George Crumb

By Michael Taylor

George Crumb is an American composer who was born in Charleston, West Virginia on October 24, 1929. He was born into a musical family and became interested in music at an early age. He studied at the Mason College of Music, where he received a bachelor’s degree in 1950. While at the Mason College of Music, he focused on playing and composing for the piano. Crumb received his master’s degree at the University of Illinois, Champaign-Urbana, while studying composition with Eugene Weigel. He continued his studies with Boris Blacher at the Hochschule für Musik, Berlin from 1954-1955, and received his doctorate in 1959 from the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, after studying with Ross Lee Finney. That same year, Crumb took up a teaching position at the University of Colorado, Boulder. In 1964, he received a Rockefeller grant and became composer-in-residence for the Buffalo Center for the Creative and Performing Arts. In 1965, Crumb was hired to teach composition at the University of Pennsylvania, a job he held until his retirement in 1997. In 2002, he was briefly appointed a joint residency with David Burge at the University of Arizona. George Crumb is the recipient of numerous awards, including the Pulitzer Prize (1968), and a Grammy for best contemporary composition (2001). He currently resides in Pennsylvania with his wife of 50 years, and still composes.¹

George Crumb has a unique voice in the music world. Where other composers sought out and built new instruments to acquire new sounds, Crumb sought new sounds

in old instruments, mainly through the use of extended performance techniques. Some of these unique extended techniques include: plucking the strings of a piano, singing through a tube, pouring a bucket of marbles into an open piano, singing into a piano, singing into a flute, use of obscure percussion instruments, and scordatura, to name a few. Crumb is known for placing contrasting styles of music together, such as western art-music, folk tunes, and hymns. Many of Crumb’s compositions also contain a theatrical element, often requiring the performers to enter or leave the stage during a piece. When asked about his compositions in an interview, he described his music as “having a certain spirituality and mysticism about it that is so appealing to his audience,” which he believes come from his major influences: Debussy, Mahler, Bartok, and Ives. He has a strong belief in Hindu concepts and believes that time is circular, that nothing is ever unimportant or goes unnoticed. These themes surface in almost all of Crumb’s music. He describes his sound as the “echoing, reverberating, haunting sounds of the river,” referring to the river valley in West Virginia where he grew up. These traits are all apparent in the music of George Crumb, through both the audible perception of his music and the beautiful layout of his graphic scores.

Crumb’s choral and vocal compositions comprise a majority of his work, having well over 20 pieces in the genre. Several of these works, including the four books of madrigals he wrote (1965-1969) and “Ancient Voices of Children” (1970) are settings of texts by Spanish poet Federico Garcia Lorca. Nearly every work is scored for varying

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mixed ensembles, usually featuring a vocal soloist and using different woodwinds, percussion, strings, and electric instruments.

Crumb’s chamber and instrumental works are also substantial and indeed where we see the true voice of this composer shine through. Included in this category are “Songs, Drones, and Refrains of Death” (1968), “Vox Balaenae” (Voice of the Whale, 1971), and his most famous composition “Black Angels (Images I: Thirteen Images from the Dark Land)” (1970). “Songs, Drones, and Refrains of Death” is avant-garde in that it has no standard melodic, rhythmic, or harmonic practice. It is unique in that it focuses primarily on tone color, and is the first instance in which Crumb uses electric instruments.6 Scored for baritone voice, electric guitar, electric bass, electric piano, harpsichord, and percussion; each of the performers play some of the 50 percussion instruments notated on the score at some point or another.7 “Vox Balaenae” is scored for electric flute, electric piano, electric cello, and four antique cymbals. The piece symbolizes and tries to emulate the sounds of humpback whales singing and other sounds of the ocean by the use of various extended techniques, such as singing into a flute. The performers are required to wear half-masks in order to eliminate the human element and portray the powerful forces of nature.

Crumb’s works for solo piano number at twelve and include “Five Pieces for Piano” (1962), and perhaps his best known piano work “Makrokosmos” (1972-73). “Five Pieces for Piano” was commissioned for Crumb’s friend and fellow teacher, David Burge.8 It utilizes various extended techniques for the piano, such as plucking the strings

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7 Edith Borroff, Three American Composers, (Lanham, MD: University of America, 1986).
inside the piano, placing a paperclip on certain strings to create a metallic buzz, and producing harmonics by lightly pressing on the strings while depressing certain keys. This piece is really one of the first appearances of what later would come to be known as Crumb’s distinctive style. “Makrokosmos” is a four volume set (two for solo piano) that uses imagery associated with the twelve zodiac signs. The title pays homage to Bela Bartok’s six books of piano pieces called “Mikrokosmos”.9 The work also directly and indirectly references works by Chopin, Beethoven, Debussy, and Schubert. In addition to playing the keyboard, the pianist is required to pluck the strings, apply objects and paper to the inside of the piano, chant, whistle, and whisper. When asked about this piece, Crumb says that his intention was to write "an all-inclusive technical work for piano using all conceivable techniques".10

Crumb has composed six major orchestral works, the most notable being “Variazioni” (1959), “A Haunted Landscape” (1984), and “Echoes of Time and the River” (1967), which we will discuss in detail later in the paper.11 “Variazioni” was written as his dissertation while attending the University of Michigan. The overall form of “Variazioni” is an introduction, a theme, a set of six variations, and three fantasias that appear periodically throughout the variations. It utilizes pitch-sets in the style of 12-tone music, though it is not a serialist work. “Variazioni” is considered an early transitional work for Crumb, as the style of the piece is not readily identifiable as his own. “A Haunted Landscape” consists of a single, continuous movement, and is scored for a more

conventional orchestra. George Crumb describes the meaning behind this work in the following way: “A Haunted Landscape is not programmatic in any sense. The title reflects my feeling that certain places on the planet Earth are imbued with an aura of mystery.”12 The unifying factor of this piece is a very low B-flat that is sustained by 2 solo contrabassists and is intended to represent a sort of “cosmic drone.”13

George Crumb’s “Ancient Voices of Children” is a song cycle for soprano and chamber ensemble, based on the poetry of Federico Garcia Lorca. Its main themes consist of childhood, aging, and death, and is highly theatrical in nature. This work is scored for mezzo-soprano, boy soprano, oboe, mandolin, harp, amplified piano, toy piano, and three percussionists.14 Crumb employs a variety of timbral effects, such as placing paper in the strings of the harp, bending the pitch of the piano by applying a chisel to the strings, and tuning the mandolin a quarter-tone flat. The percussionists also handle a wide range of unique instruments including Tibetan prayer stones, Japanese temple bells, and tuned tom-toms. The most characteristic effect used in Ancient Voices is produced by singing into the amplified piano, thereby creating a shimmering effect of echoes. George Crumb gives us some insight into the content of this piece in this eloquent statement:

“In composing Ancient Voices of Children I was conscious of an urge to fuse various unrelated stylistic elements. I was intrigued with the idea of juxtaposing the seemingly incongruous: a suggestion of Flamenco with a

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Baroque quotation (Bist du bei mir, from the Notebook of Anna Magdalena Bach), or a reminiscence of Mahler with a breath of the Orient. It later occurred to me that both Bach and Mahler drew upon many disparate sources in their own music without sacrificing stylistic purity.”

Undoubtedly, Crumb’s most recognized and revered work is “Black Angels” for electric string quartet. It was inspired by the Vietnam War and contains only two inscriptions on the score, “in tempore belli” (in time of war) and "Finished on Friday the Thirteenth, March, 1970". The piece consists of 13 movements, separated into 3 larger sections called threnodies, or songs of mourning and lament. The work portrays a voyage of the soul, Departure (fall from grace), Absence (spiritual annihilation) and Return (redemption). Crumb uses numerology almost overbearingly in the construction of “Black Angels”, basing certain compositional aspects such as pitch, rhythm, and durations off of the numbers 7 and 13. At certain points in the score, there also occurs a kind of ritualistic counting in various languages, including German, French, Russian, Hungarian, Japanese and Swahili. The work also contains multiple sinister references to tonal music, such as: the Diabolus in Musica (the Devil in music, tritone), Giuseppe Tartini’s “Trillo del Diavolo”, the Latin sequence “Dies Irae” (Day of Wrath), and Schubert’s “Death and the Maiden”. The performers are not only asked to play their string instruments, but various percussion instruments as well, including maracas, gongs, and tuned water glasses. In addition to these sounds, Crumb achieves a variety of timbral

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17 Edith Borroff, Three American Composers, (Lanham, MD: University of America, 1986).
effects by having the players bow on the wrong side of the strings, trill and tap on the fret board with thimbles, and the players are even required to make sounds with their mouths and to speak.

“Echoes of Time and the River” was commissioned by the University of Chicago for the Chicago Symphony Orchestra. Though the work shares the name of a novel by Thomas Wolfe, Crumb insists that there is no connection. It is not meant to be programmatic in nature. In Crumb’s own words, he “wanted to express in musical terms the various qualities of metaphysical and psychological time.”\textsuperscript{19} Indeed, “Echoes of Time and the River” highlights Crumb’s obsession with time by utilizing it as the unifying theme of the work. Crumb experiments heavily with spatial and theatrical effects in the work. Each movement includes processions, in which groups of performers move ritualistically around the stage. He uses this technique in his later compositions, though not to the degree that it is prevalent here. The score carefully diagrams the locations of the performers, as well as the paths that they follow throughout the movements.\textsuperscript{20}

“Echoes of Time and the River” is a suite in four movements. In the first movement, titled Frozen Time, three percussionists progress from the right of the stage to the left. Six wind players stand together on the right side of the stage, playing antique cymbals. Toward the end of the movement, a mandolin player progresses from the center and slowly exits the stage. Crumb plays with the aural relationships of the various performers, letting parts come in and out of focus as players make their way across the stage. As the title would suggest, the concept of echoing is an important fixture in the

work. Echoes serve as fleeting reminders of space and time, and Crumb marks this masterfully in the score. He calls for “ghostly, distant bells”, which are often performed onstage in order to achieve the desired effect.\textsuperscript{21} Crumb often mentions the echoing acoustic of river valleys as a primary influence in his compositional style.\textsuperscript{22} It is in this work that he thoroughly develops the central theme of the echo, which emanates into his later works. The orchestration is abundant with instruments that are extremely resonant and bell-like, such as chimes, bells, and gongs, and various effects that are supplied by the piano. Offstage, trombones play low oscillating figures that intertwine and overlap, creating a dense mysterious texture. Throughout the first movement, ideas are imitated in close succession. Percussionists imitate the mandolin by striking piano strings with mallets, and other instruments echo each other, creating an illusion of suspended time.

In the second movement, titled Remembrance of Time, nine brass players stand along the front of the stage. They are instructed to play “distant wind music,” creating an almost inaudible texture of rising and falling wind. Three trombonists whisper a quotation from Federico Garcia Lorca, “Los arcos rotos donde sufre el tiempo,” translating to “the broken arches where time suffers.”\textsuperscript{23} As the second movement draws to a close, two groups of instruments (including offstage trumpets, clarinets, and flutes) create a web of close imitation. The music is notated around three circles, giving a visual sense to the musical swirling that is occurring. The imitations become even further

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fragmented, and the sense of echoing is heightened by playing into a sympathetically vibrating piano.  

This form of visual notation, known as circle music, reoccurs in the third movement, entitled Collapse of Time. Brass trios, pianos, vibraphone, harp, and offstage mandolin continue the swirling sense of echoing through fragmented imitation. String players croak out non-sense syllables, providing an eerie effect while a solo xylophone plays the composers name in Morse code. As the movement proceeds, it begins to dissipate into a sea of quasi-improvised special effects.

The fourth movement, titled Last Echoes of Time, opens with a stratified series of echoes. In these echoes, Crumb labels an “A” theme and a “B” theme, played simultaneously, with respective echoes of each. The “A” theme features percussion, flutes, clarinets, and piano. Strings, percussion, and piano comprise the “B” theme. In both themes, the echoes alternate every other measure, one measure apart. This occurs at an extremely slow tempo. Each entrance is marked by the striking of a perfect fifth on the antique cymbals. Performers from theme “A” then begin to exit offstage. Echoes from the three previous movements make an appearance, until they are hushed by whistling figures that seem to suggest the music dissolving into the wind.

“Echoes of Time and the River” earned Crumb the Pulitzer Prize for Music in 1968.

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Michael Taylor is an American mathematician, working in partial differential equations. Taylor obtained his bachelor's degree from Princeton University in 1967, and completed his Ph.D. under the supervision of Heinz Otto Cordes at the University of California, Berkeley (Hypoelliptic Differential Equations). He held a professorship at the State University of New York at Stony Brook and is now the William R. Kenan Professor of Mathematics at the University of North Carolina.

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