

GEORGE CRUMB
VOX BALAENAE
ENSEMBLE FÜR
NEUE MUSIK ZÜRICH

One of the dangers of artistic success beyond the aesthetic value of the work itself—that is, in the artist's achieving a readily recognizable identity within a particular style, time, and/or place—is that of permanent categorization. The nature of categorizing itself is, of course, a limitation, a narrowing of significance and potential into easily digestible descriptive catch-phrases, summarized bite- (or byte-)sized mouthfuls of meaning, and a misleading simplification of contextual resonance. Like a fossil frozen in amber, a poem, book, painting, or piece of music may become so totally identified with the moment, circumstances, or conditions of its creation that it seems a historical artifact rather than a renewable experience capable of fresh insights and multiple perspectives.

The four works collected in this program were composed during the 1960s and early-to-mid-70s, a period when George Crumb achieved a great deal of deserved recognition and acclaim. There's no question why this occurred; his music was strikingly original, imaginative, deftly constructed, and intensely evocative. It surprised listeners on first hearing, primarily by breaking free of the constraints of musical convention and offering new colors, unpredictable shapes, and dramatic sounds. It was music unlike any other heard in the concert halls of that time. And like anything unexpected and innovative, it had its detractors, those who suggested that Crumb's novel soundscapes were based on sheer novelty and

insubstantial effects instead of established values, and believed that they were, simply, the product of a specific time and place, and whose relevance and meaning would not survive.

That specific time and place in question was an America in the throes of a societal (and in large part generational) conflict that fed upon opposing philosophies of lifestyle (including sex, drugs, and spirituality), personal rights, civil rights, politics, economics, environmental issues, and an increasingly unpopular foreign war. Such periods of uncertainty and insecurity often lead to radical innovations in the arts, as a reflection of the desire for new solutions via consideration of alternative viewpoints and confrontationally shocking explorations of unfamiliar resources. But when these innovations are dismissed by critics of the time, it is in some cases due to their unwillingness to accept or inability to understand change, though more commonly because of a mistrust of art that has a programmatic or persuasive intent. There is some merit in this latter theory, for a great deal of so-called art—especially, for example, propagandistic painting and writing—has not outlived the circumstances that supplied its single-minded meaning. However, it would be wrong to categorize Crumb's music of this period as either propagandistic or one-dimensionally programmatic. In fact, the sinew and substance of Crumb's music lies in its breadth of symbolism and allusions, musical as well as spiritual and philosophical.

The exception to this might be his haunting and apocalyptic “electric” string quartet *Black Angels*, which the composer characterized as “...a kind of parable for our troubled contemporary world,” and inscribed the score “in tempore belli,” alluding to the Vietnam War. (In an interview with Edward Strickland, collected in the latter’s book *American Composers*, Crumb acknowledged “Vietnam was an obsession in my music at that time.”) But even here, the musical context is enlarged by references to the essential polarity of Good versus Evil, various Death motives, and, in Crumb’s own words, the “surrealism” of the string amplification and extended instrumental effects. These extended effects, far from being a novelty, are essential to Crumb’s compositional vision, to establish the music’s structural integrity as well as evoke its spiritual and metaphysical resonances. This certainly holds true with the works included in this program.

Crumb’s connection with “surrealism” goes deeper than a casual description of unusual instrumental devices. In his 1930 “Second Manifesto of Surrealism” (translated by Richard Seaver and Helen R. Lane), André Breton wrote “...there exists a certain aspect of the spirit where life and death, the real and the imaginary, past and future, communicable and incommunicable, high and low, cease to be perceived as contradictory. One might search in vain for any other central force in Surrealist activities than the hope of finding this point.” Crumb’s music

attempts just such a reconciliation of these spiritually purified contradictions; for example, by interweaving newly composed material (the future) with quotations from other Western composers (the past) and echoes of global music, using intricate numerical systems (the real) alongside atmospheric (imaginary) evocations of Nature (note not only the whale song in *Vox Balaenae*, but the insect sounds, thunder and lightning bolts, and wind/breath in *Eleven Echoes of Autumn*), the chiaroscuro degrees of darkness and shade (evoked through Webernian acute dynamics and textural variety) in *Four Nocturnes (Night Music II)*, the insect sounds and bird calls (homages to Bartok and Messiaen?) in *Dream Sequence (Images II)*.

These scores, in their idiosyncratic notation (symbolically reflecting and producing, simultaneously, the music’s transparency, ritual ambiance, and a pseudo-improvisatory immediacy) that is elliptical, fragmented, and, in *Eleven Echoes of Autumn*, shaped as broken circles (and read both clockwise and counter-clockwise, in order to shatter the metaphorical stranglehold of the clock, while quoting a line from a poem by Federico García Lorca, “And the broken arches where time suffers”), attempt to escape the linear chain of temporal “reality” (life and death) by speaking the mystical, mythical language of dreams and echoes. The instruments speak not as a typical unified ensemble, but as individual voices that converse and blend, or sing in many distinct tongues:

melismatic, microtonal, mammalian, bird, insect, chant, whisper, aria. The unusual timbres, sparse textures, atmospheric effects, and dreamlike nuances do not *color* the music, they *are* the design and substance of the music—song as a gesture of transcendence.

In this light, Crumb should be seen *not* as an isolated, iconoclastic voice who emerged unexpectedly in the '60s and continues to follow his own separate path, but as another important historical figure in the long line of American maverick composers. Though he has mastered extended instrumental techniques to his own expressive ends, and devised some previously unheard, Crumb is following in the footsteps of Henry Cowell and John Cage, who pioneered the prepared piano; Cowell, too, initiated the now widespread adaptation of World musics into Western classical music. Other than Crumb, perhaps only Morton Feldman originated such a hauntingly beautiful, albeit drastically different, method to focus our attention so closely upon the aura *around* a single pitch, found such meaningful ways of coloring it, and gave such drama to its decay. As a composer in search of transcendence, think of Ives, Cowell, Morton, Partch, Ellington, Nancarrow, Carter, Cage, Feldman, Tenney, Monk, among others, each in their own way. It is in this company that George Crumb belongs. A company *beyond* category.

Art Lange
March 2006

Hans-Peter Frehner *flute*

Hansruedi Bissegger *clarinet*

Matthias Eser *percussion*

Viktor Müller *piano*

Urs Bumbacher *violin*

Samuel Brunner *cello*

Jürg Henneberger *conductor /
piano* on Four Nocturnes

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GEORGE CRUMB (1929)
VOX BALAENAE
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- 1–11 **Eleven Echoes Of Autumn (Echoes I)** for violin, alto flute, clarinet and piano (1966) 19:57
ISRC CHI300600459-469
- 12–15 **Four Nocturnes (Night Music II)** for violin and piano (1964) 9:20
ISRC CHI300600470-473
- 16–23 **Vox Balaenae (Voice Of The Whale)** for electric flute, electric cello and amplified piano (1971) 20:51
ISRC CHI300600474-481
- 24 **Dream Sequence (Images II)** for violin, piano, percussion and glass harmonica (1976) 13:16
ISRC CHI300600482

Total Time 63:40
DDD ²*bit*

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