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GEORGE CRUMB

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Material received:

Songs, Drones and Refrains of Death
Edition Peters No. 66463, 1971 (£9.25)

Night of the Four Moons
Edition Peters No. 66462, 1971 (£8.50)

Night Music I (with Robert Erickson: Chamber Concerto)
CRI 218 (£2.97)

Eleven Echoes of Autumn (with Stefan Wolpe: Trio)
CRI 233 (£2.97)

Black Angels (with Charles Jones: String Quartet No. 6 and Sonatina)
CRI 283 (£2.97)

PETERS EDITION HAVE now published some dozen and a half pieces by the American composer, George Crumb, covering nearly all his major works since the early Cello Sonata of 1955. Despite their high price and demands of technique and presentation which must make ideal performances rare, one hopes that these attractive scores, coupled with the several excellent recordings available through the American catalogue, will make Crumb's captivating and unusual music better known in Britain.

Crumb, who is 47, is part of a definable trend — as it, surely, now seems possible to recognise — away from the highly dissonant, intellectually complex, severe and overburdened music at the forefront of the post-war period, towards a recapture of innocence, and the sheer beauty and joy of musical sound. Regressive, indulgent or escapist such music may appear, but there is no denying its power to revive and elate jaded senses and dejected spirit. Crumb, possibly more than any other composer, has successfully replaced tonal-thematic structure with a rich and intriguing fabric of timbral change, nuance and subtly fluctuating atmosphere. A sort of aural magician whose routines constantly surprise and delight, Crumb leaves the listener spiritually stimulated and refreshed.

The works above span an important seven years in the composer's development, from 1963 to 1970, the period during which he was much influenced by the poetry of Federico Garcia Lorca; and they conveniently enable one to observe what changes, if any, occurred in his style during this time. In fact significant change is minimal. One feels that both aesthetic purpose and technique were securely established in *Night Music I* (1963), and that it is in greater depth, inventiveness and subtlety of allusion that the later music excels. From more ordinary instruments — bells, keyed percussion, piano (played inside and on the keys) — Crumb moves towards more exotic ones — alto flute, banjo, African mbira, prayer stones, kabuki blocks; from relatively conventional means of sound production to stranger ones — extreme string harmonics and curious bowing techniques, breathing words whilst playing the flute, bending notes, amplification and so on. Becoming more asiatic, the music grows richer in melodic inflection. At the same time there is an increasing use of quotation and borrowed styles placed in fresh and thought-provoking juxtaposition.

It was while working on *Night Music I* that Crumb became aware not only of the musical potential of Lorca's poetry, but also of its aptness to his own vision; and the discovery seems to have unleashed from him a flood of music scarcely less vivid in its imaginative response. At least ten of Crumb's works set or refer to Lorca, who is, indeed, an ideal partner offering, as well as frequent descriptions of actual sound, an immensely rich and passionate imagery, hidden meanings, eerie atmosphere and mystery. In this early composition, scored for soprano, piano/celesta and two percussionists, the poems occur in two out of seven movements. All of these, entitled *notturmi*, are in instrumental style derived from an amalgam of Webern, Bartók's night music, Messiaen's gongs and bird-calls and the Cage of the *Sonatas and Interludes*. As in some of Crumb's subsequent works, the latter part seems more attractive than the first, due perhaps to the effect of the intimate, trance-like atmosphere gradually stealing over one. The sixth nocturne, especially, has a wispy, veiled beauty of gently plucked repeated notes and bell resonances accumulating into chords, whilst the elegiac seventh movement makes an eloquent close.

Arresting though much of it is, there is less individuality here, particularly of timbre and sonority, than in the later *Eleven Echoes of Autumn* (1965) for violin, alto flute, clarinet and piano. The eleven short sections of this work, each with its distinct timbral and expressive character, are altogether more imaginative and vibrant, frequently requiring novel performance techniques and revealing many surprises of subtle coloration. Dramatic character is sharper, the total atmosphere and shape more memorable. Although there is no singer, the ever-present spirit of Lorca is underlined through a quotation: 'y los arcos rotos donde sufre el tiempo' ('and the broken arches where time suffers') which is softly intoned by the instrumentalists themselves before each of the three cadenzas forming *Echoes* 5 to 7.

Songs, Drones and Refrains of Death (conceived in 1962 but unfinished until 1968) for guitar, double bass, piano/harpsichord (all amplified), baritone and two percussionists, returns to full setting, this time of four dark and intense death poems. Crumb acknowledges this as his work most deeply involved with Lorca, but I feel that in the first two songs he has been over-concerned to leave unobstructed the message of the words. The predominance of Sprechgesang over singing, the frequent sparseness of the accompaniment with its hesitant, fragmentary phrases and long pauses, make them considerably less winning than the majority of his settings and certainly than the last two here, which splendidly match the powerful breadth of the poetry. The third, 'Song of the Rider', builds, from a kaleidoscope of brilliant ostinati, an energetic, almost brutal picture of beating hooves, the vocal phrases giving an eerie imitation of the animal's neighing. The Mahlerian lament of the final song, 'Casida of the Boy Wounded by the Water', with its oscillating minor thirds, piano harmonics, flexatone, water-tuned glasses and dream-like surrealist quality, is unforgettable. A curiosity is the circular notation, also used in the second song where two circles represent the Sun and Moon, one audibly shadowing the other. Similar notational symbolism appears in *Eleven Echoes* and in more recent works.

Night of the Four Moons (1969) for contralto, alto flute, banjo, amplified cello and percussion is the last but one of the Lorca-inspired pieces (the last is *Ancient Voices*), *Black Angels* of 1970, 'for electric string quartet', having behind it quite different generative ideas. These three, in fact, constitute probably the most imaginative and impressive of Crumb's music and the best introduction to it. *Night of the Four Moons* was composed during the eight days of the Apollo 11 moon mission and very effectively conveys the thoughts and subconscious associations aroused by man's capture of his ancient and once mysterious Goddess. Evocative magic is high in this piece, the vocal line always beautiful and original (a superb vehicle, incidentally, for Jan DeGaetani, whose incomparable voice and artistry contribute so much to the CBS recording, M-32739). There are fine qualities in the transitory first three songs, but the fourth is a highlight. After a breathlessly excited dialogue between the Child and the Moon, in which the singer must differentiate between the 'shrill, metallic' voice of the one and the 'coquettish, sensual' voice of the other (shades of the *Erlking* and of *Pierrot Lunaire*), four of the performers slowly exit, singing and playing farewell phrases, and leaving on stage the lone cellist sustaining (for some three minutes without a break!) a motionless 'A' harmonic, three octaves above the open string. Slowly the harmonic, symbolising the 'Music of the Spheres', begins to oscillate, while from off-stage the other players, like astronauts returned from space to a distant, tiny Earth, transmit snatches of a gentle, homely 'Berceuse (in stilo Mahleriano)' — the 'Music of Mankind' — which emerges and fades like an elusive radio signal. In the quasi-theatrical performance which Crumb invites the allegorical character of the piece could, I imagine, be greatly enhanced.

Black Angels is likewise an allegory conceived, according to the composer 'as a kind of parable of our troubled contemporary world . . . The work portrays a voyage of the soul. The three stages of this voyage are Departure (fall from grace), Absence (spiritual annihilation), and Return (redemption).' Besides some intricate numerological and motivic symbolism there are effective quotations or parody of the *Death and the Maiden Quartet*, *Devil's Trill Sonata*, *Dies Irae* and a Renaissance *Sarabanda*. The 13 movements have such titles as 'Night of the Electric Insects', 'Sounds of Bones and Flutes', 'Lost Bells', 'Devil Music', 'Danse Macabre', 'God Music'. To convey these colourful ideas Crumb requires each instrument to be amplified, using contact microphones, and the performers to adopt bizarre techniques such as playing with thimbles on the left hand, and bowing between left hand and scroll (which produces a strangely dream-like evocation of a viol consort), as well as to play an assortment of percussion instruments. The result is quite astonishing: lurid, uncanny, melancholy and hauntingly beautiful. Although the techniques are not

peculiar to Crumb, their application to so detailed and even romantic a programme must be unique. Incidentally, Christopher Bruce has recently choreographed the score for Ballet Rambert.

The recording of *Black Angels* by the New York String Quartet is excellent, both as to the performance and quality of sound. Indeed in all the listed recordings of his music Crumb is served excellently; my only complaint concerns a periodic hiss which mars the review pressing of *Night Music I*. In fact recordings have for the listener certain advantages over live performance in that sympathetic resonances, harmonics and other delicate sounds can be clearly heard, whilst one's mind is more receptive to the atmosphere of psychological suggestion when neither distracted by fellow listeners nor anxious on behalf of the performers concerning the technical hazards lying in their path. On the other hand, most of Crumb's works have visual-theatrical potential and in the right live performing situation, as Ballet Rambert is demonstrating, can be stunning.

The scores themselves are interesting to possess. In price and presentation they are almost coffee table exhibits, enticing the casual browser with their detailed descriptive instructions, visually riveting notation and excellent reproduction of handwriting by the composer so clear that it rivals that of a professional engraver. On a more serious level, it is valuable to be able to see exactly how the extraordinary sounds in Crumb's music are achieved.

Of the works which back the Crumb recordings only Stefan Wolpe's Trio of 1963 for flute, cello and piano strikes me as having a strength of personality comparable to his. In Robert Erickson's Chamber Concerto (1960) for 17 players a slightly uncertain, but mainly Weberian and atonal, language undergoes changing patterns of rhythmic relationship, a concept intended apparently to reflect 'notions more biological than mechanical, like the motions of the body or the flight of birds', but sounding to the listener, unfortunately, rather cerebral. Charles Jones's String Quartet (1970) represents the antithesis of Crumb's music. Workmanlike and substantial with sonata-based, progressive argument, dynamic thrust and eloquence, overall it wears, nonetheless, a somewhat plain face. His early Sonatina (1942) for violin and piano is also a bit confined, but its expressive, modal lyricism, reminiscent of Ravel and late Debussy, makes it pleasant to listen to, and, I should imagine, to play. Wolpe's Trio, on the other hand, impresses one at once with its commanding individuality, exciting, nervous rhythmic energy and taut, crisp motifs whose disciplined yet inventive course has the brilliance and minute precision of a fine mosaic. His highly personal and purposeful processes are both clear enough to be at once audible and sufficiently intricate to arouse one's fascination. It is the sort of music that makes one wish to hear more.

NOTE:

¹ Richard Steinitz's article 'The Music of George Crumb', *Contact 11* (Summer 1975), pp. 14-22, is obtainable from the business editor at the address on page 2 for £0.54. (The issue itself is now out of print.)