



AMERICAN CLASSICS



George
CRUMB



Schweizer Radio DRS 2

Songs, Drones, and Refrains of Death

Ensemble New Art • Fuat Kent



George Crumb (b. 1929)

Songs, Drones, and Refrains of Death (Texts by Federico Garcia Lorca) • Quest

From 1962 until 1970 much of my creative activity was focused on the composition of an extended cycle of vocal works based on the poetry of Federico García Lorca. The cycle includes *Night Music I* (1963) for soprano, keyboard, and percussion, four books of *Madrigals* (1965-69) for soprano and a varying instrumental combination, *Songs, Drones, and Refrains of Death* (1968) for baritone, electric instruments, and percussion, *Night of the Four Moons* (1969) for alto, banjo, alto flute, amplified cello, and percussion, and *Ancient Voices of Children* (1970) for soprano, boy soprano, and seven instrumentalists.

Of the eight works constituting the cycle, *Songs, Drones, and Refrains of Death* is the largest in conception and the most intensely dramatic in its projection of Lorca's dark imagery. Although the first sketches for the work date from 1962, it was only in 1968 that I felt I had evolved a definitive form for my musical ideas. *Songs, Drones, and Refrains* was commissioned by the University of Iowa and first performed in the spring of 1969.

The important formal elements of the work are identified in the title. These are, first, the settings of four of Lorca's most beautiful death-poems: *The Guitar*, *Casida of the Dark Doves*, *Song of the Rider, 1860*, and *Casida of the Boy Wounded by the Water*. Each of these settings is preceded by an instrumental "refrain" (also containing vocal elements projected by the instrumentalists, in most cases purely phonetic sounds) which presents, in various guises, the rhythmic, fateful motif heard at the beginning of the work. And finally, three long "Death-Drones" based on the interval of the fourth, and played by the amplified contrabass) dominate the musical texture in the first and last songs, and in Refrain 3.

García Lorca's poetry, with its fantastically rich expression and evocative power, provides an admirable vehicle for musical re-creation. *The Guitar*, starkly fatalistic, portrays a mood of utter desolation, and yet,

there is also a sense of wonder, of profound mystery. The opening lines of the poem - "The lament of the guitar begins. The wine cups of daybreak are broken. The lament of the guitar begins. It is useless to hush it. It is impossible to hush it." - contain one of Lorca's oft recurrent images: the guitar as the primitive voice of the world's darkness and evil (in another poem, *Malagueña*: "Black horses and villainous people move along the deep paths of the guitar"). My setting of this poem includes cadenzas in quasi-Flamenco style for the more surreal electric guitar.

The *Casida of the Dark Doves*, with its undercurrent of irony (indicated in the score: "gently sardonic; in a bizarre, fantastic style"), provides a necessary moment of relief from the prevailing darkness and intensity of the work. I have sought to enhance the eerie whimsy of the poem by directing the baritone to sing in variously stylized manners ("mock-lyric", "mock-menacing", or "in mock-chant style"). The instrumental parts in the score are laid out in circular notations, which represent, symbolically, "el Sol" and "la Luna" (Sun and Moon).

The *Song of the Rider, 1860* is a poem of violence and terror. In my earlier *Madrigals, Book II*, I had set only the refrain lines ("Little black horse. Whither with your dead rider? Little cold horse. What a scent of the flower of a knife!"), but in this complete setting of the poem I feel that I have more faithfully conveyed the demonic power of Lorca's imagination. The song is headed with the direction: "breathlessly, with relentlessly driving rhythm!" and the image of the galloping little horse is projected by the wild, hammered rhythms of lujon, crotales, drums, mallet instruments, and electric harpsichord. The climax of the song is marked by a thundering passage entitled "Cadenza appassionata for two drummers." The prototype of the genre represented by *Song of the Rider, 1860* is obviously Schubert's *Erkönig*.

The final *Casida of the Boy Wounded by the Water* is my favorite of the various Lorca poems I have set

over the years. The dream-like beginning of this song, with its gentle oscillation between the pitches B / G sharp and the tender lyricism of the baritone melody, is consciously reminiscent of Mahler. The third and final “Death-drone” announces the dark, impassioned central stanza of the poem. The drone takes the form of a huge, sustained crescendo; at the point of maximum intensity (“What a fury of love, what a wounding edge, such nocturnal murmurs, such a white death!”) the screaming voice of a flexitone is heard; the drone seems to “explode”, and as the intensity subsides the music takes on an aura of transfiguration. The opening music is heard once again, this time punctuated by the deep bourdon sounds of piano and contrabass. Two gently flowing phrases played on water-tuned crystal glasses conclude the work.

Lorca’s haunting, even mystical vision of death, which embodies, and yet transcends the ancient Spanish tradition, is the seminal force of his dark genius. In composing *Songs, Drones, and Refrains of Death* I wanted to find a musical language which might complement this very beautiful poetry.

Quest was composed at the request of the guitarist David Starobin and was commissioned by Albert Augustine, Ltd. The final revised version of the work was completed in February, 1994, and is dedicated to David Starobin and Speculum Musicae.

Over the years David Starobin had played virtually all the various parts I had composed for plucked instruments - mandolin in *Ancient Voices of Children*, electric guitar in *Songs, Drones, and Refrains of Death*, sitar in *Lux Aeterna*, and banjo in *Night of the Four Moons*. In requesting this new piece he specified only that I write for acoustic guitar and that the guitar part be treated solistically.

I initially toyed with the idea of a piece for guitar alone, but feelings of insecurity in regard to guitar technique and idiom led me quickly to the conception of

an ensemble work. Within the chosen sextet of players the guitar remains the principal protagonist, but other instruments, especially the soprano saxophone, can also take over the principal “voice”. The inclusion of a wide variety of percussion instruments gave me an exceptionally colourful palette of timbral and sonic possibilities. I would specifically cite rather unusual instruments such as the Appalachian hammered dulcimer, the African talking drum, and the Mexican rain stick.

The poetic basis for *Quest* was never very clearly articulated in my thinking. I recall pondering images such as the famous incipit of Dante’s *Inferno* (“In the midway of this our mortal life, I found me in a gloomy wood, astray ...”) and a line from Lorca (“The dark paths of the guitar”); also the concept of a “quest” as a long tortuous journey towards an ecstatic and transfigured feeling of “arrival” became associated with certain musical ideas during the sketching process. But although the movement titles are poetic and symbolic, there is no precise programmatic meaning implied. There is one use of musical quotation in the work: phrases from the famous hymn tune *Amazing Grace* are played by the soprano saxophone - initially, at the conclusion of *Dark Paths*, over a delicate web of percussion sonority, and finally, in *Nocturnal*, over a sequentially slowing ostinato of bare fifths in the harp and contrabass. On the very last page of the score a distant echo of the tune is intoned by a harmonica, or, as in this recording, a concertina.

The composition of *Quest* turned out to be much more of an arduous “quest” than I could ever have imagined. An incomplete version was first performed in Amsterdam as early as 1989, as a work-in-progress, but only after several more years of constant revision did the work reach its present form.

George Crumb

George Crumb

George Crumb's reputation as a composer of hauntingly beautiful scores has made him one of the most frequently performed composers in today's musical world. From Los Angeles to Moscow, and from Scandinavia to South America, festivals devoted to the music of George Crumb have sprung up like wildflowers. Now celebrating his 75th birthday year, Crumb, the winner of a 2001 Grammy Award and the 1968 Pulitzer Prize in Music, continues to compose new scores that enrich the musical lives of those who come in contact with his profoundly humanistic art.

George Henry Crumb was born in Charleston, West Virginia on 24th October 1929. He studied at the Mason College of Music in Charleston and received the Bachelor's degree in 1950. Thereafter he studied for the Master's degree at the University of Illinois, Champaign-Urbana, under Eugene Weigel. He continued his studies under Boris Blacher at the Hochschule für Musik, Berlin, from 1954-1955. He received the D.M.A. in 1959 from the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, after studying with Ross Lee Finney.

George Crumb's early compositions include *Three Early Songs* (1947), for voice and piano, *Sonata* (1955) for solo violoncello, and *Variazioni* (1959) for orchestra, the composer's doctoral thesis. In the 1960s and 1970s, George Crumb produced a series of highly influential pieces that were immediately taken up by soloists and ensembles throughout the world. Many of these were vocal works based on the poetry of Federico García Lorca, including *Ancient Voices of Children* (1970), *Madrigals, Books 1-4* (1965, 69), *Night of the Four Moons* (1969), and *Songs, Drones and Refrains of Death* (1968). Other major works from this period include *Black Angels* (1970), for electric string quartet, *Vox Balaenae* (1971), for electric flute, electric cello and amplified piano, *Makrokosmos, Volumes 1 and 2* (1972-73) for amplified piano, *Music for a Summer Evening* (1974) for two amplified pianos and percussion, and Crumb's largest score, *Star-Child* (1977), for soprano, solo trombone, antiphonal children's voices, male speaking choir, bell ringers and large orchestra. George Crumb's most recent works include *Eine Kleine Mitternachtmusik* for solo piano (2001), *Otherworldly Resonances* for two pianos (2002) and a four-part song cycle, *American Songbook (The River of Life, A Journey Beyond Time, Unto the Hills, The Winds of Destiny)* (2001-2004).

In his music George Crumb often juxtaposes contrasting musical styles. The references range from music of the western art-music tradition, to hymns and folk-music, to non-Western musics. Many of Crumb's works include programmatic, symbolic, mystical and theatrical elements, which are often reflected in his beautiful and meticulously notated scores. A shy, yet warmly eloquent personality, Crumb retired from his teaching position at the University of Pennsylvania after more than thirty years of service. Awarded honorary doctorates by numerous universities and the recipient of dozens of awards and prizes, Crumb makes his home in Pennsylvania, in the same house where he and his wife of more than fifty years raised their three children. George Crumb's music is published by C.F. Peters.

George Crumb is the recipient of numerous awards. These range from the Elizabeth Croft fellowship for study, Berkshire Music Centre, 1955, to the 1998 Cannes Classical Award for Best CD of a Living Composer, the 2001 Grammy for Best Contemporary Composition (*Star-Child*) and nomination in 2004 by Musical America as Composer of the Year.

Nicholas Isherwood

The bass Nicholas Isherwood is one of the leading singers of early music and contemporary music in the world today. He has worked with conductors such as Joel Cohen, William Christie, Peter Eötvös, Paul McCreesh, Nicholas McGegan, Kent Nagano, Zubin Mehta and Gennadi Rozhdestvensky and composers Sylvano Bussotti, Elliott Carter, Hans Werner Henze, Mauricio Kagel, György Kurtág, Olivier Messiaen, Giacinto Scelsi, Karlheinz Stockhausen and Iannis Xenakis. With George Crumb he has given numerous performances of the *Songs*, *Drones* and *Refrains of Death*, and the European première of *Unto the Hills*. His performances range from the rôle of Plutone in Monteverdi's *Il ballo delle ingrate* at the Angers Opera, Antinoo in *Il ritorno di Ulisse in patria*, and Satrio in Luigi Rossi's *Orfeo* at the Châtelet and for a European tour and Harmonia Mundi records, to Frère Léon in Messiaen's *Saint François d'Assise* in the last composer supervised production, performed at the Royal Festival Hall for the composer's eightieth birthday, the rôle of Death in Victor Ullmann's *Der Kaiser von Atlantis* and of Lucifer in the world premières of Karlheinz Stockhausen's operas *Montag*, *Dienstag*, and *Freitag* from *Licht* at La Scala and the Leipzig Opera. As an improviser he has performed with Steve Lacy, Joelle Léandre, Sainkho Namtchilak and David Moss, and has recorded over forty CDs for major record companies. He often teaches master-classes and gives lectures at institutions that have included the Paris Conservatoire, Salzburg Mozarteum, and Stanford University.

Alexander Swete

Alexander Swete was born in Bregenz and studied there at the Regional Conservatory and in Vienna at the Musikhochschule. He was a prize-winner in an international guitar competition held in Havana in 1988 and in the Munch ARD Competition in 1989, and took first prize in 1991 at the Paris Concours International de Guitare. His concert career has brought appearances throughout the world, with broadcasts, television appearances and recordings. He has collaborated with leading orchestras and conductors, with chamber ensembles and with distinguished singers, given master-classes and served on the juries of international competitions. He teaches at the Vienna University for Music and the Performing Arts and is guest professor at the University of Sarajevo.

Francisco Obieta

A native of Buenos Aires, the double bass player Francisco Obieta studied agronomy while pursuing his musical training. Since 1988 he has served as second principal double bass in the St Gallen Symphony Orchestra and as professor at the Feldkirch Regional Conservatory. From 1984 to 1986 he held a Yehudi Menuhin Scholarship at Gstaad. The composers J. Mortimer, Franz Kikel and Peter Herbert have dedicated concertos to him, with the premières broadcast live by ORF. He has served as a jury member on various international competitions, collaborated in a number of chamber music ensembles and leads the successful tango group Sur. He has given many recitals, concerts and broadcasts, participated in a number of recordings and given special attention to research in electronic music.

Carmen Erb

The percussionist Carmen Erb was born in Zurich and studied there at the Musikhochschule, playing with the Zurich Opera and other Swiss orchestras. As a chamber musician she is a member of the New Art and Opera Nova ensembles.

Hans-Peter Achberger

Hans-Peter Achberger studied percussion at the Feldkirch and Zurich Conservatories, and at the University of Freiburg im Breisgau studied Sinology, Philosophy and Musicology. He specialises in a range of music from contemporary percussion to dulcimer and psaltery works of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. He is a principal in the Zurich Opera Orchestra and appears in a variety of chamber music ensembles and as a soloist.

Peter Degenhardt

Peter Degenhardt was born in Kassel. He studied with Andor Foldes and Aloys Kontarsky, has appeared as a soloist and in chamber music and founded a piano duo with Fuat Kent and a duo with the saxophonist Hugo Read. He is a professor at the Cologne Musikhochschule.

Hugo Read

As a kind of European counterpart to Steve Coleman, Hugo Read has developed an independent way of playing and composing in which new jazz, elements of contemporary music, rhythmical energy and electronic additions are combined to create a sound world of his own. Read, who is regarded as a typical representative of the new European jazz generation, wants to cross borders between new classical music and jazz, and in addition he regards himself as a composer of mostly suite-like forms as a basis of his work. From 1972 Read studied the flute at the Cologne College of Music with Prof. Ulrich and later classical saxophone with Prof. Buschmann. Since that time there have been international concert activities in the fields of jazz and new classical music, as well as productions of chamber music. He has performed as a soloist with orchestras, including the Ensemble Modern and the New Art Ensemble, as well as with all the major European radio companies.

Silke Aichhorn

The harpist Silke Aichhorn is one of most active and versatile performers of her generation, appearing as a soloist and as a recitalist. She was trained at the Lausanne Conservatoire and Cologne Musikhochschule and has triumphed in a number of international competitions. With a comprehensive repertoire, she has appeared throughout Europe, in the United States and in Japan. She is a member of the Arpa Cantabile Trio, the Spohr Duo and the Salzburg Austrian Ensemble for New Music, and has made a number of recordings, together with broadcast and televised performances.

Fuat Kent

The pianist and conductor Fuat Kent was born in Istanbul in 1945. He studied in Paris and now lives in Austria, where, in 1991, he established the Ensemble New Art, dedicated to the performance of contemporary music.



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George Crumb's reputation as a composer of hauntingly beautiful scores has made him one of the most frequently performed composers today. *Songs, Drones, and Refrains of Death*, scored for baritone, electric instruments and percussion, is based on the poetry of Federico Garcia Lorca, with its fantastically rich expression and evocative power. It provides an admirable vehicle for musical re-creation: '...a language to complement this very beautiful poetry' in the composer's words. It is coupled on this disc with *Quest*, a sextet led by an acoustic guitar and featuring a host of unusual percussion instruments, including the Appalachian hammered dulcimer, the African talking drum, and the Mexican rain stick.



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George CRUMB

(b. 1929)

Songs, Drones, and Refrains of Death (1962-68)*

1 Refrain One	1:25
2 I The Guitar / Death-Drone I	4:20
3 Refrain Two	0:52
4 II Casida of the Dark Doves	4:15
5 Refrain Three	1:06
6 Death-Drone II	1:49
7 III Song of the Rider, 1860	1:56
8 Cadenza appassionata for two drummers	1:32
9 Refrain Four	1:05
10 IV Casida of the Boy Wounded by the Water	2:09
11 Death-Drone III	8:36

29:04

Quest (1994)†

12 Refrain I	1:08
13 I Dark Paths	5:07
14 II Fugitive Sounds	2:09
15 Refrain 2	0:42
16 III Forgotten Sounds	4:22
17 IV Fugitive Sounds	1:06
18 Refrain 3	1:04
19 V Nocturnal	10:04

25:41

Ensemble New Art

Nicholas Isherwood, Baritone*

Alexander Swete, Amplified guitar* / Guitar†

Franzisco Obieta, Amplified double bass* / Double bass†

Carmen Erb, Percussion • Hans-Peter Achberger, Percussion

Peter Degenhardt, Piano and harpsichord*

Hugo Read, Soprano saxophone† • Silke Aichhorn, Harp†

Fuat Kent, Conductor

Recorded at the Radiostudio Zurich from 12th to 15th June, 2004.

A co-production with Schweizer Radio DRS

Sung texts are available at www.naxos.com/libretti/crumb.htm

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Playing
Time:
54:45

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