

Father's legacy flows in new Turtle Island Quartet piece

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The Turtle Island Quartet will premiere a piece by co-founder David Balakrishnan (second from right) May 20.

The fiddling composer **David Balakrishnan** couldn't begin to decipher "the hieroglyphics" that make up 95 percent of the writings of his mathematician father, **A.V. Balakrishnan**, a UCLA engineering professor and onetime director of the school's Flight Systems Laboratory who died last year at 92.

But the younger Balakrishnan, who co-founded the fertile **Turtle Island Quartet**, loved the title and general subject of his father's 2012 book, "**Aeroelasticity**."

“He was studying the way air currents interact,” says Balakrishnan, 62, on the phone from his East Bay home.

His father, he explains, sought to make sense of the “incredibly complex patterns” created by constantly shifting and interacting currents, and use that knowledge “to deal with practical things, like the way a jet flies and how to prevent accidents.”

Balakrishnan sees something of his own interacting musical streams in the turbulence and mesh of “Aeroelasticity,” which is also the title of the new 20-minute piece his Grammy Award-winning quartet will premiere May 20 at a free public performance at the San Francisco Presidio Trust to cap its 30th anniversary season.

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Written with a commissioning grant from **Chamber Music America** and presented by **San Francisco Friends of Chamber Music**, the work is dedicated to Balakrishnan’s father and taps into his sphere while reflecting on the composer’s life.

“There are musical currents running through my life that I’m trying to find a way to understand, things that can be conflicting and chaotic. I need a practical way to understand how they can flow together,” says Balakrishnan, whose American string quartet widened the parameters with music that moves fluidly among the worlds of **Charlie Parker**, **Josef Haydn**, Indian classical music, bluegrass and **Jimi Hendrix**.

The lurching opening movement of this piece is called “**Backlash**,” a term used by people like the elder Balakrishnan to describe the flight anomalies of jets buffeted by turbulent currents, the composer notes.

“**Lonesome George**,” a loping jazz ditty flavored with blues and hoedown fiddling, refers to the last giant Galapagos tortoise (and winks to Balakrishnan’s status as the only original Turtle in the group

since cellist **Mark Summer** left last year).

The slow third section, “**Pralaya**,” is inspired by the heritage of the composer’s Indian-born father “and how it played through me,” Balakrishnan says. It’s a Sanskrit word meaning “dissolution,” and in Hindu philosophy, the still, restful state between cycles of creation.

“It’s about my dad, and it’s very emotional,” says the composer, who took another phrase from his father’s lexicon for the wild closing movement, “**Flutter Point**.”

“That’s the point at which a plane will crash if air currents get any more turbulent or conflicting,” he explains. The musical equivalent is “playing something that has so much velocity and complexity that you’re playing right on the edge of disaster, where it could completely fall apart.” He does it with bluegrass shuffle licks played at whiplash speed, then meshed together, “seeing how fast you can play this and still stay together.”

“It’s like a race car going around curves,” he says. “It’s grooving so fast it has a joyous craziness to it.”

Balakrishnan and violist **Benny Von Gutzeit** will play that and other pieces with the quartet’s newest members, **Alex Hargreaves**, whom Balakrishnan calls “one of the great young lions on the jazz fiddle scene,” and cellist **Malcolm Parson** from the celebrated **Carolina Chocolate Drops**.

“They’re the special voices that allow this group to continue and evolve,” he says.

Playhouse fare

San Francisco Playhouse’s six-show 2016-17 season opens Sept. 27 with the premiere of a new comedy by the prolific theater and television writer **Theresa Rebeck**, “**Seared**,” a riff on art and money in a hot little New York restaurant. The Playhouse commissioned it.

For the full lineup, go to www.sfplayhouse.org.

Voices raised

You a cappella nuts may know that San Francisco’s **Halfway to Midnight** won the Bay Area semis last month and competes at the 32nd annual **Harmony Sweepstakes** national finals May 14 at Marin Center. The group is singing covers of contemporary pop tunes on a bill with such diverse rivals

as Chicago's formal **Double Date** — the current world mixed barbershop quartet champs — and Seattle's **Restless Vocal Band**, a resonant septet (one woman, six men) that has listened profitably to the **Beatles**, **Beach Boys** and Sir **Smokey Robinson**.

For more information, go to www.harmony-sweepstakes.com.

Jesse Hamlin is a Bay Area journalist and former San Francisco Chronicle staff writer.

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