



Composer George Crumb's 80th birthday celebrated at CU

Famous composer made important strides in Boulder

By Wes Blomster Camera Classical Music Critic

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If you go

University of Colorado College of Music

Celebrating 80th Birthday of George Crumb

Tuesday:

11 a.m. Convocation. George and daughter Ann Crumb with Steven Bruns. Grusin Hall

6:15 p.m. Pre-concert lecture. Imig C-199

7:30 p.m. Faculty Series featuring vocalists Julie Simson and Patrick Mason and pianist Hsing-ay Hsu. Grusin Hall

9 p.m. Post-concert birthday toast. Imig Music Bldg. C-113

Wednesday:

2 p.m. Seminar. George Crumb as Teacher

4:15 p.m. Chamber Concert. Imig C-199

7:30 p.m. Concert. Pendulum New Music. Grusin Hall. Reception follow. Imig C-113.

Thursday:

4 p.m. Crumb in Action. Master class with student compositions

7:30 p.m. Concert with Ann Crumb, Andrew Cooperstock, David Korevaar and Patrick Mason. Grusin Hall

Friday:

5:15 p.m. Pre-concert. Imig C-199

7:30 p.m. Friday. Program features composers Crumb and John Drumheller and pianist Alejandro Cremaschi. ATLAS Black Box Theater

All events are free and open to the public. For information and a detailed program, call 303-492-8008 or visit colorado.edu/music

George Crumb is an American icon -- a man who has enriched the course of music through many years of creative work.

That, however, is only one reason that the College of Music at the University of Colorado is going all out to celebrate Crumb's 80th birthday this week.

Crumb, who retired from the University of Pennsylvania a decade ago, began his teaching career at CU in 1959.

He formed creative friendships here, and his association with the university has been renewed through his recent collaboration with CU baritone Patrick Mason, who performs two Crumb scores during the four-day program that opens on Tuesday.

"The concerts will offer a survey of Crumb's development," says CU musicologist Steve Bruns, who has worked with CU composer Daniel Kellogg, Hsing-ay Hsu, director of Pendulum New Music at CU and Thomas Riis of the CU American Music Research Center to plan the celebration.

"We won't be doing the blockbusters, but really interesting early works that are rarely heard today -- plus a generous look at his work of recent years."

What surprises those who did not know him then is that Crumb came to Boulder not as a composer, but as a piano teacher.

"I was out of my field," Crumb recalls. "But I was married and had a child and I needed a job.

"Piano was a useful tool for me, but I never considered myself a virtuoso."

Crumb, of course, was composing while in Boulder, and CU profited from his talent.

Wayne Scott, who joined the CU theory faculty in 1955, has vivid memories of those years.

"George hadn't yet established himself as a composer," says Scott. "But he was composing the whole time he was here and he worked with composition students."

Scott recalls a session in which Crumb analyzed a Beethoven sonata.

"He played the exposition, then stopped and said: 'Now here Beethoven might have done this.'

"He improvised a new development section for the score.

"That was a bold undertaking, and George did it well. It was terrific."

Especially important for Crumb was his collaboration in Boulder with David Burge, a CU pianist strongly committed to new music.

"In 1962 David and I worked together on Five Pieces, the first work in which I went inside the piano," Crumb says. "I knew that John Cage had written for prepared piano, but I hadn't heard his music. For me this was something new.

"It greatly extended the expressive range of the instrument."

A refreshing voice

Only those who heard Crumb in those years understand what an original -- and refreshing -- voice he was.

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Election Guide

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An exhibit of Crumb scores will be on display in the Imig Music Building and a video of scores and related images will be shown on the ATLAS Video Wall throughout the festival.

New music was then highly academic and often cerebral; the work of Schoenberg's student Anton Weber was a central influence.

And the Moog, the first synthesizer, was new, and electronic composition was fast gaining favor.

"I always felt that music should be open to a variety of influences," Crumb says. "And I never was interested in technical games.

"I felt the performer should be on stage, and that a work should be enriched by changing interpretations.

"That's the way music renews itself."

(At its most rigid, an electronic composition was committed to tape and heard as a recording. This allowed the composer to define one valid interpretation of his work.)

Crumb left Boulder to spend a year on a special project at the University of New York in Buffalo and then moved on to the University of Pennsylvania, where he taught until his retirement a decade ago.

It was only in his 30s, Crumb admits, that he found his own voice.

"And that's what I wanted my students to do," he says. "I wasn't interested in clones; I wanted them to look deep inside themselves."

And the result is heard in composers such as Jennifer Higdon and Oswald Golijov, two of today's top younger masters who studied with Crumb at Penn.

"They're as different from each other as they can be," Crumb says. "And I'm proud of what my students from Europe, Asia and Israel have accomplished."

Turning the page

Although Crumb enjoyed teaching, he found it exhausting.

"It sucks you dry," he says. "I'm delighted in the time I've had to compose since retiring."

In recent years Crumb's major Boulder voice -- quite literally -- has been CU's Patrick Mason, who performs two of his large works within the celebration.

Tuesday Mason and colleague Julie Simson sing "Voices from a Forgotten World," which he premiered in Philadelphia in 2007.

"It's the fifth of Crumb's 'American Songbooks,' the central endeavor of his recent years," Mason says. "And although you'll recognize the songs -- 'Beautiful Dreamer' and 'Bringing in the Sheaves' -- these are not mere settings or arrangements.

"George has taken pieces you know and twisted them around to make something new."

Allan McMurray conducts the songs, scored for piano and large percussion battery.

Thursday Mason sings the world premiere of "The Ghosts of Alhambra," settings of seven poems by Federico Garcia Lorca, the tragic Spanish poet who has been a source of inspiration for Crumb throughout his career.

"This is serious music of a dark sensibility," Mason says. "And George's use of harmony in it has gotten me to listen to music in a different way."

And mentioning that Crumb, despite his commitment to vocal music, has never written an opera, the singer points to "a theatrical bend" in this cycle.

"There's a lot of humanity in it -- love and empathy," Mason says. "It's music that isn't just pretty."

Guitarist David Starobin and percussionist John Kinze share the stage in this performance.

"It's exciting to be at the university where George Crumb started out," says Daniel Kellogg, whose reputation as a composer has reached international dimensions. "I first heard his music in 1994 when I was a student in Aspen.

"It was mind-blowing!"

Kellogg speaks of the impact that Crumb continues to have on younger composers.

"He made the ear his arbiter," he says. "For him the important question is always: 'how does it sound?'"

"Crumb knows how to make music challenging -- and also fun. He's had a tremendous impact on all of us."

A grand celebration

"This celebration is an immense undertaking," says Pendulum director Hsing-ay Hsu, on stage as a pianist in several festival performances. "And it's an important part of our efforts to underscore Boulder's growing reputation as a center for new music."

On October 2, as something of a coda to the festival, the Kronos String Quartet performs "Black Angels," Crumb's reaction to the Vietnam war.

Kronos, which specializes in new music, was originally formed when violinist David Harrington heard "Black Angels" over the radio.

He thought Crumb's piece was "something wild, something scary" and "absolutely the right music to play."

It was the first composition Kronos performed.

CU awarded George Crumb an honorary doctorate in 1999.



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