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# AT WAR WITH OURSELVES-

## *400 Years of You*



### KRONOS QUARTET

David Harrington, violin  
John Sherba, violin  
Hank Dutt, viola  
Sunny Yang, cello

Music by Michael Abels

Text & Narration by Nikky Finney

Performed with the

At War With Ourselves Chorus

Conducted by Valérie Sainte-Agathe

SFJAZZ Center

May 7, 2022 at 7:30pm | May 8, 2022 at 7:00pm

# AT WAR WITH OURSELVES-

*400 Years of You*

A rhapsodic modern day song cycle  
spun from the skin of history  
for string quartet, chorus, and narrator

Miner Auditorium  
SFJAZZ Center  
San Francisco, California  
May 7, 2022 at 7:30pm  
May 8, 2022 at 7:00pm

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Produced by Janet Cowperthwaite  
Production Management by Kronos Performing Arts Association

Brian H. Scott, lighting designer  
Scott Fraser, sound designer  
Cath Brittan, line producer

## At War With Ourselves Chorus

Soprano  
Yuhi Aizawa Combatti  
Rabihah Davis Dunn  
Ava Gaughan \*  
Ginger Jones-Robinson  
Adela Kelemen \*  
Victoria Ko \*  
Angelyn Liu \*  
Sarah Liu \*  
Christabel Nunoo  
Colby Smith  
Isabel Yang \*

Alto  
Kristina Blehm  
Katja Heuzeroth  
Charlotte Kelly \*  
Sarah Kelly \*  
Nia Spaulding  
Azaria Stauffer-Barney \*  
Susan Thampi  
Alexis Walker  
Heidi L. Waterman

Tenor  
Joseph Bates  
Johnnie J. Felder  
Thomas Kim  
Ryan S. Peterson  
Sidney Ragland  
Khris Sanchez

Bass  
Joel Chapman  
Glenn Healy  
Avi Jacobson  
Malcolm X Jones  
Bradley Kynard  
Edward Nunoo  
Daniel Yoder

\* Members of the San Francisco Girls  
Chorus Premier Ensemble

*At War with Ourselves — 400 Years of You* was commissioned by the Kronos Performing Arts Association, funded in part by a Hewlett Foundation 50 Arts Commission and the MAP Fund, in partnership with ASU Gammage at Arizona State University, Hancher Auditorium-The University of Iowa, Krannert Center for the Performing Arts/University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, SFJAZZ, Texas Performing Arts at the University of Texas at Austin, the University of South Carolina, and Andrea A. Lunsford.

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Special thanks to Dr Jeffrey Benson (San Jose State University), Rabihah Davis Dunn, Cava Menzies, Lynn Morrow, and the San Francisco Girls Chorus.

# At War With Ourselves — 400 Years of You

Text by Nikky Finney

You are given 10 square feet of space to live and 3 vertical inches of air to breathe. Ankle iron is ordained for your frontal & temporal lobes. Their one desire: your black body in endless service

& performance. You are the new country's newest moving picture show. They will never be disinterested in what your arms, legs, lips, can do on their well-lit screens. The rest of you, the ravishing wondrous

veiled interior: your vermilion quiet, your indigo jar of morning whispers, the midnight calculations of your mother, every smokey algorithm your father ever dreamed, will be, right from the start, thrown overboard

with the sharks, and it will never not rise up through the waves. Your one desire: to stand beyond their brutality, in the same calendar of stars that your mother stood up in. In a flash of slave schooner moonlight,

in a cotton field peculiar, alongside the invention of the TV, the automobile, the camera, the lie, the 13th amendment, the washing machine, the basketball, the blackface, they will dismiss your wailing inventive

mouth, abolish any federal reconstruction projects focused on your wind and solar capacities, order and proclaim your blood to not be human, call for more federal studies that trumpet how your eyes possess no

tear ducts, yes, your heart beats, but with only three-fifths of the necessary four chambers, your neck is believed to be made of leather and it will be stretched & tested before the eyes of their children. {Black}

"skin is the largest organ in the {American} body - and the most erotic."<sup>1</sup>  
The ravishing wondrous innermost black islands of you, were never sunk, no matter the number of cannon balls sent to sink.

You have re-attached the legs and implanted the flying cells of millions just like you, back into your own. You have run, marched, and fought on behalf of the bones, the cerebellums, the spit, the eyelashes, of the

60 million or more swirling at the bottom of the sea. Your indefatigable zest & quiet has a 4 century strong heartbeat & pulse. With the laws and codes meant to eradicate you, you invented a clock, a better ironing

board, a third traffic light, a golf tee, a blood bank that everyone but you could use. You are *The Real McCoy* among other McCoys, but other names have instead stuck to your black skin. Refusing to halt their haunting

laughter and Wall Street minuets they reach for the chokehold of their muskets to march you back into place & position & performance every time you write *Senator* or *President* or *Gold Medal* or *thundering original musician*

in front of your name. Now is the great 400th anniversary of your presence in the Republic: you, 4 feet tall in a kerchief, with a shotgun, headed back into the swamp to free more of you, you, your black and balled

leather fists rising & splitting the Olympic air, you, your majestic lunations and almanacs spilling from your pockets like gold coins. The ravishing wondrous private inner bank of you never was on the auction block.

# The Rhythm of Language

## At War With Ourselves and bulletproof creation

By D. Scot Miller

IT TAKES A SPECIAL KIND OF COURAGE to confront the white supremacy and anti-Blackness woven into the fabric of American history. Many have feared that the tugging of those particular threads in our national tapestry could unravel the entire thing, but in light of the latest racial awakening that has followed the murder of George Floyd in 2020, and the subsequent protests highlighting decades of unarmed Black Americans dying at the hands of the police with zero accountability, we all must summon the courage to do so. In *At War With Ourselves - 400 Years of You*, Kronos Quartet joins together with composer Michael Abels, poet Nikky Finney, and choral director Valérie Sainte-Agathe to lend voice and vision to the necessary conversation every American must have.

Though *At War With Ourselves* is contemporary and urgent, the seeds of the project were planted a decade ago. "One night in 2011, I was watching the National Book Awards, and they were honoring the winner of the poetry award, Nikky Finney," recalled Kronos' Artistic Director, David Harrington. "I had never heard of Nikky. I was all by myself watching her acceptance speech, just weeping." In her opening remarks, Finney pays homage to "the ones who longed to read and write, but were forbidden, who lost hands and feet, were killed, by laws written by men who believed they owned other men. [...] If my name is ever called out," she says, "I promised my girl-poet self, so too would I call out theirs." Harrington knew Kronos needed to find a way to work with this voice. So, when shortly thereafter, the Clarice Smith Performing Arts Center at the University of Maryland invited Kronos to create a piece commemorating the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the end of the Civil War, Finney immediately came to mind.

"David got in touch with me, and *The Battle of and for the Black Face Boy* was made out of our residency with the University of Maryland," Finney said of her 2013 poem that would eventually inspire the text for *At War With Ourselves*. A "radical libretto made of Civil War history, Black history, and modern American headlines," *Black Face Boy* examines how "the question of who gets to move like a free person and who gets to move in chains remains ensconced in our everyday American lives one hundred and fifty years later." Indeed, throughout the development of the project and beyond, the number of Black lives stolen by American law enforcement has continued to surge. Harrington remembers a particular meeting in Maryland that happened to coincide with yet another police killing of a young Black man: "Just as we were right in the middle of thinking about how this project would take shape as an experience, it seemed like, 'Here our society goes again and again...'" An urgent matter continually becoming more urgent still.

DAVID HARRINGTON FOUNDED the Kronos Quartet in Seattle in 1973, in part to address and protest the Vietnam War. Since relocating to San Francisco in 1977, Kronos has remained committed to social justice and protesting war and inequality, while tackling a broad range of musical genres through more than 1,000 commissioned works written specifically for them. Now, even with almost 50 years of boundary-pushing collaborations behind them, Harrington still sees this partnership with Abels, Finney, and Sainte-Agathe as one of the quartet's more momentous achievements.

"I've said before that I want to create bulletproof music," reflected Harrington. "I would love to be able to make a piece of music that we could wrap around those that we love, those that need protection in any way that they need protection. Well, we haven't succeeded yet, but I will say that *At War With Ourselves* feels, to me, like it will be the closest Kronos has ever come."

AFTER THE INITIAL PLANNING PHASE, the project went into hibernation as the University of Maryland stepped out and the Kronos Performing Arts Association (KPAA)-the non-profit that manages all aspects of Kronos' work-took over as producer. Years went by, but KPAA's Executive Director Janet Cowperthwaite kept in touch with the collaborators, each one committed to someday bringing the project to life. Finally, in 2017, it was moved off the backburner when KPAA was awarded a significant grant from the Hewlett Foundation, enabling the piece to move forward. Nikky Finney had since published *The Black Face Boy* in *Oxford American* in 2015, but when the group came together again, she condensed and reimagined the poem into the smaller piece, *At War With Ourselves - 400 Years of You*.

"The first version was so long but also deeply cinematic," Finney says. "As I wrote, I kept falling into this desire to speak in long, punctuated waves about neglected and profound American history. My history. I wanted to catch and ride the electricity that was and is the African American presence in America for 400 years. There are movements in that longer piece that you don't have time for when you're trying to do a 90-minute concert production. It needed a compression of all of that energy." It's always easier, Finney explained, to go on and on and fall in love with all the words you've written, but as James Baldwin teaches us, "You want to write a sentence as clean as a bone. That is the goal."

"THE POEM IS ONLY a single page long. How do I turn this into a complete song cycle?" composer Michael Abels wondered. "I broke down the lines and found the rhythm of Nikky's language, and in doing so, I found myself turning to Google to learn about the references in her lines about 'traffic lights' and 'ironing boards' to find elements of Black American history I didn't know before." By going line-for-line, Abels was able to compose music that captured the spirit of each one. "It incorporates Dixieland and Jimi Hendrix, and I was especially drawn to the sounds of *The Great American Songbook* coming out of Broadway, Hollywood, and the music writers of Tin Pan Alley in the 20th Century."

As a Black male composer, Abels exists in a rarefied space that made composing music for Finney's text a personal experience. "When Nikky used the word 'indefatigable,' I thought it was the whitest word I'd ever seen," he said, "but I had a better understanding of her excavation too. Right now, some Americans are trying to make history illegal in the guise of being against critical race theory. There's an anger that needs to be addressed, but I feel the piece is rooted in hope and change. Looking directly at 400 years of white supremacy and anti-Blackness is an uncomfortable conversation, but necessary if we ever expect this nation to heal."

Mirroring David Harrington's dream of "bulletproof music," the ideas of healing, protection, and confronting an uncomfortable and brutal history was echoed by all of the artists. Finney's poem, however, is also focused on the causes-both physical and metaphysical-that have created the conditions which allow for anti-Blackness and white supremacy to continue to thrive today. "As Black people in the 21st century, some of us love to say it was so long ago and none of this terrorism exists anymore," Finney said. "Some of us join the chorus of, 'Why do we have to talk about this? We don't study it. We haven't been taught it. Why do you keep talking about it?' And the answer is: because it's still happening." \*

**FOR CHORAL DIRECTOR** Valérie Sainte-Agathe, the project took on a scope that reached beyond America's shores. Paired with her primary role working with young voices at the San Francisco Girls Chorus, *At War With Ourselves* has inspired her to reflect on her youth, the global Black struggle for equality, and her personal history.

"This project actually pushed me to look for more Black history in the Caribbean," she said. "I was born in France, and my parents are from Martinique. I lived in Martinique when I was a teenager, and we did not learn of slavery in Martinique or the history of resistance behind Aimé Césaire. We didn't learn any of that. In Martinique, looking at that history is still really new. I think that with projects like this, people are encouraged to look and search and make sure they know what really happened and what is really happening. It's difficult to face that history and I understand that for probably the previous generation, it was easier to just not talk about it."

"Everybody needs to know this history," Sainte-Agathe continued. "It's not only for African Americans or white people. It's not about accusing anybody. We need to have the knowledge to share with future generations, not just to show what happened, but to say that we can do better. It's not about placing blame or accusation. There is something very hopeful about recognizing it and acknowledging it, and then asking what can be done about it. You must begin by looking at a history of victimization without walking through it feeling like a victim. You're not, you never have been, you're powerful."

*D. Scot Miller is the Managing Editor of the East Bay Express, author of The AfroSurreal Manifesto, and Founder of The AfroSurreal Arts Movement. He lives in Oakland, CA.*

*Edited by Reshena Liao*

*The World Premiere of At War With Ourselves - 400 Years of You took place at Texas Performing Arts at the University of Texas at Austin, November 2021.*



Kronos Quartet members John Sherba (violin), David Harrington (violin), Hank Dutt (viola), and Sunny Yang (cello). Photo by Lenny Gonzalez.

## Biographies

### KRONOS QUARTET

For more than 45 years, San Francisco's Kronos Quartet - **David Harrington (violin), John Sherba (violin), Hank Dutt (viola), and Sunny Yang (cello)** - has combined a spirit of fearless exploration with a commitment to continually reimagine the string quartet experience. In the process, Kronos has become one of the world's most celebrated and influential ensembles, performing thousands of concerts, releasing more than 60 recordings, collaborating with countless composers and performers, and commissioning over 1000 works and arrangements for string quartet. The group has won over 40 awards, including three Grammys, and the prestigious Polar Music, Avery Fisher, and Edison Klassiek Oeuvre Prizes. The nonprofit Kronos Performing Arts Association manages all aspects of Kronos' work, including the commissioning of new works, concert tours and home season performances, education programs, and the annual Kronos Festival. In 2015, Kronos launched Fifty for the Future: The Kronos Learning Repertoire, an education and legacy project that is commissioning-and distributing online for free-50 new works for string quartet written by composers from around the world, [kronosquartet.org](http://kronosquartet.org)



Left: Valerie Sainte-Agathe; Center: Michael Abels; Right: Nikky Finney. Above photo and cover photo by Robert Silver.

### MICHAEL ABELS

Michael Abels is best-known for his scores for the Oscar-winning film *GET OUT*, and for Jordan Peele's *US*, for which Abels won the World Soundtrack Award, the Jerry Goldsmith Award, a Critics Choice nomination, an Image Award nomination, and multiple critics choice awards. The hip-hop influenced score for *US* was short-listed for the Oscar, and was even named "Score of the Decade" by online publication *The Wrap*. Abels is co-founder of the Composers Diversity Collective, an advocacy group to increase visibility of composers of color in film, gaming and streaming media. As a concert composer, Abels has received grants from the NEA and *Meet The Composer*, and his orchestral works have been performed by the Chicago Symphony, the Philadelphia Orchestra, and many others. As conductor of *GET OUT IN CONCERT*, Abels has led orchestras like the National Symphony and the San Francisco Symphony. Several of his orchestral works have been recorded by the Chicago Sinfonietta on the Cedille label, including "Delights & Dances," a work commissioned and premiered by the Sphinx Organization. Recent projects include the ballet *FALLING SKY* for Butler University, the opera series *DESERT IN* for Boston Lyric Opera, the docu-series *ALLEN v. FARROW* for HBO, and the film *NIGHTBOOKS* for Netflix, [michaelabels.com](http://michaelabels.com)

### NIKKY FINNEY

Nikky Finney was born by the sea in South Carolina and raised during the Civil Rights, Black Power, and Black Arts Movements. She is the author of *On Wings Made of Gauze*; *Rice*; *The World Is Round*; and *Head Off & Split*, which won the National Book Award for Poetry in 2011. Her new collection of poems, *Love Child's Hotbed of Occasional Poetry*, was released from TriQuarterly Books/Northwestern University Press in 2020. [nikkyfinney.net](http://nikkyfinney.net)

### VÁLERIE SAINTE-AGATHE

Valérie Sainte-Agathe is the artistic director of the San Francisco Girls Chorus, which she has conducted since 2013, including in performances with renowned artists such as Deborah Voigt, Laurie Rubin, Philip Glass, Gustavo Dudamel, and Michael Tilson Thomas. She has also performed with the New Century Chamber Orchestra, Kronos Quartet, Magik\*Magik Orchestra, Tenet Ensemble, Philip Glass Ensemble, The Knights Orchestra, and Brooklyn Youth Chorus, as well as Taylor Mac and DJ Spooky. After five years in the United States, her first recording as SFGC's Music Director, *Final Answer*, was released on Orange Mountain Music in February 2018. Sainte-Agathe served as Music Director for the Young Singers program of the Montpellier National Symphony and Opera in France from 1998-2011. She participated in eight recordings with the Montpellier National Orchestra and The Radio France Festival. She is a recipient of Victoires de la Musique, and a two-time recipient of the Orphée d'Or award, [sfgirlschorus.org/valehe-sainte-agathe](http://sfgirlschorus.org/valehe-sainte-agathe)



*At War With Ourselves* performance. Photo by Jason Ayer.