

George Crumb

(b. 1929)

Complete Crumb Edition, Vol. 12

The International Contemporary Ensemble (ICE)

Jamie Van Eyck, mezzo-soprano

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David Bowlin, violin

Kivie Cahn-Lipman, cello

Jacob Greenberg, piano

David Schotzko, percussion

Eleven Echoes of Autumn, 1965 (Echoes I) (1966)

Commissioned by Bowdoin College for the Aeolian Chamber Players, *Eleven Echoes of Autumn, 1965* was completed in spring 1966. Scored for violin, alto flute, clarinet, and piano, the work is one of George Crumb's most original explorations of instrumental color. In a May 2008 interview, he singled out this work as among his most difficult to perform, because it requires intense and unbroken concentration from the players. Moreover, the dynamic levels are often so soft that the music is preternaturally quiet, almost "internal." The eleven brief movements are played without interruption. As the subtitle implies, the composition anticipates aspects of *Echoes of Time and the River (Echoes II)*, the 1967 orchestral piece that was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for Music in 1968.

The solo piano presents the recurring "bell motif" in *Eco 1*, a descending whole-tone in the composer's signature quintuplet rhythm. Here, the pianist produces ringing 5th-partial harmonics by touching nodal points on the strings. In *Eco 2*, the pianist draws a piece of hard rubber very slowly along the strings, producing 7th-partial harmonics. To reinforce this delicate sound, the pianist whistles each pitch, while transparent violin harmonics develop the bell motif from *Eco 1*. Near the end of the movement, alto flute and clarinet add quietly murmuring, quasi-obbligato "wind music." The final gesture is a very slow, descending glissando (marked *ppppp*, *quasi niente*), which is produced when the violinist slides his finger upward while bowing behind the left hand, near the pegs, an astonishing effect that returns in *Echi 4* and *10*.

Eco 3 introduces soft, rapid staccato figures in the winds and piano. Above this, the violinist portrays "a distant mandolin" by holding the instrument like a mandolin and producing a very rapid tremolo on each note with the fingernails. Because this

mournful solo verges on being inaudible, the effect is as much dramatic as it is musical, highlighting the special significance of the mandolin in Crumb's music, from his 1959 orchestral *Variazioni* onward.

Eco 4 is the longest so far, and its bravura introduction features a brilliant staccato pattern in the high register of the piano. A bird-like dialogue between alto flute and clarinet dominates the rest of the movement. Because they play their instruments close to the piano strings, a penumbra of sympathetic vibrations surrounds each wind figure.

Echi 5–7 are the center of the work, and the composer calls attention to them in several ways. Each *Eco* is announced by a rumbling bass glissando and repetition of the bell motif in the piano, above which the players whisper a quotation from Federico García Lorca: "... y los arcos rotos donde sufre el tiempo" ("... and the broken arches where time suffers"), words which are also recited at key moments in *Echoes of Time and the River*. In one of his most arresting uses of "symbolic" musical notation, Crumb responds to Lorca's mysterious image by notating the accompanying instruments on curved staves that resemble a circle that has been broken into two opposing arches. (The circle is symbolic of time in the eighth piece of *Makrokosmos I* [1972], "The Magic Circle of Infinity," whose glittering celestial *moto perpetuo* resembles the piano part at the start of *Eco 4*.) Above the "broken arches" of the accompaniment, extended Cadenzas are played in turn by alto flute (*Eco 5*), violin (whose frail repetitions of the motivic whole-tone in *Eco 6* are to sound "like the cries of a wounded bird"), and clarinet (*Eco 7*).

The extroverted clarinet Cadenza III ushers in the ferocious and climactic *Eco 8*, in which all instruments transform the whole-tone bell motif into violent, trill-like

repetitions, marked “shrill, screaming” at the outset. The falling whole-tone merges into glissando sighing figures in violin and clarinet, and eventually the tension subsides, with resonant knocking on the metal crossbeams of the piano that continues through *Eco 9*.

The final three movements serve as a gradual winding down. The sliding portamento gestures in *Eco 9* require the violinist to play *ppp* harmonics and whistle at the same time, a haunting effect that prefigures the last movement of *Echoes of Time & the River*. *Eco 10* also anticipates the orchestral *Echoes* in the “ghostly, hushed” wind-music in clarinet, alto flute, and violin, which returns to the incredibly soft dynamic levels of earlier movements. One last recitation of Lorca’s words is whispered amid this diaphanous texture, and then the piano begins *Eco 11* with a recapitulation of the bell motif. As the pianist’s emblematic falling whole-tone is repeated and gradually fades away, the violinist is once again called upon to play a dramatic, intensely restrained solo. The bow hair is loosened until completely slack and is drawn no faster than necessary to produce a continuous tone. Every detail of this “frail, plaintive” final echo is marked to emphasize the supernatural quiet. If *Eleven Echoes of Autumn*, 1965 is a nostalgic meditation on the irretrievability of time past, Crumb ends the work with a perfect musical expression of the transitory: exquisitely beautiful, almost inaudible sounds that vanish all too soon into silence.

The Sleeper (1984)

George Crumb followed his masterful 1979 Whitman song cycle *Apparition* with another work for mezzo-soprano Jan DeGaetani and pianist Gilbert Kalish, his brief song *The Sleeper*. As he often does, the composer here extracts a few lines from Edgar Allan Poe’s much longer poem. Crumb’s version tempers the poet’s tendency

toward excessive rhyming, and he transforms Poe’s lugubrious meditation on a dead beloved (“Soft may the worms about her creep!”) into a haunting ode to a woman slumbering beneath the “mystic moon.”

After the piano harmonics quietly toll midnight, the singer paints the scene in muted, oracular tones. In the middle section, piano and voice echo one another in sinuous, chromatic phrases, gradually descending to the low register. The singer’s lines at the opening of the third section (“The lady *sleeps!*”) twice incorporate a falling chain of thirds, thus mirroring the rising thirds in the first section (“in the month of June”). In the closing section, as the voice gradually fades, the piano gently strikes the midnight bell five times.

Vox Balaenae (Voice of the Whale) for Three Masked Players (1971)

Vox Balaenae for Electric Flute, Cello, and Piano was created during an especially productive period. This quintessential Crumb composition is among his best known and most performed works, and leading music critics quickly recognized its importance. In a 1973 issue of the *New Yorker*, Andrew Porter describes the piece as “quiet and subtly enchanting. . . a sustained and beautiful dream vision of the deep.” Each of the players wears a black half-mask throughout, which is meant to “symbolize the impersonal forces of nature (nature dehumanized).” The ritualistic effect is enhanced in most performances by using deep-blue stage lighting.

As the title suggests, the piece was composed in response to the stunning recordings of whale songs that were circulating at the time. In a recent interview with David Rothenberg, Crumb recalls that “the range was the first thing that impressed me, from the pedal tones of the organ to sounds that go way beyond the limit of

human hearing. [I perceived] a sense of musical phrase, an incredible composition that was going on, majestic, huge phrases. I loved the movement from the lowest to the highest sounds, the percussive elements, sounds like a thousand tubas playing at the same time." Rather than incorporate actual whale recordings into his piece or attempt to imitate them closely, the composer instead responds indirectly. As he explains to Rothenberg, "nature is music but it becomes refracted in a curious way through the persona of the composer. I read once that Bartók had an incredibly acute ability to hear insect sounds. It shows up in his music, and it's so effective. Don't you think that happens, that we don't need to hear the actual sound? The *evocation* of nature is what matters."

With audacious imagination, Crumb opens the piece by evoking the epic voice of the whale in a most unlikely way: the flutist sings into her instrument at the same time as she plays. The "wildly fantastic, grotesque" sing-flute *Vocalise* (. . . *for the beginning of time*) is one of the many uncanny, often mesmerizing "voices" in the work. Indeed, most listeners are amazed to learn that so many contrasting timbres are produced by just three players. In order to project the quietest sounds, microphones are used to amplify each instrument.

The sing-flute cadenza is interrupted by fortissimo chords and percussive bass tones in the piano, which Crumb identifies as a parody of Strauss's *Also Sprach Zarathustra*. Following this dramatic opening movement, the cellist initiates the central portion of the work by playing the calmly majestic "Sea Theme" in high-register harmonics. Each of the ensuing *Variations on Sea-Time* is named for one of the geological eras.

The cellist opens Variation I (*Archeozoic*; "timeless, inchoate") with the haunting "Seagull effect," which is produced by lightly touching and sliding along the A string. Imitating the gull cries are the pianist's quiet glissandi, which result when a small chisel is slid lightly on the strings while striking the key with the other hand. The cellist ends the movement with eerily gliding quarter-tone trills, an effect that returns at the end of Var. V. In Var. II (*Proterozoic*; "darkly mysterious"), the pianist creates a quietly buzzing drone by plucking low-B and lightly resting a bent paper clip on the vibrating string. Above this, the flutist and cellist play exotic melodies in dialog, and their voices are altered by using wide vibrato, whispering into the mouthpiece, and special pizzicato effects. All three instruments play wave-like figures in the high register in Var. III (*Paleozoic*; "flowing").

During the next two variations, the intensity gradually builds toward the main climax of the piece. In Var. IV (*Mesozoic*; "Exultantly!"), a glass rod rests on the strings in the central register, and a percussive, jangling sound results when the pianist plays the loud, chromatically paired pentatonic patterns (most of the time, one hand plays on black keys, the other on white keys). Above this, flute and cello play a fortissimo melodic line that suggests Messiaen's influence, as Crumb has pointed out. The loudest music of the piece occurs in Var. V, with ringing, widely spaced piano chords, and bravura cadenza passages for flute and cello. As the composer has explained, the emergence of man in the Cenozoic period is indicated near the end of Var. V by the partial restatement of the *Zarathustra* reference and rapid flute figures that recall the end of the *Vocalise*.

The magnificent, concluding *Sea-Nocturne* (. . . *for the end of time*) is announced when the cellist strikes the antique cymbal and the flutist begins to whistle; their

whistled duet is based on the "Sea Theme," as are many of the ideas that follow. As Crumb has written, the nocturne is "couched in the 'luminous' tonality of B major," and the score indicates that everything now is "serene, pure, transfigured." Amid shimmering textures—with ringing antique cymbals and other enthralling sonorities—the instruments each play in turn a beautiful, nobly lyrical phrase that nostalgically evokes late Romanticism. The composer wanted "to suggest 'a larger rhythm of nature' and a sense of the suspension of time." And so, the work concludes with gradually fading repetitions of an elegant, Chopinesque figure in the piano part, the last repetition of which is played in pantomime, "to suggest a *diminuendo* beyond the threshold of hearing." For many listeners, the closing pages of *Vox Balaenae* contain some of George Crumb's most inspired music.

Five Pieces for Piano (1962)

George Crumb composed the *Five Pieces* for David Burge in 1962, when both men were on the faculty at the University of Colorado in Boulder. Burge had casually suggested that Crumb compose something for him to play, and some months later, the pianist was presented with the finished manuscript. As Burge recalled more than twenty years later, "I would never forget that first examination. I had never seen anything like that score. For that matter, neither had anyone else. I buried myself in the music, and in the piano's insides, and gave the first performance the next month. The following month Karlheinz Stockhausen visited our campus and listened to the pieces repeatedly, shaking his head and exclaiming over and over about all the things in the score that *he* wished *he* had done."

In a May 2008 interview, Crumb observed that he now considers *Night Music I* (composed one year later and revised in 1976) to be the first composition in his

distinctive, mature style, though the *Five Pieces* marked a significant breakthrough. David Burge sees the work as pivotal, and he discusses the *Five Pieces* in some detail in his book *Twentieth-Century Piano Music*. Like so many musicians at the time, Crumb was fascinated by the exquisitely crafted music of Anton Webern (1883–1945), and Burge is not alone in observing Webern's influence, not only on the *Five Pieces*, but also on the works of the next few years. Even so, the music always sounds like Crumb and no one else.

The most striking innovation in the *Five Pieces* is the extensive use of sounds produced directly on the strings by the pianist, all of them carefully notated: pizzicato playing with the fingernails and fingertips; delicate, second-partial harmonics produced by lightly touching the string at the nodal midpoint while striking the key with the other hand; and a delicately buzzing "metallic vibrato" produced by allowing a bent paper clip to rest lightly on the vibrating string.

Crumb's later piano writing is also anticipated in the diverse pedal effects. The damper pedal is often held down for long passages, thereby allowing all strings to vibrate freely. The result ranges from blurry washes of sound to delicately echoing haloes around short pizzicato notes. The *una corda* pedal, which causes the hammers to strike fewer strings, allows for subtle gradations of very soft sounds (Crumb recommends that the instrument be amplified in most concert halls, in order to help project such nuances.) Beginning with the second piece, the middle (*sostenuto*) pedal is used to raise dampers for selected notes, creating ethereal sympathetic vibrations when related pitches are struck in other octaves.

Many listeners are initially so fascinated by the novel timbral effects in *Five Pieces*,

that they do not notice the composer's fairly rigorous approach to pitch structure. The fundamental idea is a three-note cell, first presented as a pizzicato chord at the beginning of the work: B-flat, G-sharp, A. Immediately following this first cell are three transposed variants—all played very softly—that eventually complete the chromatic collection. (Though this is reminiscent of Webern's approach to constructing a 12-tone row, the *Five Pieces* are not serial.) Later the tritone also is emphasized, and the intricate variations of the main pitch motives rival the composer's dazzling explorations of tone color.

In his performance notes, Crumb insists that the *Five Pieces* "always be performed in its entirety since the work was conceived as an organic whole." This remark points to the symmetrical arch-form of the work. Prefiguring his celebrated fondness for unusual, "symbolic" notation, a visually symmetrical grouping of pitches and slurs marks the midpoint of the third movement, which is also the central moment of the entire composition. Immediately following is a passage marked *quasi lontano (eco) pppp sempre*, which turns out to be a mirror of the preceding music: an echo is heard as if from a distance, but exactly backwards. As Burge has noted, formal symmetries extend from this "crab canon" outward to all five movements. For example, the end of the third piece is a kind of reversed echo of the opening. The second and fourth pieces are both fast (*Ruvido, molto energico*) with very similar music at the beginning and end of each movement. Finally, the pairing of the first and last movements is made apparent when the fifth piece returns to the tempo of the first piece, and the music from the very opening is recalled—slightly varied and in reverse sequence—to conclude the composition.

Writing in 1984, Burge remembers his initial reluctance to venture "inside" the

piano when George asked him about it while composing the work. He could not have known at the time that Crumb would eventually explore the extended resources of the piano more fully than any composer before or since.

Dream Sequence (Images II) (1976)

Composed for the Aeolian Chamber Players, Crumb's subtitle links *Dream Sequence* with *Black Angels (Thirteen Images from the Dark Land) (Images I)*, his famous 1970 work for electric string quartet. In *Dream Sequence* the unusual quartet is comprised of violin, cello, piano, and percussion, and the composer recommends that the four players be spaced widely on the stage. The score calls for an "atmospheric and 'breathing' texture" that seems as "poised [and] timeless . . . as an afternoon in late summer." There are common elements linking *Images I* and *II*, but the two works express very different moods: *Dream Sequence* is a serene contrast to the nightmarish intensity of *Black Angels*.

Recalling the ethereal "God-music" from part III of *Black Angels*, four tuned crystal goblets are played off-stage by two other players throughout *Dream Sequence*. This uncanny "glass harmonica" effect serves as a continuous, quasi-subliminal drone throughout. Crumb has remarked on the tremendous psychological intensity created by this device, especially in live performance; as he puts it, "everything hangs on it." The four pitches—C#, E, A, and D—are echoed in more tangible forms by the on-stage players, especially the pianist.

The piece opens with piano, percussion, and "glass harmonica," and these instruments function as a subtly shifting backdrop against which the more sharply defined figuration in the violin and cello is heard. The percussionist presents atmospheric,

resonant sounds on suspended cymbals (using a special bow technique to emphasize the highest partials), four bowed crotales, sleighbells, and five Japanese temple bells tuned low to high. The gentle chiming of the temple bells is to sound “mysterious and disembodied.” In addition to using plucked and muted interior piano effects, the middle range of the instrument has a sheet of paper resting on the strings, giving these notes a quietly buzzing timbre.

Among the remarkable features of *Dream Sequence* is the score itself, which consists of two facing 16” x 20” pages. Crumb’s celebrated “symbolic” notation in previous works had already called attention to the limitations of representing music graphically. Here, the visual impression is not as immediately striking as the famous cross, spiral, and circular notations found in *Makrokosmos*, or the converging and diverging staves in *Black Angels*, but the relationship between symbol and sound is much more complicated: one cannot examine the score and readily imagine just how the piece will sound.

The players each see a series of precisely notated fragments arranged circularly, and Crumb provides instructions on how to proceed around each circle. The pianist and percussionist each play their own “circle-music,” but the violinist and cellist are notated as a pair, and Crumb allows the string players six possible paths around their single, large circle. The players are instructed to pause between each notated fragment, and the amount of time is flexible: percussion (approximately 5–7 seconds), piano (7–10 seconds), strings (10–13 seconds). The notation of each fragment indicates the finest nuances of tone color and other musical details. On the other hand, the interrelationships of the fragments and the simultaneously sounding circle-musics are unfixed—resembling the unpredictable, enigmatic associations

in a dream. The fluid formal structure may explain why Crumb considers *Dream Sequence* to be among his most challenging works to perform. The score suggests the option of placing each player behind a silk screen with backlighting to create silhouette images. Remembering a German performance with a slowly moving dancer (“almost a tableaux vivant”), the composer recently wondered whether dance or other visual elements might be necessary to sustain effectively the hypnotic, dreamlike impression of the music.

After the strings complete their circle-music, the violinist cues the pianist to begin the concluding phrase, a suddenly loud succession of treble sixths, which soon dissolves into the delicate insect sounds that close the piece. Joining the high “cicada-drone” in the violin part, the percussionist plays a maraca and the pianist a Thai wooden buffalo bell, whose clattering is meant as another imitation of the cicada’s voice. The evocative ending of *Dream Sequence* is an idyllic transformation of the “Night of the Electric Insects,” the terrifying opening of *Black Angels*.

Steven Bruns is Associate Dean for Graduate Studies in music at the University of Colorado in Boulder, where he has taught music theory since 1987. He edited *George Crumb and the Alchemy of Sound*, a volume of essays published in honor of the composer’s 75th birthday (2005, Colorado College Music Press).



The International Contemporary Ensemble (ICE), described as “brilliant” by *The New Yorker*, is a uniquely structured chamber music ensemble comprised of thirty

dynamic and versatile young performers who are dedicated to advancing the music of our time. Through innovative programming, inter-disciplinary collaborations, commissions by young composers, and performances in nontraditional venues, ICE brings together new music and new audiences.

ICE was founded in 2001, and has rapidly established itself as one of the leading new-music ensembles of its generation, winning first prize in the 2005 Chamber Music America/ASCAP Awards, and performing over sixty concerts a year in the US and abroad. Recent engagements include performances at the Mostly Mozart Festival of Lincoln Center, the Bang on a Can Marathon at the World Financial Center, the Composer Portraits Series and Pocket Concerto Project the Miller Theatre, CAL Performances at Berkeley, the Gardner Museum in Boston, and appearances at international festivals in Eastern Europe and Latina America. The ensemble will release multiple recordings this season on the Bridge, Tzadik, New Focus and Naxos labels.

In addition to ICE's performances at major venues throughout the world, the ensemble has successfully self-produced seven large-scale contemporary music festivals in venues as wide-ranging as nightclubs, galleries and public spaces.

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Hailed as “...vocally rich and beautiful, supremely musical, and emotionally moving,” mezzo-soprano **Jamie Van Eyck** is rapidly establishing herself as an accomplished singer of both operatic and concert repertoire.

Ms. Van Eyck has performed with opera companies throughout the United States including Santa Fe Opera, Utah Opera, Opera Boston, and Wolf Trap Opera Company. Among her roles are Diana/Jove in Cavalli's *La Calisto*, Dido and the Sorceress in *Dido and Aeneas* (Mark Morris Dance Group), Dryad in *Ariadne auf Naxos* (Wolf Trap Opera Co.), and Laura in *Luisa Miller* (Opera Boston). With Utah Opera, she has performed numerous roles including Second Lady in *Die Zauberflöte*, Flora in *La Traviata*, Suzy in *La Rondine*, and Berta in *Il Barbiere di Siviglia*, for which the Salt Lake Tribune heralded, “Her lovely performance of the character's single aria was a highlight.”

Ms. Van Eyck has enjoyed success in concert repertoire, performing with notable orchestras and ensembles in works including Handel's *Messiah* (Utah Symphony), Schönberg's *Peirrot Lunaire*, Mahler's *Lieder eines fahrenden Gesellen*, Copland's *In the Beginning*, Berlioz's *Les Nuits d'Été*, Mahler's *Symphony No.2*, and Bach's *Mass in B minor*; of which The Daily Cardinal wrote, “Of particular note was Jamie Van Eyck, whose beautiful tone and pitch-precision lulled the audience into a trance.” She has also been a featured soloist in multiple Pops concerts with Keith Lockhart and the Utah Symphony. This season she joins acclaimed pianist, Steven Blier, in concert with the Wolf Trap Opera Company singing the music of Bernstein and Bolcom.

Ms. Van Eyck has also been praised for her strengths as a singer of new music. At the Tanglewood Music Center's Festival of Contemporary Music, she performed the role of Mama in the North American staged premiere of Elliott Carter's *What Next?* under the baton of James Levine. For her leading role, the Hartford Courant declared that she "...performed beautifully with exacting musical precision and strong charisma." Ms. Van Eyck recently sang the world premiere performance of George Crumb's song cycle *Voices from a Forgotten World* with Orchestra 2001 of Philadelphia. The song cycle will mark her second recording with Bridge Records of New York.

Ms. Van Eyck holds degrees from The New England Conservatory of Music and The University of Wisconsin-Madison.



Pianist **Jacob Greenberg's** work as a soloist and collaborative performer shows his far-ranging interests in music old and new. He has worked with composers as diverse as George Crumb, Harrison Birtwistle, György Kurtág, and Tan Dun, and he frequently plays his own works in recital. A resident of Brooklyn, New York, Mr. Greenberg curates and performs in the solo piano series Music at Close Range. He has been a member of the International Contemporary Ensemble (ICE) since 2002. With soprano Tony Arnold, he was a guest artist at the 2008 International Summer Courses in Darmstadt, Germany, and recent concerto appearances include Olivier Messiaen's *Sept Haïkai* at Oberlin College.

Mr. Greenberg has taught at the State University of New York at Buffalo, and he is currently ICE's Director of Educational Programs. His recordings include releases on the Bridge, Centaur, Naxos, and New Focus labels.

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