

FUSE

A BOMB PODCAST

INTERDISCIPLINARY ARTIST & MUSICIAN

Eiko Otake & David Harrington

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David Harrington is the artistic director, founder, and violinist of the Kronos Quartet. For over forty-five years, San Francisco's Grammy-winning Kronos Quartet and its nonprofit Kronos Performing Arts Association have reimaged and redefined the string quartet experience through thousands of concerts, over sixty recordings, collaborations with composers and performers from around the globe, more than 1,000 commissioned works, and education programs for emerging musicians.

Eiko Otake is a movement-based interdisciplinary artist. Born and raised in Japan and a resident of New York since 1976, Eiko Otake worked for more than forty years as Eiko & Koma but since 2014 has been performing her solo project, "A Body in Places." In 2017, she launched a multi-year Duet Project, a series of cross-disciplinary, cross-cultural, and cross-generational experiments with a diverse range of artists both living and dead.

Chantal McStay Welcome to FUSE: A BOMB podcast. Forty years ago, BOMB began as conversation between artists around a kitchen table in downtown New York. Today, FUSE brings you into the room to listen in on candid, unfiltered conversations about creative practice. Here's how it works. BOMB invites a distinguished artist to choose a guest from any creative discipline: an art crush, a close collaborator, or even a stranger they've admired from afar. And we bring them together. No host, no moderator, no interruptions, just two artists in conversation. For this episode, we asked movement-based interdisciplinary artist Eiko Otake who she'd most liked to speak with. She selected the artistic director, founder, and violinist of the Kronos Quartet, David Harrington.

Eiko Otake So I wanted to talk to David because David is not someone I see often. So when we see each other, when we talk to each other, I feel like we talk something that is important. We don't talk about wine. We don't talk about which restaurant. And those are the conversations I just dislike. We never do that. So let's just focus to what's important to us.

CM For over forty-five years, San Francisco's Grammy-winning Kronos Quartet and its nonprofit Kronos Performing Arts Association have reimagined and redefined the string quartet experience through thousands of concerts, over sixty recordings, collaborations with composers and performers from around the globe, more than a thousand commissioned works, and education programs for emerging musicians. Born and raised in Japan and a resident of New York since 1976, Eiko Otake is an artist, choreographer, and performer who worked for more than forty years as Eiko & Koma. Since 2014, she has been performing her solo project, "A Body in Places." She has been honored by the Guggenheim Fellowship, in the first Doris Duke Artists Awards. Eiko and David discuss performance as a transcendent medium, and their collaboration titled, "The Duet Project: Distance is Malleable."

David Harrington This might be useful to other people, to find out how you do your work and I do my work.

EO Yes.

DH And why don't we just let people in on this process?

EO Yes. Good.

DH To me, that's the most interesting thing we can provide for other people right now is...

EO Yes.

DH ...what we do and how we do it.

EO Sometimes I hear people goes like, Oh Eiko, "don't you some-

times make a happy piece? Everything that you make is so depressing." And I'd say, "that's not my job." I don't really have a sense of, I need to make a variation of the different emotions, you know? Because if I'm dealing with Fukushima, I see no reason why there has to be humor in there, right? And I'm dealing with the deaths, and dealing with friends, and you know, the AIDS crisis and whatnot. And I just read about Boeing, you know. And so there are many things that I can get very angry and sometimes I'm actively angry. Sometimes depressingly angry. And I can be very ... remorseful, right? And being remorseful is important to me, right? Because without regret, we don't really have the real sense of authentic action, right? So when you're dealing with often younger people than yourself and you have a very important place in the music world, don't you sometimes get afraid? You might be saying something that might change. It might be good for the quality of what you think but, what is authentic feeling about that particular composer? I trust you. So I'm not saying what you said is not good. But how do you guide yourself in giving advice?

DH Well, the first thing I listen to when I'm meeting with somebody or talking to anybody, is the tone of their voice.

EO Oh my god, I better be careful. (laughter)

DH And how the voice is you. (laughter) Because the voice is—it's kind of—each one of us has our public musical instrument that we play, and that is our voice. And the way we shape words, the timing we use, the accents, the things that we stress, the things that we don't talk about—that tells us a lot about each other actually. And when I'm meeting with a new composer, someone that's new for me, I tend to listen very, very carefully. Especially when they talk about things that we can't see. I just came from a meeting with one of my very favorite composers, and her name is Aleksandra Vrebalov. And I've known Aleksandra since she was a student at the San Francisco Conservatory in 1995, which is about when we started working together. I remember we were in Japan together about then. That's the same year that I met Aleksandra. And she's written, I think, ten or eleven pieces for us over the years. And we were just now talking about an opera that she's going to be writing. And we were talking also about an idea that I have you talking about—you mentioned

sadness.

EO Yes.

DH Well, one of the things that's happened to me recently is that I began to study Schubert's song cycle, which is "Winterreise: Winter's Journey." And it's a cycle of twenty-four songs that he wrote in the last, I think, two years of his life. And as you might know, he died when he was thirty-one. And his death is one of the great tragedies of European music, I think, because he was one of these young people that was just getting greater and greater and greater. And one of his very last pieces was the C major cello quintet. If you've never heard the C major cello quintet, Eiko, I hope you will listen to it.

EO Tonight, I promise.

DH Turn off all the lights, and just let this piece enter your being. For me, it's just one of the great accomplishments of humanity, that piece. And it was never played during Schubert's lifetime. It ended up in somebody's cabinet in Vienna, and it was discovered about twenty-five years after his death.

EO That's crazy.

DH And fortunately, there was not a fire, there was no ... it's totally insane. But we have this piece now that—and people can play it—and what an incredible thing it is. I have no idea if you would even like it. I don't know if you would like it. I have a feeling that you would intuit a whole lot about things.

EO I think this is very rare where I actually feel I have to listen to this. And I will listen to this tonight. I think it has been like this with you. It's like, every time I listen to the music, which is not very often, it's just not the way I live my life. However, you open up part of my unused muscle, you know, in a way that I just ... I do open up now. By talking to you after many longer time, I just remember the excitement I always have when I hear your music. And even when you are wrong. And also at a time where I listen to the entire concert. So I think I shouldn't really be saying oh, I don't care for music. It just

like it's—you know, because I belong to a certain field and the certain way I work, I have determined most of the time I don't use music in my work. Because too many people associate dance and movement to work to music. So this is my way of deciding. You know, I left the theater and now I perform, more or less, in public space because too many dances are associated with the stage. So I've been trying to ... you know, as you said, I don't know how many more years I have in my life that physically I can perform. And, you know, I became a solo performer. And then I'm kind of saddened and angered. You see those young people dancing on the street or in a campus always with music, and almost always not with great music. (laughter) You know? So I might not bother. But my way of defining and something that I want to bring to our people is like, no, you can dance without music. You can dance without, you know, the music blasting into your ears. So I teach an entire semester sometimes without ever, not even once, connecting any music. So this is somehow, because of the way that I'm placing myself within my field, I have restricted my time. Because I'm not ... I feel very badly. And I want to ask you, how do you curate your sense of time throughout the years, throughout the months, a week, and a day where you rehearse? Or are you committed to travel and perform? And you just said you're just studying a new music? How do you create so that you don't leave out something that is important to you?

DH That's such a great question. (laughter) Well, for me, I think of music as a huge set of variations. I think of it as something that, I mean, when I was about fourteen I decided I was going to be a musician.

EO Yes.

DH And at this point in time, I realized that really the only thing that means is that because I decided at age fourteen I was going to be a musician, it just means that I get to have music around me more than most other people.

EO That's right.

DH I don't know anything more about it than anyone else. I find it

totally mysterious. I don't know how it works. I don't get it. So at age fourteen, you know, I started playing string quartets at age twelve. And by the time I started Kronos, in 1973, it was clear that my actual instrument was two violins, a viola, and a cello. And I've never really thought of myself as a violinist, you know? Since I started Kronos, my sound is all four instruments. And then when we play a quintet it's with another instrument. And when we play with several singers, or whatever, my instrument is still the quartet. And as I was growing up, some of the most inward sounds that I remember hearing were moments in string quartet music, and I've added to that collection over the years. And now I have a large collection of sounds. But it's getting bigger all the time, you know? And some of them I use in various ways. Some of them create questions, or they can be put to use in a variety of ways. It's a dialogue, it's a conversation that goes on inside. And then frequently, you know, I might meet a composer somewhere or another instrumentalist that has his or her own collection of sounds and we can share, we can trade. I'm a collector of musical experiences. But even more than that I'm a collector of individual moments in music. Like these nerve centers of human experience that get somehow channeled through the world of music. And every once in a while you find something that's so incredibly wonderful that you just want to add it to your collection, or you want to share it with your friends, or ... I've forgotten what your question was Eiko, but I am trying to answer whatever I can. (laughter)

EO No, you have the answer. That's very enthusiastic. And one of the many things I love about you is you're very articulate in saying. There was not a word I feel you had wasted in what you just said, right? And I kind of ... I totally get it. And I feel like what you said ... it's not like you literally meditated and chose music. Because you were fourteen. And sometimes the difference is, I never wanted to be a dancer and, in fact, it almost was a joke. And almost like irony, I ended up becoming something that at least that I'm good at. Well maybe at this point, it's a different reason. I've always wanted to be a writer and I did not know what to write about. So I kind of wanted to tell myself, "If you can't have that important thing to write about before training yourself as a writer?" Because how do you train yourself if you don't have important things to say. Then I should have another very important experience first. The way that I thought about that is, how

do I deal with a very anti-capitalistic life? Because, you know, I was post-war baby. Meaning the people whose work I read, or poems, or music—and those are the people who had experienced war. So they had much more life and death experience. Whereas I kind of came to after Japan, when Japan was an upwards economy. So I never feared that I cannot survive. I could always work. And I remember the time you said you were working in a flower shop. But even in a flower shop, you're working, remember?

DH Yes.

EO You still knew you are going to be a musician. You were a musician. So you didn't really have this existential, traumatic problem I have had. As you enter through the late '60s, right, there was always a very strong mission in yourself. Which I think you're very lucky. And sometimes, my son said, "Mom, you always say, you know, find a job or find a work that is important that you love." And he said, "Mom, you have to realize many people don't have that." You know, it's not everyone actually find a work that you feel completely comfortable to say, This is what I love. And don't you feel sometimes you actually ... your listeners may not have the concentration and passion and the kind of life you have had. You create great music and you create ... you hear these amazing things that you talk about. Do you sometimes feel like ... Sometimes I see that in the dance world, how many more amazing dance do we need in the world? We already have these great pieces. Of course we humans so we keep creating. Sometimes I feel hesitation because sometimes I get very excited working. Now, am I just providing another comfort for the visitor or for the audience? Am I just providing an escape? And there's nothing wrong to provide the escape. People need escape. But am I putting too much of the proportion of my life to create what we call art? And by doing so, am I putting my face away from the things that is so deafening, that is so blinding, that is putting our existence? To the way that I feel like if you say optimistic. I am also like, look at the people's face. You know like I'm in North Carolina and I'm performing and somebody who I might know for many years says, "Eiko, how are you?" And I can't quite say, "Fine," and then kind of leave it at that. And if I say, "Um well...," and then I start to have this whole bigger conversation which takes time. Because now all of a sudden you're talking to someone,

“well, I’m not really good, because what happened yesterday and because of what happened the day before yesterday, what happened today...” Like we have these mounting things that’s happening all over the world that we get to learn about. How do you protect yourself from that? What do you have to protect yourself?

DH Oh yes. Well, I’m not sure there is a protection. For example, it’s interesting that ... I mean, one of the most dangerous and potentially catastrophic issues facing all of us is the effects of climate change.

EO Absolutely, yes.

DH And the people that are going to be most affected by this are the young people. And it’s people my age that need to learn from the people that are my grandkids’ age about this issue. And so for example, before our last tour, my grandson gave me—he’s ten—he gave me a book—lent me a book about the effect of what we eat on the environment. And after reading that book, I’ve made an executive decision for myself that I’m not going to be having beef anymore. I’m not, I’m just not having it again. Because it takes so much more water, and so much more resources, so much more than any other form of protein...

EO Right.

DH ...animal protein. So I learned this from a book that my grandson gave me.

EO That’s beautiful.

DH My granddaughter wants to be a clothing designer.

EO Oh.

DH And she went to a program this summer. And she learned about renewable fabric and making fabrics out of mushrooms skins. And it was the most interesting conversation I got to have with her. And then of course, there’s the incredible young woman that came to the United Nations and spoke.

EO Well, yeah, yes.

DH I don't know. I'm finding some real leadership from the youngest people ...

EO I agree.

DH ... in our society, who are going to be the most affected.

EO Yes.

DH Yeah. And so, when I'm thinking about, okay, how does music fit into this?

EO Yes.

DH For me, the way music works is incredibly personally. It's like there's no one way it works for any of us. For me, when I listen to a piece of music or a song or anything, my mind goes in and out of focus. And for me, that's part of the experience. And for me to demand that someone pay total attention to my music right now, it doesn't work that way. It just simply doesn't. It's like you never know when you're going to run into a note, or an instrumental sound, or a voice that can change your entire perspective. And you just have to be ready and available. You know, and I think that's the way it works. Well, that's the way it works for me.

EO I was just going to chime in to say, you just used the word "available," and this is something I think a lot about last seven or eight years. It's like, being a performer, I want to put myself to be available. So therefore, it's one of the reasons why I also perform in public places. But I also work with what's available as a more like enabled movement work. My body can be available to other dreams or to other beauties. It's not a beauty I want to create. So in that sense ... you know, people—I don't know if you've noticed—people now comment, "Eiko, you're moving faster." And I joke back on the set, I don't have much time left. Do you think about a lot about dying, and about dead people? But you know, of course, you and I have always had a con-

versation about this. I go ahead to tell you this. I now think as a performer, you and I, very long time we both are performing. So many people who had listened to you, so many people who had to see my body, died. So sometimes I think like, Oh, my body is not only for my live audience. I carry my body, and with it, some gaze of the people who died who watched me and who supported me by watching. So I have a more complex relationship to the performance because it's not like me doing something for the viewer only. I'm also carrying other people with me. It's just kind of thinking that I've been doing. Because of your long history in performance, if you have a sense of not only to distribute your music to yourself or to your kids or to your future generation, what was that relationship to the people who are gone? I know you and I talked about a lot about very important puzzle for you. But also at the same time I'm talking about so many other people in your life or your music came across. Do you think those things or...?

DH Well yes, I do. (laughter) And I think we've talked about this before, like, where does a sound go once you've finished making that sound? You know?

EO Yes, yes.

DH Where is it? And it's the same if someone watches your work, watches your body, your dance. What happens to that?

EO I think about this all the time!

DH So do I. Absolutely. Every day I think about this.

EO Yes.

DH I don't have an answer for it, except that it seems to me that what we can do is create opportunities, experiences, challenges, resonance ... we can create dissonance, we can create ugliness. For me, the entire vocabulary of possibilities that I can imagine are needed sometimes. I never know what tool I'm going to need next. Sometimes I have to learn new tools. But in thinking about, for example, people that have died and the music that they take with them and

the musical voice, their inner musical world, that is gone forever. It reminds me a little bit of, you know, what happened to the California redwoods that were just sawed down. And some of these trees were 3,000 years old.

EO I was just there. Yeah.

DH That those trees witnessed and maybe Native Americans celebrated those trees. Maybe there was all kinds of ceremonies. And then you think, for example, my father is going to be ninety-seven pretty soon. And every time I see him, I just think about all the music he's heard, all the sounds he heard. You know, he fought in World War II in Europe as a very young man. When he's gone, where does that sound, that inner sound go? And I think it becomes part of the humus of our soil. It becomes part of the earth. And that gives me optimism, actually. The more wonderful experience we can bring into ourselves, the better humus we're going to make later on. (laughter)

EO Well, this is a great theory. However, I may be honest to say, have you ever had a sense of resistance or hesitation? Which I do. How much is enough? You know? Is this our joy to receive and create and present art? Is it sometimes not in a balance? You know, I've been kind of bringing this up. It's not because I'm trying to reconcile myself between the political activism and being an artist. It's more like with a question what you just said. Take a book. I know many great people who have died and they're read and thought about, they had a conversation, there's a lot of thinking in their head. And I loved them for that, and they died. What? Where does this go? The books are left, but what happened to all that thinking? And you're the first person who just gave me the answer, that it goes into the soil. But you know, sometimes like such a thing as if the soil has too much nutrients it doesn't really give a good plants or survival. Too much—too much good things. I mean is that being a little cynical on my end?

DH Well, the thing is, we're faced with severe climate change. And so ...

EO That's right. (laughter)

DH ... I think that the ocean is going to absorb some of this, that I was speaking of, and what you were speaking of with the ...

EO Soil.

DH ... radioactive soil.

EO Yes.

DH You know, this is a huge issue. Just this morning, we were at our breakfast table, we were reading about a certain kind of bacteria that can chew on uranium, and basically regurgitate another kind of substance.

EO Oh, really? I don't know anything about that.

DH The first thing I thought about was you, Eiko.

EO Yes. (laughter) I know you make a program note, you make a program order. You speak well in a concert and you describe. So you have to decide those things in advance. Have you ever been in a place where you feel like from the time you gave the program note to the time you're playing, that something happens in the world or things happen to you personally, you want to change the work? Can you betray your own preparation? Or have you done that?

DH Yes, I mean, frequently we have changed programs. Sometimes right on the stage at that moment. It depends on what we have. Recently, there's a composer here in San Francisco that made a piece about the Parkland High School tragedy in Florida and it was made up of the voices of survivors of that massacre. And it is one of the most disturbing musical pieces that we've ever played, but it belongs in our concerts sometimes. I want everyone, every member of Kronos to not forget this piece and not forget those voices. So there are a lot of things like that. And we might do that as an encore sometimes. A lot of times, an audience would think, Oh, an encore would be something cheerful and inconsequential. And recently, we played that piece as an encore, and you could feel the audience gasp. And yet I felt that was necessary at that point.

EO So that point when audience gasped, isn't that the moment it almost becomes things are no longer just not ... it goes beyond the music in a sense. I'm not putting the music down. But it seems like at that point you're providing an occasion that is just not playing music or listening to music. It seems like there's something more than just a music happens there.

DH Well, the question is, what is music?

EO Exactly.

DH Is music an opportunity for people to share sounds with each other?

EO Yeah.

DH And the sounds of those young voices that exist in that piece. It's not a traditional musical experience, and yet it belongs in a concert of people that are gathered together to share an experience of music. To me it belongs there and needs to be there.

EO Right. And, well, that powerful of things to happen which you are so good at it. It's like I always recall the visual, I remember, the way you end the concert. The bow, you know the violin bow, just stays this beautiful, lingering sound. But in that, with that power you have, sometimes have there been occasions where you actually would like to use the right of refusal? Is there certain places you're invited that you just wouldn't go? Or you always think exposing people to your concert is always better than not doing it. I'm talking about if it's an extreme situation where the political upheaval was happening or political operation was just being exercised. And you know, you don't have to answer if you don't want to.

DH Well, so Kronos was invited to perform "Different Trains" by Steve Reich in Auschwitz. And I may have told you that that I visited Auschwitz ...

EO So did I.

DH ... several years after my son died. So it would have been about 1997. And the experience of that was ... first of all, it was very cold and I was wearing tennis shoes. And I visited the various buildings and saw the furnaces, and I saw that room of eyeglasses, and the room of hair, and the room of suitcases.

EO Totally. I know because I was there. I totally know. I can visualize it so clearly because I was there.

DH And so I was there for several hours, and my feet got colder and colder. And then finally it was time to leave. And the last thing that I did was I watched this film, and it was in a small room, and the film was about one boy, young boy. And he was made to stand out in the snow barefoot because he gave another person a piece of bread to eat. And during that film I was ... the room was kind of warm and I could feel my feet begin to tingle as they were warming up. And I will never, ever forget that experience. And the thought of playing music for a film in Auschwitz is something I could not do. I simply did not want to do it. I didn't think that Kronos could ... what could we possibly play? What could we possibly look like? For me, it was impossible. We turned it down. Didn't do it. And there have been other instances like that.

EO I trust you more when you say this, because, you know, there are certain ways where the "no" comes your mind. It's from the deep part of our body or mind. I think that "no," it's telling us something, right? Yeah, and we can change our mind later or sometimes we do. And the way that you talked about this tingling to feet, the way you remember certain details, as busy as you are. But you still take time and you're not short to cut experience. This gives me that weight and trust that I have to your music. This gives me the trust when you explain the music in a concert. This really brings the music to your curation selection. So when I go to your music concert I'm not just listening five music you choose. I'm kind of listening to my friend who takes time to remember that occasion and to share. And I have had equally impressive, or not impressive—not that I was out of the words—and we can talk about it next time. But it just gives me a sense of, I'm so glad I have asked you to do this with me. And we can

just continue.

DH I want to tell you, Eiko, that you talked about the bow at the end of the piece and a concert.

EO Yeah.

DH I remember that those performances in San Francisco that we did with you and Koma ...

EO Yeah

DH ... and I would look over at the two of you. And the idea for sculpting the sound at the end of a note has come from you and Koma actually.

EO Wow.

DH A lot of my current ideas about how to end a note and continue on with the rest of life has come from you.

EO This is beautiful.

DH So, you know, we learn from each other.

EO That's great.

DH We learn all kinds of things.

EO You know, sometimes people ... I just have to end this with a little funny story. I know, then I'll let you go. So some people with a very kind mind said, "Oh, you know you missed like perfect endings twice." In also meaning we created somewhat fake ending. Which, you know, it's not good and I totally get that. But when I was told part of me said, "Thank you very much." But the other part of me said, "I didn't come all the way to America just to end perfectly. So there was something not to create a perfect ending, you know, but like go on. Even though it might create something of the confusion because I hope that we bring something beyond just a perfect ending. (laugh-

ter) But when you said that where it's coming from ... perfect ending has the lingering ... lingering image so it doesn't end on, "Oh, bravo. Oh, let's go home have a glass of wine." That lingering image is extremely beautiful and important that I live for.

DH Eiko, it's always, you know, it feels to me like our conversation, you know, whenever we stopped our conversation, then the next time we pick it up, no matter how long it's been, it's almost like right where we stopped before.

EO Yeah.

DH And we just pick it right up.

CM FUSE is produced by Libby Flores, Associate Publisher at BOMB. It is edited and engineered by Will Smith, with production assistance by Josh Dassa. I'm Chantal McStay, Associate Editor at BOMB Magazine. Our theme music is "Black Origami" by Jlin This project is supported in part by an award from the National Endowment for the Arts on the web at arts.gov. Subscribe to FUSE on Apple Podcasts, Spotify, or wherever you listen.

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