The Unique Sounds of George Crumb’s Vocal Works

Tabitha Vincent

When a person hears about a vocal work, they think about music where a soloist or choir is singing notes on pitch, and lyrically with words and a beautiful sound. Well, with George Crumb and his music, he brings something different to vocal music. He wrote his music in the style of contemporary vocal composition, using alternative styles of singing. He chose to be like the “new compositions for the voice that use it in ways other than exclusively in the ‘usual singing mode.’ Spoken, whispered, murmured, and hummed delivery…which is combined with normal singing,”¹ making his music odd for some people to listen to. He added his own style to the music to make it all his own, and this paid off for him in the end. Crumb’s style used a variety of forms of consonance, such as whole-tone, modal, and tonal elements that came together in a way to make his music truly fascinating for people to listen to.² George Crumb’s vocal music demonstrates musical uniqueness through the use of different instrumentation, the use of different types of tone color, and the different expression of emotions he tried to provoke through his music.

George Crumb was a very unique composer, and one way he made his vocal works interesting was in the instrumentation he chose to accompany the vocal parts, as well as the vocal parts themselves. On average, a vocal work has either one singer, duet, trio, a whole choir, or some sort of combination of vocalists, accompanied either

simply by a piano, or maybe a standard instrumented orchestra, but that is not so with George Crumb’s music. Though, in his earlier works he did use the typical instrumentation for his vocal works. Mr. Crumb was still in high school when he first made his first compositions of vocal works, which include *Four Songs for Voice, Clarinet, and Piano, Seven Songs for Voice and Piano, and Three Early Songs.* These works all have fairly common instrumentation, with either a simple piano accompaniment, or with one other instrument. The only vocal work from this time that has been performed recently is his *Three Early Songs.* This piece was first performed by a local tenor named James Bailey, choosing the “instrumentation” to be with a tenor voice and piano. After these early years of Crumb’s career in composing, during the 1960’s, he started to extend his techniques into his composing for many different instruments. “Crumb is one of only three composers who emphasized extended instrumental techniques in a thoroughgoing and consistent way.” He did not only use different techniques for just his instrumental works, but he also added these effects into his vocal works. He asks that the instruments that are normal be played differently, such as the pianist plucking the actual strings in the piano to add a different type of effect to the music. In his *Night Music 1*, the instrumentation includes soprano, piano doubling with celesta and two percussion, which might be considered fairly normal, but then he adds in a water gong glissando. Not many people know what a water gong is, and they will be caught by

---

surprise when they hear its glissando. The use of percussion in this piece, and the “watergong” effect is expected to make the pitch a vibrating solid rise, not drop when dipped in water.\(^7\) This is a very different instrument to have in a vocal work, as well as a very interesting sound which is the uniqueness of George Crumb.

Moving on from Crumb’s earlier pieces, Crumb continues to have new ideas for his music. He wrote a series of four books called *Madrigals*. In these songs, the first book instrumentation that accompanied the soprano was contrabass and vibraphone, moving on to flute and percussion in book two, and then harp and percussion in book three, and in book four, Crumb brought all of these instruments together with flute, harp, contrabass and percussion. These instruments helped emulate what Mr. Crumb wanted to put across in the music, and someone else who helped express the music of Madrigals was Jan DeGaetani, a mezzo-soprano who was featured in the Madrigals, and it was “the beginning of a long standing professional relationship and personal friendship.”\(^8\) The talent of Ms. DeGaetani was appreciated by Mr. Crumb, and he made more pieces for her to sing as he progressed in his composing. Moving on to Crumb’s next vocal work, he used unusual instrumentations in order to achieve a style to imitate the Japanese chamber music. In *Night of the Four Moons*, three melodic instruments are used to imitate these Japanese chamber instruments including the Japanese shanisen which was represented by a banjo, a biwa represented by a cello, and a shakuhachi represented by an alto flute.\(^9\) All of these, plus an alto make up the song

\(^7\) Stiller, “Where’s that Sound Coming From?” p. 40.
\(^9\) Stiller, “Where’s that Sound Coming from?” p. 47.
which is very unique, and the combination of the instruments only makes the music all that more unique. “The severing of instruments from their cultural roots is a major stylistic resource for Crumb, and is particularly well illustrated in the banjo parts of this piece.”\textsuperscript{10} Just because these three instruments are used to emulate the sound of Japanese Chamber music does not mean that the song is supposed to sound completely Japanese. The percussion part is supposed to sound anything but Japanese. The music has its own style, and sound to it.

The instrumentation in George Crumb’s most popular work, Ancient Voices of Children, is kind of taken from the mountain music, but these instruments do not bring that sound, but instead they bring an appropriate accompaniment to Lorca’s poetry. George Crumb himself says:

“The instruments employed in Ancient Voices were chosen for their particular timbral potentialities. The pianist also plays the toy piano (in the 4\textsuperscript{th} song), the mandolinist musical saw (2\textsuperscript{nd} song), and the oboeist harmonica (4\textsuperscript{th} song)...the three percussionists command a wide range of instruments, including Tibetan prayer stones, Japanese temple bells, and tuned tom-toms.”\textsuperscript{11}

The percussion instruments have a lot of exotic types of instruments. There are numerous percussion instruments in Crumb’s pieces, including in Ancient Voices. Not only does he use this instrumentation, Ancient Voices of Children also has the soprano and the boy soprano, and he again called for the talents of Jan DeGaetani. The vocal parts themselves are different instrumentation in themselves. The part calls for the

\textsuperscript{10} Stiller, “Where’s that Sound Coming from?” p. 48.

\textsuperscript{11} George Crumb, Ancient Voices of Children. (New York: C.F. Peters Corporation, 1971).
vocalists to try different things with their voices, such as having them sing into the
piano, to trill a note rapidly or flutter tongue, and also having the boy soprano slowly
walk onto stage at the end of the song to add to the musical effect.\textsuperscript{12} \textit{Ancient Voices} so
far has been the most unusual in instrumentation, in the uniqueness of types, and ways
he uses the instruments.

Another large and major vocal work by George Crumb is \textit{Star-Child}. This was a
very large ensemble requiring a large orchestra, which consists of woodwinds in fours,
six horns, seven trumpets, eight percussion, organ, two choruses, and a handbell choir,
but surprisingly does not have a large string section. There are also antiphonal
Children’s Voices and a male speaking choir. In the score of \textit{Star-Child}, Crumb gave very
specific instructions over what to do with the instruments, and exactly what materials to
use. The percussionist played a bow timpani which the player had to “hold a rigid
wooden ruler (with metal edge) firmly against edge of membrane with the thumb.”\textsuperscript{13}

Not many choral works out there require a ruler for musical means. This piece also calls
for the water gong effect. This is when the cymbal is “placed on the timpani membrane
while executing a tremolo (with two soft sticks), make indicated pedal glissando,
thereby bending the pitch of the cymbal.”\textsuperscript{14} The overall use of these different
instruments in not only \textit{Star-Child}, but in all of Crumb’s pieces help project the sound
that he is looking for in his music. In a lot of his pieces Crumb has stated that “he might

\textsuperscript{12} George Crumb, \textit{Ancient Voices of Children}. P. 4 and 8.
\textsuperscript{14} Crumb, \textit{Star-Child}. P. 7.
associate an appropriate timbre”\textsuperscript{15} to something either in a poem or in the feel of what he wants the particular piece to be. His use of different types of instrumentation has helped contribute to this composer’s unique style.

Something else that is very important in knowing George Crumb’s vocal works is through the tone color of each instrument. Each instrument has its unique sound, but Mr. Crumb also asks for different uses of these instruments in order to get the specific sound he is looking for. The different sound that Mr. Crumb uses makes his music sound very mysterious and mystic. “The sound matter itself- a bricolage of unusual timbres, spell-like recitations counting multiple languages, and other sound effects that invoke the ‘supernatural’”\textsuperscript{16} adds a certain mystery to his music that leaves the audience wondering after they hear his music. This ‘supernatural’ feeling is invoked in the vocal part when the singer is asked to do different things with her voice to add a certain color to the music. In two pieces of his, George Crumb really asks a lot of his vocalist to add the color he wanted in the piece. Both use a solo soprano, and this color is what Mr. Crumb liked in his pieces.

In \textit{Night Music 1}, and his first two books of \textit{Madrigals}, the composer used intervals of minor seconds and ninths, sevenths, and tritones, which are dissonant intervals to add the tone color of mystery.\textsuperscript{17} This dissonant sound is not unusual for Crumb’s music, and it adds flair to his music that is not in other vocal works. Another area for \textit{Madrigals} is the person who sang a performance of it. Jan Degaetani was the

\begin{footnotesize}
\textsuperscript{15} Cohen \textit{George Crumb: Bio-Bibliography}. p. 20.
\textsuperscript{17} Stiller, “Where’s that Sound Coming From,” P. 39.
\end{footnotesize}
one to premiere this, and her “enormous range of pitch and timbre... and extraordinary precision made her the ideal medium for Crumb’s unique and delicate sonic palette,” making her add to the tone color that Crumb eventually began to use in *Ancient Voices of Children* and *Star-Child*. George Crumb actually wrote *Ancient Voices of Children*, as well as other vocal pieces, with Ms. Degaetani in mind.

In his *Ancient Voices for Children*, the solo soprano, and boy soprano are asked to use different techniques to put the tone color into the piece. These unique qualities are not used in a normal vocal score. Some of these techniques for the vocalist are to use different vowels for their “words,” flutter tonguing, singing into the piano, humming, as well as having the soprano speak into a tube. Mr. Crumb gives special instructions for the soprano to follow in order for the right color and sound to be achieved in the piece. He says in the score, “the soprano sings into the piano to produce sympathetic vibrations. The pianist must keep damper pedal depressed in this and all similar passages.” The vibrations used add color to the piece, and making Crumb’s music the mystery it is. The soprano is also asked to use rapid, indeterminate pitches in a section, as well as glissandos in her voice, and then finally having her sing tenderly and whispering. This is a very mysterious use of tone color. When a person thinks of the use of whispering, they think that someone is hiding something, therefore making it a very mysterious experience of hearing this song. Another way *Ancient Voices of Children* is mysterious with its tone color is through the boy soprano. The boy soprano

---

20 Crumb, *Ancient Voices Score* P. 1.
is offstage for most of the piece, and is asked to sing into a cardboard speaking tube, and at the end to come onto stage with the soprano, and then sing into the piano with the soprano. The use of vocal effects in this song is very effective in giving the piece a good tone color filled with mystery, which is a stamp for George Crumb.

Another piece of George Crumb’s that demonstrates the different types of tone color used in his pieces is Star-Child. In this piece, the solo soprano is called to have different syllables for her words, like in Ancient Voices. Several vocal affects were used in the piece, such as having the soprano sing an indistinct pitch in several places in the music, again giving the music a mysterious feel to it.\(^{22}\) Another vocal color added in this piece was having male speaking voices instead of male singing voices, adding a whole different type of sound to the music, making it a good sound for the tone color Crumb was trying to put across. Many composers have a distinct tone color to their music, such as through male voices, female voices, or mixed choruses, but not many ask their singers to do quite this many unusual things to their voices.

Not only do these songs have a variety of tone colors because of the vocalists, but the instrumentalists also change their sounds in unique ways. As Crumb explains in the Ancient Voices score, “Certain special instrumental effects are used to heighten the ‘expressive intensity’ ‘bending’ the pitch of the piano by application of a chisel to the string; use of paper-threaded harp, the frequent ‘pitch-bending of the oboe, harp and mandolin.’\(^{23}\) Mr. Crumb was a creative person in his vocal works, paying close attention to everything, from the main vocal line, to the percussion part. Everything added its

---

\(^{22}\) Crumb, Star-Child, P. 7.

\(^{23}\) Crumb, Ancient Voices of Children, P. 1
own sound to create the perfect combination of music to completely reflect what he was looking for. Not only did he use these instrumental affects, but he also had the instrumentalists actually sing, shout, and whisper, giving that sense of mystery as to what is actually going to happen in the music. *Ancient Voices of Children* is not the only vocal work that incorporates instrumental effects. In *Star-Child*, the main instrumental color added into the song was with the trombone. The trombonist had to do many things, such as sing and speak into the instrument, use a harmon mute, a plunger mute, as well as a lot of glissandos.24 These are all qualities that add to the tone color, distinguishing George Crumb from other composers.

People have noticed the tone color in his music as well. “The variety of tone color Crumb managed to get from his singer and two instrumentalists was so wide as to be almost beyond belief. It was certainly an apt demonstration that there is no necessary conflict between advanced musical thought and immediacy of appeal.”25 Crumb put thought into his vocal works, and the tone color that was created because of this thought was different and appreciated by those who listen to it. One way he showed the different tone colors in his music was not only through making composer notes throughout the whole score, but also through putting the music on circular staves. This type of notation for notes helps “make a gradual crescendo to midpoint of circle music, then a gradual diminuendo to last measure. The whispering progresses gradually to shouting, then back to whispering.”26 This dynamic color is shown through the

---

24 Crumb, *Star-Child*.
circular form of the music (see example 1 in musical examples), and is a very efficient way of illustrating the style he wanted the music to be played. There are many factors that contribute to the tone color of these vocal works, but these are some major ways that really makes the tone color stick out. “Crumb, in effect, invents highly imaginative sonorities and timbres”27 These sonorities and timbres made George Crumb’s vocal works truly great.

One very important aspect in music is not only to have a unique tone color, but also to have expression and emotion of any sort in music. Whether it is happy, sad, pensive, or anything, the musicality of the piece is greatly heightened with the use of emotional parts, and George Crumb does this very well in his music. Crumb stated, “I believe that music surpasses even language in its power to mirror the innermost recesses of the human soul.”28 The human soul involves having different emotions, and music is a language in showing these complex feelings. Though first listening to George Crumb’s music for the first times, a person only hears the unusual sound of the vocalist, and so they don’t really hear this emotion demonstrated, but once a person takes time to listen to the music and get past the peculiar sounds, the true emotion is reflected through the use of instruments and tone color in the music. Listening to Ancient Voices of Children, a person can hear a playful nature in the music, representing the sound of children playing and laughing.29 This is helped in his music with his instrumentation, and sounds he uses. “Crumb has thought to mine new instrumental sounds for their

expressive qualities, searching always for those of the greatest inherent beauty and
evocativeness.”30 He truly aspired to seek something that would be expressive, and
would evoke people to hear his music and truly feel something.

Another way he uses expression in his vocal works is through mystery and the
mythological. In Lux Aeterna, the performers were supposed to play the work “very
slow, with a sense of meditative time, pregnant with mystery.”31 This mysterious
quality in his music is expressed, as stated earlier, through the tone color in the music.
There is a large quantity of emotions that can be felt with mystery. It might be fear,
excitement, surprise, or many feelings that is hard to express, but in George Crumb’s
vocal works this sense is picked up very well. Another expression in Crumb’s music is his
expression of the mythological.32 This has to do with emotion because it causes people
to think and feel that sense of the mythological and having feeling in the music is what
brings forth emotion. George Crumb himself defines myths as, “generalizations of
things that are happening or have happened in history.”33 Everyone has experienced
something that has happened in their history, or most have heard of things that have
happened, so emotion will be struck with Crumb’s use of the mythological. Crumb’s use
of the mythological and mystery in his vocal works helps bring forth emotion in many
different people, whether that emotion be fearful, confused, sad, or a combination of
many different feelings.

30 Stiller, “Where is that Sound Coming From?” P. 41.
32 Adamenko, “Channels of Mystification.” P. 324.
33 Adamenko, “Channels of Mystification.” P. 331.
The very major way Crumb used emotion and expression in his music was through the poetry of Frederico Garcia Lorca. “Almost all of Crumb’s vocal compositions are settings of verse by Lorca, and the composer views them as an extended cycle...Indeed programmatic writing and symbolism pervade Crumb’s music.”34 The texts of Lorca’s poetry helped inspire Crumb to bring out the emotion in the words, and express it in the music. “As Brian Fennelly observes, ‘At the core of Crumb’s success is his ability to mirror and reflect upon the rich poetry of the chosen Garcia Lorca excerpts with particular sensitivity to mood and special timbral possibilities.’”35 Crumb’s special attention to mood and timbre made him truly add emotion into his music, evoking moods in people through the combination of the text and sound of his music. Crumb commented on Lorca’s poetry by saying, “I feel that the essential meaning of this poetry is concerned with the most primary things: life, death, love, the smell of the earth, the sounds of the wind and the sea.”36 All of these events occur in people’s lives, and it provokes many different types of emotions, so Crumb was trying to bring forth these emotions in his vocal works through Lorca’s poetry. The vocal work, *Songs, Drones, and Refrains of Death*, which is set to Lorca’s poetry, is darker in mood than other Lorca settings, and “perhaps summing up his feelings regarding composing Lorca settings Crumb says, “Lorca’s haunting, even mystical visions of death...is the seminal force of his dark genius.”37 Again, Crumb’s sense of mystery is introduced, instead of through the music, through the text of Lorca’s poetry. The texts in Lorca’s poems help the

36 Adamenko, “Channels of Mystification.” P. 327.
performers sing with extra emotion because they can find out what the texts mean, and truly portray the emotion those texts are expressing. In Ancient Voices of Children, Crumb wanted to catch the spirit of children, and he did this partly with the help of Lorca. (See example 2 in musical examples.)

Something else that George Crumb uses Lorca’s poems to tell is to catch the spirit of something or to tell the story of something through song. In Night of the Four Moons, Crumb “captured the spirit of the space flight and of Lorca’s poems.” Some people may have been emotionally involved in this space flight, so this piece of music was able to bring forth those emotions through the music and text of Lorca’s poetry.

The vocal work Apparition was set to a different text than Lorca. Crumb chose to use Walt Whitman’s “When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom’d.” Crumb was not the first person to use this poem in music, but he made the music all his own through using just piano and voice. This was used to put the listener’s attention on thoughts of death. Thought of death is a very emotional subject and Crumb uses the excerpts from the poem that “are transcendent ruminations on mortality.” Apparition was a good vocal work that is very emotional, and expressive, showing Crumb’s talent in demonstrating this in his music.

There are many composers that have lived and written vocal works, so it is important for each composer to set their music apart in some special way. George Crumb was able to do this through his use of different instrumentation, different tone

38 Cohen, George Crumb: Bio-Bibliography, Pg. 10.
39 Cohen, George Crumb: Bio-Bibliography, Pg. 17.
40 Cohen, George Crumb: Bio-Bibliography, Pg. 17.
colors, and through evoking emotion with his use of expression in his music. There is a wide range of instrumentation in his music, starting out simply with a piano and voice, and moving to a mixture of chorus with exotic instruments such as a mandolin, toy piano, muted trombones, and many other types of instruments. The way Crumb used these odd instruments was for their unique timbre and sound, using their tone color to bring forth his ideas in the music. Through having the soprano sing into the piano, or having the instruments bend their pitch, Crumb succeeded in his music being mysterious and thought provoking. Finally, and maybe most important of all, was the way Crumb used expression in his music to show emotion. A composer’s overall goal in music is to provoke the audience to feel something after they hear a musical piece, and Crumb’s vocal works definitely do this through the sound as well as the poetry used in the songs, mostly of Lorca, but also with the poetry of Walt Whitman. George Crumb was a successful composer in his lifetime, maybe starting out slow, but by the end of his career he can look back and be proud of what he produced in his vocal works.
Musical Examples

Example 1 shows circle notation in Crumb’s vocal work, *Star-Child*\(^{41}\)

Example 2 shows an example of Lorca’s text in 2\(^{nd}\) Movement of *Ancient Voices of Children*.\(^{42}\)

In the text:

Me he perdido muchas veces por el mar
con el oído lleno de flores recién cortadas,
con la lengua llena de amor y de agonia.
Muchas veces me he perdido por el mar,
como me pierdo en el corazón de algunos niños.

\(^{41}\) Crumb, *Star-Child*. P. 6
\(^{42}\) Crumb, *Ancient Voices of Children*. 
Translated to English:

I have lost myself to the sea many times with my ear full of freshly cut flowers, with my tongue full of love and agony, I have lost myself in the sea many times as I lose my heart of certain children.
Bibliography


