



PEOPLE IN THE NEWS

George Crumb, 1929-2022. An Appreciation.

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American composer George Crumb, whose innovative, theatrically charged soundscapes explored a new kind of musical poetry, has died after a long and far-reaching career. He was 92.

The Pulitzer Prize- and Grammy Award-winning artist died on February 6, surrounded by family at his home in Media, PA, a Philadelphia suburb. The news was announced to the musical community by his representative Becky Starobin, the president of his longtime label Bridge Records.

Crumb became known to a larger public as the creator of unusual, provocative, often haunting sound worlds, above all in such works as *Black Angels: Thirteen Images from the Dark Land* (1969-70). A "threnody" for electric string quartet and percussion that he characterized as "a parable on our troubled contemporary world," *Black Angels* alluded to the atrocities of the Vietnam War, then at its height, with piercing sonic

metaphors for helicopter attacks and surreal, symbolic representations of the devil. David Bowie professed admiration for the work, and it became the impetus for violinist David Harrington to found the groundbreaking Kronos Quartet.

Around the same time, Crumb caused a sensation with another piece incorporating his reactions to the war. *Ancient Voices of Children* (1970) called for extended vocal techniques and such instruments as tuned prayer stones and a toy piano to set fragments by the Spanish poet Federico García Lorca. The Nonesuch recording featuring mezzo Jan DeGaetani, a frequent collaborator, enhanced Crumb's reputation as a leading avant-garde figure.

In addition to writing music that was received as voicing political protest, Crumb anticipated contemporary concerns with environmental degradation in *Vox Balaenae (Voice of the Whale)* (1971). Inspired by a marine biologist's taping of the sounds made by the humpback whale, he created a performance art piece for electric flute, cello, and piano in which the players are instructed to don black visor-masks that efface their human identities.

But the piece's ritualistic staging and experimental sound effects—simultaneous instrumental and vocal incantation from the flutist, seagull-mimicking glissandos on the cello—were only the means, not the end, to weave what *New Yorker* critic Andrew Porter praised as "a sustained and beautiful dream vision of the deep."

An important collaboration

In 1970, guitarist David Starobin began a lifelong friendship with Crumb that extended to musical collaboration and preservation of his legacy. Over the years since Starobin founded Bridge Records in 1981, the label released a 20-volume *Complete Crumb* edition that was supervised by the composer.

"George Crumb doesn't just have a few specialists who are devoted to the music, the way it is with a lot of contemporary composers," Starobin said in a phone interview. "There's more than one enthusiastic generation now that performs his music because they love it—because they believe the pieces really reach people. More than anything else, he was a great communicator."

Juilliard professor and new music expert Joel Sachs observed: "Crumb's music very quickly connected the broader concert audience to the compositional world of their own time, quietly challenging younger composers to speak directly without sacrificing their integrity. Without any pretension to starting a 'movement,' he brought post-modernism to the world, with aftereffects that continue to this day."

George Henry Crumb, Jr., was born on October 24, 1929, in Charleston, WV, to a cellist mother and a clarinetist father. His studies included a formative year abroad as a Fulbright Fellow in Berlin and a doctorate under Ross Lee Finney at the University of Michigan.

Crumb embarked on a teaching career at the University of Colorado, Boulder, and in 1965 began his 30-year post as composition professor at the University of Pennsylvania. His enormous influence as a mentor in itself distinguishes Crumb as a towering figure in contemporary music. His students number among today's most successful composers, including Jennifer Higdon, the late Christopher Rouse, Osvaldo Golijov, Uri Caine, and Margaret Brouwer.

The majority of Crumb's output, published by Edition Peters, is for solo or chamber forces, though his orchestral suite *Echoes of Time and the River* garnered the Pulitzer Prize for Music in 1968, while the Bridge recording of his epic-scale *Star-Child* (1977) for orchestra and chorus, which calls for four conductors, won the 2001 Grammy Award for Best

Contemporary Classical Composition.



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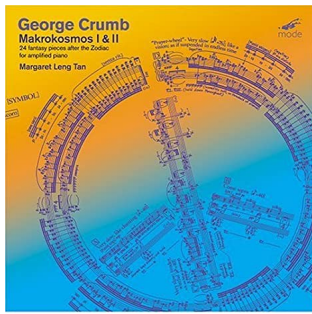
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From the late 1980s to the early 1990s, Crumb endured "the darkest period of his creative life and was tearing up whatever he had written at the end of the day," recalls David Starobin. "But he came through it and from then on composed nonstop." The 21st century proved especially fruitful. Inspired by the collaboration with his daughter Ann Crumb, a Broadway actress and singer who died in 2019, Crumb composed the seven-volume *American Songbook*, refracting the heritage of American vernacular music through his style. "Somehow, his relationship to Americana and folklore opened him up, and some of his most beautiful expression is in those songs," Starobin remarked. The composer's final work was *Kronos – Kryptos* for percussion quintet, premiered at Lincoln Center in 2019.

Crumb drew on a rich fund of knowledge both of American music and the European tradition, embedding musical (and, at times, literary)

quotations or imitations of specific historical styles into his compositions. Crumb's omnivorous interests also led him to include a "larger world" of extra-musical impulses that affected "the evolution of a composer's language," as he put it (the origin of the term *Makrokosmos* for his ambitious, widely performed four-volume collection of piano-based works).

Such devices illuminate—and are illuminated by—the astonishing originality and poetic sensitivity of the timbral combinations Crumb could conjure. Despite being frequently pigeonholed as an "eccentric" avant-gardist, Crumb contributed to a uniquely American tradition that, as he once articulated it, considers music to be "a very strange substance, a substance endowed with magical properties ... tangible, almost palpable, and yet unreal, illusive..."

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