

“Transcendence and Religiosity: Compositional Elements in the Writing of George Crumb's ‘*Black Angels*’”

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Abstract. This paper analyzes the intersection of religiosity and music composition in George Crumb's quartet *Black Angels: Thirteen Images from the Dark Land* and its implications for its teaching and thus its cultural reproduction. In this quartet, Crumb employed stringed instruments to invoke the sounds of nature along with extended vocal techniques—shouting, chanting, whistling, whispering, gongs, maracas, and glass—to powerful and terrifying effects. Crumb's use of archaisms in the composition of the piece—numerology, cyclicity, and repetition—complemented the writer's attempt to make music a repository of nature and of the sounds of primitive man. Its religious character thus resides in the transcendental invocation of nature through the playing of music. We argue, though, that an analysis of *Black Angels*' performance and reception does not fully do justice to Crumb's piece. One has to look at Crumb's own score with its visual and graphic reenactment of the music's archaic themes to understand the extent of Crumb's vision. Thus we take a look at the forms of transmission of the piece, how it is learned, how it is rehearsed and apprehended by the performers, and the role imagination plays in the mind of the student-performer, to fully comprehend its religious character.

Keywords: George Crumb, *Black Angels*, Vietnam War, Experimental Music, Avant-garde, Notation.

1. Introduction

The traditional music developed in the third quarter of the twentieth century has been extended into different streams. During and after World War II, many European artists, composers and musicians travelled to America and settled temporarily or permanently, importing European musical traditions modified in various forms with new ideas and multi-cultural inspirations. These musical influences from different parts of Europe included German Modernism, French Impressionism, Neoclassicism and *Musique concrète* (concrete music). This influence, particularly in North America, has revealed unique characteristics reflected in the work of different American composers. Their compositional techniques have also challenged the boundaries of traditional music composition as in the case of experimentalism, which has been developed and strengthened by New York based composers such as John Cage (1922-1992). His work has shown a new way of composition varied by specific genres and applied electronic musical instruments into the performance. [1] *Concerto for Prepared Piano* (1950-51) and *4'33"* (1952) are examples of this.

2. Crumb's Compositional Concepts: Religious and Social Influences

The writing of experimental music not only allowed composers to discover musical traditions, imported or native, but also extended their freedom to experiment much more in comparison to other European composers. These influences can be found in a number of Crumb's work from the 1950s and 1960s before he reached the peak of his musical career. In a lecture held in the Hochschule für Musik in Vienna in 1994, he explained his fascination and interest in new instruments, especially in light of the fact that the composer had no obligation to use the instruments in their traditional way, but were instead free to use them as they pleased and according to their own compositional wishes. [2]

Before the completion of 1970's *Black Angels*, Crumb had already started exploring the possibility of sonority and the exploration of timbre in two 1960s works: *Five Pieces for Piano* (1962) and *Four Nocturnes (Night Music II)* (1964). Crumb expanded the idea of timbral possibilities, particular the use of voice-effects

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in several of his instrumental works, for instance, in the four volume pieces for piano, *Makrokosmos I* and *Makrokosmos II* (1972 and 1973) or in the electric string quartet *Black Angels*. In *Black Angels*, Crumb instructed musicians to whisper, shout, sing, whistle and tongue-click to accompany the instrument, adding to or increasing their original musical voice.

The religious influences on *Black Angels* are illustrated by the various musical concepts and compositional skills borrowed by Crumb from traditional classical music, styles and numerology such as:

- Dies Irae, meaning “Day of Wrath”, a thirteenth century Latin hymn, particularly in the Roman Catholic Requiem Mass;
- Vox Diabli (tritone in Greek), the intervals of three whole notes;
- Sarabanda (It.), a dance music in triple meter;
- *Death and the Maiden* (String Quartet No. 14 in D minor, 1824) by Austrian composer, Franz Schubert (1797-1828);
- Conventional musical symbolisms such as the Diabolus in Musica (the interval of the tritone) and;
- The *Trillo Di Diavolo*, the “Devil's Trill” violin sonata in G minor by the Italian composer, Giuseppe Tartini (1692–1770).
- Numerology, referring to the supposed influence of numbers on human affairs, used by Crumb throughout the piece and revolving around the numbers 7 and 13 in many intervals. Throughout the whole piece, three important pitch elements are written and used for different instruments: ascending D-sharp, A and E. [3]. For example: the interval between Ascending D-sharp, and E is Diminished 7th. [4]
- “I believe that music surpasses even language in its power to mirror the innermost recesses of the human soul.” explained by Crumb. In *Black Angels*, Crumb employs different languages in the music such as German, French, Russian, Hungarian, Japanese and Swahili (Bantu). [5] For example, in *13 Threnody III: Night of the Electric Insects [Tutti]* 7 times 13 and 13 times 7, Crumb indicated the Electric violin I player to pronounce vowels in Japanese numerals ichi-ni-san-shi-go-roku-shichi, one through seven.
- Second, the social influence of this piece was explained in Crumb’s interview with Benjamin Dwyer. [6] Crumb explained:

It 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 realized it was pulling in more and more of the kind of hysterical...the hysteria 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.

Crumb also makes references to other tonal works that incorporate death. Franz Schubert’s (1797 - 1828) *Death and the Maiden* is quoted in section 6 *Pavana Lachrymae* and section 13 *Threnody III* in the *Black Angels*. [7] Crumb used stringed instruments to create music that fully expressed the destruction, death and disasters of that era. Crumb also utilizes these ideas to develop the mood in different sections, the atmosphere of the music and the imaginations given to the listener.

Black Angels was commissioned by the University of Michigan and dedicated to the Stanley Quartet (G. Ross, G. Rosseels, R. Courte, J. Jelinek). The premier performance of *Black Angels* was given by the Stanley Quartet in Ann Arbor, Michigan, on 23 October 1970. This theatrical and dissonant piece was inspired by the horror of the Vietnam War (1955-1975). The design of *Black Angels* is an arch-like convention used by musicians to represent an angel banished from Heaven. The “Dark Land” refers to Hell, with consistent references to 4 Devil-music [*Solo: Cadenza accompagnata*], the *Trillo del diavolo* (“*Devil's Trill*,” from Giuseppe Tartini), and the *Dies Irae* (quoted in section 4 *Devil-music*, and as a *Duo Alternativo* in section 5 *Danse Macabre*). An example of tritone, such as A natural and E flat or B natural and F natural on the Electric Violin II shown in 5. *Danse Macabre [Duo]*.

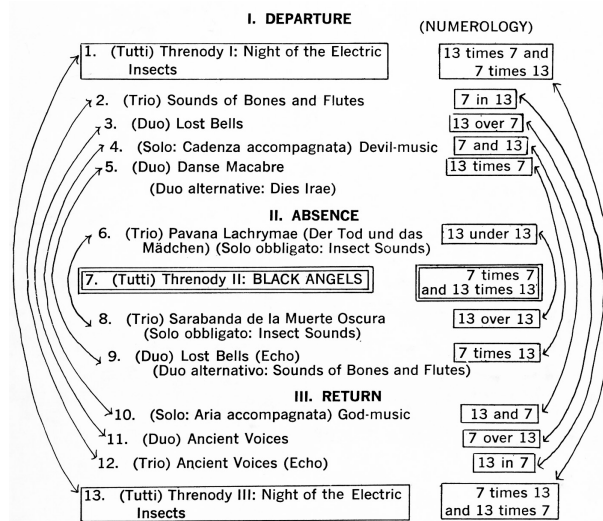


Fig. 1: George Crumb, *Black Angels*, Program. © 1972 C. F. Peters Corporation. All rights reserved. Used by permission. [8]

2.1. Musical Form and Symmetry

Black Angels shows an example of the use of palindrome forms where the thirteen movements of the work are suspended in an arc and where the instrumentation of the movements relates symmetrically to one another. Hlavatý explains that in *Black Angels* “through its emergent musical forms the use of sonological analytical methods reveals form patterns that looks more at reoccurrence, repetition and textural relatedness than harmonic progression and thematic development in the sense of traditional form.” Based on Crumb’s personal idea of “a parable on our troubled contemporary world,” *Black Angels* represents a mystical journey, “with the fall from grace (Departure), through the state of the dark night of the soul (Absence) and the return to light (Return).” The main essence of the work is between light and darkness, and God and the Devil. [9]

In *Black Angels*, Crumb applied numerology systematically, employing the numbers seven and thirteen as a basis for rhythmic figures, intervals, melodic phrases and repetition of chords, among other things, as well as the overall shape of the movements. Crumb wrote in the score that the numerological construction of movement 7 [*Tutti*] *Threnody II: Black Angels!* (7 times 7 and 13 times 13) is a central motto, which can be seen as the numerological basis for the entire work. [10]

2.2. The Use of Instrumentation

In *Music and Network. A Becoming Insect of Music*, Cobuseen argues that Crumb symbolizes the death and destruction of the musical lamentation and thirteen audible sections to allow the audience to experience the feeling and the sense by himself. [11] Crumb applies the concept of the numerology and symbolism into the use of instrumentation. For example, each performer has to sit with 7 crystal glasses and 6 glasses. It connects to 7 as God and 7 plus 6 equals to 13 to evil.

General speaking, *Black Angels* challenged the performer’s skills to produce unusual sounds or instrumental timbres through the conventional bowed string instruments. In *Black Angels*, amplification is used to deliver and convey the sound from the conventional instrument to the audience. Each of the string players is assigned a set of instruments to play throughout the piece. Some of the equipment requires specific preparation, for example, the crystal glasses, which are tuned with different amounts of water. The requirement for 4 instruments are as followed:

- 2 violins, viola and cello are electrically amplified.
- 1st violin and cello have to use maraca in certain sections. Maraca is an idiophone instrument, which can produce a soft and whistling noise while hitting the string against the fingerboard.
- 2 violins place 7 crystal glasses and 6 crystal glasses next to each performer. Each crystal glass is filled with different amount of water and tuned to a different pitch.
- In certain sections, 2 violinists and a violist switch to a 6” glass rod playing on the fingerboard.

- 2 violinists and a violist wear 2 metal thimbles to strike or click strings to produce percussive sound.
- 2 violins and violin use a metal pick (paper clip) to pluck strings. This is a plectrum played by plucking the string like the bachi for use with shamisen (Japanese plucked string instrument) or plectrum for the guitar.
- Violin II plays 15” suspended tam-tam and mallet and cellist plays 24” suspended tam-tam, soft and hard mallet. Both players have to change the bow to contrabass bow to play on tam-tam as requested.
- Each player’s voice is instructed to shout and speak and sometimes the performers must also click their tongues.

In the music, Crumb gives the stage position and the setting direction. (See Fig. 2.)

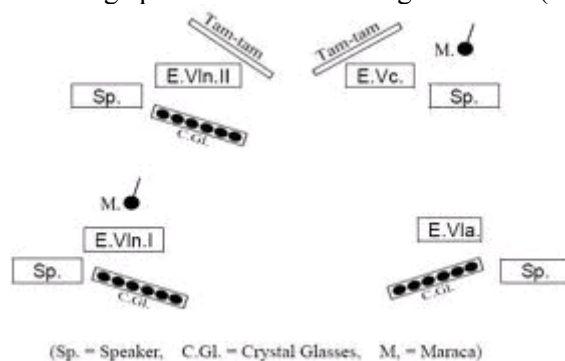


Fig. 2: George Crumb, *Black Angels*, Stage Positioning. © 1972 C. F. Peters Corporation. All rights reserved. Used by permission. [12]

3. Conclusion

In *Black Angels*, Crumb applies symbolic notation and numerology as part of his visual understanding of music writing this electric string quarter. Each performer must distinguish the meaning of 7 and 13. Each one must explore the various ways to execute the music as close as possible to the composer’s vision. Furthermore, Crumb clearly notates and describes details on the score while at the same time leaving room for the performer and the listener to develop their sensitivity and interpretation. *Black Angels* is a piece that encourages both the audience and performer to appreciate our daily life, experience, historicity, spirituality and the meaning of music. This is the most interesting part of performing experimental music and listening to non-classical music.

4. Acknowledgements

We are grateful to Beijing Normal University-Hong Kong Baptist University United International College for their generous 2012 UIC research grant without which this investigation could not have been completed.

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