

Finding Appalachia

Glen Herbert

The *Appalachian Concerto* is a very different kind of recording for the Kruger Brothers, and is without any true precedents within their catalogue to date. Still, if there are any real surprises in this work, perhaps the greatest is how entirely natural and obvious it was to pair the Kruger Brothers with a string quartet. The Kruger Brothers' sound, after all, is principally an ensemble sound, with each of the players refining and contributing to a singular presentation. In that sense, it's as far from a traditional bluegrass arrangement – with instruments alternating between accompaniment and soloing – as you can get. Likewise, a classical string quartet, with its close harmonies, counterpoint, and the lack of a true “soloist” in a jazz or bluegrass sense, is an accurate analogue for the kind of ensemble playing that Jens, Joel, and Uwe have been doing for years. On hearing the concerto, we're less apt to wonder why they would choose to pair

with a chamber orchestra than we are to wonder why they haven't done it sooner.

The *Appalachian Concerto* is a commissioned piece, created at the request of the Ashe County Arts Council for a new work based in the musical culture of the Appalachian region. When it premiered at the Ashe Civic Center in West Jefferson, NC, on the night of November 20, 2010, the audience didn't have the benefit of the section titles that appear on this disc. Still, they could not have missed the strong historical narrative that runs through the work. “It's my romantic idea of the Appalachians,” says Kruger, and in particular the discovery of the Blue Ridge Mountains and the Appalachians by settlers to the region.

“This is just very personal. It may not be based in universal truth ... [but] that's the romantic part about it,” says Kruger. “When I listen to something like, let's say, ‘Shady Grove,’ there is a loneliness and something mystic about it. There's a [sense of] longing that draws me to the music. ... I want to reflect some of those ideas that I have about this place.”

It is that loneliness, that sense of uncertainty, that is the first emotion the audience encounters in the work. Banjo, guitar, and bass give a statement of place as if dressing the stage for the scenes to come. The addition of musical themes—German, Irish, Scots, Jewish, Cherokee, among many other others heard here and throughout the work—add the cultural dimension to the landscape. By the end of the movement, any sense of uncertainty has been driven away in a climax of confidence and determination.

During the writing process Kruger referred to the second movement as an “overlook” (“As Far as the Eye Can See”) in reference to the scenic overlooks perched high atop the Blue Ridge as it meanders along the western edge of North Carolina. “If you go up to the Blue Ridge Parkway, and you look over the landscape, it is just breathtaking,” says Kruger. “You can see all the hills moving behind each other. You don't see houses or streets, because they are all in the valleys. All you can see are mountains.” In that vein, the strings beautifully introduce an extended meditation that forms the emotional core of the work.

Later in the movement (“Gone but Not Forgotten”) we first hear the banjo alone, full of emotion, bridging the various cultures that are found in the region. There are hints both at its history as an indigenous instrument of the region, but then elsewhere taking the role of something more akin to a period European instrument. By straddling so many musical worlds, Kruger allows us a contemplation of the various identities that have come together within Appalachia.

From the first bars of the third movement, though, the reverie is broken, and the music bristles with the pride, the confidence, and the celebration of a fireworks display on the fourth of July. If the earlier movements were a looking back, or a looking across, then this is a looking forward to the vast possibility that life in this new country can provide.

Throughout, the *Appalachian Concerto* is ultimately a deeply personal work, made all the more so in the knowledge, as Kruger has noted on occasion, that he too is a settler who has found a home and a future in Appalachia.

Originally from Switzerland, where the Kruger Brothers first formed, the band later moved to North Carolina in part to be closer to the music and the people that has inspired them and have informed so much of their work. The concerto was composed on a property within the foothills of the Brushy Mountains, in a place that embodies the beauty and the isolation reflected in the composition. Kruger uses the piece to celebrate the history, the landscape, and the determination that continues to form the infectious character of the Appalachian region, but it is ultimately his own experience that speaks so clearly to us from the work. This piece is as uniquely Jens Kruger as his fingerprint.

It's perhaps easy to see that the concerto may draw comparisons to the work of Aaron Copland, on one hand simply because of the title, and on the other because so few composers have done as successfully what he did with American vernacular musical forms. Like Copland, Kruger uses the modes and instrumentation of traditional music to convey new ideas; also like Copland, there are lots

of familiar sounds that point to various musical traditions, though none of them stands entirely on its own or for its own sake. One of the ways that the *Appalachian Concerto* differs is in the explicit comparisons Kruger draws between North American musical traditions and a specific European form: a concerto with three movements and a standard chamber instrumentation. That Kruger uses this form as a setting for a rumination on the music of Appalachia, and does so with such ease, suggests not only his remarkable facility for composition, but affirms the idea that these things are, perhaps, not really that far apart after all.