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The Music of George Crumb

The eternal silence of infinite space terrifies me (Pascal)

George Crumb, now in his mid 40s, is becoming an increasingly significant American voice. Like earlier compatriots, Ives, Partch and Varèse, Crumb has evolved a style which, while it may draw upon the music of others, is fundamentally set apart from any 'schools', be they the conservative symphonic tradition or the various paths of the avantgarde. His self-contained idiom has, admittedly, a certain narrowness, but it also has impressive strengths: a powerfully imaginative vision, an unmistakable identity, a sureness of intent as well as of technique.

What makes Crumb unlike other American composers of his generation is that he is an unashamed poet, little concerned with experimental attitudes, ideology or systems. His music is lyrical and evocative - displaying an almost Schumannesque response to external stimuli and an undercurrent of expressive allusion - vivid, surrealist, exotic, wistful and elegiac, intense in feeling, rich in metaphor, symbolism and ritual. It represents the very antithesis of, for instance, Elliott Carter's intellectually-questing idiom, whose entirely musical processes tend to encounter such complex relationships that the resulting whole may risk being less than the sum of its admirable parts. Crumb's style is, on the contrary, often slender and vulnerable, suggesting more than it states and implying more than music. Sensuous it may be, but it also contains some of the most startling and enriching explorations of timbre made by any composer.

Despite its orientalism, the music springs from a broad-based contemporary awareness. It poignantly records the cleavage between technological ambition and spiritual yearning, and a turning away from the achievements and consequences of Reason towards a rediscovery of the hidden depths of human consciousness and of the original spiritual and magical properties of music. Recurring preoccupations are with a lost state of innocence, death, time, evil, threatened species, and the troubled soul of Man voyaging, as never before, among the stars.

The quotation from Pascal is made in Crumb's foreword to his recent Makrokosmos: 24 Fantasy Pieces after the Zodiac (1972/3) for amplified piano. Over almost a decade, however, Crumb has repeatedly identified his own artistic impulses with those of the Spanish poet, Federico García Lorca (1898-1936), whose work he has set or alluded to in no less than ten compositions. The affinity with Lorca is strong. In his introduction to Ancient Voices of Children (1970) the composer writes: "I have sought musical images that enhance and reinforce the powerful yet strangely haunting imagery of Lorca's poetry. I feel that the essential meaning of this poetry is concerned with the most primary things: life, death, love, the smell of the earth, the sounds of the wind and sea." And in citing Lorca's lecture on the genesis of his poetry, Crumb could be thinking of the source of his own inspiration: "This mysterious power that everyone feels but that no philosopher has explained is in fact the spirit of the earth . . . All one knows is, that it burns the blood like powdered glass, that it exhausts, that it rejects all the sweet geometry one has learned . . ."

Born in West Virginia in 1929, George Crumb followed the conventional stages of American academic achievement through Mason College in Charlestown and the universities of Illinois, Michigan, Colorado and, finally, Pennsylvania which is now his home. He studied with Ross Lee Finney and then with Boris Blacher both in the United States and Berlin. Since 1955 he has been the recipient of an enviable number of grants, commissions and awards, and his music is now beginning

be fully sensed. In every work the composer has carefully indicated stage positioning, taking into account dramatic relationships between the performers as well as mere convenience. Not infrequently performers are asked to move, in a symbolic gesture, to excite sound from each other's instruments. A telling instance occurs in the pounding, chilling 'Song of the Rider' in Songs, Drones and Refrains of Death (1968) when the two percussionists suddenly invade the territory of double-bass and guitar, rapping out percussive ostinati on their open strings with hard vibraphone mallets.

The theatrical and the visual are frequently important factors in Crumb's works. In Eleven Echoes of Autumn (1965) they take the form of a suggested lighting, deep blue "at the beginning; then very gradually (almost imperceptibly) brightening until reaching a fiery red at the beginning of Eco 8; then very gradually dimming until reaching total darkness at the beginning of Eco 11". Echoes of Time and the River requires groups of orchestral players to process on, off, and about the stage using steps of various lengths synchronised with the music - a "spatial projection of the time continuum". Not surprisingly, this seems to have been abandoned in most (possibly all) performances so far!

A simpler relationship of on- and off-stage music occurs in Ancient Voices of Children and, even more beautifully, in Night of the Four Moons. Towards the end of this lovely, meaningful piece (inspired by the Apollo 11 moon-mission and using uncannily apt Lorca texts), the off-stage music - a Berceuse in 'stilo Mahleriano' and aglow with the human warmth of F-sharp major - is made to emerge and fade from hearing like a distant radio signal. The audience, left with the strangely disembodied, ethereally high harmonics of a lone cello ('Music of the Spheres'), sense the human music as if from far outside. With exquisite economy Crumb conveys the image of a tiny, belittled earth lost in the vastness of interstellar space; every phrase seems inevitably right and apt, yet spare, fresh and unexpected.

In this and other works there is a delicate synthesis, the artistry of which lies in the bringing together of dissimilar fragments in revealing conjunctions. Crumb's expressed "urge to fuse unrelated stylistic elements and juxtapose the seemingly incongruous" leads him from the harmonic radiance of the Romantic lied, via gamelans, viol consorts, flamenco, tribal drumming, expressionism, pointillism, plainsong, microtones, electronic treatments and the recorded voices of whales, to a monodic timelessness uniting the oriental and the medieval. Parody and quotation have become, for him as for other composers, a means of exploring relationships between past and present. The direct quotations from Bach, Schubert or Chopin, heard through his strange and unworldly soundscape, acquire an amazing aura of distance both cultural and temporal. Surrealist museum exhibits, their mummified beauty seems utterly remote, like a childhood memory of warm, homely security.

Collage, dramatic stance and ritual are the principal elements behind Crumb's block, strophic and cyclic structures. Details of the musical material operate without the aid of any complex system, unity arising instead from the use of a repertoire of kindred scalar, timbral and ornamental types, rhythms, phrase shapes and so on. More rigorous order-making devices occasionally appear - isorhythm in Madrigals Book III (1), the retrogrades of Madrigals Book IV (1) ('Why was I born surrounded by mirrors?'), the numerological symbolism governing pitch and durational values in Black Angels - but these are more part of the dramatic furniture than genuinely generative forces. There is little in the music of harmonic progression, still less of contrapuntal continuity. This leaves us, therefore, with an essentially monophonic (and occasionally heterophonic) course of events akin to the music of the non-European cultures to which Crumb is attracted, and ultimately dependent on a wide vocabulary of melodic and timbral subtleties. When, however, this is layered into a sort of aleatoric counterpoint, as in the 'Dance of the Sacred Life-Cycle' in Ancient Voices, the result is indeed stunning.

Melodically, it is astonishing what a wide range of expressive shapes Crumb

although this chromatically inflected pentatonicism is soon intensified by a further compression of the tones, via semitones, into quarter-tones.

The scale shown in Example 2 suggests a certain quality of interval relationships. One, a tiny mirror whose whole-tone tendencies are countered by a minor third at either or both ends (e.g. (C), E flat, F, A, B, (D)), is almost an obsession with Crumb:

Example 5. Crumb: Songs, Drones and Refrains of Death, page 17.

Bar. *nar mi co-ra-zo n de-mus-go,*

On the other hand, any one form of the scale makes available all possible intervals, and two together offer all twelve semitones (see Example 2). Thus the progression of pitches in the astounding, virtually unaccompanied, vocalise which begins Ancient Voices is linked to these scales, yet really quite complex. The melody is, alas, too extensive to quote; but a précis of the pitch-content of its first segments will show how the small intervallic cell of the opening grows, its pitch permutations, peaks and contours being held in a sophisticated control which keeps the melody constantly alive, and the sustained final notes of each phrase also accumulating in a meaningful progression:

Example 6.

Basic scales

favourite interval group

Pitches used in each phrase.

11 chromatic pitches

etc.

This summary hides some of the line's most important characteristics: obviously its rhythmic intricacy, but also the incantatory patterning of hypnotic ostinati, repeated notes, numerous expressive inflexions and contrasts of colour and articulation. Some idea of the effect of these, applied to a limited range of pitches, but producing a sense of spontaneous improvisation, may be gleaned from Example 7 (part of Eleven Echoes of Autumn)

Cadenza III (very free)

Alto Flute and Piano
begin circle-music
(Quasi meccanico)

7

Clarinet

modo ord.

f f f f f

(accel.)

f fppsub. f f f

(accel.) (accel.)

ff f molto ritmico cresc. poco a

ff poco fff

Dark, intense [$\text{♩} = 52$]

whispered:

don-desu-fre el tiem-po
al niente

Alto flute

Begin circle at cue (v) in Clarinet cadenza

Quasi meccanico [$\text{♩} = 146$]

poco f

Alto Flute (on keys)

actual sound: $\text{♩} = 5$

on the keys

(lasc. vibr.)

ffz mf

Piano

PI. (sempre)

touch strings lightly at center

PI. (sempre)

N.B. Alto Fl. and Piano in canon (not unison!)

pp subito

pp subito

the Clarinetist should finish shortly before the circle-music is completed.

attacca subito l'eco 8

Piano

PI. (sempre)

touch strings at 8th partial

on keys

Vivace [$\text{♩} = 208$] (quasi tamburi)

actual sound: $\text{♩} = 10$

Take repeat only if Clarinetist has not completed Cadenza III

ppp

(8va sempre)

cresc. sempre

poco

Pianist N.B. - There should be absolutely no break between Eco 7 and Eco 8! The 32nd note figure should be regarded as an upbeat to the first chord of Eco 8.

As often happens in Crumb's music, the rhythm is unbarred, great flexibility being made possible - and, perhaps, necessary - by the monodic situation.

In this instance the Cadenza has an accompaniment: an unsynchronised, primitive-sounding canon whose circular notation is itself a curiosity. Similar visually striking notations, including forms of the cross and spiral, may be found in Echoes of Time and the River, Songs, Drones and Refrains of Death, Ancient Voices and Makrokosmos Book I. The intention is clearly symbolic (suggested by the circle and heart-shapes of Baude Cordier's chansons?), but one feels that such devices contain more musical possibilities than Crumb has yet discovered. In Eleven Echoes of Autumn his point seems to be purely a visual representation of Lorca's "broken arches where time suffers". On the other hand, the more elaborate circle which the performers read three times round in 'Dance of the Sacred Life-Cycle' from Ancient Voices does make a very effective audible impact.

I have left until last the most remarkable aspect of Crumb's music: his gift for conjuring timbres that remain in the mind and haunt one. It would be misleading to make over-much of the unconventional actions: the piano strings played with a chisel, the violinist capping his fingers with thimbles, the string trio holding their instruments like viols and bowing between left hand and scroll, or the numerous times when players sing, whistle, or mutter into their instruments. These could be fashionable gimmicks. Generally, however, in Crumb, what on paper might seem like artifice turns out to be part of an imaginative and valid aural poetry. Often only study of the score explains how some specially bewitching sound has been made. Who ever imagined that a cellist, with a cunning glissando of artificial harmonics, could realistically mimic the mournful crying of seagulls? Or that the seventh harmonic produced by drawing a rubber along a piano string, combined with a pianissimo whistle at the same pitch, could sound so phantom-like and disturbing?

From the Romantics' linking of different orchestral colours with various emotional qualities by way of 'Klangfarbenmelodie', Varèse's harnessing of noise and Cage's establishment of musical relations with all sounds regardless of pedigree, composers have explored ever more deeply the power of timbre as an expressive reservoir in itself, and as a means of articulating structure. Crumb's music teems with superbly conceived sonorities. Piquant contrasts of instrumentation (from mandolin, Tibetan prayer-stones, a "raw, primitive, shawm-like" oboe, tunable tom-toms, paper-damped harp, claves, tambourine, finger cymbals and staccato vocal exclamations) give shape to the ostinato fragments of 'Dances of the Ancient Earth' in Ancient Voices. Black Angels proceeds according to a sequence of sonority blocks which, as sounds emanating from a string quartet, are truly amazing, and which lead to titles such as 'Sounds of Bones and Flutes', 'Lost Bells', 'Night of the Electric Insects' etc.. In Vox Balaenae (1971) the writing for cello is less macabre; its tuning of the open strings to a dominant seventh on low B casts a consoling warmth over music which is otherwise lonely and desolate. The end of Songs, Drones and Refrains of Death also conveys its lovely affectionate lingering as much through transmutation of timbre as through other elements: all the earlier violence is softened in the caressing resonances of amplified guitar, double-bass and piano, vibraphone, glockenspiel and, finally, water-tuned glasses which bring the work to a dreamlike dissolution. Crumb has a penchant for combining instruments which can scarcely have met each other before, and the result is usually delightful and revealing.

Integration needs care, and nothing in Crumb is left to chance. His scores abound in detailed instructions which extend from tiny nuances to what parts of the hand to use in drumming, how best to obtain piano harmonics, or how to amplify instruments to emphasise the desired partials without distortion. All the same, the music is far from easy to perform successfully. As well as special instruments, players need a virtuosic command of new techniques and an ability to execute every phrase with grace and naturalness. Difficulties of production or ensemble have to be masked by an appearance of effortless spontaneity. For in a style so dependent on the successful flowering of an intangible, magical atmosphere, should any stiffness, lack of conviction or hint of awkwardness occur all can be lost.

This touches on the music's weaknesses. Sometimes, it must be admitted, one wishes for more substance, a more elaborately woven texture, more dynamic growth and inter-involvement of all the elements. There are places where the material seems dangerously slender for its given time span, or when (as in the sitar music of Lux Aeterna) the composer appears to have adopted too superficial semblances of another musical culture missing its real essence. Perhaps Crumb is overbent on looking for an identity outside himself, just as his performers, with curious frequency, find themselves acting the part of another: the cellist as a seagull, violin quasi mandolin, string quartet imitating the sound of prayer-stones, flute the voice of the humpback whale, instrumentalists playing percussion, percussionists singing, singer and double-bass 'neighing' like horses, violin, flute and clarinet sounding "ghostly, hushed, like the gentle rushing of the wind".

But it is still early. Already in less than 15 years as a mature composer Crumb has produced music both powerful and unforgettable, which radically enlarges the vocabulary of the traditional instrumental ensemble, which is aware and relevant, yet original. The tenuous threads and meditative reposefulness of his music are also virtues. In being so uncluttered, so open and childlike, it speaks directly to the spirit.

NOTES

¹From the composer's own comments on Ancient Voices of Children on the record sleeve (H-71255).

List of works and discography

- 1954 String Quartet
- 1955 Sonata for Solo Cello
- 1959 Variazioni for large orchestra
- 1962 Five Pieces for Piano
- 1963 Night Music I for soprano, piano, celesta and percussion (CRI S-218)
- 1964 Night Music II for violin and piano (MS 5016)
- 1965 Madrigals Book I for soprano, vibraphone and string bass
Madrigals Book II for soprano, flutes and percussion
Eleven Echoes of Autumn for alto flute, clarinet, piano and violin
(CRI SD-233)
- 1967 Echoes of Time and the River for orchestra (Lou S-711)
- 1968 Songs, Drones and Refrains of Death for baritone, electric instruments
and percussion (Desto 7155)
- 1969 Madrigals Book III for soprano, harp and percussion
Madrigals Book IV for soprano, flutes, harp, double-bass and percussion
Night of the Four Moons for alto, alto flute, banjo, electric cello and
percussion (Col M-32739)
- 1970 Black Angels for electric string quartet (CRI SD-283)
Ancient Voices of Children for soprano, boy soprano and seven
instrumentalists (H-71255)

- 1971 Vox Balaenae (Voice of the Whale) for three masked players: electric flute, electric cello and electric piano (Col M-32739)
- Lux Aeterna for five masked musicians with optional dancer
- 1972/3 Makrokosmos Volumes I and II: 24 Fantasy Pieces after the Zodiac for amplified piano (Vol 1: H-71293)

All the records quoted above are at present available from Henry Stave, Dean Street, London W.1. Only Ancient Voices of Children is in the March 1975 issue of The Gramophone Classical Catalogue.

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NOTES

From the composer's own comments on Ancient Voices of Children on the record sleeve (H-71252)

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