

Response to Steven Bruns about a new book he is writing on George Crumb  
(November 24, 2014):

Well, there seems to be some cafe time...

This has been enjoyable, to be outside the US and looking back at my studies with George Crumb. It turned out to be quite interesting.

As concerns citation, why don't you start with direct ones, and if you need to paraphrase, perhaps you could let me review in case I didn't make myself clear? If that's too much to ask, perhaps you could just check things with me.

**When did you study with George Crumb?**

I studied with George on and off during my years at the U of Penn, 1974-77, not every semester--there were some in which I worked with Richard Wernick or George Rochberg. As I had somewhat advanced standing as an undergraduate, I was permitted to study with George, not something usually allowed an undergraduate; soon I became submatriculant, that is, accepted into the graduate program as an undergraduate.

**Why did you decide to study with him?**

Now it's hard to remember everything but I am sure that I did not attend Penn a year earlier (1973-74) because both Georges were on leave. In any case, I was greatly attracted to his music, which I discovered probably around 1972 through the Nonesuch recording of *Ancient Voices of Children*, perhaps *Black Angels* and subsequently in live performance at one of Pierre Boulez's NYPO Rug Concerts; I also knew George Rochberg's *Symphony No. 2* from the NY Phil recording with Werner Torkanowsky, and then, in 1973, his Third Quartet.

**Describe his approach to teaching composition? How would you compare it with your other teachers?**

GC was very modest, I think, about what could be taught, and he would be the first to say that ability for composition was substantially innate. But his most valuable role for me was in demonstrating understanding of how the classical tradition was so veritably living: he was actually a great teacher in that he could call up the entire literature, viscerally, under his fingers to demonstrate fast music in slow tempo, or a beautiful sonority ("*...it's like Mahler does in the Fourth Symphony...*" or "*Bartok does this in the Fourth Quartet*") and then he'd play the example, gleam in his eye. This was the case with a vast amount of music: Beethoven, Chopin, Mahler, Bartok, Ives, and Debussy. So this was a qualitative difference with other teachers, who might have verbalized more, and played less. Some others who studied with George felt he wasn't sufficiently attentive, probably because he wasn't always verbal, always on. But he was certainly present, musically. Therefore, for me learning was sometimes like a process of osmosis. Also, it was perfect timing for me developmentally; as I was learning the

Debussy Etudes as a pianist, and trying to write my own set (a project never fully accomplished), George's comments were so on point.

I don't remember George prescribing what I should write next, but like other teachers, when I later played him recordings of pieces more remote from his compositional style, these interested him a little less (for example, he was surprised when over the summer I wrote a piece for Jazz orchestra and soloists; and otherwise he was more reserved about another almost expressionist piece that my other teachers and many other listeners, had praised highly). Anyway, a typical lesson might have been spent playing four hands together (he preferred symphonies of Haydn and Mozart and Schubert originals to transcriptions of Beethoven quartets), or hearing George play one of the Chopin Etudes, and then looking at my progress on a piece. He could hear the damn thing internally! Once we were in his Penn studio, sitting on a couch (or he may have been sitting in a stuffy chair), George with my score folded out before him (in those days all composers had big music paper), and George got very excited to go the piano to demonstrate how a certain kind of punctuation could be made, I think it was something orchestrational which opened up the acoustical realm of the composition considerably. As George got up he knocked over his ever-present ashtray, spilling butts and ashes over everything. A mess. He continued with the example he wanted to show, and then, brushing this dump of stuff off my score, his brown corduroy suit, etc. he muttered "look what an ash I've made of myself..."

I don't think George was that confident that the process of studying with someone would yield results, even as he'd had such good teaching from Ross Lee Flinney and others. On this, he remarked that "the best students never finished or didn't stay with us very long..." I think he was referring particularly to Steven Albert, and I'm sure he said this much later when I was no longer a student, like in the 1990s.

The exception to an attitude that composition couldn't be taught were courses in which George taught "writing in the style": Classical minuets, sonatas, etc.) but I didn't take any of them (that kind of work I did more with Rochberg, although George was always delighted to see my string quartet in c minor or some such thing). I did take a seminar on the Mahler symphonies with George, something given for graduate students, and let's just say George was better in the studio. As a classroom teacher George didn't have lots to say about the phrase structure, harmonic organization, or philosophical background of the symphonies. On the other hand he had lots of interesting insights, for example about the hergendengel in Mahler's 7th Symphony ('perhaps a little sentimental...'), or that the Adagietto reminded him of Tchaikovsky's "Late Summer Music" in the *Pathétique*, which of course, he then played on the piano, perfectly, with élan and authority.

What did you learn about Crumb's artistic sensibility, his way of hearing and thinking about music, from your studies with him?

I learned that he was unfailingly and overwhelmingly musical, and had an internal musical imagination that was always singing. At the same time, he really did seem also to be quite exacting, to be \*measuring\* internally, factors like proportion, timbre, and virtuosity, often by making a comparison to other music. This was new for me, that someone could abstract a section of piece by Hindemith or Beethoven and then apply it to something composed yesterday. I always thought the ability to think of small and big components at once very impressive--and it is an idea present in George's own statements defining music "...a series of proportions in search of a spiritual impulse.." (the only definition of music that doesn't mention sound).

What are the most important things you learned from him?

What do you recall about the composition department at Penn: the faculty, your student colleagues, etc.?

This could go on for a long time. Maybe a few stories would suffice.

Fellow students. In my year were Marilyn Bliss, Robert Kyr, Robert Carl, David King, Martin Herman.

In the classes above me were Stephen Hartke, Morris Rosenweig, a Canadian composer Ron Harris, and Norman Seigel. Seems rather quaint now, but there were stylistic fights, largely around the following lineage. Morris and Norman, and maybe a few others really didn't like any 20th century music which led to Crumb, or to contemporary Rochberg of the 1970s. This was especially Bartok, Penderecki, and what they viewed as the current fad for Mahler in the 1970s. On the other hand, this group admired the serial Rochberg of the 1950s, along with late Stravinsky, Kirchner, Mario Davidovsky, Leon Kirchner. Crumb did attract a legion of people who were imitators; circle music, masked players, etc. and it really must have stuck in the craws of those who were hoping to further a post-Schoenberg line that these students would bring their stuff, and GC would blithely say "*nice sounds!*" and not insist that they learn Dallapiccola, Schoenberg, or Webern, all of which he admired.

What aspects of Crumb's music do you especially admire? Which particular compositions are among your favorites?

I think the letter I sent to you (on George's 80th) sums up the many pieces I liked.

There are a few pieces by which I am fascinated, but don't include on my favorites list. If you'd like to know them, I'll be happy to elaborate, but I have so many favorites.

Do you recall discussions with him about other composers or compositions that impressed George (or that he disliked)?

If you are asking about the relationship between GC, George Rochberg and Richard Wernick, I would say that George was unfailingly kind in his assessment of both colleagues. At George Rochberg's funeral (2006?) George said to me "*Everything I know about collage I learned from George [Rochberg].*" Also, I heard George compare Dick Wernick's conducting of his music favorably to Pierre Boulez and others, expressing relief that it would be Dick and not Eugene Ormandy conducting a performance (I think of *Star Child*) with the Philadelphia Orchestra: "*I think Dick's the best conductor there is for my music.*" He also expressed that he liked Wernick's *Visions of Terror and Wonder*. I would say that George R and Richard W managed George Crumb's success graciously (both were highly successful, musically and otherwise), and rarely baited their students with comments about his music--amazing when you consider that because of his fame and maybe, his personality, George was excused from a lot of departmental dirty work, which his colleagues have got to have resented.

George was unfailingly kind to me when I was struggling, after finishing my degree but before I had jobs, reputation, status, etc. Most of my colleagues had to go on to get Ph.D. degrees. Miraculously, that was not required of me, but still I was sometimes in need of criticism by a knowledgeable and sympathetic listener. On a musical level I was really encouraged by letters George wrote in response to scores I sent, sometimes asking for feedback about one issue or another (formal balance, or over-preponderance of virtuosity ("*not every piece is the Hammerklavier...*")

Music by other composers? George liked *Le Marteau sans Maître*, but felt that *Pierrot Lunaire*, while clearly a masterpiece, would have been improved with "*just one singing song*" every now and then (perhaps he said one in seven, I don't remember). The point is that behind George's frequently cited eclecticism, there was a winning and traditional compositional craft trying to birth itself anew from the ashes of single story modernism.

We certainly discussed Maxwell-Davies, Harbison, Martino, Ralph Shapey, Barbara Kolb, Mario Davidovsky, and others together, but I can't recall what he said. I mention this only because it looks from the above could be read from the above that all he cared about was older music. There were a few contemporary composers' works he didn't like ("*there are some composers that...*" or "*you hear an awful lot of literal recapitulations...*") but he never criticized anyone personally.

How do you see George Crumb's place in the broader history of music since 1960?

George always said to me that "*I'll only be remembered by about ten pieces*", something that struck me at 21 or 23 as an amazing statement, since he was such an amazing master, and so original, wherein his great pieces were among the best, and even the lesser pieces were of interest. Now it strikes me, at nearly 60, that George was about right. His appraisal sounds severe, but I think it is true of most of the greatest

composers since 1965: excepting Ligeti and maybe Messiaen and Elliott Carter, possibly Louis Andreissen and Witold Lutoslawski, if remembering means actual engagement that musicians give to written music by playing it, or that audiences engage with regularly, I don't think we will be remembering more than ten pieces by Pierre Boulez, Steve Reich, John Adams, Alfred Schnittke, George Rochberg, Harrison Birtwistle, Luciano Berio, Karlheinz Stockhausen, Luigi Nono, Thomas Ades, or Yehudi Wyner. I wish I (and George) were wrong--and this doesn't even mention other amazing composers like Frederick Rzewski, Mark Anthony Turnage, Morton Feldman, Franco Donatoni, Wynton Marsalis, John Harbison, Kaija Saariaho, Osvaldo Golijov, Donald Martino, Meredith Monk, Toru Takemitsu and others. This isn't necessarily bad. It's just the reality of how much space there is for music to be remembered as something living, performed, listened to. It's the case with Dallapiccola, Ravel, maybe Copland, certainly Varese, Revueltas, and probably even Berg. Probably not more than 10 pieces. Nothing is stopping anyone from going deeper into the works of Birtwistle, Rochberg or Donatoni if they are interested. But I doubt we'll be having many retrospectives of these composers showing a depth of more than ten pieces. Maybe 12.

The more interesting question is: for a composer to produce ten real winners, is it necessary for s/he to produce in quantity (like Berio or Yehudi Wyner)? Or can ten or twelve pieces be produced as chefs-d'ouvres, over a lifetime (like Ruggles attempted, or Ruth Crawford, Varèse, arguably Samuel Barber)? If composing is meant to include regular engagement with a community of performers, and a life's work, most of us feel that regular production is part of it, whether one keeps the majority of what one does or throws out a lot (George and Debussy have a lot in common in this respect--I have an impression of many unfinished pieces). My observation is that for a composer so preoccupied with originality as George, it may have been hard to keep producing novel and convincing scores, one after the other. In the late 1980s and 90s, there was a period when he seemed to slow down considerably, a period of particularly critical self assessment-- *Quest* was revised about as much as any piece of his I know, except perhaps *Night Music I*. But given my own artistic development, having now witnessed what happens when you actually have produced a dozen or so top-notch pieces, it is moving to me that George just kept right on going, and kept on developing into the late style of what became American Songbook. I never spoke with George about the pressure he felt, but did observe one summer he just decided to build a wall, and that's what he talked about.

In George Crumb I hear an unfailingly original voice in American music, unlike any other, deeply musical and poetic, and perhaps more perfectly crafted with his ideas than almost anyone. I wish George continued life and creation.

Thank you in advance for sending me the book. You can send it to me at Duke: Department of Music, Duke University, Box 90665-0665, Durham, NC 27708-0665.

Please give my regards to Susan Grace, if you see her. I just worked with Steve Beck, and knew about Alice's decision to step away from Quattro Mani. I wish you much luck with your work, however not fulfillment any time soon of George's macabre remark that "death's the most important thing that can happen to an American composer."

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September 22, 2009

Dear George,

Happy 80<sup>th</sup> birthday, October 24, 2009! Although I cannot be present for the Philadelphia Crumb concerts in September, we've programmed *Processional* here in your honor on October 25. You will be 80 and 1/365<sup>th</sup> for the performance.

Here it is my pleasure to acknowledge, with much gratitude on your birthday, two major ways in which your example has been so important for me: your knowledge and complete ownership of musical tradition, and your compelling artistic example.

In the first case, I often think how deeply you have the entire musical repertoire right at your fingertips, accessibly and palpably: moods, themes, sets of proportions. Beethoven quartets, Chopin Etudes; the Barcarolle, the Fantasy, whole worlds of Debussy, Mahler, Dallapiccola, Ives, Bartók! For you, and those of us who are privileged to have been your students, such command represents not only a touchstone, but a connection—to a perceptibly *felt* imaginative world of music-- joyful, mystical or poignant notes, sometimes otherworldly, but unfailingly tangible. When I was your student, you communicated this living legacy through affecting, immediate solo playing, or together with me in four hand arrangements; in conversation you made music live through the most incredibly precise and brilliant observations about details or structure.

Equally inspiring is your music itself, deeply affecting for me since the early 1970s. In our letters and conversations together, and in my letter marking your retirement from Penn (which has now awarded you a Ph.D., *bravissimi*)—I have recalled the many beautiful

premieres of your works which I remember having attended: *Makrokosmos II*, *Star Child*, *A Haunted Landscape*, and even *The Sleeper*. In recent years we've had a number of your works at Duke, including *Quest*, *Vox Balanae*, and *Mundis Canis* and this summer in New Hampshire I heard Toni Arnold sing *Madrigals*, Book III, one of my favorites. So the pleasures go on and on. Every note sounds to me authentic, original, and captivating; unfailingly I am moved, suspended, or challenged. Here's to many more years of creating.

I also want to note your kind friendship all these years, as if you felt inside that life, and music, and friendship were important—and just as cosmic as the right notes in *Quiero dormir el sueño de las manzanas*. I know them by heart.

With warm wishes,

Stephen Jaffe



## Introduction of George Crumb – Stephen Jaffe

It's my honor to represent the members of the American Academy of Arts and Letters which today presents to George Crumb the Gold Medal for distinguished achievement in the arts, determined by a vote of Academy colleagues in recognition of a lifetime of work.

Previously, the Academy has recognized the life's work of Stravinsky, Copland, Sessions, Carter, Steven Sondheim and Steve Reich, among a select few.

Having known and learned from George for forty years, it is my particular pleasure to introduce such an inspiring musical presence, whose music has long since demonstrated its staying power, not through its sonic innovation, theatrics or novel notation, but through its sheer poetry, originality, and the greatest sense of musical timing in recent memory. In a Crumb work, the right thing happens at the right time.

I would like to invite George to the podium to accept this beautiful medal.

The citation reads as follows:

**From the great Lorca song cycles like *Ancient Voices of Children* to the recent *American Songbooks*, George Crumb's works are unique. With the African talking drum, the jug, plucked piano strings and hauntingly beautiful vocalisms, Crumb has created enduring works where sound creates an emotional and memorable response in the listener. In music spiritual, dark—and beloved—Crumb is a fitting American successor to Ives, Mahler, and 1960s experimentalists.**