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MUSIC REVIEW

Return to Crumb's World, With Crumb Along for the Ride

By ALLAN KOZINN

George Crumb and his music are getting a second wind these days. In the 1970s Mr. Crumb's colorful, idiosyncratic chamber works were all the rage: no self-respecting new-music fan, particularly of college age, was without the Nonesuch recording of his "Ancient Voices of Children" (1970), and his string quartet "Black Angels" (1970) was an unusually elevated and searing Vietnam War protest. Earlier and later scores rode on the coattails of these works, but by the mid-1980s Mr. Crumb seemed to have faded from view.

In recent years new works have become plentiful again, old ones are reappearing on concert programs, and among the increasingly frequent recordings of Mr. Crumb's music are a dozen discs (so far) on the Bridge label, which plans to complete its comprehensive Crumb survey before the composer's 80th birthday, in October 2009.

Mr. Crumb solved one mystery in an installment of Carnegie Hall's Making Music series at Zankel Hall on Monday evening. In an interview with Jeremy Geffen, the hall's director of artistic programming, he said his output had dwindled into the '90s because he was spending more time teaching than composing. His retirement in 1997 solved that problem.

The program proved another point too: Fascinating as it is to hear composers speak for themselves, the music tells you what you really need to know. And because Mr. Crumb's music is rooted in a sound world of his own creation — in which musicians hit, scrape, stroke and sing into their instruments, and notions of tonality and atonality are entirely fluid — his signature is unmistakable.

The earliest work on the program, the avant-garde classic "Vox Balaenae" (1971), is driven by bending, microtonal flute and cello pitches and percussive

inside-the-piano writing. A stylized version of whale song is evoked, but other things are afoot as well in this extended variation set, including a refracted quotation from Strauss's "Also Sprach Zarathustra." Tara Helen O'Connor, the flutist; Priscilla Lee, the cellist; and Molly Morkoski, the pianist, played the work with an intensity that was actually a refined kind of virtuosity.

Two more recent vocal works showed the extent to which Mr. Crumb has continued to demand that virtuosity, while stripping away the outlandish effects. You still hear them in the sometimes swooping, sometimes whispered vocal lines and plucked piano writing of "The Sleeper" (1984). But in "Voices From the Morning of the Earth (American Songbook VI)" (2007), Mr. Crumb's expansive arrangements of folk songs, spirituals and pop tunes, those sound effects give way to layered, contrapuntal percussion writing and deeply expressive reconfigurations of the vocal melodies.

In an assertive performance by Ann Crumb, a theater singer and the composer's daughter; Randall Scarlata, a baritone; and Orchestra 2001, led by James Freeman, the work's finale — a haunting version of Pete Seeger's "Where Have All the Flowers Gone?" — was particularly gripping. Against a hazy chromatic backdrop, with an angular piano figure punctuating the verses, the two singers alternated lines, the stanzas sung with an acidic vehemence and the refrain ominously whispered. Mr. Seeger's plaintive antiwar text has never sounded more grim.

The Kronos Quartet will perform George Crumb's "Black Angels" at Carnegie Hall on Dec. 5; (212) 247-7800, carnegiehall.org.

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