

“Music and the Politics of War: George Crumb’s ‘*Black Angels*’ and the Vietnam War”

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Abstract. This research paper seeks to identify and analyse how the revolutionary musical techniques employed in the writing and performance of George Crumb’s quartet *Black Angels: Thirteen Images from the Dark Land* expressed criticism of the Vietnam War (1955-1975). In *Black Angels*, Crumb probed the limits of the American imagination by crafting a musical experience where the listening self found little solace in the strict binaries of enemy and friend, but found instead transiting fluid boundaries connecting them. By examining the use of archaisms in Crumb’s piece—numerology, cyclicity, extended vocal techniques—we uncover evidence of Crumb’s notion of the pre-reflective as the historical moment that becomes present in *Black Angels*. This mythical time rejects the conventions of linearity that characterizes Euro-American music, especially the popular production that challenged the legitimacy of the war, and that is invested in the clear distinction between selves, in this case, enemy and friend. Instead, it fosters a sense of “undecidedness” where the selves of enemy and friend are constantly dissolved and remade, a form of fluidity antagonistic to nationalist memory. *Black Angels* refuses to speak for anybody in particular. In rejecting the conventions of popular memory, it offers little comfort in the midst of war.

Keywords: George Crumb, Black Angels, Vietnam War, war, experimental music, avant-garde

1. Introduction

This research paper seeks to identify and analyse how the revolutionary musical techniques employed in the writing and performance of George Crumb’s electric string quartet *Black Angels (Images I): Thirteen Images from the Dark Land* expressed criticism of the Vietnam War (1955-1975). American composer George Crumb (b. 1929) wrote in *Black Angels* one of the defining musical expressions against the war in this amplified string quartet written in 1970. Crumb followed in the tradition of Krzysztof Penderecki (b. 1933), whose *Threnody to the Victims of Hiroshima (Tren ofiarom Hiroszimy)* in 1960 offered a powerful indictment of war in the avant-garde tradition. Yet, in revolutionizing conventional notions of music notation, organization and performance, Crumb challenged conventional narrative structures of public memory and thus the very way of remembering of the nation. The constellation of sounds and emotions elicited by the piece not only challenged the expectation of contemporary audiences, but offered evidence of the political implications of Crumb’s piece. In *Black Angels*, Crumb probed the limits of the American imagination by crafting a musical experience where the listening self found little solace in the strict binaries of enemy and friend, but found itself instead transiting fluid boundaries connecting them. In *Black Angels*, Crumb fulfilled the command to reinvent music, not by writing a piece that reflected on the war, but by making music as the embodiment of war and thus assume, as Victoria Adamenko argues, mythic qualities.

2. *Black Angels* and the Memory of War

2.1. The musical language of *Black Angels*

The intersection of politics and music in *Black Angels* has rarely if ever been explored, partly due to Crumb’s own insistence that the piece initially did not intend to make a political statement on the war. In an interview with Benjamin Dwyer, Crumb recollected that the composition, commissioned by the University of Michigan and to be performed by the Stanley Quartet (G. Ross, G. Rosseels, R. Courte, J. Jelinek), didn’t set out to be a political piece at all. It started by fulfilling a commission by a string quartet that ordered the piece. As I got into the composition I realised it was pulling in more and more of the kind of hysteria...the hysteria

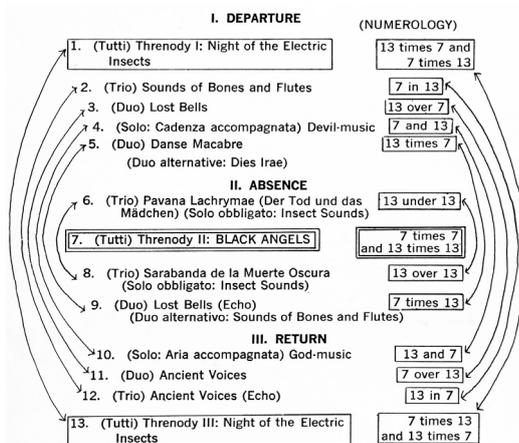
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that was reigning in the States in this period. It was a rather dark time. So much so, that at the end there, when I finished, I borrowed the Haydn, ‘In time of war’ and put that in the piece as a subscript. I just became aware of that but the intention wasn’t there from the beginning.

In spite of Crumb’s protestations that his music does not intend to be political, these declarations must be understood within the larger context of American understandings of the political, which refers mostly to the workings of the formal electoral process. When it comes to issues of power, Crumb’s *Black Angels*, is decisively political. The premier performance of *Black Angels* was given by the Stanley Quartet in Ann Arbor, Michigan on 23 October 1970. Crumb’s score, with his annotations— in tempore belli (in time of war) and “Finished on Friday the Thirteenth, March, 1970”— made evident the politic qualities import of the work as a statement of the Vietnam war if not on war itself. Even more significant are Crumb’s personal reflection on how his music already embodied political qualities before his own conscious recognition of that fact. He stated to NewMusicBox that, “very soon after I got into the sketching process, I became aware that the musical ideas were picking up vibrations from the surrounding world, which was the world of the Vietnam time. And there were dark currents operating and those things were somehow finding their way into the conception of the string quartet.” This statement suggests an important distinction in Crumb’s own musical imagination that may help us understand the full political implications of his work. Crumb makes a distinction here between two forms of experience in the writing of music: a pre-analytical and an analytical one. Crumb’s post-facto realization of the implications of his work—the analytical moment—re-organizes the experience of music composition as discovery in the form of inspiration. We argue that these two aspects of *Black Angels*—war and experience—are linked as one in Crumb’s political language.

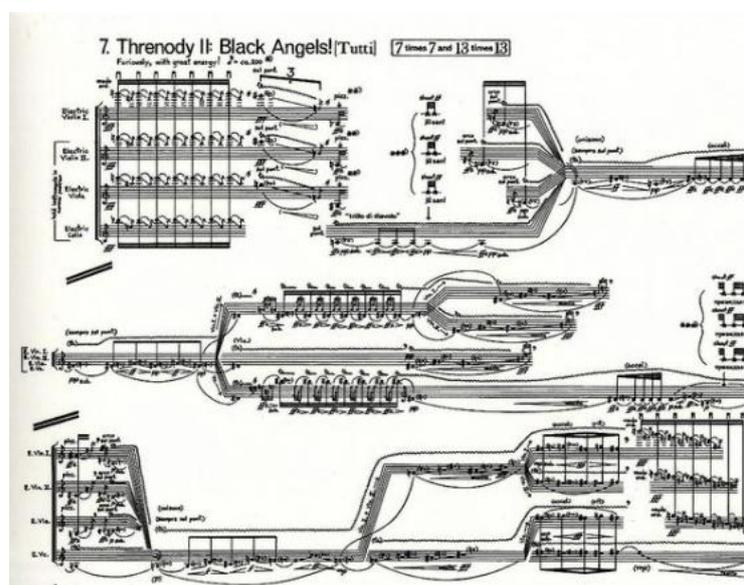
Pure experience thus belongs to a pre-reflective moment. This “turn to the pre-reflective,” as Adamenko calls it, characterizes Crumb’s music in its use of numerology, syncretism, and archaism in *Black Angels* and overall in his music. Crumb intends to make music a space within which aspects of our pre-analytical experience express themselves. Categorizing experience this way could be seen problematic. Proponents of empire categorized the colonized as living in a pre-cognitive dimension of historical experience, which only the west could give form and thus explain and appropriate. Is Crumb doing the same? Crumb’s philosophy of music seems to point to a different direction. He seeks in *Black Angels* to make music the site of the pre-reflective experience of mankind, the “pre-historic” if you will, an experience that he valorises as fundamentally universal and still permeating our present experience of time. It is not something to be transcended, but made present in the performance by the use of archaisms. One of them is numerology. (See Figure 1). For example, the performers’ pronunciation of Japanese, Russian, and Swahili numerals (Joo-sahn, Tree-naht’-saht, koo-me^s nah^s tah-too) while performing Threnody II: Night of the Electric Insects or the denotation in the score of the numbers 7 and 13 denoted in the score variously as 7 times 7 and 13 times 13) express a pre-modern concept of numbers as invested with physical properties. (See Figure 2).

Fig. 1: An example of numerology in George Crumb, *Black Angels (Images I): Thirteen Images from the Dark Land*, Program. © 1972 C. F. Peters Corporation. All rights reserved. Used by permission.



There are other forms of musical technique that accomplish this goal. For example, the sound of insects, the primordial “ancient, pre-historic music,” music of men is invoked through an arsenal of sounds to be performed by the players, such as shouting, chanting, whistling, whispering, as well as the use of gongs, maracas and crystal glasses. The very use of extended vocal techniques to convey the sacred meaning of numbers of archaic times—as we noted before—reflects the use of syncretism, the ability of music to create a space for the convergence of pre-reflective modes of living. This is effectively used also in the use of other compositions such as the sonata of Giuseppe Tartini’s *Devil’s Trill* (1692–1770) in *Trillo Di Diavolo* of the 7. *Black Angels: Threnody II: Black Angels! [Tutti]*, 7 times 7 and 13 times 13—where numerology, appropriation, and archaism converge. (See Figure 2). Syncretism, by itself, becomes a technique that denotes an accumulative concept of knowledge, rather than a linear one. Similarly, the use of graphic notation also serves to denote another archaism: a cyclical concept of time.

Fig. 2: An example of graphic notation and pre-modern concept of numbers as invested with physical properties from *Black Angels: 7. Threnody II: Black Angels! [Tutti]*, 7times 7 and 13times 13. © 1972 C. F. Peters Corporation. All rights reserved. Used by permission.



2.2. The musical reception of *Black Angels*

Although one could argue that these aspects of Crumb’s music express an a-political stance by the composer give the extraordinary focus on nature, natural sounds, and the environment—the reception and dissemination of his music indicate not just the opposite, but also the very subversive quality of the piece. We argue that in subverting the conventions of popular memory—in this case the memory of the Vietnam war—Crumb’s piece occupies an ironic place in American music: both a quintessentially American response to the war and one that is for the most part absent from the musical memory of Americans. Why is this so?

We would like to suggest one important reason: Crumb’s music violates the conventional narrative form of popular memory and, in doing so, the sacrosanct distinction between the selves—the American (standing in for the western world), and the Vietnamese (standing in for the “East”). Witness the large production of Vietnam War music in the United States: whether songs or anthems respond negatively or positively to the war, the American self always remains distinct from that of the Vietnamese. Whether it is Bruce Springsteen’s *Brothers under the Bridge*, Creedence Clearwater Revival’s *Fortunate Son* or the Charlie Daniel Band’s *Still in Saigon* all these musical poems stand as examples of musical expressions planted firmly within this western conventional framework. This is also true of film; witness the plots of *Platoon* or the *Rambo* films where the “hero,” the American self, is firmly located in contradistinction from the Vietnamese, and strictly at the centre: Vietnam is the periphery to the American “other.” America’s memory of the war is above all a national memory where the American stands separate from the Vietnamese. Crumb’s music does not grant such bodily comfort.

Crumb's music contradicts the narrative time of classical and popular music, so much tied to the modern nation and its forms of popular remembrance. According to Timothy D. Taylor, the qualities assumed to be inherent in western national identities such as a vision of the self as separate from that of its "other," a concept of time as linear, and of space as formed by centres and peripheries are but historical constructions. Given the historical implications, it should be not surprising that the memory of the Vietnam War in America is deeply implicated with the nation and its forms of memory that are linear since they locate the self in the time of the nation and opposite to its "other." Crumb's musical patterns of repetition and cyclicity contradict these mnemonic structures. Thus the political import of *Black Angels* is twofold: it speaks in opposition to the war, but in ways that are visibly contradictory to normative western musical assumptions. Lauded as a powerful statement against the war, yet ignored by the vast majority of Americans.

The reception of Crumb's work validates the power of *Black Angels* to diffuse the material boundaries between selves. Marcel Cobussen, writing in *The New Centennial Review*, asserts that Crumb's *Black Angels* is music "beyond rationality...beyond...categorical frameworks." It is music in which the self cannot be represented, but "conjured up...made present: presented." Within this structure, selves converge and confuse themselves, present themselves in music, positing the possibility of shared human experience. The very image of the "angel" emphasizes this point even further: not human, not gods either, the angels exemplify Derrida's notion of the "undecidable." Any self invoked in *Black Angels*, let's say the American soldier lost in the jungles of Vietnam facing an enemy who does not present itself, that seemingly hides in the jungle or in Vietnam's innumerable villages—where is the enemy in the dark of night when only insects are heard when not interrupted by the incessant noise of America's helicopters?—could conceivably be also the Vietnamese soldier. Our selves are thrown into that jungle, a space "between category and reality." Popular memory of the war, so tied to America's complicated racial histories, especially with Asians, does not tolerate such confusions: its critique—even its defence—of the war relies entirely on the clear boundaries between America and Asia, white Americans and Vietnamese, America and Vietnam. The ecological dimensions of *Black Angels*, the invocation of the "universals of sound"—the insects in the Night of the Electric Insects segments—make the environment present, unique, alive, but at the same time, makes all its inhabiting selves anonymous. The self that experiences war can be anybody.

What is experienced is terror and thus it is not ironic that the only intersection of popular culture and *Black Angels* occurred significantly in the film *The Exorcist*. On the surface, the film's plot relies on the conventions of "western" narrative: witness the clear distinctions between good—the priest—and evil—the devil and the clear resolution for good. On the other hand, the film's location of evil within the body of the innocent child in the midst of the typical suburban American home, complicates these clear distinctions. Not well known is the fact that the film is based on a novel explicitly evoking the times of the Vietnam War (in *tempore belli*) and the American fear, both in society and in the battlefield, of the impossibility of locating the enemy: is the enemy our own government? Is the enemy within our own social body? Here we have the contradictions of America's relationship to the Vietnam War: seeking to contest evil, unable to expose it in bodies separate from our nationalist selves.

3. Conclusion: *Black Angels*' Many Wars

Cobussen speculates that Crumb deals in this piece with "the fundamental violence in and between human beings." We would like to take Cobussen's analysis farther and posit this statement: Crumb's music moves away from the American historical imagination to the extent that it prioritizes the inextricable nexus between humans and violence. In this domain of the abstract, the terror of war that we all share, the nationalist self evaporates. In the anonymity of war, we become equal. What is abstract here is not so much the soldier, but the very experience of war, which is distilled to the most visceral of experiences: the drone of insects, the sudden whisper, the thunderous and violent sounds of the dark. We face here a different kind of universality; not the universality of reason (which can differentiate between a good war and a bad war, a just war and an unjust war), but the universality of the experience of war embodied in the pre-reflective experience of men and women, in the visceral feeling of terror. It is more than ironic, that a war whose cruelty and barbarism was intensified precisely by the inability of the American soldier to distinguish enemy and friend, would find in this piece a conduit to express such terror. *Black Angels* refuses to speak for

anybody in particular. It rejects the conventions of popular memory. Crumb's music does not offer such comforts.

4. Acknowledgements

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