

“Black Angels (Thirteen Images from the Dark Land)”--The New York String Quartet (1972)

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Essay by Victoria Adamenko (guest post)*



George Crumb

George Crumb (b. 1929) is an American modern classical and avant-garde composer who formed his distinct style, featuring unusual timbres and innovative sonorities, in the early 1960s. By the time he finished “Black Angels” on March 13, 1970, the composer had already won a Pulitzer Prize (1968) and established himself as the creator of a highly spiritual and poetic sound world.

In Crumb’s words,

The composition of “Black Angels” started with a simple commission from the University of Michigan for the Stanley Quartet, so I was first of all faced with the task of coming up with a string quartet. I had not worked in that medium since my student days. At the outset, I wasn’t planning anything like a political statement; I was just writing a piece of music. But very soon after I got into the sketching process, I became aware that the musical ideas were picking up vibrations from the surrounding world, which was the world of the Vietnam time. And there were dark currents operating and those things were somehow finding their way into the conception of the string quartet. By the time I finished writing the whole piece, in token of this recognition of its character and identifying with that very dark time, I inscribed the work “In Time of War” using the model of Joseph Haydn’s “Mass in Time of War.”

“Black Angels” was premiered by the Stanley Quartet in October of 1970, but it was the New York String Quartet (Paul Zukofsky, Romuald Teco, Timothy Eddy, and Jean Dupouy) that made the first commercial recording of the piece in 1971. The composition calls for Electric Violin I, Electric Violin II, Electric Viola, and Electric Cello. Previously, Crumb employed combinations of both amplified and acoustic instruments, but never before (or after) in the quartet genre. Having all four string quartet instruments in amplification (hence Crumb’s label

“electric string quartet”) clearly produces a striking effect, which made this piece an icon of American avant-garde music.

In the performance notes attached to the score, Crumb specifies the effect he seeks:

The amplification of the instruments is of critical importance in “Black Angels.” Ideally, one should use genuine electric instruments (with a built-in pick-up). Otherwise, fine-quality contact microphones can be attached (by rubber bands) to the belly of the instrument. The player should find the best position for the microphone in order to avoid distortion of the tone. If the amplifier is equipped with a reverberation control, this should be set on “high” to create a more surrealistic effect.

In addition to their regular duties, the quartet players are engaged in shouting and whispering in different languages, playing tam-tams, maracas, and water-tuned crystal goblets. They are asked to trill on the strings with thimble-capped fingers, bowing on the “wrong” side of the strings, bow the “lip” of the tam-tam with a contrabass bow, and more. A quintessential avant-gardist, Crumb includes mere noises. At one instance, he indicates in the score: “Gradually increase bow pressure until pitch becomes pure noise.”

Many of Crumb’s compositions pursue philosophical and mystical goals and narrate a story. “Black Angels,” in Crumb’s own description, “portrays a voyage of the soul. The three stages of this voyage are Departure (fall from grace), Absence (spiritual annihilation) and Return (redemption).” The programmatic subtitles of Departure, Absence, and Return are clearly modeled on the ones Beethoven used in his piano sonata op. 81a. Crumb saturates “Black Angels,” which is largely atonal, with other allusions to tonal music, which he acknowledges in the foreword: a quotation from Schubert’s “Death and the Maiden” quartet, medieval sequence “Dies Irae,” Tartini’s “Devil’s Trill,” and more.

The dramatic concept of “Black Angels” is imbued with Christian symbolism. In his notes for the recording, Crumb comments on “the essential polarity--God versus Devil” and how the “black angel” symbolizes the fallen angel. Section 4 of the piece is subtitled “Devil Music” (*Vox Diaboli*) and calls for a cadenza by solo violin. In the section titled “God-Music,” we hear a cadenza by the cello solo.

Continuing in the line of mournful Lorca-inspired nocturnes Crumb wrote in the early 1960s, “Black Angels” is even darker in tone and emotional intensity, aided by the characteristic subtitle “Thirteen Images from the Dark Land.” The sounds range from highly disturbing, scary, and piercingly dissonant in “Electric Insects” to beautifully melodic in “God-Music” and delicate in the concluding section.

“Black Angels” distinctly played to the sensibilities of its era. Musicologist Robert Greenberg even went as far as comparing the opening, “Threnody I: Night of the Electric Insects,” to the sound of Vietnam War helicopters. Beyond just that immediate appeal, the piece has continued to excite the imagination of listeners to the present day. Countless more performances and recordings followed the now-historical first recording by the New York String Quartet, which caused a splash not only in musical circles but also in the broader culture. It influenced

professional musicians from both the academia and the popular camp. David Bowie named it as one of his favorites, while the violinist David Harrington was so inspired by it that, in 1973, he decided to establish the Kronos Quartet, which eventually made its own recording of the piece in 1990. The opening section of “Black Angels” is heard in the soundtrack of the movie “The Exorcist,” while “God-Music” was used in the television series “Cosmos: A Personal Voyage.” In literature, Elizabeth Hand acknowledged borrowing the chapter titles for her dark fantasy novel “Waking the Moon” from the names of the sections of “Black Angels.” The quartet also acquired great international recognition and became a staple piece frequently played by many ensembles specializing in modern music around the world.

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*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and may not reflect those of the Library of Congress.