

The Colors of Crumb

Acclaimed Composer George Crumb's works featured at Bach Festival's Composers Symposium

Late one night, a young Seattle violinist named David Harrington was listening to the radio, when the most unearthly sounds began to emerge. Buzzing, shouting, scraping, whirling, then eerie, barely audible. The whole wild auditory experience seemed to sum up the anger and confusion raging through the country. A pointless, unjust war, a corrupt government, a polarized America — while the setting may seem sadly familiar these days, Harrington's encounter with George Crumb's frighteningly powerful electric string quartet, *Black Angels*, actually happened in 1973, three years after Crumb wrote it. That night, Harrington resolved to start an ensemble that could play music as relevant, as powerful, as inventive as that work, and the most influential art music ensemble of its time, the Kronos Quartet, was born.

Harrington wasn't the only listener affected by Crumb's music of the time.

"During the 1960s and '70s, when new music was generally rejected by audiences as being too harsh and dissonant, George Crumb broke the ice," says UO music professor Robert Kyr. "He created a truly 'new' music that was visionary in all respects; it captivated audiences around the world with brilliant sound colors and a dramatic use of lyricism. And now, several decades later, every one of George's groundbreaking works — such as his masterpiece, *Black Angels* — sounds as fresh as the day when it was first heard."

We'll have the chance to find out when Crumb's landmark work is performed by the excellent Portland ensemble Third Angle at the Oregon Bach Festival's Composers Symposium, kicking off a 75th birthday celebration for one of America's greatest composers. The amiable Crumb, whose thoughtful good humor, expressed in his native West Virginia twang, belies the intensity of his most famous piece, will attend the performances of his music on Friday and Saturday, July 2 and 3, at the UO's Beall Concert Hall, along with his son David, a composer and UO music professor, whose own elegiac "September Elegy," written in response to the 9/11 tragedy, and "Awakening" for trumpet and percussion will also be on the program.

Black Angels "wasn't intentionally composed as a political statement," but the turbulence of the time surely found its way into the work, Crumb told *Eugene Weekly* recently. And with American soldiers under fire in another dirty little war, "here we are again," he said.

By the time he wrote *Black Angels*, Crumb had already gained fame, a Pulitzer Prize (for 1968's *Echoes of Time and the River*) and major label recordings for trailblazing works like *Ancient Voices of Children* (one of his many settings of the poetry of Federico Garcia Lorca). More 1970s masterpieces followed: *Song of the Whale* (Vox Balaenae), for electric flute, electric cello and amplified piano (performed with the specified masked musicians and blue lighting when Crumb was here a few years ago); *Lux Aeterna* for soprano, bass flute, sitar, and percussion; *Makrokosmos*, for amplified piano; *Music for a Summer Evening* for amplified pianos and percussion; the large-scale, Grammy-award winning *Star-Child*.

His music then and now reveals his great influences: Debussy, Bartok, Mahler, Ives,

Messiaen, all of whom share an ability to transform multiple sources into a language of their own.

The UO concerts contain an earlier work, *Four Nocturnes*, for violin and piano, that Crumb wryly describes as "the most delicate pieces I ever wrote — on the verge of not even existing. The audience might not know anything has happened."

Somewhat reminiscent of the music of Takemitsu, the Nocturnes use harmonics, pizzicato, rapping sounds, and rustling (achieved by a percussionist's wire brush rubbing strings of the piano) to create a suspension of time and evoke "music of nature," such as birdsongs and rustling leaves.

Crumb describes another work on the program, *Processional* as "an experiment in harmonic chemistry," (Debussy's description of his *Images* for piano). "The music is concerned with the prismatic effect of subtle changes of harmonic color and frequent modulation."

"Messiaen-ic influences," Crumb puns, inform his final work performed at the symposium, *A Little Suite for Christmas, A.D. 1979*, which came together after Crumb was moved by images of Giotto frescoes, and resolved to capture the "medieval innocence, the childlike quality that pervades his work," Crumb explained. Along with the influence of 20th century French composer Olivier Messiaen, Crumb says, "the ghost of Debussy is hovering over the piece."

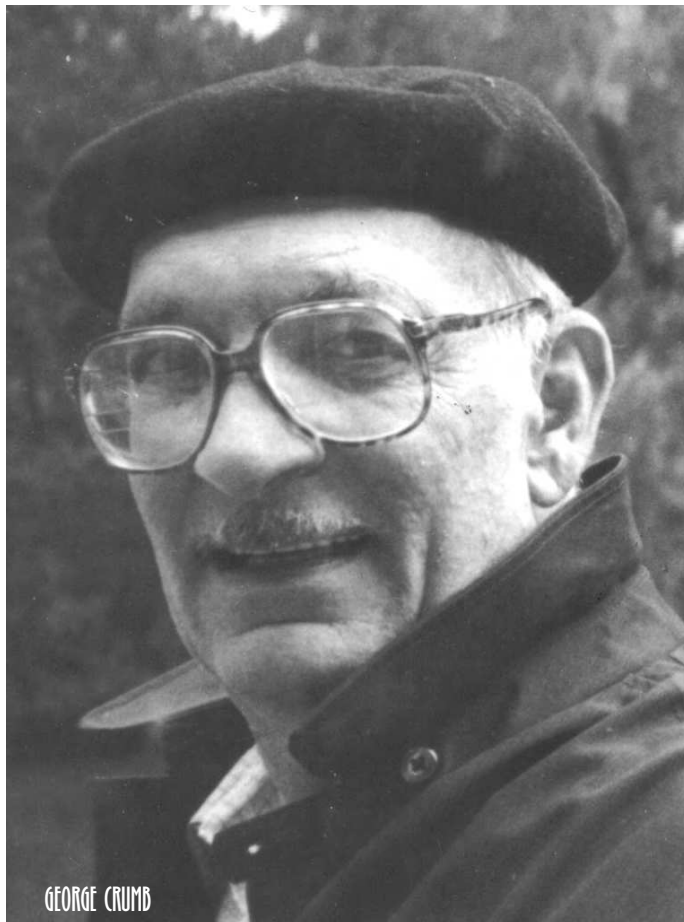
After retiring from a long teaching career a few years ago, Crumb found new energy for composing, resulting in charming miniatures like *Mundus Canis* (A Dog's World), just performed by the UO's 100th Monkey ensemble; "Eine Kleine Mitternachtmusik" ("A Little Midnight Music") (based on Thelonious Monk's jazz classic, "Round Midnight") and more. Now he's engaged in four large song cycles (for percussion, voice, and electric piano), based on American folk songs,

including African American spirituals whose melodic power he considers the equal of anything in European classical music. Crumb was, after all, born in song-drenched Appalachia.

Crumb's legacy lies not only in his own music, but also in his impact on musicians such as Kronos, in the music of his son, David (whose own muse bears, according to his father, more of a Stravinskyian imprint), and of his many students, including Kyr, himself a notable American composer.

It's appropriate, then, that the Symposium honor Crumb by commissioning 13 new works, one from each participant in the symposium (who hail from all over the U.S.) and debuted by Third Angle in these concerts along with George and David's work. (More information on the symposium is available at www.iwagemusic.com.)

Those composers are fortunate to be able to study with him here, and Eugene audiences are lucky to be able to experience so many of his works at this year's Bach Festival. "Listening to one of his works is always an unforgettable experience," Kyr says. "His music is filled with innovation and yet, it sounds and feels so familiar, as though one has always known it. This is music of spiritual depth, as he once put it: 'sound in the service of a spiritual impulse.'" ■



GEORGE CRUMB

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