

# A Conversation with George Crumb

---

One of the objects of the George Crumb Festival in Boulder (October 9-12, 1992) was to introduce the composer to present day Boulderites in an informative but informal atmosphere. To this end Thomas Riis conducted a public interview with Crumb on Saturday morning, October 10. An audience of about thirty people attended, listened attentively, and often participated themselves, as they had been invited to do by Festival director Steven Bruns. The following is a partial transcript of that interview/discussion.

TR: Let's go back to your beginnings. What music did you hear when you were growing up in West Virginia?

GC: My parents were both musicians. My father was a clarinetist and my mother a cellist. They played in local chamber music concerts and both were in the local orchestra. This was in Charleston, West Virginia, in the heart of Appalachia, not a place a lot of people see. [*To audience*] Has anybody been to Charleston, West Virginia? I had a lot of music in my ears as a kid. My father taught me clarinet. He started me quite young and wanted to make a clarinetist out of me. In fact, he started me so young I had to use the little E-flat clarinet. I couldn't quite reach the holes of the B-flat instrument! I've often felt that this gave my ears a kind of treble bias which has lasted all my life. So there was a lot of chamber music in the house. I don't know whether that tradition exists so much nowadays, but I'm speaking of the late 30s and 40s period.

TR: Was there concert life in Charleston at that time?

GC: Yes, there was a sort of minimal concert life. There was a community orchestra. Perhaps the standards were not so high that I could hear what an orchestra truly sounded like. At least there was some music to hear. I suppose, like all Americans at that time or any time, I heard the pop music of the day and a lot of folk music, which is rather strong in Appalachia.

TR: Do you remember any particular folk performers that you heard?

GC: I don't remember any specific names. The performers in the country style in those days were more anonymous than they are now. These were sounds in the air. We had our kind of church music, like Ives, who heard revival hymns. I'm trying to convey that there was a lot of music going around. I think all composers draw on what they've lived and heard. We have memories and everything we've heard becomes a part of our subconscious.

TR: And we hear unconsciously. I guess the sounds that people think of as most Crumb-like are small cells that ring. You've said elsewhere that your interest in color comes from Bartók and Debussy. Did you hear these sounds in Charleston?

GC: I think I first heard Bartók in the late 40s, still in Charleston. It was very new to the United States. The real impact of Bartók was not quite felt in 1947 and 1948. I suppose Claude Debussy would have been considered very contemporary music circa 1948 in this place [Charleston].

TR: Did you actually study the *Mikrokosmos* of Bartók . . . all the way through the sixth book?

GC: I saw some of the little pieces. I don't think I had Book Six in those days, but I had seen a few pieces from the earlier volumes. It opened up the world to my ears. We had radio. We weren't restricted to just live performances. We had the New York Philharmonic on the radio and the NBC radio orchestra and international broadcasts. My father had records, this many [*holding his hands about a yard apart*]. 78 recordings. Of course that's not too many pieces. The Beethoven Ninth symphony was a stack [*about six inches high*]. [*Audience laughter*] So it was different then. I'm not really convinced that it's a bad thing to be a bit impoverished when you're developing. I didn't suffer from being away from the big city. I don't think it hurts at all. You get your own ideas and don't feel too much influenced.

TR: Do you remember hearing any specific pieces and saying to yourself, "I want to use *that* sound?"

GC: Well, I loved Russian music, the "nationalists" with their brilliant orchestration, and of course all earlier traditional music. I have to say I think my background is very traditional. I felt very much at home with traditional music.

TR: Musical saws, mandolins and banjos come from your West Virginia background. Are there other types of sound, aspects of timbre, that you attribute to oral traditions?

GC: That's true, I've used those relatively unusual instruments and I have to say I think they should become part of the percussionist's normal equipment. Percussionists with their skillful mallet technique adapt easily to instruments like the Hungarian cimbalom (a board with strings and crazy cross-tuning!) or the Appalachian hammered dulcimer.

TR: When did you realize that writing music was your gift, your talent?

GC: All I knew as a very young kid was the Viennese Classical repertory. I started writing little pieces in the Mozart style. I always joke that at the age I was writing in the Mozart style, Mozart was also writing in the

Mozart style! [*Audience laughter*] It was a rather depressing thought! This is a normal way to develop. There are a number of young composers here, and you know, you really have to go through the history of music almost methodically, writing pieces that are copies of earlier composers. You're sort of reprising the history of music in your development as a young composer. Of course you eventually get frustrated with that and say, "Enough of this rewriting." One's own personal "voice" wants to emerge. We all have different genes and different DNA structure. We all have something personal to express and that's what you aim for, but that's a slow process, perhaps slower today than in earlier times. Nowadays our ears are open to everything and we have to process it all. That's what makes it so difficult in trying to form our own styles. There's so much to work through.

TR: I have to ask this question. I'm sure you've only heard it a thousand times. For those in the audience who love your music but know less about García Lorca, could you tell us a bit about him and how you got to know his poetry that you use so often?

GC: Lorca was an important poet in modern Spain. His poetry really summarizes the mystical aspects of Spain. There is a dark cast in much of his poetry that is traditionally Spanish. Lorca himself made a very illuminating remark about Spain and about his poetry. He said, "In Spain dead people are deadlier than anyplace else in the world." [*Audience laughter*] Which is kind of a black thought. The idea of the darker aspects of life becomes an exalted element in his poetry. People used to accuse me of being too dark. Of course, Lorca wrote some joyous poetry too. I've tried to also set some of his more joyous poetry. I think one reason I was attracted to him as a student (after I found a bilingual edition of his poetry) was his philosophy—he's somehow reconciled the joyous and the tragic. Both sides are represented in my favorite music, all the music that I love. In Mozart there's an affirmative, almost childlike quality, but there are underlying ironies as well. Even [in] the innocuous beginnings of certain of his piano sonatas there is a surface nonchalance, but there is at the same time a dark side underneath.

TR: So you were maybe seeking a balance that we don't always see. How has your music been received in Spanish-speaking countries? In Spain itself? I wonder how audiences respond to your treatment of his images.

GC: *Ancient Voices of Children* was performed in Madrid, but I couldn't attend. I once many years ago had a letter from Lorca's brother who said he liked my settings of Lorca's poetry. There have been numerous performances of some of my Lorca pieces in Latin America, in Mexico, Argentina, Colombia, Venezuela, and even in Brazil where the

language is Portuguese. And I was happy with their reaction to my work. I was dreading that they would say, “Oh, what horrible settings of these Spanish words,” since I don’t speak Spanish and only read a little. But they didn’t.

TR: Have you noticed any particular upsurge in interest in your music with the popularity of the so-called magical realist writers of the last few years. I’m think of Isabel Allende and Gabriel García-Marquez.

GC: No, not specifically in relation to these writers. Lorca of course was an international figure long ago, and he was an all-around artist. He did some graphics and had some musical talent. He made little guitar arrangements of Spanish folk tunes. He understood notation and did it all himself. He knew many Spanish painters, like Dali. He was interested in all aspects of Spanish culture. This leads me to an idea—that all composers have to find that poet whose words he or she can deal with in terms of musical imagery.

TR: Is that how you start to compose? Or is it one of the ways?

GC: Of course in a vocal work the poetry is central. Some composers improvise a bit to get their ideas flowing. I suppose everyone is different in the way they work.

TR: Obviously part of the wonderful eeriness of your music is your use of drones and ostinatos, but for me it isn’t just the repetition of a sound that is crucial, but the sound as echo, which is almost a living being. When you are a child and you first hear your voice echoing, you know it’s alive but it’s not alive. What’s your take on this?

GC: I once commented on that, maybe too fancifully. All of us have something built into our ears that comes from the place where we grow up and where we were as children. It is structured into our hearing. Now it may be fanciful, but I think if you come from the desert the silence is almost deafening. If you come from the seashore, the woods, or New York City, the acoustic is always different. I came from a place where echoes existed, a river town with mountains, not the mountains you have here, but hills nonetheless. You could hear sounds from across the river because they echoed off the hills. So I love reverberating sounds, sounds that ricochet, or sounds that go on and on and on. For example, when I write for piano I make sure the damper pedal is clamped down pretty much throughout the piece. There are composers like Igor Stravinsky whose ideal in sound was the *secco* sound. Very dry. The sound he loved could never be dry enough. When he conducted his own music it had to be desiccated. Maybe St. Petersburg produced a music of desiccation. I don’t know.

TR: Issues of time and form and so on are crucial in your pieces. Do you plot out rhythms, rhythmical structures in advance, like Medieval motets?

GC: Yes, there is something quasi-Medieval in my music. I've also heard a lot of Eastern music. I visited China some years ago and they wanted to make me an honorary Chinese composer because they heard something in my music that sounded Chinese to them, something I'd unconsciously appropriated, I guess. That's what we are today; we're composites. Our ears are open geographically. I often joke, when we first make contact with alien life in outer space, think what that will do to us! To our ears! We'll have to have millions of new musicologists to deal with those new literatures. [Laughter]

TR: That's a scary thought, speaking as a musicologist. [Laughter] We're doing all of the *Makrokosmos* set this weekend. It's a fascinating rainbow of sounds. I notice that you've dedicated several movements, through their initials, to friends. And you include your own initials in *Makrokosmos I* and give the movement the title "The Phantom Gondolier." Can you explain that? Is there some sort of Venetian fantasy here? I hope this isn't too personal a question.

GC: Oh, these are just poetical titles. That's one way I can avoid that question. [General laughter]

TR: I won't press you.

GC: Never pin a composer down with his titles.

TR: Since we're here in Boulder, I want to circle back and talk about your time here in the early 1960s. You came here to teach class piano, isn't that right?

GC: Yes, and I had secondary piano students in private lessons.

TR: And were you allowed to pretty much compose as you pleased?

GC: Well, there was a recession going on in 1959. I'd been out of school and I needed a job. I couldn't find anything in composition, so when I heard of this position I applied for it. I loved it in Boulder because everyone was so encouraging. I think Storm Bull was secretly pleased to have a composer on the piano faculty. He overlooked my relative ineptitude at the keyboard, didn't expect virtuoso technique, and encouraged my writing. I was lucky I wasn't fired because I couldn't keep up with the piano guys. I was allowed to do my own thing.

TR: Do you recall when you first had David Burge pluck the inside of a piano and you collaborated with him?

GC: At that time (in 1962) I wrote the *Five Pieces*, the first work that included extended piano techniques. I hadn't heard John Cage or [Henry] Cowell's pieces using special techniques. I independently explored those resources. Of course later I did become familiar with Cage and Cowell. But of course I developed in a different direction.

TR: I think elsewhere you have dated your personal style from the Colorado years. Would it be fair to say that the Crumb signature was created in Boulder?

GC: Well, I think that's true. Things come together at a certain point. As a composer moves through life, a very important rite of passage is when you find out what you are all about, you develop fingerprints or, probably more accurately, you allow your fingerprints to appear in the music. Look, of course no music is completely original, personal music. That's a psychological impossibility, because we have memories and have been influenced by so much.

TR: And expectations. Speaking of Boulder and the 60s, I was going to ask about campus turmoil and politics. You've written works that have in some way been a response to social issues—*Black Angels* had to do with Vietnam and in 1985 *An Idyll for the Misbegotten* had a clear ecological message, you've said. How do you understand the contemporary composer's role in politics, the issues of the day?

GC: That's an interesting point, Tom. I've always been a little suspicious about writing political statements in music. I'm not sure music can carry the weight of propaganda.

TR: You're not writing any campaign songs for the coming elections?

GC: No. There are works though that are right on the edge of this sort of thing, Schoenberg's *Survivor from Warsaw*, for instance. And of course music always exists in a specific time and reflects currents of thinking, but in a more generalized way. The *Eroica* Symphony is genuinely heroic and tells us something about how the world was changing then. But you know Beethoven tore up the Napoleon dedication. That was too specific. I think he realized that before he finished the work and became disenchanted with Napoleon. The music was a more general expression of his time.

[An audience member raises the issue of the influence of politics and the 20th-century Russians, Prokofiev and Shostakovich.]

GC: You know that in that case [of Shostakovich], he wasn't wanting to affirm his own politics. In fact, political pressure really drove Shostakovich to be introspective. You know his best works are probably his string quartets, which are more introspective and personal. On the Prokofiev issue, I don't know—Russian history would show how an outside force can work on a composer and how it can work adversely on the human creative spirit. In a similar way, we have the Yellow River Concerto [in China] from some years back—propaganda-influenced music, I think. Well, this was even the case in Beethoven's last years. I guess it was pretty much a police state in Austria for a while. And Beethoven could get away with criticizing the regime

because he was well known and they didn't dare touch him. But I think what was happening then may have driven even him to more introspection and soul-searching in his late quartets and late piano sonatas.

TR: That brings up the question, how do you deal with the critics? Do you just ignore them?

GC: I read the critics, and I save the reviews, even the bad ones. I enjoy reviews. Sometimes I enjoy the bad reviews the most! I like to see what people say about my pieces even if its completely negative. Probably the worst kind of review is when they use a word like "interesting" and leave it at that.

**Audience question:** In the prefatory statement to *An Idyll for the Misbegotten*, you made an interesting comment about humans being "monarchs of a dying world." Politics notwithstanding, do you think environmental issues will influence your writing in the future?

GC: These are the only two of my works [*An Idyll for the Misbegotten* and *Vox Balaenae*] that are environmental pieces, and I suppose they are "statements." I think of music as being so intimately connected with nature to start with, though. Composers that influenced my music wrote nature music. Debussy was a composer who was refracting through his aural prism the sounds of nature, replicating the rhythms of nature. Maybe this is an ancient Greek idea.

TR: You were writing before the current crop of minimalists were getting big commissions. How do you see yourself in relation to Philip Glass and Steve Reich and John Adams? Do you know them personally?

GC: I've met only Reich among those composers. Some of the pieces are rather intriguing. Minimalism is one way of constructing music, but I would have to say that much of this music is all too minimal for my ears. I think there's not enough information for the ear. That's a personal bias, of course. I would also say that most music in the world is essentially minimal in the sense of being economical, but I am attracted to music with more richness of vocabulary, more range.

TR: (*prompting*) Interruption, surprise?

GC: Uh, huh, but minimalism has nonetheless been an interesting development. You know it has a counterpart in Europe, but maybe it was more important a few years ago than now. I think there is more searching going on, on larger questions, as we approach the end of the century—the mystique of the *fin de siècle*. It is going to be a period of searching.

TR: You've never written electronic music and I think that's an important part of your aesthetic.

GC: I've never felt the need of using synthesized sound, although I can admire someone like Davidovsky who seems to be able to combine live

and electronic sounds in imaginative ways. My music really depends on a live situation and includes what I call the “danger element.” That is the element that comes from the live situation. There are precarious things in the music, and the audience is waiting to see how performers will conquer those difficulties. Pieces can be treacherous things, fragile things that can break. And the composer depends on the performer for a certain kind of bravura. Whereas in a purely electronic piece there is no danger or bravura element. You can’t just admire the machine—it’s bound to work if the electricity doesn’t go off. You know the piece is there. It exists but there is no “danger element.” Perhaps a composer like J.S. Bach could achieve bravura by purely compositional means. That’s why Bach works so well when it is turned into synthesized sound. However, Bach could be played on ten banjos and it would still sound great. The sounds of electronic music are nonetheless interesting and I will say my own music has been influenced by electronic sound.

TR: One of the things about your music that sometimes strikes us is that it sounds so spontaneous. But of course the notation is very precise. You say Bach is very bravura on the page, but I think some of your music has that quality.

GC: Well, I think one can suggest an improvisatory character in the actual notation—nuances of tempo rubato, for example. Chopin comes to mind in this connection.

*[An audience member questions Crumb about the Kronos Quartet performances of “Black Angels.”]*

GC: I’ve not heard them in live performance, and I was not in on the recording session. Of course, once a piece is available, you can do different things with the music. Dancers take on pieces and sometimes give them dimensions that a composer doesn’t even think about. A film may use a Ligeti score or any piece of concert music, but the music doesn’t lose integrity. I tend not to be bothered when I hear different interpretations of my works in performance.

**Audience question:** You talked about critics earlier. Aren’t the best critics your contemporaries? When another composer uses your sound isn’t that the biggest compliment you can get?

GC: Well, we all steal from each other. Stravinsky said, you know, “Good composers steal, they don’t borrow.” What he meant was, you rob and make it your own, whereas if you borrow you don’t make it your own. Music is full of cross-references. When we hear a new work our ears can pick up these associations. That’s the culture of music. Young composers can make anything a point of departure. [Peter] Maxwell Davies can derive inspiration from Medieval music! A composer can take off from any point of departure. He can make a point of contact

and a sort of arch over the centuries.

TR: We know you've used Bach, Mahler, Chopin. Do you have a philosophy of quotation?

GC: Well, there is a reason—an explanation—for the quote from the *Hammerklavier* in *Makrokosmos II*. It comes from a science fiction work I've read by Fred Hoyle, called *The Black Cloud*. Hoyle was an astronomer and an important English scientist. He was the astronomer royal and wrote science fiction as a hobby. He also knew a lot about music. Anyway, the Black Cloud is coming to choke earth. It is not evil or antagonistic, but it needs some place to roost. The people have to communicate with the Cloud, to tell it that it has to move on, that there is culture on the planet Earth. They discuss the problem and how to communicate with it; should it be in German, Swahili, Chinese? None of the Earth's languages will do, but Beethoven's *Hammerklavier* has the power to convey a message to the cloud. It works! It understands. This is exalted stuff, the *Hammerklavier* sonata. That's why I quote a little of the *Hammerklavier*.

**Audience question:** How do you encourage students to use their own individual voice?

GC: It usually doesn't happen when they are young—although there might be hints about their future developments. There is so much music to work through and come to terms with for young composers. Fortunately, composers seem to live longer these days. If I were Mozart, I would have been dead already thirty years. [Audience laughter] So maybe we develop a little later and we have a few more years to get down whatever music we have in us.

TR: What are you working on now?

GC: The last piece I completed was a piece for carillon. I've an unfinished work for guitar and chamber ensemble. I have sketches for other things, too.

**Audience question:** Where do you start on the blank page? Do you start with intervals or what?

GC: I do a lot of sketching, creating germinal cells, selecting those tiny elements I later combine in a mosaic.

**Audience question:** A certain amount has been made of numerology in your works. One can occasionally find a twelve-tone row. Did you ever take any interest in serialism?

GC: When I was a student in Ann Arbor in the 1960s, I tried some exercises in twelve-tone technique, but I could never make it work for me. I was interested in Dallapiccola. He used a rotational system, very

logical, but very personal. But I couldn't make it work myself, so I didn't follow through on that. I decided I was more interested in combining different systems à la Debussy or Charles Ives. Numerology occurred to me when writing *Black Angels*, so I structured in a symbolic use of the magic numbers 7 and 13. My music is very much involved with symmetrical structures, and combines tonality, modality, atonality, whole-tone effects, etc. Some of it is quite dissonant, but it's still basically tonal.

**Audience question:** Can you speak about the evolution of your sonority, how it developed from your studies?

GC: I was influenced by so many earlier composers. Bartók's music, for example. Just think how much he did in the whole area of timbre. However, my music is paced much slower than Bartók, I guess. . You know Stravinsky said once that all music has its specific internal tempo which has to do with the relative speed of the harmonic rhythm. He said he really didn't understand Schoenberg because his sense of movement was much faster than his own. Mine would be on the other side of Stravinsky—much slower. Schoenberg had a quick mind and a fast metabolism, I guess. There are people like that, on either side of the norm. Maybe Stravinsky would be the norm. Mine is more glacial, like the sloth or some even slower animal. [Laughter]

**Audience question:** Can you talk about the future of music?

GC: I really can't. I'm only confident that music will be reinvented again and again. It always happens.

**Audience question:** Can you comment on the interface between language and music?

GC: Language is one-dimensional. In a room with people talking you can't follow four conversations at once, which is not to say there aren't expressive dimensions in language. In music you have many more dimensions, tiers of the voice. It is incredible that someone invented this multi-dimensional language; it not only moves through time in a linear way, but is involved with texture and the coming together of many layers at many different levels. It is an incredible thing. Perhaps I am biased when I say that music goes beyond language, but it does.