

Arts

The Imp of the Puppet Perverse

Creepy marionettes meet the Kronos Quartet, courtesy of Erik Sanko

BY ROBERT SHUSTER

Imagine the laboratory of a Victorian-age mad genius, and you'd probably come up with something like the Tribeca apartment of impish polymath Erik Sanko. An emporium of wonders, the place is jam-packed with creepy cabinets, bones, skulls, taxidermy (watchful birds, wild pigs, a small kangaroo), anatomical models, and—hanging everywhere from delicate strings—some of the creepiest marionettes you'll ever encounter, all of them Sanko's creations. Long admired as a singer, songwriter, and bassist in the experimental-alternative scene, and leader of his own band, Skeleton Key, Sanko has come out of the closet recent years as a self-taught puppeteer, quickly becoming a star with racy acts at the Box and his gothic horror hit *The Fortune Teller*.

Now his talents for odd music and strange wooden creatures are merging. At BAM's Next Wave Festival on October 3, 5, and 6, Sanko and his troupe will present *Dear Mme.*, a marionette love story enacted on a stage ingeniously set inside a 15-foot-tall figure and accompanied by Sanko's own compositions, commissioned and performed by those aficionados of the weird, the Kronos Quartet.

With a mellifluous voice and a grin that suggests mischief, the 43-year-old Sanko begins to explain. "It scratches some itch. I can't stop. As much as I love playing music, which is very communal and democratic and loud and physical, there's something about the privateness and the intimacy of making puppets—sitting there quietly whittling away—that's really super-satisfying."

The dual careers had their origins in a '70s childhood on sleepy Staten Island. An interest in the experimental began when Sanko's older brother, a budding guitarist, brought home a library-copy of the Mahavishnu Orchestra's *Birds of Fire*, that still-startling collection of intense jazz-fusion psychedelia. "I remember hearing it," says Sanko, "and being kind of frightened and excited. I knew it was music, but I couldn't tell what kind." The genre collision would become a guiding aesthetic, defining the sound of the first major band he joined, John Lurie's Lounge Lizards, who played a punky, funky jazz that often lurched into the avant-garde. Already a skilled bassist at 20 but still underage that first year, Sanko had to get Lurie to become his official legal guardian so he could tour Europe with the group—an experience, Sanko says, that was "like handing an egg to a gorilla."

At the same time that Mahavishnu was filling his brain, Sanko was developing puppet love. For special

occasions, his mother would take him and his brother to a marionette theater in the Village run by Bil Baird, a guy Sanko later discovered was "a rock star of the puppet world," whose most famous characters had appeared in *The Sound of Music*, when Julie Andrews yodels "The Lonely Goatherd." "Like any kid, I thought they were magical," says Sanko, remembering, in particular, Baird's version of *Alice in Wonderland* being "surreal and freakish"—which applies, naturally enough, to *The Fortune Teller*.

But it wasn't until the early '90s, after establishing himself as a musician who could write catchy, frenetic tunes and play with anybody (John Cale, They Might Be Giants, the Melvins, Yoko Ono), that Sanko rediscovered his puppet urges, reconnecting with Baird. Not till this time—he'd died in 1987—but his son Peter, who had continued the theater. Thrilled with the creation of his first marionette, Sanko found Baird in the phone book and got an invitation to come up to his place, where, after pointing out an old "Goatherd" puppet ("Very cool!" Sanko exclaims), Baird demonstrated a sophisticated device for the strings. Inspired, Sanko not only set up a workshop but invented his own control, which allows a more human kind of movement. In his apartment, he demonstrates it with *Dear Mme.*'s tuxedoed magician, whose lifelike gait attracts suspicious sniffing from Sanko's dog.

It takes Sanko a month or two to create a puppet—carefully carving the features from a wood block, painting the head and hands, then tailoring clothes. He first sold the marionettes only as artwork (film composer Danny Elfman owns five). But they soon attracted Matthew Acheson

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and Randall Whittinghill, puppeteers who helped Sanko stage his first big show last fall at Here Arts Center, *The Fortune Teller*—a tale of strange characters assembling at a millionaire's mansion for the reading of a will. With narration recorded by singer Gavin Friday, music by Elfman and Sanko, sets designed by Sanko's wife (artist Jessica Grindstaff), and a grant from the Jim Henson Foundation, the show impressed the critics and, as it happened, violinist David Harrington, the founder of the Kronos Quartet.

Harrington, who by coincidence was in town for one of the performances, had already discovered Sanko's

MySpace page, where the singer posted tracks from his solo album (fragile, rickety songs that sound as if they were sung by his puppets). "I got an e-mail one day," Sanko says. "It was like, 'Hi, I'm Dave! Would you like to trade some CDs?' Like they're baseball cards or something." Sanko wasn't quite sure what to make of it, having once known "a coke-snorting crackpot" with the same name. But the confusion was soon cleared up. "Two days later, I got a whole bunch of Kronos Quartet CDs, and I thought 'Wow.'" Over beers, Harrington invited Sanko to join his group at BAM. And thus emerged *Dear Mme.*, in which that 15-foot-tall puppet, assembled from old barn lumber, opens his heart by way of two hand-cranked doors, revealing his romantic dreams—enacted, of course, by marionettes, and accompanied by the Kronos performing Sanko's moody soundtrack.

Writing for the group posed a challenge, since Sanko doesn't read music and wasn't too familiar with string quartets. But he took his usual approach: "Bungle your way through it, put together a bunch of notes, and suddenly you have a song." On his grandmother's out-of-tune piano, he worked out basic motifs, memorized them, and played them again on the Midi keyboard of a friend, who then arranged everything for strings—the result being a series of noirish, bittersweet themes with hints of Philip Glass, Shostakovich, and Sanko's synesthesia, that peculiar affliction in which the brain equates notes with colors. "It was very emotional," Sanko says of the first time the Kronos rehearsed. "I really felt like I was going to cry and throw up at the same time."

Though Sanko hasn't jilted Skeleton Key—"I love puppets, but I still gotta rock out"—the marionettes are getting plenty of attention. Next month, *The Fortune Teller* will have a second run at UCLA, and might later tour the U.S. and Europe. Sanko's creating 30 new figures for a Tokyo performance of *The Devil and Daniel Webster* (a collaboration with multimedia artist Ping Chong and a 400-year-old Japanese puppetry company), and he and his wife are planning an innovative show based on Shackleton's Antarctic expedition, which will create the setting's expanse by having the string-pulling puppeteers become mobile, wearing construction-worker stilts. Eventually, too, Sanko will resume his shows at the Box, the gonzo cabaret where the randy crowds, Sanko says, are eager to see his marionettes "fucking, killing each other, and taking drugs." He grins mischievously. "There's nothing like puppets jumping on each other and going at it."

Remigiusz Pyrdol

