

# The Radical Compositional Approach of George Crumb in *Madrigals, Book I*

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This paper was written for Pat Callaway's Music History II course.

“He talks about music in a way that no one else does; he is never pedantic (hardly!) or even terribly analytical” (Gillespie 69). This quote by Richard Wernick describes the simple, unassuming nature of his dear friend, the revolutionary twentieth century composer, George Crumb. Crumb's unique conception of music pervades his entire compositional voice. As Wernick explains, “When George says, ‘gee, garsh, look at how Beethoven does...’ it is almost guaranteed that he has perceived something in a way that is original and different” (Gillespie 69). With this in mind, can there be any better way to speak of Crumb's music than to take up the same unassuming approach? His redefining usage of timbre, form, instrumentation, and tonality are most significant because they conjure rich emotional associations.

Although a theoretical analysis of Crumb's compositional techniques is useful in determining that none of his striking tonal effects are accidental, the larger scheme of his works reveals the heart of his compositional style. The most characteristic elements within this framework are Crumb's usage of extended performance techniques, the correlation between instrumental and vocal lines, and the repertoire of devices he employs to depict a text or mood. *Madrigals, Book I* is replete with examples of Crumb's individual style although it has not been as frequently analyzed as, for example, *Makrokosmos I and II*, *Vox Balaenae*, and the Vietnam War allegory *Black Angels*. The chamber set for soprano, vibraphone, and contrabass has a stirring overall effect despite the sparse instrumentation and brevity that make it ideal for concise analysis. “The *Madrigals* are, like all of Crumb's music, more about meaning than technique” (Walsh 6). This meaning, based on lines of poetry by Federico García Lorca, is set in a world of mystery and imagination. “Dark and disquieting, (the *Madrigals*) are music made when reason sleeps” (Walsh 6). The set stems from Crumb's upbringing in the chamber music tradition and his desire to create new methods of expression. His effectiveness as a communicator is surprising given his meek demeanor.

“George is a study in contradictions and opposites. Personally he presents himself rather gently, with wit and introspection. Musically, the George one encounters is often unabashedly lyrical and poetic, or, just as often, savage and demanding” (DeGaetani 28). Crumb was born in Charleston, West Virginia on

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October 24, 1929, the date of the infamous stock market crash. His father played the clarinet, his mother the cello, and he himself the flute, clarinet and piano by the age of ten. Despite his aptitude for chamber music, teenaged Crumb was not a remarkable student because he rather preferred reading Thayer's *Life of Beethoven* and Einstein's *Mozart* to his school books. "Since music was the focal point in Crumb's life from a very early age on, all else seemed peripheral" (Cope 8). While his aunt was studying violin in Berlin during the depression she bought nearly every orchestral score from the Eulenburg catalog and sent them to Crumb's father. Crumb not only played from these on the piano, but he also "took scores to school and read them during class, trying to approximate the live sound in his head" (Cope 8). These formative experiences enabled the adolescent Crumb to comprehend and imitate the compositions of Beethoven, Chopin, and Debussy.

Studying scores played an integral role in Crumb's life as a mature musician as well. He said in a July 1988 interview with Edward Strickland, "I tend to read scores like a book rather than put on a recording. I have a very large score collection. Reading the score is somehow more private, more intimate—without the sound. I generally read anywhere from Bach to now" (Strickland 164). One can only imagine how closely he was able to "approximate the live sound in his head" of the final ensemble while composing *Madrigals*.

Crumb became a member of the first generation of composers to emerge with advanced training from university programs after the post-War "subsumption of the conservatory elements" in course curriculum (Borroff 257). He received an undergraduate degree from Mason College (where he also met his wife Elizabeth May Brown), a graduate degree from the University of Illinois at Urbana, and his doctorate from the University of Michigan. During his doctoral studies with Ross Lee Finney he learned "the need for precision and clarity in score notations" (Cohen 2-3). Crumb learned from Finney "to depend upon the inner ear and to hear what (he was) writing—rather than to approach music in an abstract way" (Cohen 3). Indeed, the best elements in *Madrigals* are seemingly effortless and abstract but on further examination are found to be clearly supported by a logical process.

Practicality, despite the intimidating appearances of his scores, is always a consideration in Crumb's compositional technique. "Nothing in Crumb's music, no seemingly far-out effect, is theoretical; everything has been tried and found practicable and dependable" (Borroff 256). As a professor at the University of Colorado, Boulder, and then at the University of Pennsylvania (where he held a composition post for thirty years), he fulfilled his role as "one of many doctoral graduates who fanned out through the United States to build and to strengthen

the university system as the producer of composers” (Borroff 254). His impact is just as deep in the revolutionary compositional techniques he pioneered that continue to inspire this generation.

To those individuals familiar with Crumb’s personality or those who have merely seen photographs of him, a calm and formal approach to music may be expected from the quiet professor. During his early acquaintance with Crumb, David Burge explains, “It seemed as though he never *did* anything, just talked a lot, and I...talked back when I could and wondered only slightly if he would ever accomplish anything other than to talk slowly in his drawling West Virginia way” (Burge 6). Burge’s impression is found across the board in accounts such as this one by John Rockwell in the *Los Angeles Times*:

Yes, the hair is suspiciously tousled, and yes, there is a drooping mustache, however conventionally fashionable it may be. But this looks still like the face of an academician. In fact, it *is* the face of an academician, and one who by all reports fits the stereotype further by being a reticent and quiet man (Chase 2).

Quoted by Gilbert Chase in “George Crumb: Portraits and Patterns,” Rockwell also exclaims, “Looking at George Crumb’s picture, and armed with the knowledge that he teaches at the University of Pennsylvania, one would hardly suspect the hot-tempered, coolly controlled Romanticism which lurks within his compositional soul” (Chase 2). George Crumb is a delightful contradiction.

Burge’s assessment of *Night Music I*, written only two years before *Madrigals Book I*, aptly describes the quality of Crumb’s “music made when reason sleeps.”

Here the arresting nature of the vocal writing as well as the (for 1963) fiercely demanding requirements of the instrumental parts made one wonder just how far a composer could go—but all of this paled when, in actual performance, the absolutely hair raising emotional impact of the work’s climaxes swirled around the stage and through the audience in paroxysms of madness, fury, and untempered passion (Burge 7).

*Madrigals, Book I* sounds like a group of such paroxysms that are at once primitive, dark, and sensuous. To create their exotic quality, Crumb explores three expressive veins: the relationship between the instrumentalists to one another and to the voice, unconventional performance practices, and the relevance of the music to the text.

The score of *Madrigals* is equally overwhelming and enticing at first glance. Detailed notes demand unconventional techniques from the performers and above all else, complete communion in the ensemble effect. Arrows are drawn from one part to the next, indicating where contrasting rhythms should come together to align seamlessly, if only for a brief second. In the midst of con-

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trasting horizontal melodies and textures, a note stem connects a contrabass and vibraphone accent or even spans through the vibraphone line to connect a contrabass note to a word spoken by the soprano.

A detailed diagram in the performance notes explains that the vibraphone is to be set up in the middle of the contrabass and soprano to make these close relationships between the timing of pitches in various sections manageable. The soprano is positioned stage right of the vibraphone, left of the vibraphone from the perspective of the audience facing the stage. The contrabass is set up on stage left. The vibraphonist is necessarily in the middle since he or she must line up simultaneously with either the contrabass or soprano line more frequently than the soprano and contrabass align with one another. In the first movement, “Verte desnuda es recordar la tierra,” arrows or note stems connect pitches meant to be played at the same time between the soprano and vibraphone seven times whereas the soprano line is connected to the contrabass line in this manner only twice. In the score, the soprano line comprises the top staff, the vibraphone line is the middle staff, and the contrabass is written on the bottom staff of each system. This configuration correlates logically to the stage positions of the performers, but also allows these connections between the vibraphone and the other two parts to be clearly apparent to the performers (Crumb 4-5).

At times the staff for a performer disappears completely for a measure or several, suggesting that the performer should pay close attention to the lines of fellow performers rather than merely counting rests until his or her next entrance. This occurs on the second page of the first movement, second system, where the vibraphone and contrabass hold out pitches while the soprano hums a haunting melody “senza misura.” Since the section is not precisely metered, close attention must be paid to the soprano line in order for the reentrance of the other instruments to flow organically from the end of her phrase. In the following system, the soprano staff disappears twice and she must watch the vibraphone part closely (and indeed know it by heart) to interject with quick syllables that fit together where arrows align her line to the vibraphone’s (Crumb 5).

The visual necessity of following contrasting lines on the page while one staff disappears implies cohesion, and focuses the attention of performers to the overall scheme of the work. Independent melodic lines branch apart and suddenly horizontally coalesce in rare instances with a poignantly dramatic effect. This cohesion can also be found in relation to pitch. In fact, subconscious pitch recognition occurs as some are repeated in subtle ways, giving the work a feeling of relative stability amidst prevailing dissonant sevenths and tritones. An interesting double cross relationship is apparent in measures one and two of Movement I. In measure one, the soprano sings an  $a^1$  to  $d\#^1$  to  $e^2$ . This pattern

is reversed in the vibraphone pitches of measure two,  $e^3$  to  $d\sharp^1$  to  $a^3$  (Hurd). The contrabass plays a  $d^2$  to  $g\sharp^1$  tritone in measure one, a figure that is sung by the soprano a measure later (Crumb 4). Without over-analysis, such discoveries reveal that underlying mapped out melodic and harmonic relationships pervade the intuitive guise of the madrigals. This fits Crumb's description of music as "a system of proportions in the service of a spiritual impulse" (Gillespie 77).

In keeping with this philosophy, Crumb economically reuses sets of pitches and intervals. The technique also gives a feeling of a cyclic continuum between otherwise contrasting movements. For example, in measure five of Movement I the soprano sings a grace note on a  $c\sharp^2$  and then descends to a sustained  $b^1$  on the utterance "tau" (Crumb 5). Dynamically the line moves from the *forzando* grace note to the *piano subito* sustained pitch. This figure repeats in the section "Rain death music I" of Movement II, "No piensan en la lluvia, y se han dormido." The soprano sings this  $c\sharp^2$  to  $b^1$  figure twice in succession with almost the same dynamic markings; this time the *forzando* grace note descends to the *ppp* sustained note (Crumb 6).

Unconventional performance and compositional practices abound in *Book I*. Diverging from tradition, the grace notes throughout the work have unprecedented prominence. Rather than leading to a more significant pitch, the *forzando* markings above nearly all of the grace notes accent their importance especially in consideration of the longer duration yet dynamically less consequential notes that follow them. The grace notes also provide important melodic contours (Hurd). If the tritones  $a^1$  to  $d\sharp^1$  and  $g\sharp^1$  to  $d^2$  are temporarily ignored so that only the pitches of the grace notes in the first two measures of the soprano line in Movement I may be considered, then a string of perfect fifths from  $a^1$  to  $e^2$  and  $g\sharp^1$  down to  $c\sharp^1$  can be heard (Crumb 4). Here Crumb is sneaking consonance into the overall compositional structure in an almost subliminal way. The result is a balancing of the stark effect of dissonant tritones that seem strangely acceptable and appealing to the ear because they are less dynamically enforced than the brief consonances. Crumb also uses grace notes in the final system of movement one to delineate beat groupings clearly (Hurd). There is one grace note at the beginning of each beat in the vibraphone staff, whether the beat is divided into a triplet or quintuplet. These grace notes establish consistency between rhythmic vibraphone outbursts that distort the clear sense of meter and the contrabass interjections which fall on the beat (Crumb 5).

The fact that *Madrigals* is metered by sixteenth notes visually suggests the quick and accurate quality Crumb describes as "molto ritmico." He only uses sets of five to seven beats per measure, paralleling his tonal structure which is characterized by tritones and sevenths. Within the measures, notes may be

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grouped together into triplets or quintuplets. It is interesting to note Crumb's fascination with odd numbers in this set. Upon hearing a performance of *Madrigals, Book I* it may seem that the rhythms are arbitrary, but, as in the tonal structure, a clear sense of order solidly binds them.

The order established by the odd groupings gives *Madrigals* an instinctive and primitive feeling because it lacks a sense of symmetry. Therefore this "primal" organization audibly defies the even proportions traditionally associated with civilization, as sculpturally demonstrated in the visual equilibrium of the Parthenon. In defiance of musical traditions, and complete contrast to anything resembling a da capo aria or sonata form, Crumb's *Madrigals* each seem to begin with developmental phrase fragments. Whereas in the Classical style a clear theme is presented at first and then developed or varied as the work progresses, Crumb's fragments do not seem to come together into complete phrases until the middle or end of each madrigal (Crumb 4-9). It is also important to note that the composer distorts the conception of time as well as form in *Madrigals* by "using such musical devices as long pauses, echoes which add the dimension of distance to time, motives of repeated notes with changing dynamics, and long passages at extremely soft dynamic levels which lull the listener into an almost meditative state" (Mac Lean 23).

Crumb extends the technique of each instrument in revolutionary ways in *Madrigals, Book I*. The bassist frequently plays harmonics to create a timbre and overtone series that blends in the register of the soprano and vibraphone. This is hardly surprising since George Crumb professes a predisposition for treble instruments. The percussionist is instructed in Movement II to play on the plates of the vibraphone with his fingernails for a delicate quality (Crumb 6). The percussionist must also play harmonics two octaves above the pitch notated by placing a finger down while striking the plate of the primary pitch (Hurd). One of the most interesting of the many unconventional techniques used in this set occurs in Movement III when the vibraphonist walks to the contrabass and plays on the strings with his mallets as the bassist silently fingers an oscillation between the perfect fifth E to B and the perfect fifth B $\flat$  to F (Crumb 8-9). Of course, these fifths achieve consonance and dissonance at the same time because the distances from E to B $\flat$  and B to F comprise two tritones.

Soprano Jan DeGaetani premiered *Madrigals, Book I* in Washington, D.C., in 1966. Her "enormous range of pitch and timbre, mastery of avant-garde performing techniques, and extraordinary precision made her the ideal medium for Crumb's unique and delicate sonic palette" (Cope 12). In the article "Reflections on Twenty Years" she remembers the premiere of *Madrigals* and "being aware during the performance that players for the other works on the

concert were literally hanging out of the wings to hear this beautiful music” (DeGaetani 27). She explains that Crumb requires extended vocal techniques in the set just as he demands unconventional performance practices from the instrumentalists. “Quite often you must take time to learn a new skill,” she warns before continuing:

For the most part, the pitches are not difficult to learn, and the patterns emerge quickly: tritones, uses of 5 and 7 rhythmically, chromatic intervals, displaced octaves. Most of this is not new and has been part of the modern vocabulary for many years. The newness, the freshness comes in other ways—in the variety of articulations one must use, the sense of exact rhythmic proportion, the eloquent use of silence, the passing from singing speech or vocal percussion sounds (DeGaetani 28).

In DeGaetani’s opinion these are the qualities that “make the music seem hard for singers looking at it for the first time...very often they lack even a coherent vocabulary for discussing them” (DeGaetani 28). In the movements of *Book I* the singer alternates between a “wind sound” (Crumb 6), tongue rolls (Crumb 5), spoken exclamations (Crumb 4), and percussive whispers (Crumb 8-9). She must even sing wailing quarter tones. Of course all of these devices, along with the instrumental effects and atonality are not for the superficial sake of novelty. Rather, they are significant because they connect the music to the text in a way that is immediately appealing.

*Madrigals, Books I-IV* are based on the poetry of Federico Garcia Lorca, whose “powerful word pictures found a responsive chord in Crumb” (Mac Lean 23). The composer views all of his Lorca compositions as part of one extended cycle. For his settings, Crumb selects only one or two lines from a Lorca poem to “express his own personal vision” (Mac Lean 23). The texts and the songs that flow out of these lines ask “penetrating questions about the meaning of life” and focus on death, love, existence and natural elements including the earth, rain, and air (Mac Lean 23).

The text of Movement I, “Verte desnuda es recordar la tierra,” is translated “To see you naked is to remember the earth” (Crumb 4). The phrase is graphic and sensuous, with a mysterious wealth of possible interpretations. Crumb creates an emphatic urgency with his opening successions of tritones in each melodic line that builds up to chromatic rising and falling coloratura in the voice. In the beginning, the vocal line explodes into nonsense syllables, crying out “tai-o tik!” The usage of acoustically strong speech fragments has an entrancing percussive effect. They are not meaningless utterances yet they use the voice as a communicative instrument outside the realm of speech. Crumb said, “I

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believe that music surpasses even language in its power to mirror the innermost recesses of the human soul” (Gillespie 1). Here he gives the soprano the opportunity to transcend literal interpretation. When the text finally appears it is in a seductive sliding passage of quarter tones (Crumb 4). Because *Madrigals, Book I* resists academic interpretation it is necessary to “absorb the message and gesture of the page in some private (often obscure) fashion, with intuition as your best guide” (DeGaetani 28). Crumb merely aids the interpretive process by creating an exotic world of stark sounds.

Each movement of *Madrigals, Book I* demands a unique interpretation. The text of Movement II, “No piensan en la lluvia, y se han dormido,” translates to “They do not think of the rain, and they’ve fallen asleep.” The vibraphone is played with fingernails to produce the gentle fluid pings of water and the voice falls through the consonants “t-k-t-k-t,” going on to depict wind in pitches that descend into a sustained “sh” sound made with the breath. In this same section, labeled “Rain-death music I,” dark tension is established in polyrhythm between the four beats per measure vibraphone melody and the five beats per measure contrabass theme (Crumb 6).

The phrase “The dead wear mossy wings” is portrayed eerily in Movement III, “Los muertos llevan alas do musgo,” with low contrabass melodies and intense whispers traded between all three performers to represent the voices of the dead. Crumb even includes the direction “hauntingly” amidst a rapid contrabass tremolo and vibraphone glissando. He uses restrained dynamics atmospherically and sparsely limits the impression that the three separate thematic lines are more than just coincidentally correlated. In doing so, he creates a realm of supernatural imaginings (Crumb 8-9).

“Because what he wants to say is full of deep human understanding, both gentle and wild, this music deserves to be heard” (DeGaetani 27). Crumb proves that radical twentieth century compositional techniques are appealing in their great expressive capacities. In what is certainly a worthy endeavor, academia may only hint at a few fascinating qualities of this novel music. The deeper value of *Madrigals* is found in the way the set encourages individual interpretation and transcends conventional musical expression.

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