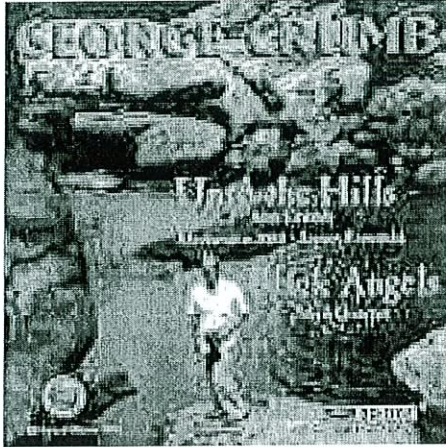


## CLASSICS TODAY “10/10 REVIEW”



### GEORGE CRUMB

Unto the Hills: Songs of Sadness, Yearning, and Innocence;  
Black Angels: 13 Images from the Dark Land for Electric String Quartet  
Ann Crumb (voice)  
Orchestra 2001; Miró String Quartet James Freeman  
Bridge- 9139(CD)

*Artistic Quality* **10/10** *Sound Quality*

Melody always has played an important part in George Crumb's music, however unusual the sonic explorations on which his reputation largely rests. I vividly remember a conversation a few years back on the occasion of his receiving a “Living Composer” tribute at the Cannes Classical Awards where he shocked a colleague by responding to the question “What music do you enjoy listening to” with the thoughtful observation: “Well, I think Rachmaninov wrote some terrific tunes, don’t you?” More to the point, bits of folksong, references to other composers (such as Schubert, Beethoven, and Dowland in *Black Angels*), and a general concern with imposing on these “found objects” a sort of unified, primal musical essence all play a major role in Crumb’s mature music. His use of a complete folksong melody--*Amazing Grace*--in the recent work *Quest* hinted that something was up, and that something finds glorious fulfillment in *Unto the Hills*, a setting of six Appalachian folksongs for voice, electric piano, and percussion quartet (playing some 70 different instruments).

The problem for Crumb in adapting these songs was a tricky one: how to preserve the integrity of those beautiful melodies while remaining true to his own compositional style. To say that he has succeeded would be a major understatement. The very first rustle of percussion, the initial drone played directly on the strings of the piano introducing the song *Poor Wayfaring Stranger*, proclaims the music as Crumb’s. The tune may be common coin, but the setting is as personal as the work of a master jeweler. What’s so satisfying about this piece is the manner in which Crumb respects his melodies while intensifying the meaning of the words. Thus, the lullaby *All the Pretty Little Horses* acquires the quality of ritual incantation through the simple device of concluding each phrase with jingling sleigh bells, like the stylized rustling of a shaman’s rattle.

By alternately singing and whispering the opening line of each verse of *Every Night When the Sun Goes In*, Crumb also avoids the potential monotony of literal repetition, so important when each song basically consists of one or two verses set to identical music. Some of the selections are quite well known: *Ten Thousand Miles* even featured in an episode of *The Munsters* (sung by Yvonne DeCarlo), while *The Riddle* (a.k.a. *I Gave My Love a Cherry*) has been parodied by everyone from Alan Sherman to Anna Russell. As for *Black, Black, Black is the Color*, Berio set it in his own piece called *Folk Songs*, and comparison between the two versions is fascinating--certainly Crumb strikes a darker note of despair when the instrumental prelude is so ominous and singer Ann Crumb finds such desperation in her gasping cries of the word “black”, which open each stanza.

Which brings us to the performances: the composer’s daughter is the perfect exponent of this material. A noted actress on stage and television (you may have seen her on *Law and Order*), Ann Crumb has a gorgeous but above all non-operatic voice and the training to stay spot on pitch. This is important because the melody seldom receives much instrumental support--the voice bears the message while the ensemble (the equally marvelous Orchestra 2001) amplifies, dissects, deepens, and intensifies. It only remains to note that while *Unto the Hills* bears the subtitle “American Songbook III”, it actually is the first-composed of four cycles based on folksongs, two more of which have been completed. Lasting nearly 40 minutes, the work is a flat-out masterpiece that deserves the sort of cult following that *Ancient Voices of Children* enjoyed way back in the 1970s. Indeed, there's no reason why it should not become genuinely popular.

This is Volume Seven in Bridge’s complete Crumb Edition, and what happier news can there be than the knowledge that at 75 the composer is still writing music of such quality and humanity? May this series never end! -DAVID HURWITZ