## POP MUSIC REVIEW

### Kronos fires up the power tools

The string quartet delves into industrial music at Royce Hall, and the sparks fly.

By Ann Powers  
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Avant-garde music's goal is to bring noise back into the concert hall — philosophically as well as literally. The Kronos Quartet has continually disrupted the listening habits of its avid followers, making a racket for more than 25 years. On Saturday at Royce Hall, the San Francisco foursome went a step further, seemingly taking the name of the evening's co-headliners — Bang on a Can — as a mandate.

Sheet metal, buckets, chains and other metal-shop detritus ringed the stage as Kronos performed. These tools remained mute until late in the program, when violinist David Harrington stood before one rack, two hammers in his hand. *Bang! Crash!* Cellist Jeffrey Zeigler whacked what looked like the innards of a bed frame, taking out a small circular saw and letting sparks fly against the steel. Second violinist John Sherba and violist Hank Dutt bowed vigorously, producing a heavy undertone. Then they took their turns at the metal frames. Harrington growled and howled in German over the din.

This was "Armenia," by the Berlin-based industrial music group Einstürzende Neubauten — the most dramatic moment of the night. Kronos didn't approach the menace of Neubauten, whose machine-based experimental rock employs bigger, rougher tools (including the demonic voice of Blixa Bargeld, next to whom Harrington is Tweety Bird). But it was a gutsy gesture from a quartet that could have gone soft long ago.

Another industrial reference opened the program: "Nomatophobia," a commission by J.G. Thirlwell, who pioneered the genre under names like Foetus and Steroid Maximus. Thirlwell is a manic hybridizer who instills his severe, rockish sound with elements of classical, jazz and film music. This new work resembled the latter, with polytonal sections intensified by a menacing undercurrent of low notes.

A short piece composed by the Bay Area electronic duo Matmos, "Solo Buttons for Joe Meek," took Kronos into 1960s studio auteurism, a lighter-toned precursor to industrial music. Evoking the rush of surf guitar, the quartet played to a backing track of groovy beats and samples, culminating in a "Sgt. Pepper"-like crescendo.

Could these new pieces presage a Kronos album based on industrial music? Abstract but visceral, the style connects well to the minimalism Kronos has helped popularize, and its dramatics complement the film music that's their sideline.

Kronos' program also explored music from Iraq, Iran and Sweden and celebrated the two Darren Aronofsky film scores the quartet developed with composer Clint Mansell (of the band Pop Will Eat Itself). "Potassium," an explosion of glissando by Bang on a Can composer Michael Gordon, was also a standout. Kronos ended with a fiery political protest that recalled its roots exploring classic rock — a Jimi Hendrix-style version of "The Star-Spangled Banner."

If Kronos explored noise explicitly, its New York-based counterpart the Bang on a Can All-Stars, performing with Czech wonder Iva Bittová, found it in more organic sources.

Bittová, 48, is a violinist, singer and composer who's made a splash in Europe since the 1980s but has seen only a couple of American releases. The folk-tinged, globe-hopping songs on "Elida," her 2005 collaboration with the All-Stars, suggest their own category: erotic experimentalism.

Bittová took the stage alone, singing as she played violin. Her sweet but powerful soprano stretched to accommodate guttural clucks, whistles, bird sounds and happy yelps as she sang the amorous and whimsical songs on "Elida." Joined by pianist Lisa Moore and then by guitarist Mark Stewart, bassist Robert Black and percussionist David Cossin, Bittová fused her vocals with each, pulling away in a way that was sometimes animal, sometimes sublime.

When clarinetist Evan Ziporyn and cellist Wendy Sutter joined the group, Bittová found her two favorite duet partners. Bittová understands that the throat, like her beloved violin, is a string instrument; her tone often came remarkably close to Sutter's fluid playing. She had fun with Ziporyn, mimicking his bright timbre as she danced seductively around him. Bittová's personal choreography added another layer to each song.

The language barrier (on "Elida," she worked with several noted Czech lyricists) has kept Bittová from the Meredith Monk and Joanna Newsom fans who should embrace her here. Bang on a Can's embrace is an important step toward a major midliferevival for this innovative artist, who

shows how even one small body can transform a world of noise into stunning music.

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