

Composer, Performer and Audience: George Crumb's Music

by Leona Francombe



Left to right: George Crumb, Leona Francombe, Chantal Rheaume, Patrick Binford rehearsing *Vox Balaenae*.

From complete blackout a red light gradually suffused the stage. A pianist, cellist, violinist and percussionist, spaced as if for separate performances, cast dark silhouettes against the reddish screen behind them. To the side, in the gloom of the wings, four people sat facing each other around a small table, tracing with their index fingers the rims of the wine goblets sitting in front of them. The glasses produced a continual chordal drone—a drowsy thread extending throughout the performance to which the other instruments added snatches of disembodied motifs, repeating mechanically or shuddering like half-gestures that rumple the smooth fabric of sleep.

When the last revolution of the last wine glass died away and the silhouettes stopped, motionless at their instruments, there was a long pause, and then a rustle, and the audience came to. At this performance of American composer George Crumb's *Dream Sequence* in the Margaret Greenham Theatre at The Banff Centre, the triangle was complete: composer, performers and audience had convened in the same room and allowed the compositional process to come full circle.

The creative path leading from the source, George Crumb, to the ceremonial performances of his music, is a twisted and often elusive one. By what means, and with what kind of understanding, does a thought become a written note, a note become a sound, and a sound travel the final stretch to meet the audience? During his visit to The Banff Centre in December 1984, Crumb gave some insights into the route his own music follows from author to performance. The initial clue lay with the personality himself.

On Crumb's first morning at The Banff Centre, I looked around the breakfast room for someone with that composer's air: cool intensity, unorthodox clothes and a preoccupation with his own inner weather. Perhaps a person with a New York cutting edge look. When a fatherly sort with thinning gray hair and a sports jacket rambled over from the infamous rotating toaster and said, with Southern deliberation, "Glaciers move faster than that," my theory came undone. This unassuming man, who could have stepped out from behind the counter of a rural hardware store, had produced some of the most haunting and unusual music created by American composers in this century.

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Despite his status George Crumb prefers the softer edges of the spotlight, living in Media, Pennsylvania and teaching composition at the University of Pennsylvania, where he has been on the faculty since 1965. His achievements, which have earned him membership in the elite cabinet of American composers, include a Pulitzer Prize (1968), the Koussevitsky International Recording Award (1971), a Guggenheim Fellowship (1967), Rockefeller grant (1964) and numerous commissions and other awards.

The audience assembled for Crumb's lecture at The Banff Centre waited anxiously for the composer to speak, hoping that the creative secrets of a master would be revealed. Crumb, however, treated his successes and abilities with unconcern. With his checked flannel shirt and glasses stubbornly seeking the end of his nose, he was disarmingly like a retired professor at leisure in the country. It was as if the mysterious invocation of mood that characterizes his compositions, together with their ritual elements and portentous drones, exited his mind through some remote channel, leaving, for public view, a thoroughly uncomplicated man.

Closer observation uncovered a vital link between the languor and extended pauses of Crumb's manner and the vast spaces inhabiting his music. The tempo indication from the score of *Dream Sequence*: "Poised, timeless, 'breathing': as an afternoon in late summer," begins to describe the aura surrounding him.

Crumb lets his senses be lulled by the mystical, never losing a feeling of wonder for forces beyond comprehension. The enormity of time stretching back to prehistory, the magic of night, fantastic images inspired by natural sounds (whales and insects, particularly), the darker mechanisms of the universe: these fascinations bring both drama and tenderness to his music. It is no coincidence that many pieces have amplification. Some passages are so ethereal and delicate that they would never be heard otherwise. Crumb's personal touch comes through tempo markings precisely defining the intended mood: "With a sense of imminent destiny, limpidly, solemn, with calm majesty, gently sardonic, timeless, inchoate." Titles themselves suggest dark enigmas and entire epochs: *Night of the Four Moons* (1969), *Ancient Voices of Children* (1970), *Echoes of Time and the River* (1967).

The compositional process tends to slip coyly from sight when pursued too closely, and the composer himself is often the last person who can accurately define his own creative patterns. "Whatever drives my music has something to do with space, a sense of projection," Crumb told the Banff musicians gathered around him. He frequently admitted to not knowing the answers, and always expressed a deep respect for music's evasive nature. "Music is a strange substance," he said after a long hesitation, slowly shaking his head. "I began improvising at the piano before writing music down. And then I wrote little pieces in the Mozart style, and later in life found that Mozart at that age was also writing in the Mozart style." Crumb's music has been strongly influenced by Bartok and Debussy, but there came a point when he decided he was relying too heavily on the languages of other composers: "I simply woke up one night in a cold sweat—you use this term figuratively, but it's a reality—this sudden awareness: what am I doing? Why rewrite other music? It was as abrupt as that. *Five*



George Crumb, Banff, December 1984. Photo, Karen McDiarmid.

Pieces for Piano (1962) was the first piece where I started writing my own music rather than simply rewriting the music of other composers." In *Music for a Summer Evening* (1974) Crumb began to open up his language. Finding chromaticism too restricting, he started using Webern-like three-tone clusters along with modal and whole-tone elements. These sounds punctuate the limpid spaces, adding here some colour, there a percussive episode.

Despite the oblique allusions and outright parodies of other music that filter into Crumb's work, a brooding presence distinguishes his own style. He frequently combines incongruous fragments from other composers (in *Ancient Voices of Children*, a suggestion of flamenco is mixed with a reference to the *Notebook for Anna Magdalena* by Bach), but his own voice maintains its unruffled poise. "All music is a possible source. The way we're constituted psychologically we can't start from nothing, creating without reference. It's impossible for composers to write in the abstract."

Crumb gently smiled at his listeners to see if his point was clear, and continued with a wave of the cigarette. "Every composer has his fingerprint. I feel that style generally is an expression of a person's psychology; not something that is arrived at consciously but that evolves as an articulated expression of the psyche. Impressions about life, books we've read, landscapes we've seen, even genes—our total life experience contributes to this."

Crumb is deeply affected by the mysteries lurking behind the great rhythms of the earth. Subjects with deep associations—the origin of evil, the breadth of time, profound ironies—call to attention his wide-ranging imagination. The Spanish poet Federico Garcia Lorca's haunting vision has strongly influenced the composer, and the music that Crumb has set to Lorca's poetry has a distinctly macabre tone. "Well, if you use a lot of texts by Lorca it's bound to come out. If you get down to basic language, how many things are there to write about in the world anyway? You know, death is one, life is another, love is a third. If you do them all you have range."

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Variations on Sea-Time

[SEA THEME] Adagio (♩=50); solemn, with calm majesty

From *Vox Balaenae*, c. 1972.

Crumb's approach to complex musical issues has an eastern simplicity. Instead of frantic searching, he seems to have endless perseverance for waiting for just the right idea to come to him. The waiting involves a lot of cigarettes, a lazy crossing of the legs with a "Gosh... I don't know...," and a dreamy look that eventually signals a thought. "I work very slowly myself," he said. "I write my music in snatches, take the ideas as they come, in desperation. A composer exploits any little thing he can do, and keeps away from things he can't manage."

In this analytical age simple answers rarely hold much weight. Crumb's modest offering: "It just comes out that way—you write what you have to write," left his audience floundering. Could such a confession possibly account for music that conjures the sublime? Crumb tried to be a bit more helpful in exposing his muse, but invariably his talk would ease along, a word or two lost in the lower regions of his West Virginia drawl, only to lead up to a punchline capable of dissolving all pretension. (Not unlike the way his music prepares an important theme.)

Crumb delighted in putting himself at the mercy of his own jokes. Even the subliminal plane to which *Dream Sequence* (1976) carries its listeners didn't escape a playful nudge from its creator: "Funny thing was, this piece was performed in Australia at an institution where people had some problems, and the piece drove them over the brink; these precise chords that I used with the glasses were the ones that were horrible—they do damage."

In June 1984 the New York Philharmonic premiered Crumb's *A Haunted Landscape*, and as part of his lecture he played a tape of the new work with which, he admitted, he is not entirely happy. By this time the audience was prepared for the droll introduction that was vintage Crumb. "One unifying factor in the piece is a low B flat drone. I chose the drone as played by two solo contrabass players on C extensions. The low C string of the bass is tuned to a B flat so the thing is vibrating like a clothesline. I had a poetical allusion here that turned out to be completely false. My idea was that this B flat is the cosmic sound of the universe because it's the frequency of alternating current. Then I was told by a friend, a scientist, that alternating current is different in every country. Anyway, it's there in the score."

To decipher what's "there in the score," the classical musician has to translate a completely new language with its own set of grammatical rules. A flutist is required to hum and sing into the instrument, while a percussionist has to tackle such exotic unknowns as the Thai Buffalo Bell, Japanese Temple Bell, Tibetan prayer stones you rub together, and three tuned cowbells ("the genuine large cowbells, imported from Austria"). A pianist is asked to peer under the lid and tinker with the bowels of the piano which is like telling an auto body specialist to give the engine a major tune-up. Everything feels unnatural and out of its element, and the old performance traditions that have long since become automatic suddenly vanish from the stage.

For Banff Centre percussionist Mark Duggan, the challenge of playing with Crumb was "the short period of time you have to change from being sensitive to being loud and aggressive." Sal Ferraras, visiting from Vancouver especially for the Crumb concerts, had similar encounters with the style: "To a percussionist his music has everything you ever wanted to do. He's able to integrate percussion with other instruments, and colouristically he knows just how to place certain notes. I found his music very simple and precise." Crumb, along with several other modern composers, typically asks a percussion player to run from instrument to instrument in the battery, and these movements contribute to the overall choreography of hardware and players that animates the stage. Ferraras wryly described his experience performing in *Songs, Drones and Refrains of Death* (1968) as "the Jane Fonda Workout for percussion."



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Dream Sequence

(Images II)

for Violin, Cello, Piano, and Percussion
[and offstage "Glass Harmonica"]

GEORGE CRUMB

One of the most difficult things about performing Crumb is sustaining the wide expanses: long notes held for measures at a time, impossibly slow tempos, repeated motifs that lead both performer and audience into a trance-like state, the underlying drones that continue monotonously until they erase any sense of time. These things create a mood described by Crumb at the beginning of *Vox Balaenae*'s last movement as "serene, pure, transfigured." Pianist and composer Brian Pezzone, a participant in Banff's 1984-85 Winter Cycle whose own music was performed in one of the Crumb concerts, found that "Crumb brings another dimension to space. There is emotional appeal, but it's subconscious, not a surface emotion. He strives for a kind of spirituality."

Crumb's scores excite a hornet's nest of complexities and decision-making. To begin with, there are the staging problems involving lighting effects, microphone placement and the necessary ceremonial attitudes. *Vox Balaenae* (1971) can be performed either as a straight piece of chamber music or as theatre, with bluish lights, black masks and movements that become part of the ritual's dramatic statement.

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Then there is the task of getting everyone on stage to do the right thing at the right time. Ensemble is difficult enough with a traditional score but Crumb's writing, almost hieroglyphic at first glance, needs many rehearsals and immense concentration to streamline. Timothy Anderson, a singer and actor with Banff's Music Theatre program, was a performer in *Songs, Drones and Refrains of Death*: "Crumb expects the performers to be multi-talented—for example, a singer must play percussion. As a group you have to be unified and work together. Vocally it's also very taxing. Crumb goes back to a basic heartbeat and the beginnings of speech."

Much of Crumb's piano writing includes special effects produced inside the piano. For the "chisel-piano" motif in *Vox Balaenae* the player has to disregard aesthetics and put a chisel into the piano's innards, sliding it up and down the strings. This gesture, along with letting a paper clip buzz on a plucked string and strumming the strings as if they were a harp, meets with continual difficulties. The interior of every piano is constructed differently and is usually not built to be played. Crumb quickly solved a technical problem in the Margaret Greenham Theatre by taking a screwdriver to a \$100,000 Steinway and removing a strut. "Don't worry," he reassured a nervous stage technician while tucking the part under his arm, "it won't hurt the piano."

"Music bypasses the intellectual—it hits you straight—and there's a danger of too much rational thought"

After the pieces have been composed and the performer has committed them to sound as accurately as possible, the last part of the triangle—the audience—joins the other two. But the complete triangle is not always achieved at a performance of twentieth century music. That is, the audience is often left out: confused by the strange sounds coming from the stage, and as distanced from familiar waters as a whale stranded on a forgotten beach. Crumb couldn't account for this difficulty, but ventured a guess. "They tell me that music is on the left side of the brain, and that words, speech and visual things are on the right side. And I wonder if it isn't the left side of the brain that is particularly vulnerable to assaults by new things that upset the patterns."

The lack of communication at contemporary performances could also have something to do with the newness of the language, and the drawbacks associated with two types of contemporary musical form: non-repetitive, and repetitive or minimal. "There are dangers to both," warned Crumb. "The repetitive can lead to a kind of monotony and lack of variety. The non-repetitive can lead to a formlessness. Today's conflicts in music will probably result in one little sentence in the history books: 'This was a time when nothing really was settled.'"

Each time contemporary composers scramble to find a likely direction for their work, their tenuous link with the audience erodes a little more. "My colleague, George Rochberg, used to speak of 'gray music,'" said Crumb. "'Gray music' is existing so much now that composers feel hesitant about anything as overt as a theme—it's associated with older music. When Elliott Carter speaks about his own music and says, 'Here's the second theme,' well, nobody can hear the second theme."

Crumb, however, never seems to lose sight of his listeners. His music often follows traditional forms. Themes, in themselves compelling fragments, communicate with Crumb's usual eloquence and no doubt originate from his own understated grace as a person. He has never thought that people need special technical training to understand his music. For Crumb, the insidious threat to public musical understanding is too much analysis. How can you analyze something whose tangible evidence is ciphers on paper, and whose real substance is invisible and yet everywhere at once? "Music bypasses the intellectual—it hits you straight—and there's a danger of too much rational thought," he said. "I think that music affects us physiologically; in the muscles there is a tactile sense from playing an instrument. Rhythm is connected with dance, and rings in the ear physically."

Crumb frequently reminded his audience of his discomfort with cornering music and defining it. He suggested that the only possible way to speak about music, and to address its spirituality, is to talk in metaphors. Otherwise, the substance slides through the fingers. "In fact, we can't even say why music is good." For the first time Crumb sat forward in his chair. "If in one of my classes I am analyzing a Mahler symphony that I like or a nocturne by Chopin, I can't tell the students why that's good. There's no way. Some quite insipid piece of the same period would have the same basic vocabulary but not the urgency or eloquence. There's some quality in good music that you can't pin down. And I've often thought that we make a mistake in universities by talking about masterpieces. You present the *Eroica* symphony and I'm speechless each time. There's nothing to be said about good music. I thought I should give an anti-masterpiece course teaching only the bad pieces, and learn from those."

At this point in his musings the composer gave a few moments to silence. He then lit another cigarette and spoke languidly, looking past his listeners. "Music is so...so..." Another pause, a long draught on the cigarette, and then that disarming humility. "Music is so...potent."

...When we filed onto the stage, silence already pulsed through the hall. Something was about to happen. Not a musical performance, exactly, but a rite to which everyone there was granted passage. As we took our places there was no applause. Only a faint bluish light outlined the piano, perceived a cello, gleamed from the end of the flute. Through my mask objects on the stage seemed to retreat into the darkness and distances swam. Were the keys really under my hands? Was the amplified quaver of the flute in fact a voice from another epoch? The pulsing silence became stillness as the audience began its part of the ceremony, and the composer, sitting hidden in the blackness of the last row, let his thoughts speak for themselves.



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