

**GEORGE CRUMB**  
**An Idyll for the Misbegotten,**  
**Vox Balaenae**  
**Madrigals**

**New World Records 80357**

The injection of overtly theatrical elements into the concert world is one of the significant developments of postwar music. No longer can performers be content to sit poker-faced over their scores, playing the notes to the best of their ability and letting the emotional chips fall where they may. Musicians are now called upon to make eye contact (and sometimes more) with the audience, to wear costumes, to speak, to act--all in addition to negotiating the difficult techniques and vivid, unorthodox notation that mark new music.

The works of George Crumb (born in Charleston, West Virginia, October 24, 1929) perhaps best exemplify this trend. Other composers may make greater use of "theatrical" movement on stage but none combines such an unfailingly imaginative ear for sonorities with such a highly developed sense of myth and ritual.

Not everyone has applauded Crumb's unique compositional ethos. Observing Crumb's directions for the costuming of the performers in *Lux Aeterna* for soprano and four chamber players--"the performers, masked and wearing robes, sit in lotus position and in near-darkness around a lighted candle; sung phrases of the Requiem text alternate with a refrain for sitar, recorder and tabla"--the British critic Paul Griffiths in his book *Modern Music* snorts that they suggest "nothing so much as the excoriating excesses of the contemporary cinema."

Such an assessment of Crumb's histrionic methodology entirely misses the point, which is the emotional content of the music. In such works as *Black Angels* (1970) for electric string quartet, the two books of *Makrokosmos* (1973, 1974) for solo amplified piano, and *Star-Child* (1977) for soprano, children's chorus, and orchestra, Crumb has charted new expressive territory in scores of extraordinary power and haunting beauty. The string quartet stages a battle between God and Satan, and the ominous tread of the *Dies irae* is heard; the pianist in *Makrokosmos* adopts the sinister persona of Charon in "The Phantom Gondolier," playing on the strings of the piano with thimble-capped fingers; the orchestral piece evokes the biblical Massacre of the Innocents. As Edith Borroff has pointed out, in these works Crumb "approaches the heart of the medieval *quadrivium*" (the group of four related studies that were the highest of the liberal arts), his music displaying "the astronomical, arithmetic, geometric and musical elements vital to that concept."

Crumb's expressive content is heard to good effect in the works on this record, which reflect several obsessions: the four books of *Madrigals* (the poetry of Federico Garcia Lorca), *Vox Balaenae* (nature), and *An Idyll for the Misbegotten* (quotation; mood painting).

The *Madrigals* were composed between 1965 and 1969. Like many of Crumb's most significant works, including *Songs, Drones and Refrains of Death* (1968) and *Ancient Voices of Children* (1970), they are constructed from fragments of poetry by Federico Garcia Lorca. In a sense, his many Lorca pieces constitute, as the composer has pointed out, "an extended cycle." Still, each work stands firmly on its own merits.

The four books, which last about thirty-two minutes in performance, are scored for soprano and a variety of instruments: vibraphone and double bass in Book One, alto flute (doubling flute and piccolo) and percussion in Book Two, harp and percussion in Book Three, and flute, harp, bass and percussion in Book Four. Fierce themes of *Eros* and *Thanatos* haunt the piece, reflected in its agitated, percussive idiom and angular, often harsh vocal lines. The texts evoke Goyaesque images: *Verte desnuda es recordar la tierra* ("To see you naked is to remember the earth"), *Los muertos llevan alas de musgo* ("The dead wear mossy wings"), both from Book One; *¡La muerte me esta mirando desde las torres de Cordoba!* ("Death is watching me from the towers of Cordoba!") from the last book.

Crumb's penchant for hidden structures is evident in the first madrigal of Book Three, *La noche canta desnuda sobre los puentes de marzo* ("Night sings naked above the bridges of March"), in which he uses two instrumental isorhythms of different lengths, while the voice floats unencumbered above. Yet the *Madrigals* are, like all of Crumb's music, more about meaning than technique. Dark and disquieting, they are the music made when reason sleeps.

Less threatening is *Vox Balaenae* (Voice of the Whale), a kind of oceanic equivalent of Olivier Messiaen's birdcalls, based on the songs of the humpback whale. Crumb first heard the eerie submarine singing of the huge mammals on tape in 1969; the twenty-minute *Vox Balaenae* for electric flute, electric cello, crotales and electric piano was finished two years later. The composer directs that

...each of the three players should wear a black half-mask (visor-mask) throughout the performance of the work. The masks, by effacing a sense of human projection, will symbolize the powerful impersonal forces of nature (nature dehumanized). *Vox Balaenae* can be performed under a deep-blue stage lighting, if desired, in which case the theatrical effect would be further enhanced.

Typically, Crumb calls on the pianist to play upon the instrument's strings pizzicato and also to produce harmonics; the cello is tuned *scordatura* (B-F-D#-A); the flutist is called upon to sing and play simultaneously. The work itself is a three-movement fantasy, beginning with a Vocalise (*...for the beginning of time*) for the flute that is suddenly interrupted by leaping, incantatory chords on the piano. There follows a set of five variations on Sea-Time (each with the name of a different geologic period) whose sea-theme, played in harmonics, is stated by the cello and piano. The last movement is a radiant Sea-Nocturne (*...for the end of time*)--the Messiaen reference is unmistakable here--with a performance direction of "serene, pure, transfigured."

A somewhat more human-centered view of nature is evident in the newest work, the nine-minute *An Idyll for the Misbegotten* for amplified flute and percussion, composed in 1985. "I feel that 'misbegotten' will describes the fateful and melancholy predicament of the species *homo sapiens* at the present moment in time," writes the composer:

Mankind has become ever more "illegitimate" in the natural world of the plants and animals. The ancient sense of brotherhood with all life forms (so poignantly expressed in the poetry of St. Francis of Assisi) has gradually and relentlessly eroded, and consequently we find ourselves monarchs of a dying world. We share the fervent hope that humankind will embrace anew nature's "moral imperative."

Once again, the theatrical element is paramount. Crumb suggests, "impractically," that the music be "heard from afar, over a lake, on a moonlit evening in August." The scoring, employing two of man's

oldest instruments, conjures up a primitive, timeless aura; there is a brief quotation from Debussy's *Syrinx*, interpolated into a passage for the flute that also calls for the performer to speak a few lines by the eighth-century Chinese poet Su-K'ung Shu, while still playing the instrument ("The moon goes down. There are shivering birds and withering grasses.").

Over a *pianissimo* tremolo in the bass drum, the flute intones a Pan-like song that gradually grows ever more agitated. Sensing this, the drums respond to the flute's emotional state; they burst the bonds of the tremolo to punctuate the melodic line in barely controlled outbursts and send the flute skittering along in a flight of flutter-tongued fantasy. The hysteria soon subsides, the drums recede, and at the end nothing is left but the flute, musing softly on a pair of tritones--the devil's interval. In George Crumb's universe, the black angels are never very far away.

—Michael Walsh

Michael Walsh is a 1971 graduate of the Eastman School of Music. Since 1981 he has been music critic of *Time* magazine.

## **The Lorca Texts for Madrigals, Books I-IV**

### **Madrigals, Book I**

I Verte desnuda es recordar la tierra  
*To see you naked is to remember the earth*

II No piensan en la lluvia, y se han dormido  
*They do not think of the rain, and they've fallen asleep*

III Los muertos llevan alas de musgo  
*The dead wear mossy wings*

### **Madrigals, Book II**

I Bebe el agua tranquila de la canción añeja  
*Drink the tranquil water of the antique song*

II La muerte entra y sale de la taberna. La muerte entra y sale, y sale y entra la muerte de la taberna.  
*Death goes in and out of the tavern. Death goes in and out, and out and in goes the death of the tavern.*

III Caballito negro. Dónde llevas tu jinete muerto? Caballito frío. Que perfume de flor de cuchillo!  
*Little black horse. Where are you taking your dead rider? Little cold horse. What a scent of knife-blossom!*

### **Madrigals, Book III**

I La noche canta desnuda sobre los puentes de marzo  
*Night sings naked above the bridges of March*

II Quiero dormir el sueño de las manzanas para aprender un llanto que me limpie de tierra  
*I want to sleep the sleep of apples, to learn a lament that will cleanse me of earth*

III Nana, niño, nana del caballo grande que no quiso el agua. Duérmete, rosál, que el caballo se pone a llorar. Las patas heridas, las crines heladas, dentro de los ojos un puñal de plata.

*Lullaby, child, lullaby of the proud horse who would not drink water. Go to sleep, rose-bush, the horse begins to cry. Wounded legs, frozen manes, and within the eyes a silver dagger.*

### **Madrigals, Book IV**

I Por qué nací entre espejos? El día me da vueltas. Y la noche me copia en todas sus estrellas.  
*Why was I born surrounded by mirrors? The day turns round me. And the night reproduces me in each of her stars.*

II Tu cuerpo, con la sombra violeta de mis manos, era un arcángel de frío  
*Through my hands' violet shadow, your body was an archangel, cold*

III La muerte me está mirando desde las torres de Córdoba!  
*Death is watching me from the towers of Cordoba!*

### **Titles of the Original Lorca Poems**

#### Book I

I Casida de la Mujer Tendida *Casida of the Reclining Woman*: transl. W.S. Merwin

II Casida de los Ramos *Casida of the Branches*: transl. Stephen Spender and J.L. Gili

III Gacela del Niño Muerto *Gacela of the Dead Child*: transl. Edwin Honig

#### Book II

I Balada de la Placeta *Ballad of the Little Square*: transl. Stephen Spender and J.L. Gili

II Malagueña *Malagueña*: transl. J.L. Gili

III Canción de Jinete [1860] *Song of the Rider* [1860]: transl. J.L. Gili

#### Book III

I Serenata *Serenata*: transl. J.L. Gili

II Gacela de la Muerte Oscura *Gacela of the Dark Death*: transl. J.L. Gili

III Nana *Lullaby*: transl. J.L. Gili

#### Book IV

I Canción del Naranja Seco *Song of the Withered Orange-tree*: transl. J.L. Gili

II Gacela del Niño Muerto *Gacela of the Dead Child*: transl. Edwin Honig

III Canción de Jinete *Song of the Rider*: transl. J.L. Gili

Federico Garcia Lorca, Obras Completas.

©Herederos de Federico Garcia Lorca. All rights reserved.

Selected Poems.©1955 by New Directions Publishing Corporation.

By permission of New Directions Publishing Corporation, New York.

## SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Borroff, Edit. "Crumb, George." In *The New Grove Dictionary of American Music*. H. Wiley Hitchcock and Stanley Sadie, eds. London and New York: Macmillan, 1986.
- Frank, Andrew. "George Crumb: Songs, Drones, and Refrains of Death." *Notes* 33 (1976-77), pp. 694-96.
- Gagne, Cole, and Tracy Caras. "George Crumb." In *Soundpieces: Interviews with American Composers*. Metuchen, N.J.: Scarecrow Press, 1982.
- Gillespie, Don C., ed. *George Crumb: Profile of a Composer*. New York: C.F. Peters, 1986.
- Hamilton, David. "Three Composers of Today." *Musical Newsletter* 1, no. 1 (1971), p. 16.
- Henahan, Donal. "Current Chronicle: Chicago." *Musical Quarterly* 54 (1968), p. 83.
- Lusk, Larry. "George Crumb: "Makrokosmos Vol. I." *Notes* 31 (1974-75), p. 157.

## SELECTED DISCOGRAPHY

- Ancient Voices of Children*. Jan DeGaetani, mezzo-soprano; Michael Dash, boy soprano; Contemporary Chamber Ensemble, Arthur Weisberg conducting. Nonesuch H 71255.
- Black Angels*. Gaudeamus String Quartet. Philips 6500 881.
- Dream Sequence*. Aeolian Chamber Players. Four Nocturnes. Eric Rosenblith, violin; David Hagan, piano. *Lux Aeterna*. Jan DeGaetani, mezzo-soprano; University of Pennsylvania Contemporary Players, Richard Wernick conducting. Columbia Odyssey Y 35201.
- A Haunted Landscape*. New York Philharmonic, Arthur Weisberg conducting. New World NW 326.
- Madrigals*, Books I-IV. Elizabeth Suderberg, soprano. Turnabout TVS 34523.
- . Anne-Marie Muhle, mezzo-soprano; Musica Varia. Bis LP-261, CD-261.
- Makrokosmos I*. David Burge, piano. Nonesuch H 71293.
- Makrokosmos II*. Robert Miller, piano. Odyssey Y 34135.
- Night Music I*. Louise Toth, soprano; chamber ensemble, George Crumb conducting. CRI SD 218.
- . Jan DeGaetani, mezzo-soprano; Orchestra of Our Time, Joel Thome conducting. Candide CE 31113.
- Night of the Four Moons; Vox Balaenae*. Jan DeGaetani, mezzo-soprano (on Night); Aeolian Chamber Players. Columbia Masterworks M 32739.
- Songs, Drones, and Refrains of Death*. Lawrence Weller, baritone; Philadelphia Composers' Forum, Joel Thome conducting. Desto DC 7155.

George Crumb

New World Records 80357

1- *An Idyll for the Misbegotten* (9:37)

Zizi Mueller, Flute; Gordon Gottlieb, Benjamin Herman, Stephen Paysen, percussion

*Vox Balaenae* (Voice of the Whale) 20:13)

2- Vocalise (...for the beginning of time) (5:13)

Variations on Sea-Time

3- Sea Theme (1:44)

4- Archeozoic (Var. I) (1:31)

5- Proterozoic (Var. II) (2:00)

6- Paleozoic (Var. III) (1:04)

7- Mesozoic (Var. IV) (1:14)

8- Cenozoic (Var. V) (2:00)

9- Sea-Nocturne (...for the end of time) (5:27)

Zizi Mueller, flute; Fred Sherry, cello; James Gemmell, piano

Madrigals (32:31)

Book I

10- I (2:03)

11- II (2:58)

12- III (3:52)

Book II

13- I (1:47)

14- II (3:18)

15- III (1:24)

Book III

16- I (1:37)

17- II (2:12)

18- III (3:42)

Book IV

19- I (2:37)

20- II (1:54)

21- III (4:14)

Jan DeGaetani, mezzo-soprano

The University of Pennsylvania Chamber Players

Bonnie Insull, flute/alto flute/piccolo; James Freeman, contrabass; Jude Mollenhauer, harp; Matthew Hopkins, Joel Thome, percussion; Richard Wernick, conductor

**Zizi Mueller** has performed solo recitals throughout the United States, conducted for the New York Shakespeare Festival, and recorded for Vanguard and CRI. As principal flutist of the National Orchestra of Columbia, Mueller gave numerous recitals and founded the Colombian Group for Contemporary Music. From 1970-76, while at the Juilliard School, she performed internationally as music director and conductor of Wilford Leach's chamber opera company. She is also a winner of the Artists International Competition.

**Jan DeGaetani**, one of the leading interpreters of twentieth-century music, has premiered and recorded a succession of works by contemporary composers--Elliott Carter, William Schuman, Peter Maxwell Davies, Richard Wernick, George Crumb, and Jacob Druckman, among others. She is equally at home in the earlier vocal literature of the thirteenth through the nineteenth centuries. DeGaetani appears as soloist with the major orchestras of the United States and Europe, and also performs a wide range of vocal chamber music. She is Professor of Voice at the Eastman School of Music. Her recordings appear on the Nonesuch, CRI, CBS, and Telarc labels.

Producers: Marc Aubort and Joanna Nickrenz

Engineering: Elite Recordings, Inc., New York

Mastering: Robert C. Ludwig, Masterdisk

*An Idyll for the Misbegotten* was recorded on April 28, 1987.

*Vox Balaenae* was recorded on May 22, 1985.

The Madrigals were recorded on October 24, 1969; this recording originally appeared on Acoustic Research 0654 085.

All selections published by C.F. Peters Corp.

Front cover music from *Vox Balaenae* by George Crumb ©1971 by C.F. Peters Corporation.

Cover design: Bob Defrin

### **The Acoustic Research Contemporary Music Project**

Acoustic Research, Inc., provided a group of composers with the funds and technical support necessary to produce broadcasts and recordings of music composed by their colleagues and themselves. The series, made available to the public in 1970, consisted of fourteen radio broadcasts and six recordings. The aim of the project was to provide composers with direct access to as large an audience as modern technology could offer, and to give listeners an opportunity to hear contemporary music, chosen by composers on the basis of musical criteria alone.

Advisers on the project were Milton Babbitt, Elliott Carter, Aaron Copland, Gunther Schuller, and Roger Sessions; the program committee consisted of David Epstein, Earl Kim, Donald Martino, and Seymour Shifrin. David Epstein was director of the project; Leo Treitler was in charge of production and annotation; technical supervision was provided by Roy F. Allison and Robert Berkovitz.

©1987 ©1987 Recorded Anthology of American Music, Inc. All rights reserved.

**This recording was made possible with grants from the National Endowment for the Arts, the New York State Council on the Arts, Fromm Music Foundation Recording Program and Francis Goelet.**

FOR NEW WORLD RECORDS:

Herman E. Krawitz, President; Paul Marotta, Managing Director; Paul M. Tai, Director of Artists and Repertory; Lisa Kahlden, Director of Information Technology; Virginia Hayward, Administrative Associate; Mojisola Oké, Bookkeeper; Ben Schmich, Production Associate.

RECORDED ANTHOLOGY OF AMERICAN MUSIC, INC., BOARD OF TRUSTEES:  
David Hamilton, Treasurer; Milton Babbitt; Emanuel Gerard; Adolph Green; Rita Hauser; Herman E. Krawitz; Arthur Moorhead; Elizabeth Ostrow; Don Roberts; Patrick Smith; Frank Stanton.

Francis Goelet (1926-1998), Chairman

**NO PART OF THIS RECORDING MAY BE COPIED OR REPRODUCED WITHOUT  
WRITTEN PERMISSION OF R.A.A.M., INC.**

**NEW WORLD RECORDS**  
16 Penn Plaza #835  
NEW YORK, NY 10001-1820  
TEL 212.290-1680 FAX 212.290-1685  
Website: [www.newworldrecords.org](http://www.newworldrecords.org)  
email: [info@newworldrecords.org](mailto:info@newworldrecords.org)

LINER NOTES © Recorded Anthology of American Music, Inc.