

The Twenty-First Century Vocal Compositions of George Crumb:
Voices From A Forgotten World and the Seven-Volume American Songbook Series

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The Twenty-First Century Vocal Compositions of George Crumb:
Voices From A Forgotten World and the Seven-Volume
American Songbook Series

I've always believed that since our DNA code is very precise, and unlike anybody else's, that our music should reflect the sum of everything we've learned in the world—whether from other music, from people we've met, from landscapes, from books. I guess I have distrust for any school of composition that eliminates the persona of the individual composer. It seems to me this should come out very strongly. In the music that I love, this always comes out.

~ George Crumb¹

George Crumb's musical style truly is unlike that of any other composer. His compositions are instantly recognizable, intensely personal, and have remained fresh and vital throughout his career, which has spanned over 60 years. This dissertation focuses on the vocal music of George Crumb, particularly his enormous American Songbook series, which is, at this time, his largest contribution of the twenty-first century. I will outline the qualities in Crumb's music that make it so recognizable, like instrumentation choice, use of timbral effects, and text setting, and I will highlight the ways that the American Songbooks are in keeping with Crumb's previous compositions, as well as the ways that they stand out as one of the most groundbreaking collections of his career.

¹ David Starobin, *Bad Dog!* (New Rochelle, NY: Bridge Records, 2009), DVD.

I. *About George Crumb*

George Crumb was born into a musical family in Charleston, West Virginia on "Black Thursday," October 24, 1929, the day the Great Depression began. His father, George Henry Crumb, Sr., was a clarinetist, conductor, music copyist, and arranger. His mother, Vivian, was an accomplished cellist, and she and George, Sr. raised their sons, George and William, in what Crumb calls an "idyllic" childhood, with constant exposure to music.² Crumb has said that the echoing acoustic of his youth and his home were structured into his hearing, and became the basic acoustical model for his music.³

Today, Crumb is eighty-two years old. A bit shy, incredibly warm, and eloquent, he has been married to his wife Elizabeth for over 60 years, has 3 grown children, Ann, David, and Peter, and a home filled with several energetic rescue dogs. He has won numerous awards and honors, including a 1968 Pulitzer Prize for *Echoes of Time and the River*; a 2001 Grammy Award for his orchestral vocal work, *Star Child*; and he was named Musical America's Composer of the Year in 2004.

In an interview at the home of George Crumb in March of 2012, I marveled at how these compositions, which are so innovative, deep, and otherworldly, could come from such a traditional and humble man. He chuckled and said, "yes, I don't really know where it comes from."⁴ Crumb has said that he writes from an emotional place. His personal connection to his compositions is evident, and this is particularly true for the American Songbook series.

² David Cope, "Biography," in *George Crumb, Profile of a Composer*, ed. Don Gillespie (New York: C. F. Peters, 1986), 8.

³ George Crumb, "Music, Does it Have a Future?," *The Kenyon Review*, New Series 2, no. 3 (Summer 1980): 121.

⁴ Jamie Van Eyck, "Personal Interview II with George Crumb" (Interview, Media, Pennsylvania, 2012), 76.

II. *Introduction to the American Songbooks*

The American Songbook series contains seven volumes of American folk songs realized by George Crumb. They were written between 2001 and 2011, and include familiar folk tunes like *Shenandoah*, *'Tis the Gift to Be Simple*, *When Johnny Comes Marching Home*, and *I Wonder As I Wander*. In each volume, Crumb writes for the same ensemble: amplified voice, amplified piano, and percussion quartet. Each songbook requires roughly 100 different percussion instruments from around the world. Together, the seven American Songbooks amount to 61 songs and over 5 hours of music, and they have been called the largest song cycle ever written.⁵

III. *My Experience and Background with The American Songbooks*

My initial interest in the music of George Crumb began in 2006, when Bridge Records, Inc. invited pianist Jacob Greenberg and me to record Crumb's 1984 work, *The Sleeper*. Bridge Records is in the process of releasing Crumb's entire collection of music. *The Sleeper* was the result of a commission to compose a short song, and Crumb decided to base the work on a small segment of an Edgar Allen Poe poem. It was premiered by two of Crumb's greatest friends and collaborators, mezzo-soprano Jan DeGaetani and pianist Gilbert Kalish.⁶ *The Sleeper* was my first exposure to Crumb's music and his unique approach to vocal writing, as well as his writing for the piano, and I was instantly enamored of his mysterious and completely original sound world.

⁵ Jamie Van Eyck, "Personal Interview I with George Crumb" (Interview, Media, Pennsylvania, 2012), 62.

⁶ David Cohen, *George Crumb: a bio-bibliography* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2002), 19-20.

Bridge Records then invited me to sing the world premiere performance of the fifth installment in Crumb's American Songbook series, *Voices From A Forgotten World*. I worked closely with Crumb in coachings and also studied with the musicians of Orchestra 2001 of Philadelphia, who have premiered all of the American Songbooks, as well as several of Crumb's other works. We gave the premiere performance in 2007, recorded the piece for Bridge Records in 2008, and we also performed excerpts at Crumb's 80th birthday concert in 2009. During this time, my familiarity with the composer and his style grew, and I wondered why it took me so long to learn about his music and why more young singers and instrumentalists aren't performing Crumb's work, today.

I believe that this is because George Crumb's music is not discussed quite as often as it once was. There is an abundance of scholarly material on Crumb's compositions from the 1960s, '70s, and '80s. These twentieth-century works have been extensively analyzed and compared with works of composers of various eras and backgrounds, including Webern, Schoenberg, and Ives. Much of the writing focuses on Crumb's unusual scores, autograph reproductions that incorporate elegant calligraphy and unexpected layouts of the music, as well as Crumb's alternative use of instrumentation and timbre as tools of expression. Interest in Crumb's earlier works has also focused on the unusual performance techniques he requires of musicians, including manipulating and plucking piano strings, whispering and speaking into wind instruments to create other-worldly sounds, and vocal noise-making involving nonsense syllables and humming.

IV: *A New Phase in Crumb's Compositional Career*

From 1987 through 2000, Crumb composed no vocal music, and during the 1990s he took a sort of hiatus from composition, writing only two or three instrumental works throughout the entire decade. During this period of time he was focusing all of his energy on his teaching position in the music department at The University of Pennsylvania. After retiring from teaching in 1997 he returned to composing, slowly at first, but soon writing at what may be the most prolific rate of his entire career.

A reconsideration of George Crumb in the context of the twenty-first century is important. Crumb has spent the majority of the past decade writing his seven American Songbooks, but many people in the music community are not aware of their existence. Given the extensive analysis of Crumb's earlier works, it is surprising that his current body of exciting new vocal works is not yet receiving the same widespread attention from performers and scholars.

The American Songbooks are unique because they represent a significant shift for Crumb due to his expanded experimentation with percussion and piano, his use of a new genre of texts, and his unique and personal treatment of well-known American folk tunes. This new period in his compositional career has yet to be thoroughly examined by the academic community. There is need for further exploration of the American Songbooks, and I hope that my writing will help to bring these incredible works to the attention of a larger audience.

V. *The American Songbook Series in Depth*

The first of Crumb's American Songbooks was written in 2001/2002 at the request of his daughter, Ann. An accomplished theater actress and singer, Ann asked if her father might find inspiration to write a concert-length work for orchestra, utilizing American folk tunes. Together, they immediately thought of the Appalachian folk songs from Crumb's childhood in West Virginia.⁷ They selected several of their favorite Appalachian folk songs, and the American Songbook, *Unto the Hills*, was born. It included seven movements of songs very dear to Crumb, such as: *All the Pretty Little Horses*, *Ten Thousand Miles*, *Down in the Valley*, and the Appalachian lullaby, *Hush Little Baby*. Crumb's primary goal in setting these beloved pieces was to keep the folk song melodies completely in tact because, he says, they are perfect just as they are.⁸ He wanted to set these popular folk songs like diamonds, clearly recognizable and unbreakable, creating magical accompaniments to surround them.⁹

The first of all the folk songs arranged by Crumb was *Poor Wayfaring Stranger*. He was inspired by the power of its words, and he set out to write a kind of music that would appropriately express the text.¹⁰ He began thinking about the types of instruments he could use, and he ultimately scored the piece for what he calls the "unusual orchestra" of amplified piano and percussion quartet. He felt that together, they offered the greatest

⁷ Eric Bruskin, "George Crumb's American Songbooks (2002-2004)," in *George Crumb & the Alchemy of Sound: Essays on his Music*, eds. Steven Bruns, Ofer Ben-Amots, and Michael D. Grace (Colorado Springs, CO: Colorado College Music Press, 2005), 340.

⁸ Van Eyck, Personal Interview I, 59.

⁹ Bruskin 331.

¹⁰ Van Eyck, Personal Interview I, 68.

variety of expressive possibilities.¹¹ Crumb had not intended to write more than one volume of folk songs, but soon after he'd finished *Unto the Hills* he felt compelled to arrange more of his favorite American music, now focusing on hymns, revival tunes, and African-American spirituals. This resulted in two new songbooks, *The River of Life* and *A Journey Beyond Time*, both written in 2003.

Crumb made the decision to write a fourth and final installment titled *The Winds of Destiny*, based on American Civil War songs and spirituals. By this time, a large-scale structure for the songbooks had already begun to take shape. In order to unify the songbooks, Crumb made significant adjustments to the previous three folk-song volumes. He was committed to maintaining the same ensemble for each songbook: voice, amplified piano, and percussion quartet, though the percussion instruments vary from one volume to the next. Crumb decided to center each songbook on a moment in the diurnal cycle, or the 24-hour rotation of the earth. The first four songbooks, therefore, relate to sunrise, noontime, sunset, and nighttime. Crumb moved the earliest-written songbook, *Unto the Hills*, to the third position, as it carried the theme of sunset.¹²

Songbook I: <i>The River of Life</i> (2003)	Sunrise
Songbook II: <i>A Journey Beyond Time</i> (2003)	Noontime
Songbook III: <i>Unto the Hills</i> (2002)	Sunset
Songbook IV: <i>The Winds of Destiny</i> (2004)	Nighttime

To further unify the series, Crumb tinkered with the number of songs in each songbook, making sure that each had eight songs and an instrumental interlude written in his famous symbolic score notation. The following figure shows the instrumental

¹¹ Bruskin 340.

¹² Bruskin 330.

Songbook IV with his favorite folk song, *Shenandoah*, a piece which he feels is unsurpassed in its beauty, mysticism, and otherworldly appeal.¹⁵

VI. American Songbook V: *Voices From A Forgotten World*

The first four songbooks made a complete entity in themselves, and for almost two years Crumb thought he was finished with the series. However, he says that no collection of American songs should be complete without honoring the American Indian musical tradition, so he began compiling Native American and other songs for American Songbook V: *Voices From A Forgotten World*.¹⁶

In Songbook V, Crumb wrote for the same percussion and piano ensemble however, he departed from the pattern of the first four songbooks in several ways. Most notably, he wrote for *two* voices since he had imagined some of the Native American songs in the male voice. This was not only a first for the American Songbook series, but it marked the first time Crumb had experimented with duet writing in his entire career. A great majority of the duet writing features the male and female voices singing in alternation. Crumb waits until the very last lines of Songbook V to combine the two voices in phrases that are not sung, but hummed. Of this, Crumb says, “I had the two voices to use, but I wasn’t compelled to combine them in true duet, quite yet.”¹⁷ He writes considerably more true duet singing in Songbooks VI and VII. Crumb also decided not to include an instrumental interlude in book V because he felt that the two voices

¹⁵ Van Eyck, Personal Interview II, 90.

¹⁶ Van Eyck, Personal Interview II, 77.

¹⁷ Van Eyck, Personal Interview II, 85.

provided enough textural variation.¹⁸ In doing this he also eliminated the visual score element found in the interludes of the first four songbooks. He increased the number of songs from eight to ten, making volume V the longest among the existing songbooks.¹⁹

American Songbook V is significant for Crumb because in it he explored new areas with regard to the palette of sounds used, and he created new colors in the orchestration and voices. Also, he says, he *finally* included some songs that are less somber, with considerably faster tempos. This is important because Crumb has said that creating convincing music at faster tempos has been problematic and challenging for contemporary composers. He feels that fast music must have “a sense of propulsion without clinging too slavishly to past procedures.”²⁰ Crumb experiments with these faster tempos in the folk songs *Hallelujah, I’m a Bum*, which is an amusing, drunken parody of a secular hymn; ‘*Tis the Gift to Be Simple*, the well-known Shaker tune with a tempo-marking indicating that it is to be played “like a ringing, intricate clockwork mechanism;” and *Firefly Song*, which includes a playful and original melody written by Crumb.²¹

Songbook V ends with the haunting duet, *The Demon Lover*. Originally called “The House Carpenter,” Crumb wanted the song to have a more descriptive and eerie title. The piece provides a supernatural ending to the cycle and allows the listener to linger in the mythical and magical world of folk-song and folklore.

¹⁸ Van Eyck, Personal Interview I, 61.

¹⁹ George Crumb, *American Songbook V: Voices From A Forgotten World* (New York: C. F. Peters, 2007), 1-43.

²⁰ Crumb, *The Kenyon Review*, 119.

²¹ Crumb, *American Songbook V*, 35.

Soon after the 2006 completion of *Voices From A Forgotten World*, Crumb was inspired to set additional Native American songs. This led to the composition of American Songbook VI: *Voices From the Morning of the Earth*, in 2007. It matched Songbook V in many respects, including its use of male and female voices, lack of musical interlude, and number of songs, ten total. It even carries the same subtitle as the fifth songbook: *A Cycle of American Songs From North and South, East and West*.²² For this collection Crumb specifically wanted to embrace modernity and avoid the feeling that the songbooks are relegated to a time far back in America's history.²³ To connect the modern listener to the material, he included the songs *Blowin' in the Wind* by Bob Dylan, and *Where Have All the Flowers Gone* by Pete Seeger.

Three years passed before Crumb wrote what would truly be the final installment in the American Songbook series. Songbook VII: *Voices From the Heartland*, was written in 2010. Also scored for male and female voices, Crumb writes more duet singing in this songbook than he had in the previous two, wanting to take advantage of the expressive potential of the two voices singing together.²⁴ He continued to utilize as great a variety of song keys as possible. To highlight this Crumb decided to include, at the beginning of each published songbook score, a listing of every song in every volume and its assigned key. The following figure shows the song and corresponding key listing found in the score of American Songbook VI.²⁵

²² George Crumb, *American Songbook VI: Voices From the Morning of the Earth* (New York: C. F. Peters, 2008), 1.

²³ Van Eyck, Personal Interview I, 60.

²⁴ Van Eyck, Personal Interview II, 85.

²⁵ Crumb, *American Songbook VI*, v.

Tonal plan of the six *American Songbooks*

Major Tonalties

All of the major tonalties are represented (including the common enharmonic keys).
[The volume numbers are in parentheses.]

C sharp major

Deep River (I)

*) *Where Have All the Flowers Gone?* (VI)

F sharp major

One More River to Cross (I)

The Riddle (III)

Twelve Gates to the City (IV)

B major

Go Tell it on the Mountain (IV)

Bringing in the Sheaves (V)

E major

Swing Low, Sweet Chariot (II)

Shenandoah (IV)

Weep, All Ye Little Rains (VI)

A major

Will There be Any Stars in my Crown? (I)

'Tis the Gift to be Simple (V)

O Peter, Go Ring-a-dem Bells (VI)

D major

Were You There When They Crucified

My Lord? (I)

Lonesome Road (IV)

Beautiful Dreamer (V)

My Lord, What a Beautiful Morning! (VI)

G major

Nearer, My God, to Thee (I)

Sit Down, Sister (II)

Down in the Valley (III)

**) *Dry Bones* (VI)

*) *Where Have All the Flowers Gone?* (VI)

C major

Ev'ry Night When the Sun Goes In (III)

F major

Ten Thousand Miles (III)

Hallelujah, I'm a Bum! (V)

B flat major

Give Me That Old Time Religion (I)

Goodbye, Old Paint (VI)

E flat major

Shall We Gather at the River? (I)

Oh, a-Rock-a My Soul (II)

Blowin' in the Wind (VI)

A flat major

Amazing Grace! (I)

All My Trials (IV)

When the Saints Go Marching In (VI)

D flat major

Nobody Knows de Trouble I See (II)

Hush, Little Baby (III)

G flat major

Steal Away (II)

Put My Little Shoes Away (VI)

C flat major

Mine Eyes Have Seen the Glory (IV)

Minor Tonalties

All of the minor tonalties are represented (including the common enharmonic keys).
[The volume numbers are in parentheses.]

A sharp minor

Song of the Thunder (Navajo) (V)

D sharp minor

Firefly Song (Ojibwa) (V)

G sharp minor

Go Down, Moses (II)

C sharp minor

The Demon Lover (V)

A Mountaineer's Sad Song (VI)

F sharp minor

All the Pretty Little Horses (III)

B minor

**) *The Enchanted Valley* (IV)

E minor

Sometimes I Feel Like a Motherless

Child (II)

A minor

****) *When Johnny Comes Marching*

Home (IV)

D minor

Poor Wayfaring Stranger (III)

Poor Wayfaring Stranger (Echo) (III)

G minor

Joshua Fit de Battle ob Jerico (II)

**) *Dry Bones* (VI)

C minor

***) *The Enchanted Valley* (IV)

F minor

Somebody Got Lost in a Storm (V)

B flat minor

Black, Black, Black is the Color (III)

E flat minor

The House of the Rising Sun (V)

****) *When Johnny Comes Marching*

Home (IV)

A flat minor

I Wonder as I Wander (V)

*) "Where Have All the Flowers Gone?" is constructed on the tonal polarity C sharp major – G major.

**) "Dry Bones" contains the simultaneous bimodality G major – G minor.

***) "The Enchanted Valley" is constructed on the tonal polarity C minor – B minor.

****) "When Johnny Comes Marching Home" is constructed on the tonal polarity A minor – E flat minor.

Volume seven is the last in the American Songbook series, and Crumb closes it with an emotional nod to Mahler's *Das Lied von der Erde*, one of Mahler's most profound and personal compositions. We see similarities between the two works in that the title of Crumb's final folk song matches the title of the Mahler work, *Song of the Earth*. To end the song and the entire series, Crumb has the voices repeat the word, "forever," three times, just as Mahler's work closes with the repetition, "Ewig... ewig... ewig."²⁶

²⁶ Gustav Mahler, *Das Lied von der Erde* (New York: Boosey & Hawkes, 1939), 156-159.

In general, Crumb continued to keep the folk song melodies intact, though he became a bit looser with this restriction as the American Songbooks progressed. For example, in Songbook V, *Somebody Got Lost in a Storm*, he felt that the original folk tune, written in a major key, was weak and did not express the ferocious storm indicated by the lyrics. So Crumb kept the lyrics and wrote his own melody. He also made changes to the original tune of *Put My Little Shoes Away* from Songbook VI. He made it simpler and more child-like, similar to a nursery rhyme, in order to suggest a song that might be chanted by children playing a game. He did this to heighten the heartbreaking impact of the text, which is about the death of a child.

Additionally, Crumb found certain folk texts that were appealing to him, but had no extant melodic material. In these cases he composed his own completely original tunes. Examples include the Ojibwa *Firefly Song*, for which he wrote a bouncing and playful melody, and the Navajo *Song of Thunder*, for which Crumb wrote a melody based on an imagined recreation of a Navajo chant. In pieces like *Old Blue* and *The Kanawha River at Dusk*, both from Songbook VII, Crumb and his daughter, Ann, wrote their own original song texts.²⁷

In every song setting, Crumb's primary goal was to enhance the listener's enjoyment and bring out the psychological depth, mysticism, humor, whimsy, and irony inherent in the folklore of the American people. Crumb has said that if his folk song settings cause people to hear these songs in a *new* way, then he has succeeded.²⁸

²⁷ Van Eyck, Personal Interview I, 57.

²⁸ Bruskin 331.

VII. *Eight Elements of Crumb's Early Style of Composition and Their Relationship to the Twenty-First Century American Songbooks*

I have outlined the development of the American Songbook series and Crumb's compositional intentions and processes for the series. But how does Crumb's writing in the American Songbooks compare to his pioneering style of composition from the 1960s, '70s, and '80s? To explore this question I will examine eight major aspects of Crumb's earlier compositions, and I will outline the ways that the American Songbooks are in keeping with this earlier style, and the ways in which they differ, or offer an extension of Crumb's early style.

1) *Visual Scores*

George Crumb is perhaps best known for his striking visual and symbolic scores, featuring music in the shape of circles, swirls, and even a peace sign. This kind of composition is often referred to as *Augenmusik* (literally, "eye music"), which is music notated in a visually striking way on the page. The first example of this can be found in Crumb's *Night Music I*, which utilizes a quasi-circular notation where the staves are positioned around a circle drawn in the music.²⁹ His work in circles and swirls is, in part, a reflection of his feeling that humans are naturally connected to circular shapes, since culture evolves spirally rather than linearly.³⁰

²⁹ George Crumb, *Night Music I* (New York: C. F. Peters, 1996).

³⁰ Crumb, *The Kenyon Review*, 116.

This visual style of score writing is perhaps most apparent in Crumb's *Makrokosmos*, two volumes of music for amplified piano from 1972 and 1973. Here, movements are unified by their title and shape. For example he writes *Crucifixus* (figure below) in the shape of a cross, and *Spiral Galaxy* in the shape of a spiral.³¹

Crumb's interest in the visual aspect of scores began at an early age. For this he credits his father, who exposed him to music scores and meticulous score copying during his childhood, as well as Ross Lee Finney, Crumb's composition instructor at the University of Michigan. These mentors impressed upon him the importance of accuracy and precision in score writing, what Finney called, "beautiful notation."³²

³¹ George Crumb, *Makrokosmos, Volume I* (New York: C. F. Peters, 1974), 10, 19.

³² Cohen 3, 4.

Crumb says, “I always had the feeling that any special notation, like the circular notation in some of my earlier pieces and the earlier American Songbooks, communicates a sense of freedom and circularity to the performer.”³³ He believes that the visual symbolism on the page is important, and he writes in this type of notation only when it can compliment the text or grow naturally from the general mood of the piece.

In the American Songbooks, Crumb utilizes this special notation for the instrumental interludes in his first four volumes. Songbooks I, II, and III have interludes in the shape of a sun, with eight rays shooting outward, since they represent sunrise, noontime, and sunset. Crumb calls this “circle music,” and says that the sounds represent nature’s awakening in the morning, flourishing throughout the day, and finally resting at night. The focus of Songbook IV is nighttime, so for its interlude Crumb inverts the black and white of the score, so the players see a dark black background with white notes, representing the depth of night.³⁴ The following figure shows this interlude from Songbook IV titled, *De Profundis, A Psalm for the Night-Wanderer*. Ever practical, Crumb learned from performers that the dark page was hard to read, so he included an appendix in the back of the score with the music written in the standard way, with black notes on light paper.³⁵

³³ Van Eyck, Personal Interview I, 55.

³⁴ Bruskin 335.

³⁵ Van Eyck, Personal Interview I, 54.

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V. De Profundis: A Psalm
for the Night-Wanderer
(Instrumental Interlude)

Even when working in regular stave formation without patterns and shapes, the look of the music is of primary importance to Crumb. All of his scores, with the exception of his earliest published pieces, are written in his exquisite manuscript. The following example shows the hand-drawn first page of American Songbook V.³⁶

for Janis van Eyck, mezzo-soprano; Patrick Mason, baritone; and Orchestra 2001 (James Frenson, Conductor)

AMERICAN SONGBOOK V
VOICES FROM A FORGOTTEN WORLD
A Cycle of American Songs from North and South, East and West
for Two Solo Voices (Male and Female), Amplified Piano and Percussion Quartet

George Crumb

I. Bringing in the Sheaves

Suspended, with a languid Indian summer feeling
Western Buffalo style (♩ = ca. 92) (with cicada droplets)

Female Voice
Med. Single (control) *Singing in the morning-sunrise notes of head-ress. Singing in the moon-tide and the cloudy eyes. Waiting for the bar-vest.*

Male Voice
Med. Single (control) *Singing in the morning-sunrise notes of head-ress. Singing in the moon-tide and the cloudy eyes. Waiting for the bar-vest.*

Amplified Piano
Ped. I, Ped. III (two pedals) *the piano will produce a "balancing" (rather than continuous) sound. The resultant 7th partial harmonic will be of cosmic microtonally flatter than the true pitch.*

Edition Peters 08216

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³⁶ Crumb, *American Songbook V*, 1.

In each of Crumb's scores, every line of every stave is produced by hand, using a ruler or protractor. Every note and every word of text is also hand-written using fine, Japanese technical pens. Each page takes him up to two days to complete, but Crumb says he wouldn't consider producing his scores in any other way. He has never liked the look of computer notation, explaining, "What I have against it is it all looks alike, no matter who the composer is. It looks dry and has no vitality. It's undernourished and has no personality. Also, the spacing is too regular on a computer, which makes it hard to read. It's just not very beautiful."³⁷

Jan DeGaetani, the great mezzo-soprano and interpreter of many of Crumb's works, has said that the look of Crumb's scores "is intended to excite and stimulate. One *wants* to learn this music, to ask questions, to understand the gestures."³⁸ Crumb's hand-drawn scores create a much more personal and beautiful experience for the performer, which then translates to something incredibly special for the audience.

2) *Poetry: Folk Poetry and Lorca Poetry*

Crumb is quite famous for his settings of poetry by Spanish writer Federico García Lorca (1898-1936). Crumb has set 11 large works to Lorca's poetry, including his *Ancient Voices of Children* (1970); *Songs, Drones and Refrains of Death* (1968); and his four books of *Madrigals* (1965-69). His fascination with Lorca's poetry continues to this day, as two of his newest works are set to Lorca texts: Spanish Songbook I: *The Ghosts of Alhambra* (2009), and Spanish Songbook II: *Sun and Shadow* (2009), which is Crumb's

³⁷ Van Eyck, Personal Interview II, 79.

³⁸ Jan DeGaetani, "Reflections on Twenty Years," in *George Crumb, Profile of a Composer*, ed. Don Gillespie (New York: C. F. Peters, 1986), 28.

first Lorca setting in English translation. Crumb considers all of his Lorca works to be one great big cycle. Therefore, the “Lorca Cycle” and the American Songbook series are the two largest bodies of music of Crumb’s career.

Crumb first became acquainted with Lorca’s poetry during his graduate studies at The University of Michigan.³⁹ When Crumb speaks about Lorca’s writing, one immediately senses his affection and respect for it, and his feeling of deep personal connection. Crumb believes that he and Lorca have a kindred artistic spirit. He says that “the essential core of Lorca’s poetry is concerned with the most primary things: life, death, love, the smell of the earth, the sounds of the wind, and the sea.”⁴⁰ Crumb is deeply attracted to the poetry as a vehicle for his music and says, “I seem to identify with the world of those poems, and that’s why I keep setting them. What I like so much about Lorca is that the images are so simple and they come from the earth.” This is in opposition to a lot of English poetry, which he says, in some cases, is “just spinning out things and it gets away from the real meaning.” Crumb says that in contrast, “the Lorca is very direct, much like the Indian poems I set in the American Songbooks.”⁴¹

This is significant, because the elements that attract Crumb so strongly to Lorca’s poetry are the same elements that attract him to American folk poetry. While some may think of folk poetry as simplistic and light in meaning, Crumb feels that American folk texts are filled with ironies, humor, and despair, and he sees folk writing and Lorca’s writing as being very much the same. He gives the example of the folk song, *Poor*

³⁹ Van Eyck, Personal Interview I, 64.

⁴⁰ Cited in: Victoria Adamenko, “George Crumb's Channels of Mythification,” *American Music* 23, no. 3 (Autumn 2005): 327.

⁴¹ Van Eyck, Personal Interview I, 65.

Wayfaring Stranger, which he says has such depth and complexity that it could be included among Mahler's emotional, *Songs of a Wayfarer*.⁴² Regarding folk songs, Crumb has said that it is important for composers to be able to merge technical systems with folk music and the whole tradition of western music. He says that this creates a unified style, while still placing the expressive intent of the music at the forefront.⁴³ Crumb's folk-song settings in the American Songbooks serve as an example of this type of unified style-

3) *Work in Cycles*

Crumb has always thought about his music in terms of cycles, and the American Songbooks are certainly one of the largest cycles in his entire output. He began grouping his works into cycles around 1964 with his two *Night Music* collections and his group of four *Madrigals*, which are settings of Lorca poetry for voice and various instruments.⁴⁴ This work in cycles is significant, because it speaks to Crumb's tendency toward circular shapes and balanced forms, offering the listener a beginning, middle, and end to each grouping of songs.

As mentioned, Crumb's greatest poetic muse has been Federico García Lorca. He thinks of his many Lorca works as one large cycle, even though they were written for a variety of ensembles in a variety of styles, and over a span of nearly 50 years. The American Songbooks, on the other hand, are Crumb's largest cycle written on the same theme and with the same instrumental ensemble. Over the course of an entire decade

⁴² Van Eyck, Personal Interview I, 65.

⁴³ Bruskin 331.

⁴⁴ Cohen 6.

Crumb continuously found inspiration in American folk texts, and discovered numerous ways to express the texts and tunes, while utilizing the same vocal and instrumental ensemble. This sets the American Songbook series apart from the Lorca Cycle and emphasizes its importance within Crumb's career.

4) *Influence of Other Composers and Use of Quotations*

Throughout Crumb's career he has been open about the inspiration he draws from the music of other composers and the many ways he adapts it into his own writing. He is inspired not just by the actual music of other composers, but also by their *ideas*. I've mentioned the example of Crumb's use of all of the major and minor keys in the American Songbooks, for which he credits Bach and Chopin as inspiration. Crumb also draws inspiration from Debussy's use of beautiful, image-conjuring titles.⁴⁵ Crumb's early works had purely descriptive titles, such as *Three Early Songs for Voice and Piano* (1947), and *A Cycle of Greek Lyrics for Voice and Piano* (1950). He first began giving his pieces poetic titles in 1965 with *Eleven Echoes of Autumn*, and Crumb's poetic titling continues to this day.⁴⁶ All of the American Songbooks follow this pattern with their evocative titles, like *Voices From a Forgotten World*, *Voices From the Morning of the Earth*, and *A Journey Beyond Time*.

In this same poetic fashion Crumb also finds creative ways to write mood and tempo descriptors within his pieces. This is something that has become increasingly evident in Crumb's later compositions. Works from the beginning of his career, like his

⁴⁵ Van Eyck, Personal Interview II, 84.

⁴⁶ Cohen 8.

Three Early Songs (1947), utilize more standard Italian descriptors like “Animato misterioso,” and “Tranquillamente mosso.”⁴⁷ Conversely, in the American Songbooks Crumb goes wild with evocative tempo and mood descriptors, like “Comically swaggering” in *Hallelujah, I’m a Bum* and “Resounding, like an intricate clockwork mechanism,” in *‘Tis the Gift to Be Simple*, both from American Songbook V.⁴⁸ In Songbook I, *Will There Be Any Stars in My Crown*, the vocal line is described as “luminous and prismatic.”⁴⁹ Crumb says that he writes in this fashion to create a feeling of magic and wonderment. He specifically mentions inspiration taken from Mahler’s *First Symphony*, which opens with the instruction, “Like the sounds of nature.”⁵⁰

Nature has always been important to Crumb, and folk tunes are frequently associated with the natural world. Crumb is a proponent of what he calls the “ancient idea” that music should be a reflection of nature.⁵¹ He took opportunities to bring out nature and animal sounds in the American Songbooks. For example, *Bringing in the Sheaves*, from Songbook V, incorporates the sound of cicadas, represented in the score with a whispered “*i-u-i-u-i-u*.”⁵² Certain instruments are utilized for more obvious nature sounds, like the thunder sheet and wind machine in *Somebody Got Lost in A Storm* and *Song of Thunder*, both from Songbook V.⁵³ Crumb also imitates the sound of crows with the percussion instruments in *Ghost Camp*, from Songbook VII. His goal is to express

⁴⁷ George Crumb, *Three Early Songs* (New York: C. F. Peters, 1986), 6, 13.

⁴⁸ Crumb, *American Songbook V*, 16 and 27.

⁴⁹ Crumb, *American Songbook I*, 6.

⁵⁰ Van Eyck, Personal Interview II, 84.

⁵¹ Crumb, *The Kenyon Review*, 121.

⁵² Crumb, *American Songbook V*, 2-6.

⁵³ Crumb, *American Songbook V*, 6-13 and 24-26.

the ferocity of nature in every possible way, and in the American Songbooks, he takes these audible representations of nature to an extreme.

When he feels moved to do so, Crumb does not hesitate to quote short segments of music by other composers. He does this when he wants to invoke a mood or an idea that is associated with another composer's work. In *Ancient Voices of Children*, Crumb quotes *Bist du bei mir*, from the Anna Magdalena Bach notebook. He also quotes a segment from Mahler's moving *Das Lied von der Erde* at the very end of the piece. Each of these musical quotes serves to illuminate the tenderness and unification between the soprano (maternal figure) and boy soprano (child).⁵⁴

In the American Songbook series, we also find direct quotations of other composers' music, as well as quotations from Crumb's own earlier compositions. For example, *When Johnny Comes Marching Home* (Songbook IV) includes quotations from the third movement of Mahler's *First Symphony*. *All My Trials* (Death's Lullaby), also from Songbook IV, includes a reference to "The moon is dead" movement from Crumb's 1969 work, *Night of the Four Moons*.⁵⁵ *Blowin' in the Wind*, from Songbook VI, includes three segments directly borrowed from Charles Ives' 1906 piece, *The Unanswered Question*. The borrowed segment is part of the trumpet motif from *The Unanswered Question*, which Ives uses to represent "the perennial question of existence."⁵⁶ Crumb labels the segments clearly so that they are identifiable within the texture of his work.

⁵⁴ Cohen 12.

⁵⁵ George Crumb, *Night of the Four Moons* (New York: C. F. Peters, 1971), 1-2.

⁵⁶ Jan Swafford, *Charles Ives: a life with music* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1996), 180.

With this quotation, Crumb creates a meaningful link between the many questions asked in the song, *Blowin' in the Wind* and Ives' "eternal question of existence." The following figure shows an example of this motif from Crumb's score.⁵⁷

27

(Charles Ives: *THE UNANSWERED QUESTION*)

38 Intrusive, interruptive!
(♩ = ♩ sempre)

Xyloph. 8
Glsp. 15
Flexitone
Mba. s=d
Med. Chinese Cym. (ix)
Lg. Chinese Cym. (ix)
Chinese Wind Gong (Feng Luo) (ix)

ff acuto, feroce
ff
ppp misterioso, enigmatico
ppp
ppp
ppp-mp-ppp

like a muted trumpet
misterioso, enigmatico

5) *Timbre*

The music and ideas of Charles Ives also influenced Crumb's heavy use of *timbre* as an expressive tool.⁵⁸ *Timbre* refers to the quality of a sound, outside of its pitch or volume, and it is one of the musical terms most frequently associated with the compositions of George Crumb. Crumb has said that *timbre* has a bewitching effect and appeal, and it is an essential element of music, equal to melody, harmony, and rhythm. He gives the example of the English horn in the slow movement of Dvořák's *New World Symphony*, saying, "Nothing else could produce that sense of loneliness; it had to be the English horn." He mentions little touches like the unique sound of the crotales on the last

⁵⁷ Crumb, *American Songbook VI*, 27.

⁵⁸ Donald Walker, "Charles Edward Ives (1874-1954)," in *Music of the Twentieth-Century Avant-Garde: A Biocritical Sourcebook*, ed. Larry Sitsky (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2002), 218.

page of Debussy's *Prelude to the Afternoon of A Fawn*, the high trumpets in Stravinsky's *The Rite of Spring*, as well as the "special colors" that appear in a Beethoven string quartet.⁵⁹ Each of these instruments or instrumental combinations create a sound that conjures an *emotion*. Crumb's interest in timbre comes out of this kind of music.

Crumb's special timbres are instantly recognizable in the American Songbook series. Each instrument in each of the songbooks, including the voice, was chosen for its timbral possibilities. To invoke a sense of mystery, for example, Crumb uses Japanese temple bells at the beginning of *'Tis the Gift to Be Simple*. The song *Beautiful Dreamer* offers perhaps Crumb's most exaggerated use of timbre in any of the songbooks. The piece seems so reliant on timbre, that it almost lacks tonality entirely. Its well-known melody is greatly obscured, since it is merely whistled in what Crumb calls "wind singing." The instrumentation features only non-melodic instruments, including bowed flexitone, vibraphone played with wire brushes, and thread pulled against a suspended cymbal.⁶⁰ Crumb uses these purely timbral tools to turn this familiar piece into something that is dream like, ghostly, and subliminal.⁶¹ The song is a prime example of Crumb utilizing his earlier compositional practices in the American Songbook series, but stretching them in ways that he never had before.

⁵⁹ Van Eyck, Personal Interview II, 86.

⁶⁰ Crumb, *American Songbook V*, 32-34.

⁶¹ Van Eyck, Personal Interview II, 89.

6) *Instruments*

The various non-melodic instruments just mentioned offer a glimpse into yet another well-known element of Crumb's musical style, which is his use of non-traditional instruments as well as standard classical instruments played in non-traditional ways. He is probably most famous for his unique approach to piano. Crumb often works with amplified piano, because the amplification allows the piano to be used in new ways by projecting its most delicate sounds, including harmonics, glissandi, and pizzicati. The idea behind this is to maximize the expressive possibilities of the instrument.⁶²

Crumb began working with the piano in this new way in 1962, when he was asked to write a piece for his friend and colleague, David Burge.⁶³ At the time Crumb knew that composers John Cage (1912-1992) and Henry Cowell (1897-1965) were experimenting with the piano, but he'd never had the opportunity to hear any of their music, so he was on his own to find different ways of using the instrument. His composition for David Burge, titled *Five Pieces for Piano*, marked Crumb's first foray into his "mature style," which includes many unusual playing techniques.⁶⁴ For example, he asks the pianist to play pizzicati on interior strings. The pianist also presses down on strings while simultaneously playing on the keyboard, creating harmonics. Harmonics are indicated in the music with this symbol: 0. Other special effects include depressing notes silently while applying the piano pedal to produce "synthetic harmonics," and rubbing a paper clip on the strings to create a "metallic vibrato effect." Crumb goes so far as to indicate the shape in which the paper clip should be bent for maximum sound projection and

⁶² Van Eyck, Personal Interview II, 81.

⁶³ Cohen 5.

⁶⁴ Van Eyck, Personal Interview I, 70.

effectiveness. In the score's performance notes Crumb gives instructions regarding these unusual techniques, and suggests labeling the piano strings with bits of tape, so that execution of the effects is clear and accurate.⁶⁵

Crumb's writing for piano is not to be confused with "prepared piano," which alters the sound of the instrument for the entire length of a piece. His system is instead designed to revert immediately back to normal piano. Crumb engineers his piano pieces to use the full resources of the instrument, including its percussive aspects, harp-like qualities, and various resonances that can be produced by pedaling.⁶⁶

Crumb applies many similar piano techniques in the American Songbook series. In Songbook V, for example, the pianist is asked to play on the strings with a wire brush, strike the strings with fingers and the palm of the hand, draw rosin across strings, mute strings, press on partials of strings to create harmonics, and scrape bass strings with a metal ruler.⁶⁷

Crumb's years of experience working with the piano in this unique way have taught him that performers need detailed explanations regarding execution of the sounds. Also, once a piece has received its premiere, Crumb learns from performers which effects need even further explanation. As a result, Crumb describes these techniques very specifically in the American Songbook scores. In Songbook V we find instructions such as, "The muting of notes in this passage would be much facilitated by the use of a strip of wood with attached felt or rubber," or "Touch the fifth partial node with thumb, then flick

⁶⁵ George Crumb, *Five Pieces for Piano* (New York: C. F. Peters, 1973) 5, 3.

⁶⁶ Van Eyck, Personal Interview I, 70.

⁶⁷ Crumb, *American Songbook V*, 1, 11, 3, 4, 13.

the forefinger nail over the metal winding of the string in a single rapid stroke.”⁶⁸ As Crumb’s career has progressed, he has continued to find ways of creating piano sounds and timbres that are new and exciting to the ear.

Aside from piano, the instrument or group of instruments that Crumb has written for most often is percussion. Much like his unusual piano writing, Crumb writes for percussion in his own, completely unique fashion. Some of Crumb’s earliest experimentation with percussion can be heard in his 1963 work, *Night Music I*, for soprano, piano/celeste, and two percussionists. He continued this exploration with his 1968 song cycle, *Songs, Drones, and Refrains of Death*, for baritone, electric guitar, electric double bass, amplified piano/amplified harpsichord, and two percussionists. Here, Crumb includes unlikely percussion instruments including tuned cowbells, water-tuned crystal glasses, and guitar strings played with hard mallets. He also calls for many delicate timbral effects, and a great deal of vocal whispering and noise making from the percussionists, which at one point grows to the level of “intense screaming.”⁶⁹ The score for Crumb’s 1977 orchestral vocal work, *Star Child*, calls for six or eight percussionists on nearly 80 different instruments. Among its more standard percussion instruments, like timpani, bass drum, and vibraphone, Crumb includes non-traditional instruments like heavy iron chain, mounted pot lids, and a large low-pitched bell played with a metal hammer.⁷⁰

⁶⁸ Crumb, *American Songbook V*, 4 and 22.

⁶⁹ George Crumb, *Songs, Drones, and Refrains of Death* (New York: C. F. Peters, 1971), 1-17.

⁷⁰ George Crumb, *Star Child* (New York: C. F. Peters, 1977), 2-3.

The American Songbook series is special because it offers Crumb's largest and most varied use of percussion instruments to date. The American Songbooks include standard percussion instruments like xylophone, cymbal (over 12 different cymbals are used in Songbook V), bass drum, and triangle, but Crumb often writes for these instruments in unexpected ways. Examples include tapping and scraping a wooden stick or metal rod against a tam-tam, bending pitches of the vibraphone by sliding mallets down the keys, tapping claves with a coin, playing a tambourine as it rests against a bass drum, drawing rosin against a string that is pressed against a cymbal, and playing the flexitone with stringed bow.⁷¹ Crumb takes advantage of the expressive possibilities of percussion like no other composer, and the American Songbooks are his most creative effort yet.

Percussionists are occasionally required to utilize the *piano* in the American Songbooks. For example, *I Wonder as I Wander*, from Songbook V, instructs a percussionist to play a gentle glissando over the piano strings with the unsharpened end of a wooden pencil.⁷² This kind of crossing of instruments creates special requirements for the positioning of players on the stage. In this case the percussionist must be stationed close enough to the piano to allow him to quickly dash back and forth between his percussion set-up and the piano without missing his next musical entrance.

In addition to these standard instruments played in non-standard ways, Crumb also writes for unusual instruments not typically found in Western music, and sometimes not even found in the realm of music at all. For example, American Songbook V requires the log drum; Amerindian rattle; bowed timpani; wind chimes made of metal, glass, and

⁷¹ Crumb, *American Songbook V*, 11-18 and 33-32.

⁷² Crumb, *American Songbook V*, 21.

seashell; lion's roar; and guïro. Certain instruments are homemade, and some were invented by Crumb and various percussion colleagues over the years.

Inspired by the folk music he heard as a child in West Virginia, Crumb has included folk instruments in his music throughout his career. The American Songbooks are no exception, and in them Crumb utilizes folk instruments like never before, incorporating a stone jug, musical saw, tambourine, sandpaper blocks, and rute (switch of twigs).⁷³

Crumb is interested in both the visual and aural aspects of performance. He has said that watching the percussionists move about their instruments in the American Songbooks creates a kind of ballet.⁷⁴ Performances are nearly as interesting to watch as they are to hear. It is not surprising that numerous dance companies throughout the world have set choreography to Crumb's music, including Alvin Ailey Dance Theater of New York, Ballet Rambert of London, The Australian Ballet, and The Hamburg Ballet.⁷⁵

Crumb's choice of instruments for the American Songbook series also highlights his love of international music styles. He incorporates over 150 percussion instruments from numerous countries, including opera gongs and temple bells from China, camel bells and ankle bells from India, Thai buffalo bell, Tibetan prayer stones, Philippine "devil chasers," Kenyan shaker, and Vietnamese frog.⁷⁶ The following figure shows the full list

⁷³ Crumb, *American Songbooks I, V, and VI*.

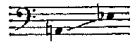
⁷⁴ Van Eyck, Personal Interview I, 72.

⁷⁵ Don Gillespie, ed., *George Crumb, Profile of a Composer* (New York: C.F. Peters, 1986), 102, 103.


⁷⁶ Bruskin 330.

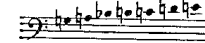
of percussion instruments in Songbook V: *Voices From A Forgotten World*.⁷⁷

Percussion I	Percussion II	Percussion III	Percussion IV
Xylophone	Vibraphone	Vibraphone	Mãrimba
Crotales (2 octaves)	Medium suspended cymbal	Large suspended cymbal	Tubular bells
Glockenspiel	Large sizzle cymbal	Large sizzle cymbal	Medium suspended cymbal
Small suspended cymbal	Medium tantam	Large tantam	Very large suspended cymbal
Medium suspended cymbal	Medium Chinese temple gong	Medium Chinese temple gong	Very large sizzle cymbal
Medium Chinese cymbal	Chinese wind gong (Feng Luo)	Large Chinese temple gong	Very large tantam
Large Chinese cymbal	Finger cymbals	Large bass drum	Very large Chinese temple gong
Medium sizzle cymbal	Sleighbells	3 Tomtoms	Very large bass drum
Small tantam	Wooden agogo bell	Conga drum	2 Bongo drums
Small Chinese temple gong	Kabuki blocks	Maraca	Chinese tomtom
4 Japanese temple bells	Amerindian rattle	Metal wind chimes	Indian ankle bells
Indian ankle bells	Small triangle	Bamboo wind chimes	5 Temple blocks
Glass wind chimes	2 Ruten (switches of twigs)	2 Claves	Sandpaper blocks
Metal wind chimes	Maraca	2 (high-pitched) prayer stones	Finger cymbals
Seashell wind chimes	Bell tree	2 Wood blocks	Sistrum
Wooden buffalo bell	Indian ankle bells	Small triangle	Cabasa
Wooden agogo bell	Log drum	2 Mounted castanets	Sleighbells
Log drum	Surf drum	Large tambourine	Caribbean steel drum
Maraca	Medium bass drum	Lion's roar	
2 bongo drums	Suspended saw blade (a standard saw blade detached from wooden handle)	Guïro	
5 temple blocks	Wind machine	Ratchet	
Jug	Medium tambourine	Amerindian rattle	
Flexitone	Very small (high-pitched) guïro	6 Almglocken	
Sandpaper blocks	Tube (a metal tube filled with tiny ball bearings)		
Amerindian rattle	3 mounted glockenspiel plates:		
Small thunder sheet (with thinner metal than standard thunder sheet)			
Timpano			




(N.B. A quarter-tone above the E-flat is also required)

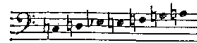





Caribbean steel drum



Flexitone
Sleighbells



Timpano



(N.B. A quarter-tone above the A-flat is also required)

A small Japanese Kokiriko (with very thin wooden "leaves")

The pairing of percussion and piano is special for Crumb. He first used this combination in *Music for a Summer Evening (Makrokosmos III)* in 1974.⁷⁸ He says, "I've always thought this was one of the greatest ensembles, because the piano can join the percussion so readily. It's a percussion instrument that can sing."⁷⁹ Crumb has said, "percussion lacks a true bass. It's always a drawback in a percussion ensemble when you want that fundamental sound. In adding the piano, you get a sense of a super bass, and you can treat the piano almost as an extension of the percussion."⁸⁰ Crumb's lifetime of experimentation and experience with these instruments has allowed him to create the many fascinating sounds and textures heard in the American Songbook series.

⁷⁷ Crumb, *American Songbook V*, iii.

⁷⁸ George Crumb, *Makrokosmos III: Music for a Summer Evening* (New York: C. F. Peters, 1974).

⁷⁹ Van Eyck, Personal Interview I, 63.

⁸⁰ Bruskin 330.

7) *Writing For the Voice*

Crumb's vocal writing is as unique as his instrumental writing. He has always been interested in vocal music, and about half of his compositional output is for the voice. The writing is not necessarily "classical" in style. He has said that in certain pieces he had a type of voice in mind when composing. For example, in his concept for *Ancient Voices of Children*, Crumb says he was inspired by the voice of mezzo-soprano Jan DeGaetani for her enormous technical and timbral flexibility.⁸¹ This extreme flexibility is necessary in most of Crumb's vocal works, as the primary idea is to stretch the expressive capabilities of the voice and utilize all of its beautiful aspects.

Crumb frequently writes unusual effects for the voice. For example, in *Will There Be Any Stars in My Crown* from Songbook I, he asks the singer to use a tone that is "strident, and metallic in timbre: like a hymn singer from rural Appalachia!"⁸² In Songbook VI, *Put My Little Shoes Away* is to be sung "in a little girl's voice," and *Blowin' in the Wind* is marked, "sotto voce, like wafting, windborne music (distant and faintly perceived)."⁸³ In Songbook V Crumb writes what he calls "wind singing" for the song *Beautiful Dreamer*, which is achieved by whistling in an especially airy fashion. Other special vocal indications in the score include: "with a dark and powerful sonority" in *Song of Thunder*; "as if sung through an alcoholic mist" in *Hallelujah I'm A Bum*; "white sound/non-vibrato" in *I Wonder As I Wander*; "sotto voce, in a lazy blues style" in *The House of the Rising Sun*; and "dreamlike and wafting" in *Bringing in the Sheaves*.⁸⁴

⁸¹ George Crumb, *Ancient Voices of Children* [CD liner notes] (New York: Elektra/Nonesuch, 1975), 5.

⁸² Crumb, *American Songbook I*, 5.

⁸³ Crumb, *American Songbook VI*, 22 and 26.

⁸⁴ Crumb, *American Songbook V*, 1-43.

Crumb is greatly influenced by more popular forms of music, like folk, jazz, blues, and gospel. These styles of singing have been present in Crumb's music since he began composing, and in the American Songbooks in particular, Crumb needs vocalists to be flexible enough to clearly express these American popular styles of singing.⁸⁵

Crumb also writes purely phonetic or nonsense syllables for the singer in order to bring out certain vocal colors. This style was utilized heavily in his earlier works like *Ancient Voices of Children*, where the vocalist sings phonetic sounds throughout, such as “ka-o-ka-ka-o-ka-o-ka-o-ka-o!”⁸⁶ Crumb occasionally asks that sung vocalizes be projected into the open, amplified piano to produce iridescent sounds. This type of nonsense-syllable singing is included only in rare instances in the American Songbooks. An example can be heard in the “ti-u-wi, ti-u-wi” of Songbook V's Ojibwa *Firefly Song*.⁸⁷

Crumb is also known for writing lines that flow back and forth between sung text and humming within the same phrase. This style is featured in Crumb's 1984 short song, *The Sleeper*, where the singer flows from the words “June” and “moon,” directly into melismas on the closed [n] of each word.⁸⁸ In the American Songbooks we hear this in *Song of Thunder* from book V. Here the singer repeats the phrase, “The voice that beautifies the land,” and each time he sings it, he is instructed to close to the [n] of “land” before singing the melismatic flourish at the end of the line.⁸⁹ The entire instrumental ensemble also hums lengthy phrases throughout the song, bringing the humming sound

⁸⁵ Van Eyck, Personal Interview I, 70-71.

⁸⁶ George Crumb, *Ancient Voices of Children* [CD] (New York: Elektra/Nonesuch, 1975).

⁸⁷ Crumb, *American Songbook V*, 35-36.

⁸⁸ George Crumb, *The Sleeper* (New York: C. F. Peters, 1984), 4.

⁸⁹ Crumb, *American Songbook V*, 24-26.

even more to the forefront, and offering yet another exaggeration of Crumb's earlier compositional practices in the American Songbooks.

8) *Extended Techniques: Non-Standard Performance Requirements*

Crumb is also known for asking musicians to participate in performance outside of just playing their instruments. The example was just given of the percussionists humming a Navajo tune in Songbook V. Players may also be asked to move in a certain way around the stage or performance hall, or they may be asked to speak and shout as part of the piece. Similarly, vocalists are sometimes required to play instruments. For Crumb this is all about heightening the drama of the music and making as great an impact as possible.

Crumb first experimented with this idea in 1963 in *Night Music I*, when he wrote whistling in the part of the percussionists.⁹⁰ In his 1967 orchestral work, *Echoes of Time and the River*, Crumb indicates that the musicians should process around the performance hall at different points in the music. During rehearsals for the premiere performance, this procession led to a great deal of resistance from many of the instrumentalists, who felt that it somehow diminished their dignity as musicians. There was such strong resistance that no procession was included in the first performance, and it was only partially included in the second performance.⁹¹ Crumb's *Lux Aeterna* (1971) for soprano, bass, flute, sitar, and percussion, instructs performers to wear black masks and sit in the lotus position during performance, if they are able. The stage is to be lit in red, and the singer begins by lighting a candle. In Crumb's *Vox Balaenae* for electric flute, electric cello, and amplified

⁹⁰ Van Eyck, Personal Interview I, 72.

⁹¹ Cohen 9.

piano, he again asks the instrumentalists to wear black half-masks to represent the powerful and impersonal aspects of nature.⁹²

Crumb continues this method of “heightening the drama” in the American Songbook series. In Songbook V’s *Bringing in the Sheaves*, the instrumentalists join the vocalist in making the sounds of cicadas [i-u-i-u...], and the vocalist plays the Indian ankle bells throughout the piece. *Somebody Got Lost in a Storm* requires the instrumentalists to shout, “Somebody got lost,” and “Poor sinner got lost” to increase the chaos and intensity of the “storm.”⁹³

VIII. *Why Are the American Songbooks Groundbreaking?*

I have explained the ways in which the American Songbooks are consistent with Crumb’s earlier compositions, and the ways in which he takes his earlier compositional style to new extremes in the American Songbooks. But what makes the American Songbook series so groundbreaking and significant, not just within Crumb’s repertoire, but also the entire body of Western contemporary music? One of the things that is most remarkable is Crumb’s ability to create folk songs that are recognizable, yet completely original. How does he do this?

⁹² Cohen 12.

⁹³ Crumb, *American Songbook V*, 1-13.

1) *A Fresh Approach to Pre-Existing Material*

a) *Harmonic Changes to the Folk Songs*

The American Songbooks are the first compositions in which Crumb primarily works with pre-existing melodic material. He had to find ways to reinvent the familiar folk tunes and leave his own DNA imprint upon them. As mentioned, Crumb felt strongly about maintaining nearly all of the original folk song melodies, however he rarely preserves the *harmonic* material accompanying the tune. In fact, harmonies are purposefully and radically altered to allow Crumb's individual expression to come through.

Crumb changes the harmonic material by incorporating extended chromaticism, utilizing a wide range of unexpected timbres, and occasionally obscuring rhythms. He avoids using the common chords and conventional tonalities associated with the folk songs, and instead "spices them up" by perhaps using a chord with a tritone rather than a standard triad. He utilizes unexpected whole-tone formations, or mirrored and symmetrical structures, which are designed to "pull your ear out of any sense of the traditional tonalities." Or, he says, he might overlay a tune or tonality that is complimentary, but not typically associated with the folk song, itself.⁹⁴ This type of writing is heard in *'Tis the Gift to Be Simple* from Songbook V. At the very beginning of the song and at various points throughout, the marimba and xylophone play a sparkling,

⁹⁴ Van Eyck, Personal Interview II, 74.

invented motive, which is in no way affiliated with the original folk tune. It serves to morph this familiar song into something that is fresh and new.⁹⁵

The goal is not only to remove the listener from the traditional settings of these pieces, but also to enlarge the harmonic space of the tune. Crumb sometimes does this with chords built on unexpected 4ths and 5ths. He also relies on modal or very sparse harmonies to skew the standard accompaniment. For example, Songbook V's *Firefly Song* is primarily pentatonic, while *Beautiful Dreamer* is almost entirely without harmony.⁹⁶ Crumb describes its orchestration as "very fragile and non-harmonic."⁹⁷

b) *Rhythmic Changes to the Folk Songs*

In addition to harmonic changes, Crumb also makes significant rhythmic adjustments to the folk songs. Throughout the American Songbook series he utilizes repetition to create heightened expression. For example, in Songbook V's *Hallelujah, I'm a Bum*, Crumb repeats the text, "Revive us, revive us again," in a comic way to suggest hiccups and increasing drunkenness from the singer.⁹⁸ In *'Tis the Gift to Be Simple*, Crumb uses repeated text to create six canonic statements. For this he says he drew inspiration from Chopin's canons, but he feels that he carried the idea of the canon even farther than Chopin in this folk song.⁹⁹

Not only does Crumb take the liberty of repeating phrases, but he also stretches rhythms, speeds them up, and even adds extra beats within phrases. He describes his

⁹⁵ Crumb, *American Songbook V*, 27-31.

⁹⁶ Crumb, *American Songbook V*, 32-34.

⁹⁷ Van Eyck, Personal Interview II, 89.

⁹⁸ Crumb, *American Songbook V*, 16-20.

⁹⁹ Van Eyck, Personal Interview II, 88.

practice in this way: “Sometimes I contract or compact the measure to give it more momentum. Usually though, I spread the measure out in order to add not just leisure, but space—an American space. So I open 4/4 up to 5/4, or even 7/4, to give it spatial breadth.”¹⁰⁰ He does this to draw the ear to the moments that he feels deserve extra emotional power. For example, in *Shall We Gather By the River* from Songbook I, Crumb adds an extra eighth-note rest in the middle of the phrase, “That flows by the throne of [rest] God.”¹⁰¹ He also manipulates standard rhythms by interrupting phrases with humming and whispered text, which is again designed to focus our attention on important moments within the song.

c) *Drifting Tonality Within the Folk Songs*

Crumb continues to obscure these well-known folk tunes with what he calls drifting tonality. In many of the songs, the vocal line and accompaniment frequently change key, effectively bringing the tunes in and out of focus, while still maintaining the original melody. A primary example is found again in *Shall We Gather By the River*. The tune first appears in E \flat , then in G \flat , back to E \flat , then in D, E, G, E, E \flat , G \flat , E, and E \flat . All of this is accompanied by Crumb’s “River Music,” shown in the following figure, which is a lengthy sequence of chords in various keys, meant to further obscure the tonality. The instructions at the beginning of the song say that this drifting tonality should suggest something surreal and disembodied, like “a song in search of itself.”¹⁰²

¹⁰⁰ Van Eyck, Personal Interview I, 68.

¹⁰¹ Crumb, *American Songbook I*, 1-4.

¹⁰² Crumb, *American Songbook I*, 1-4.

THE RIVER OF LIFE
Songs of Joy and Sorrow
A Cycle of Hymns, Spirituals and Revival Tunes
for Voice, Percussion Quartet and Amplified Piano

George Crumb

I. Shall We Gather at the River?

"River Music"
1 Solemnly with a profoundly mysterious sonority [$\text{♩} = \text{ca. } 40$]

Amplified Piano
Perc. 4

"Water-gong" (= Sm. Tam-tam)
"Water-bell" (= Atmingsloche)
"Water-crotales"
"Water-chime" (= Tubular bell)

NOTA BENE:
A. "Shall We Gather at the River" begins with the "River Music" (for piano and percussion 4). These four bars of music are repeated several times until the conductor's cue signals the end of the superimposed music (for voice and percussion 2 and 3). At the cue, piano and percussion 4 (at whatever point they find themselves) should complete that bar and then go directly to the three final bars of the "River Music Code." The superimposed (but not rhythmically coordinated) music for voice and three percussionists will begin at the point shown by the arrow (during the first statement of the four-bar sequence).
B. For the "water-bounding" glissando effects in percussion 4, the composer desires the following precise pitches:

The vocal part in "Shall We Gather at the River", with its "drifting tonality" and interrupted phrases, should suggest something surreal and disembodied (like "a song in search of itself").

2 delicatissimo [$\text{♩} = \text{ca. } 52$]
and ppp

3 ppp dreamlike, amusingly, gently drifting [$\text{♩} = \text{ca. } 60$]
Voice
Shall we gather at the riv - er Where bright an-gel feet have trod.

In Songbook V we experience drifting tonality in the first song, *Bringing in the Sheaves*, which constantly switches back and forth between two keys that are a whole step apart. Similarly, the volume's final song, *The Demon Lover*, has opposing keys for the male and female, with the male voice in C# minor, and the female in E minor.¹⁰³ Here we see another example of Crumb's tendency toward symmetry, in that the first and last pieces are the only ones that feature shifting tonality throughout the vocal line.¹⁰⁴

The final piece of American Songbook IV, *Shenandoah*, offers a prime example of Crumb's rhythmic and melodic tinkering. Here he takes his favorite folk song of all time and uses it to construct a piece that stands out from his entire body of work. Instruments are never playing the same rhythms at the same time, which results in an unusual layering effect. This creates what Crumb calls a "drifting continuum," and he says that the piece is special because:

¹⁰³ Van Eyck, Personal Interview II, 89.

¹⁰⁴ Crumb, *American Songbook V*, 1-6 and 37-43.

...the music is just floating there in space in a strange way, a way that I hadn't ever been able to create before. And yet when the tune comes in, you hear all the normal relationships in the singer's notes, but the surrounding sound is like another world. It's as if the two separate worlds are colliding. I love the sense of loneliness that this projects. The voice is there, yet it's estranged from the music in the background. The ensemble is not really used to support the voice in the standard way, but to actively pose something against the traditional sense of it.¹⁰⁵

Through Crumb's words we come to understand that in the American Songbook series he took many opportunities to experiment and stretch himself as a composer. By manipulating harmony, rhythm, and the listener's sense of tonality, Crumb breathes new life and meaning into these beloved American folk songs.

2) *Respectful Treatment of American Folk Music*

This dissertation has presented numerous examples of the great care and thought that Crumb put into his folk song settings. This illuminates what is perhaps most significant about the American Songbook series, which is Crumb's *genuine* and *respectful* treatment of American folk music. Here's what Crumb had to say about this:

Something went wrong after the second world war, even after the first world war, where composers became kind of elitist and denied a big part of their heritage... It's fashionable nowadays if you make a reference to American folklore and folk songs, or anything about America, to be ironic. It's almost as if some composers are making fun of these old tunes, and it's just not very interesting... I want to be sincere in the way that I approach these texts, trying to find things in them that I can compliment or supplement, in some way, to make the expression even more powerful.¹⁰⁶

It is Crumb's reverence and admiration for American folklore and folk music that make these compositions such an incredible contribution. He uncovers the great depth in

¹⁰⁵ Van Eyck, Personal Interview II, 90.

¹⁰⁶ Van Eyck, Personal Interview I, 66-67.

folk poetry and uses it to express a range of emotions beyond the simplistic naïveté that is sometimes found in folk song settings by other American composers. Crumb has great appreciation for the folk song settings of Luciano Berio, Aaron Copland, and Charles Ives, but beyond this, he saw an opportunity to present folk music in a way that gives it the respect that it deserves. With regard to this, Crumb references Stravinsky, whose early work is loaded with folk melodies. He notes that Stravinsky's *The Rite of Spring* is full of Ukrainian folk tunes, and similarly, Tchaikovsky's piano concertos include many overt folk melodies. Crumb heralds Mahler's use of his own national folk tunes in *Des Knaben Wunderhorn* and *Das Lied von der Erde*. He also mentions examples in the music of Beethoven, Brahms, and Mozart.¹⁰⁷ These composers utilize their native folk music in a way that pays tribute. Crumb would like for America's folk music to be treated as something serious with a lot to say.

3) *Crumb's Most Personal Composition*

The American Songbooks are perhaps George Crumb's most personal works to date. They are meant to celebrate his country and upbringing in a way that no other work has before. He brings the American Songbooks close to his own life with inclusion of some extremely personal touches. The personal elements are evident in the early songbooks in Crumb's use of the songs of Appalachia, the region of his childhood and the place where his first musical memories and tastes were formed. The title of the first songbook, *Unto the Hills*, came from Crumb's childhood as well. During his youth, the

¹⁰⁷ Van Eyck, Personal Interview I, 67.

conductor of the Charleston Symphony was Antonio Modarelli, who was not only a conductor but also a composer. Throughout his life Crumb had carried with him the memory of one of Modarelli's songs called *Unto the Hills*. He had always liked the title and found it to be evocative of the Psalm of David: "I will lift up mine eyes from unto the hills," and he finally found occasion to use it as the title of his first songbook.¹⁰⁸

Adding further personal touches, Crumb utilized song texts written by himself and his daughter, Ann. This was a first for Crumb, who is extremely particular about which texts resonate with him and which align with his style of composition. The songs with lyrics written by Ann Crumb include *The Enchanted Valley* from Songbook IV, and two verses of *Old Blue* from Songbook VII. Crumb says that the experience of working so closely with his daughter on this project was very special.¹⁰⁹

The folk songs that Crumb heard during his childhood near West Virginia's Appalachian Mountains became part of his musical psyche, and he has woven these beloved folk songs into his music throughout his career. For example, the hymn tune, *Will There Be Any Stars in My Crown*, is whistled by the pianist in the first volume of Crumb's *Makrokosmos* (1972).¹¹⁰ Fragments of the folk song, *Were You There When They Crucified My Lord*, can be heard at the end of Crumb's, *Echoes of Time and the River* (1967).¹¹¹ In turn, Crumb quotes bits of *Echoes of Time and the River* at the end of *Were You There When They Crucified My Lord*, in Songbook I.¹¹² He quotes *Bringing in the Sheaves* in 2005's *Otherworldly Resonances*, and *'Tis the Gift to Be Simple* is heard in

¹⁰⁸ Van Eyck, Personal Interview I, 60.

¹⁰⁹ Van Eyck, Personal Interview I, 63.

¹¹⁰ Crumb, *Makrokosmos I*, 13.

¹¹¹ Van Eyck, Personal Interview II, 74.

¹¹² Crumb, *American Songbook I*, 23.

Twelve Gates to the City from Songbook IV, creating a folk song within a folk song.

Crumb says that many of our national folk songs have such sturdy and incredible melodies that they are equal to the greatest themes by Brahms and Beethoven.¹¹³ He values American folk music and considers the citations within his work to be very important. They are an homage to his home area and upbringing, and he says that they serve as a musical signature of sorts.¹¹⁴ In this way Crumb's settings of American folk songs in the American Songbook series have been a lifetime in the making, since he has known most of these folk songs for his entire life and used them consistently in his compositions.

The American Songbooks also highlight Crumb's strong feelings about world music. They are designed to honor not only the music of this country, but also the music of many of the world's cultures. In 1975, reviewer Nat Hentoff, writing in the magazine *Cosmopolitan*, called George Crumb, "the most authentically American composer since Charles Ives."¹¹⁵ Crumb's seven volumes of American Songbooks are the most overtly "American" of all of his works. It is therefore significant that Crumb heavily incorporates international instruments and sonorities into the songbooks. This offers insight into one of Crumb's major philosophical beliefs about music, which is that all music is interrelated. In 1980, he wrote that he was haunted by the thought that the many musics of the world are coming together as one.¹¹⁶ In his American Songbook series, we can clearly hear evidence of Crumb's attempts to bring together various styles of world music.

¹¹³ Van Eyck, Personal Interview I, 65.

¹¹⁴ Van Eyck, Personal Interview II, 73.

¹¹⁵ Cited in: Gillespie, *George Crumb: Profile of a Composer*, 30.

¹¹⁶ Bruskin 331.

Crumb's optimism and nationalistic pride are not lost on those who hear his music. His writing has an immediate impact on listeners. Jan DeGaetani, Crumb's dear friend and collaborator, has said that the response to George's work has been the same the world over: it touches the heart. She says that the sense of communication is always clear, and audiences feel rewarded by his music.¹¹⁷ Crumb says that music must somehow relate to our central nervous system and touch us deeply.¹¹⁸ This is what is so special about George Crumb, and this is something that his American Songbooks offer in abundance.

We can see how George Crumb's American Songbook series has made its mark on American music through Crumb's unique treatment of our native folk music and his original style of writing for piano, percussion, and voice. The American Songbooks fit within the creative context that we have come to expect from Crumb, yet in them we also see examples of Crumb stretching his previous compositional practices to new levels. Now in his sixth decade of composing, Crumb continues to challenge himself and experiment, keeping his music fresh and vital, and always giving the listener and performer something new to enjoy.

Crumb has jokingly called the American Songbook series his "Ring Cycle," which is at least partially due to the immense size of the work. But just as Wagner is best known for his Ring Cycle, I believe that the American Songbook series will be one of the great contributions for which George Crumb is remembered throughout history.

¹¹⁷ DeGaetani 27.

¹¹⁸ Crumb, *The Kenyon Review*, 121.

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 Doctoral Dissertation
 May 2012

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Appendix A: George Crumb's American Songbooks, Volumes I-VII

American Songbook I: *The River of Life* (2003)

Songs of Joy and Sorrow

A Cycle of Hymns, Spirituals, and Revival Tunes

For Voice, Percussion Quartet, and Amplified Piano

Premiered by Ann Crumb, soprano; and Orchestra 2001 with James Freeman, conductor

- 1) Shall We Gather By the River?
- 2) Will There Be Any Stars in My Crown?
- 3) Amazing Grace!
- 4) Give Me That Old Time Religion
- 5) Time is a Drifting River: A Psalm for Daybreak and Morning (Instrumental Interlude)
- 6) Were You There When They Crucified My Lord?
- 7) One More River to Cross ("Noah's Ark" – A Humoresque)
- 8) Nearer, My God to Thee
- 9) Deep River

American Songbook II: *A Journey Beyond Time* (2003)

Songs of Despair and Hope

A Cycle of Afro-American Spirituals

For Voice, Percussion Quartet, and Amplified Piano

Premiered by Barbara Ann Martin, soprano; and Orchestra 2001 with James Freeman, conductor

- 1) Swing Low, Sweet Chariot
- 2) Joshua Fit de Battle Ob Jerico
- 3) Steal Away
- 4) Oh, a-Rock-a My Soul
- 5) The Pregnant Earth: A Psalm for Noontide (Instrumental Interlude)
- 6) Sit Down, Sister
- 7) Nobody Knows De Trouble I See
- 8) Go Down, Moses
- 9) Sometimes I Feel Like A Motherless Child

American Songbook III: *Unto the Hills* (2002; revised 2004-2005)

Songs of Sadness, Yearning and Innocence

A Cycle of Appalachian Songs

For Voice, Percussion Quartet, and Amplified Piano

Premiered by Ann Crumb, soprano; and Orchestra 2001 with James Freeman, conductor

- 1) Poor Wayfaring Stranger
- 2) All the Pretty Little Horses (Appalachian Lullaby)
- 3) Ten Thousand Miles
- 4) Ev'ry Night When the Sun Goes In
- 5) Appalachian Epiphany: A Psalm for Sunset and Dusk (Instrumental Interlude)
- 6) A. Down in the Valley, B. Hush Little Baby (Appalachian Lullaby)
- 7) Black, Black, Black is the Color
- 8) The Riddle
- 9) Poor Wayfaring Stranger (Echo)

American Songbook IV: *The Winds of Destiny* (2004)*Songs of Strife, Love, Mystery, and Exultation**A Cycle of American Civil War Songs, Folk Songs, and Spirituals*

For Voice, Percussion Quartet, and Amplified Piano

Premiered by Barbara Ann Martin, soprano; and Orchestra 2001 with James Freeman, conductor

- 1) Mine Eyes Have Seen the Glory
- 2) When Johnny Comes Marching Home
- 3) Lonesome Road
- 4) Twelve Gates to the City
- 5) De Profundis: A Psalm for the Night-Wanderer (Instrumental Interlude)
- 6) All My Trials (Death's Lullaby)
- 7) Go Tell It on the Mountain!
- 8) The Enchanted Valley
- 9) Shenandoah

American Songbook V: *Voices From A Forgotten World* (2006)*A Cycle of American Songs from North and South, East and West*

For Solo Female and Male Voices, Percussion Quartet, and Amplified Piano

Premiered by Jamie Van Eyck, mezzo-soprano; Patrick Mason, baritone; and Orchestra 2001 with James Freeman, conductor

- 1) Bringing in the Sheaves
- 2) Somebody Got Lost in a Storm
- 3) The House of the Rising Sun
- 4) Hallelujah, I'm a Bum!
- 5) I Wonder as I Wander
- 6) Song of Thunder
- 7) 'Tis the Gift to Be Simple
- 8) Beautiful Dreamer
- 9) Firefly Song
- 10) The Demon Lover (A Ghostly Ballad)

American Songbook VI: *Voices From the Morning of the Earth* (2007)*A Cycle of American Songs from North and South, East and West*

For Solo Female and Male Voices, Percussion Quartet, and Amplified Piano

Premiered by Ann Crumb, soprano; Randall Scarlatta, baritone; and Orchestra 2001 with James Freeman, conductor

- 1) My Lord, What a Beautiful Morning!
- 2) A Mountaineer's Sad Song
- 3) Weep, All Ye Little Rains
- 4) Dry Bones (Humoresque Macabre)
- 5) Put My Little Shoes Away (from the Ozarks)
- 6) Blowin' in the Wind (Bob Dylan)
- 7) When the Saints Go Marching In
- 8) Goodbye, Old Paint
- 9) O Peter, Go Ring-a Dem Bells
- 10) Where Have All the Flowers Gone? (Pete Seeger)

American Songbook VII: *Voices From the Heartland* (2010)

A Cycle of Hymns, Spirituals, Folksongs, and American Indian Chants

For Solo Female and Male Voices, Percussion Quartet, and Amplified Piano

Premiered by Ann Crumb, soprano; Patrick Mason, baritone; and Orchestra 2001 with James Freeman, conductor

- 1) Softly and Tenderly
- 2) Ghost Dance (Pawnee Tribal Chant)
- 3) Lord, Let Me Fly!
- 4) The Kanawha River at Dusk (An Appalachian Nocturne)
- 5) Glory Be to the New-Born King (A Christmas Spiritual)
- 6) A. Come All Ye Faithful and Tender Maidens
B. On Top of Old Smoky (“The War of the Sexes”)
- 7) Beulah Land
- 8) Old Blue
- 9) Song of the Earth (Navajo Tribal Chants)

Appendix B:

The Complete Vocal Compositions of George Crumb

- *Four Songs* (1945), for voice, clarinet, and piano
- *Seven Songs* (1946), for voice and piano
- *Three Early Songs* (1947), for voice and piano
- *Alleluja* (1948), for unaccompanied chorus
- *A Cycle of Greek Lyrics* (1950), for voice and piano
- *Night Music I* (1963, revised 1976), for soprano, piano/celeste, and two percussionists
- *Madrigals, Book I* (1965), for soprano, vibraphone, and double bass
- *Madrigals, Book II* (1965), for soprano, flute/piccolo/alto flute, and percussion
- *Songs, Drones, and Refrains of Death* (1968), for baritone, electric guitar, electric double bass, amplified piano/electric harpsichord, and two percussionists
- *Night of the Four Moons* (1969), for alto, alto flute/piccolo, banjo, electric cello, and percussion
- *Madrigals, Book III* (1969), for soprano, harp, and percussion
- *Madrigals, Book IV* (1969), for soprano, flute/alto flute/piccolo, harp, double bass, and percussion
- *Ancient Voices of Children* (1970), for soprano, boy soprano, oboe, mandolin, harp, amplified piano/toy piano, and three percussionists
- *Lux Aeterna* (1971) for soprano, bass flute/soprano recorder, sitar, and two percussionists
- *Star Child* (1977) for soprano, antiphonal children's voices, male speaking choir, bell ringers, and large orchestra
- *Apparition* (1979), for soprano and amplified piano
- *The Sleeper* (1984), for mezzo-soprano and amplified piano
- *Federico's Little Songs for Children* (1986), for soprano, flute/piccolo/alto flute/bass flute, and harp
- *American Songbook III: Unto the Hills* (2002, revised 2004/2005), for soprano, percussion quartet, and amplified piano
- *American Songbook I: The River of Life* (2003), for soprano, percussion quartet, and amplified piano
- *American Songbook II: A Journey Beyond Time* (2003), for soprano, percussion quartet, and amplified piano

- *American Songbook IV: The Winds of Destiny* (2004), for soprano, percussion quartet, and amplified piano
- *Yester-Year (Vox Humana I)* (2005), vocalize for soprano and three instrumentalists
- *American Songbook V: Voices From A Forgotten World* (2006), for male and female voice, percussion quartet, and amplified piano
- *American Songbook VI: Voices From the Morning of the Earth* (2007), for male and female voice, percussion quartet, and amplified piano
- *Spanish Songbook I: The Ghosts of Alhambra* (2009) for baritone, guitar, and percussion
- *Spanish Songbook II: Sun and Shadow* (2009), for soprano and piano
- *American Songbook VII: Voices From the Heartland* (2010), for male and female voice, percussion quartet, and amplified piano

Appendix C:

Personal Interview I with George Crumb

March 9, 2012

This interview took place in Media, Pennsylvania at the home of George Crumb on March 9, 2012. Any text within parentheses was not part of the actual interview, but was inserted in this transcription for the sake of clarity.

Jamie Van Eyck (J): George, thank you so much for meeting with me today. You're very generous with your time in that you've given so many interviews, and there's so much great information on your music that's already out there.

George Crumb (G): Yes, but not so much for the American Songbooks. I'm working on editing the songbooks now. I'm going through one by one and making adjustments, adding things to the scores for clarity.

(He flips through the American Songbooks, showing me some new edits:)

G: There are things I didn't like here. I simplified and cleaned it up a little. They're mostly details, mostly editing things and notational things. For example, in this section the staves didn't go all the way through, so I fixed that. (He made the score easier to read by stretching the staves across entire page in one section of *Ten Thousand Miles* from Songbook III.)

G: It looks too complicated, so I made the pedal instructions much clearer. I added copious footnotes because there are so many little details, and this should help the performer.

J: Sure. They don't always have the luxury of having you there to clarify score markings.

G: Yes, as a matter of fact, I'm now putting footnotes in your volume (American Songbook V).

J: And that allows you to communicate exactly what you want to the players?

G: Yeah, it helps - little details like that. (He shows me a score example from one of the American Songbooks.) They may look at dynamic markings and wonder why one thing is loud and another is soft - important little things like that - or how to produce the clave sound on the bass drum.

(He keeps all of this in his head and just *remembers* what was difficult or confusing to performers at the work's premiere. He is now going back, 10 yrs later in the case of the earliest songbooks, and adjusting the markings in the score or adding extra information so that instructions are clearer and more detailed for future performers.)

(I request to see the instrumental interlude of Songbook IV, which is meant to represent nighttime, with white notes printed on a black background. We begin to discuss this:)

J: Wow, this is striking. It's very interesting to look at. Is this intended to cause performers to feel a certain mood of darkness and nighttime?

G: Well, yes, but you know, it's hard to read, so in the appendix I have it in the normal notation (black notes on white paper).

J: Regarding these visual scores for which you're so famous, obviously the audience can't see that the score is written this way, with sunbeams, circles, swirls, and other shapes and pictures in the music. Do these shapes put the performers in a certain state of mind? Is this visual aspect solely for the performer?

G: Yeah, in a way. I always had the feeling that any special notation, like the circular notation in some of my earlier pieces and in the earlier songbooks, communicates a sense of freedom, of circularity. And some of those work in a circular way. But what the black page would do (interlude from Songbook IV) is symbolically represent the darkest time of night.

(We discuss the theatrical elements of the American Songbooks:)

G: Dawn Upshaw did a staged version of Songbook IV with Peter Sellers. It really made its point, you know. He's such a genius with converting things. He made it into a one-character opera.

J: I've read that Dawn was the inspiration for your version of *When Johnny Comes Marching Home* in Songbook IV.

G: Yeah, I heard Dawn sing *When Johnny Comes Marching Home* on a concert where she was doing *Ancient Voices of Children* and some Civil War folk songs. She sang it like a funeral march and repeated some of the text. Suddenly it changed tempo to something funereal, so I built a transition like that into my piece. I constructed it a little like an opera scena. I added a whole page to transition between those two moods, and the character becomes totally different. I wrote the score marking as, "bitterly ironic and grotesque." Barbara (Barbara Ann Martin, soloist for the work's premiere) used a Weill type intonation. I liked the way she did it and at the time, I considered putting that in the score, saying something like, "In the style of Kurt Weill." I also use the cannon drum in this movement.

J: Is the cannon drum that large, tube-like instrument?

G: Yeah. Ideally it's about this big around (gestures about the size of a tree trunk), and it might reach as far as that back wall (about 6 feet). And that's homemade. I ran into that on a visit to the University of Idaho in a town called Moscow, Idaho. There was a percussionist there who told me about it, and I gave him credit for that in the score. I'd borrowed his version. He's the one who showed me the possibility. It can be constructed out of tubing for air ducts, and then you stretch a bass drum membrane over one side.

J: You use such an incredible array of percussion instruments in so many of your pieces, but particularly in the American Songbook series. Did you invent any of the instruments yourself?

G: Not really, but in some cases I maybe imagined different ways to use certain instruments. Even in the last songbook, I still hadn't given up on introducing weird instruments. (He chuckles.) For example, here I use a low-pitched siren. Varèse does this with a siren, too. But I never really liked the sound of the siren up in the normal register. It's a terrifying sound, like an ambulance. So I use it at a very low pitch, without much of a crescendo. In the score I say that it should sound like a disembodied human voice, and that's the effect it made in the song, *Softly and Tenderly*. I use a glissando of siren, overlapping with a water gong glissando.

G: Let's see if there are any other special things... (He flips through several American Songbook scores.) These Amerindian rattles are also in your songbook (Songbook V). Oh, here's a new one: the Afro-Brazilian berimbau. It's about that high (gestures 3 feet),

and it has one string. You hit the string with a wooden stick, and it gives a different pitch depending on where you hit it. It has a resonator on the bottom. (He vocalizes an example of how it sounds.) It's a crazy little instrument.

J: Where do you find out about all these instruments? There are so many, and from all over the world.

G: In most cases, percussionists have shown me these crazy little instruments over the years. I remember them and later I think, well I could use that one here or there.

J: Do you keep a written catalogue of instruments anywhere?

G: No, I just remember them over the years, like the African Udu, which I used in earlier songbooks.

J: Where do you find your folk texts?

G: You know, the texts are a mixture. Some are Native American songs or tribal chants. *Lord Let Me Fly* is a spiritual I hadn't known before. It was new for me. It's very funny, it's a *humorous* spiritual. I needed something for baritone (for Songbook VII), and hadn't come across a text I wanted to use, so I wrote my own little words for the song *The Kanawha River at Dusk*. The Kanawha River is a river where I grew up, and I wrote the tune and the short text based upon it. Next I added another spiritual, *Glory Be to the Newborn King*. Then I used 2 folk tunes, which I call *The War of the Sexes*, with each voice talking about how the other can't be depended on. (He chuckles.) Then came *Beulah Land*, which has always been one of my favorites, followed by *Old Blue*, a dog song. Ann wrote two verses of that. Then at the end, I use a Navajo tribal chant, three of

them, actually. I thought the end of the whole series should be a little longer, so this one is a tripartite song. The first part is for baritone, the next for soprano, then they end in duet. I call it the *Song of the Earth*, like the Mahler work. The songs are all about newness and beginnings. At the end, I repeat the “forever,” as in Mahler’s *Song to the Earth*. Ewig... forever...

G: And do you know about the key and tonality scheme?

(He is referring to the fact that he used all possible keys when setting the songs in the American Songbooks.)

J: Yes, I do. When did that end up being an important element of the songbooks?

G: It came in around the second songbook. I noticed I was using a wide variety of keys, and some very unusual keys for some of the songs. The first book I wrote, of course, was *Unto the Hills*, even though I re-numbered it later (moving it to position number 3 among the books). I used the key of F# major for *The Riddle* (Songbook III). (He sings part of it.) That’s an unusual key for a folk song. Then I thought at a certain point in writing the second book, maybe I can use all the different keys, a la Bach, in the style of his *Well-Tempered Clavier*. I’ve always admired that in Bach, and of course Chopin did it too. He uses all the keys in his *24 Preludes*.

J: You said to me, earlier, that you write from an emotional place.

G: Yes, I think about the words, and the tunes, and associations with the tune. That's one element. And also, since I'm re-adapting these folk songs to suit my style, I may include some meaning or suggestion that's not on the surface, like sometimes I almost invent another world that doesn't always have much to do with the original context of the song.

J: I've read that particularly in *Unto the Hills*, which is comprised of Appalachian songs chosen by you and Ann, you wanted to leave the melodies exactly in tact, because you thought they were perfect on their own.

G: Yes, that's right.

J: Did you become a bit looser with your interpretation of the folk tunes as you continued composing your songbooks?

G: Well, yes, in some cases. In *Somebody Got Lost in A Storm* (Songbook V), I don't use the original tune. I thought the original tune was so weak. It was in a major key, which didn't sound much like a storm. So I evolved my own tune, which didn't have much at all to do with the original. Another one was *My Lord, What a Beautiful Morning* (from Songbook VI; he plays a bit of it). I really went wild with that one. I made it very brilliant and in a higher register. It was greatly extended and melodically changed. (George mentions that in this song, he offers the option to begin with 4 bars of the vocalist singing the original folk melody offstage.)

G: The offstage singing should be sung in a country style, then it moves into my own setting. (He plays a bit of it.) I wanted it much more dramatic than the original, too, as if to illustrate "The Morning of the World!" My setting includes turns, flourishes, and

pyrotechnics not found in the original. And I use that as a motto for the whole cycle.

The first song is the only one that's technically about morning, but all of the songs I use in this collection are about when the world was young.

(George describes some of the pieces in Songbook VI:)

G: *Put my Little Shoes Away* - There's a case where I didn't like the original tune at all, so I made up a little tune that children might sing. It's heartbreaking (because of the fatal implications of the song).

I also bring in a couple of modern songs, like *Where Have All The Flowers Gone* (Pete Seeger) and *Blowin' in the Wind*, by Bob Dylan. For these especially, the folk sound really needs to be present in the voice. This was a way to bring in the songs of our own times, so the songbooks aren't relegated to a point far back in history.

J: You said that all of the songs in book VI are about youngness of the earth, or newness. In general, did you choose the songs first, then try to find a unifying title for the larger songbook?

G: I think so, yeah. I'd had the Appalachian songs in mind for a long time.

I grew up in Charleston, WV, and there was a conductor of the Charleston Symphony named Antonio Modarelli. He sometimes wrote songs, and one of his songs was titled, *Unto the Hills*. I'd always remembered it and liked it very much, so I decided to use it with the other Appalachian songs. And of course it's from the Psalm of David: "I will lift up mine eyes from Unto the Hills..."

J: When did you begin to unify the first four songbooks in such a specific way?

G: I started to figure this out by the time I'd begun the third songbook. I decided it would be a four-volume cycle, and that each volume should have eight songs and one instrumental interlude. That's why I later added two songs to *Unto the Hills* (to make it match the others in number of songs).

J: So at the time that you began writing *Unto the Hills*, did you know there were going to eventually be four songbooks in the cycle?

G: No, I wrote that one as a single songbook, but then thought immediately afterward, gee, I love those spirituals, and I could do another set on spirituals. That's as far as it went for a while. Then later I thought, well, I could also do some more hymns and more spirituals.

J: The first four books are such a unit with their morning, noon, sunset, and nighttime themes; matching numbers of songs; and the inclusion of the instrumental interlude. Did you think you were done with the series after writing four songbooks?

G: Yup. For a while I thought they were a complete kind of entity, a complete work or collection of songs. Then I started to think of how I might extend it in a different way. That's when I brought in a second voice (for Songbook V). I also added a song to make 10 songs in each of those next two volumes (Songbooks V and VI). It comes back to 9 songs at the end (Songbook VII), because the final song is very long.

J: And you decided there was no need for the interlude in these last three songbooks?

G: Yes, I dropped the interlude. The two voices provided enough variation.

J: Do books V, VI, and VII match or have unifying features, like books I-IV do?

G: Well they all match in that the instrumentation is the same. Somebody once said that this is technically the largest song cycle ever written, using the same instrumentation.

J: How do you feel about that?

G: I kind of couldn't believe that. There are 61 songs and more than 5 hours of music.

J: I've heard that you've called this your Ring Cycle.

G: Yes, in a funny kind of way I thought that. I suppose the songbooks are at least as long as *one* of Wagner's operas (he chuckles).

J: The American Songbooks are such a major contribution. As you were writing, did you expect that the series could become one of the primary works with which your name will forever be associated?

G: Well I've *always* thought in terms of cycles. All of my Lorca settings are, in a sense, one big cycle. A certain group of my piano works, the *Makrokosmos*, are in a cycle of four, and sometimes they're recorded that way. There's a recent German recording of the four *Makrokosmos*. I've done lots of things in fours. The *Madrigals* are a group of four within the Lorca cycle. So it was easy and natural to do another cycle in the American Songbooks. Thinking in terms of cycles is part of my way of thinking.

J: And you write such varied and interesting music for percussion in the American Songbooks. How did you come to write for percussion and also piano in this way?

G: A combination of things - I first used percussion like this in *Music for a Summer Evening* for two pianos and percussion, written for the Bartok ensemble. I've always thought this was one of the greatest ensembles, because the piano can join the percussion so readily. It's a percussion instrument that can sing. And a lot of the things I discovered in the Bartok, like the combination of vibraphone in a certain way with the piano, well these combinations create a sound that's just magical. Muted tones on the piano combined with, say, little marimba notes - that also makes a very special sound. These are complimentary kinds of things that can happen between the amplified piano and the percussion instruments.

J: You've written quite a bit for the voices of people with whom you're very familiar, like your daughter, Ann, and your friends, Jan DeGaetani, Barbara Ann Martin, and Patrick Mason. You know their voices so well. Was it different writing a piece like Songbook V, when you didn't necessarily know who was going to be singing the premiere and recording?

G: Well I wrote it in the same kind of style as the others. I kept it a little on the low side, because folk songs are normally not written for the top, but I generally kept all of the songbooks low, because I love Ann's low register so much. So I basically followed that tessitura.

J: It must be very special writing for your family.

G: Yeah, it was fun. There are four American Songbooks written for Ann, and another that she has now is called *Sun and Shadow* (Spanish Songbook II from 2009). Those are more Lorca settings, but in English. They are the first Lorca I've done in English.

J: What made you decide to set them in English?

G: They're such beautiful translations, and it was something different to do. The songs are for voice and amplified piano.

(Looking at the music for *Sun and Shadow*.)

G: This will interest you – I directly quoted Bartok's music from *Diary of a Fly*, because I'd used a little Lorca poem about a fly. Then Bartok's estate and his son refused to have his music combined with the music of any other composer. So there were five direct little quotes from the Bartok *Diary of a Fly* that I had to take out of the piece. My re-write still includes a little bit of a nod towards Bartok, and I hope people will pick up on that. I just had to make it law-suit proof. (He chuckles.)

J: Have you ever had any trouble getting rights to Lorca poetry?

G: No, they're always very nice. Now, I pay through the nose for them, of course.

J: Is it true that you were first introduced to Lorca poetry in graduate school at the University of Michigan?

G: Yes, well not formally introduced, but I went to a concert of a fellow composer, a student composer who used, I think it was, the *Song of The Boy Wounded By the Water*. It's an Arabic form poem, and I was blown away. What I liked in the Lorca was that the images were so simple and they came from the earth, you know. So much English poetry seems to just spin things out, and it gets away from the real meaning. The Lorca is very direct. It's more like those Indian poems I set in the American Songbooks.

J: The Lorca poems always seem so complex and so deep. And some people may think of American folk text as being quite simple, and kind of just on the surface.

G: Oh, but I don't think that's true. They (American folk texts) are filled with ironies and humor, sometimes very strong humor comes out. There's also a lot of despair, like *Poor Wayfaring Stranger* - that one could be set by Mahler. It could be one of the *Songs of a Wayfarer*. That's what attracted me to these folk songs and texts.

J: You've composed so much music to Spanish text, and now also English text. You've also got two Latin pieces (*Lux Aeterna* and *Star Child*). Have you ever been drawn to write music to texts in any other languages?

G: I'd sketched out Rilke once. I studied in Germany for a year. My German is better than my Spanish by a long shot. But I never really got around to the Rilke. The folk songs and the spirituals are things I've known for a long time, some of them since I was a kid. Liz (George's wife) taught me a lot of them. I used to play piano in the old churches, so I learned the hymns there. And I just love the spirituals. Some of them are just such incredible and sturdy melodies. They equal the themes by Brahms and Beethoven.

G: Also, it appears to me that music now is becoming so elitist. A New York Times critic said something about this when the songbooks premiered in New York, and I liked what he had to say. It's fashionable nowadays, if you make a reference to American folklore and folk songs, or anything about America, to be ironic. It sometimes seems as

if some composers are making fun of these old tunes, and that's just not very interesting. I want to be sincere in the way that I approach these texts. I approach them with respect - not making fun of them, but trying to find things in them that I can compliment or supplement in some way, to even make the expression more powerful by the instrumentation. And that's my approach. I feel, even with some of my students, if they do something with *Shenandoah*, for example, it tends to be silly or cute, like "look what they used to do in the old days." (He chuckles.)

This is the New York Times review Crumb is referring to:

Sarcasm is the prevailing mode in contemporary music about the American experience. Since many talented composers are dubious about the country and its history, their well-meaning attempts to grapple with them musically can easily slide into self-righteous critique. It may not be wrong, but it's not interesting. In his series of six "American Songbooks," which surround skeletons of melodies from hymns, folk songs and spirituals with shimmering, hallucinatory percussion effects, the great composer George Crumb finds a way out of this limiting paradigm, conjuring the horrors — slavery, religious rigidity, war — that resulted in much of the beauty of American music without ignoring the reality of that beauty.

-Zachary Woolfe, *The New York Times*, May 1, 2011

J: Well, I think that's part of the problem, that some people think of folk songs as being more shallow than other kinds of writing – as compared to the Lorca poetry, for example.

G: That's how music has changed in this country – I have to think of the example of Stravinsky, whose early work is just loaded with folk songs. For example, the *Rite of Spring* is practically all Ukrainian folk tunes. Or another example is Tchaikovsky's piano concerto. (He plays a bit.) It has two folk tunes as the main themes of the first and last movements. You'll find this even in Beethoven and Brahms... and Mozart in *The Magic Flute*; it's *full* of folk styles!

G: I think something went wrong after the second world war, even after the first world war, where composers became kind of elitist, and denied a big part of their heritage. I really believe that one's nationality is advertised in their music and comes out naturally. I always had the theory that the acoustic that a composer grows up with enters his music. And likewise all the music you ever knew becomes re-focused and refracted through your brain and comes out in another way. I hope this continues. Of course, I'm not the first to think in this way. Berio did a beautiful little set. And for Russian composers, folk music is still a main source of inspiration.

J: Yes, I wanted to ask if there are other composers whose folk songs you enjoy.

G: Well, yes, the Berio, but mostly the Russian composers. And I guess there aren't too many others who have written in this way, at least not since the Copland days.

J: Is this something that you thought was missing in American music? Did you set out to pay homage to these folk tunes with your meaningful settings?

G: Well, it seemed like an opening. It seemed like something that's just not done every day, and it might be worth revisiting the materials to see what I could do with them. I remember the first song of all these was *Poor Wayfaring Stranger*. I thought that the words were so powerful and there must be a kind of music that would express them. I thought of the sound of the wind machine and the menacing sounds of some of the drums and things like that. I thought those sounds would reinforce the sense of the poetry. So that's the way I approached it, with very dramatic sounds cutting in and the use of the recorder as a lonely little voice, floating in the wilderness. Things like that...

J: And the way that you adjusted some of the rhythms, adding a beat or removing a beat – that's very interesting. It doesn't really change the tune, but it does change something for the listener.

G: Yes, I'm glad you noticed that. That would be a study right there for somebody. I spent a lot of time with that. Sometimes I contract the measure, I compact the measure to give it more momentum. Usually though, I spread out the measure in order to give more kind of, not just leisure, but space - an American space. So I open 4/4 up to 5/4, or even 7/4, to give it spatial breadth. And that's one area where I tinker with the tune just a bit.

J: I know that you don't use any of those computer programs where you can plug in the music, and it'll play a version of it back to you. So you don't get to hear the instruments together until the live ensemble begins rehearsing for a premiere performance. What's this like? Is it a little scary? Thrilling?

G: Well, sometimes it's thrilling, and sometimes you make mistakes and it doesn't work in the way you'd expect. So you adjust and re-write - like if something is technically not really possible. That's a lot of what I'm doing in going through the songbooks again to edit. I remember the things that need to be focused or fine-tuned. I basically recall passages that I was never quite happy with, and I fix them as much as I can. Some of these works are 10 years old already.

G: Recently I went back and adjusted a work for four hands piano, *Celestial Mechanics*. I was never happy with the end of that. The Colorado piano team said if I re-wrote the end they'd re-record it. So I did! I'm so glad, because I really didn't like the original version, and I'd always known there had to be a better way to end that piece. So I'll always do revisions if I think they're necessary.

J: When did you start working with the piano, in this way, with the plucking and strumming inside the instrument, etc?

G: It was in 1962, a piano piece called *Five Pieces for Piano*, which I wrote for David Burge. He asked me if I'd write a piano work for him, and he had no idea what I'd do. I'd never heard anything by John Cage at that time. I'd never heard anything by Henry Cowell, either, but I knew that both of those composers had done different things with the piano. If there were recordings, I hadn't run into any of them. This was the early '60s and a lot was still un-recorded. And so I was on my own to find my own way of using it. What I do has very little to do with prepared piano. I do things that can revert immediately to normal piano. With the prepared piano, you're set for the entire piece.

Prepared piano can have a beautiful effect, but mine is a different system. It has to do with using the full resources of the piano, its percussive aspects, harp-like aspects, and everything. Or use of the pedal, sometimes the middle pedal, to produce certain resonances. There's some of that in the American Songbooks, too.

J: And was that about the time you came into your current style of writing (with *Five Pieces for Piano* in 1962)?

G: Yes, my mature style - at least in my approach to instruments, for the piano particularly.

J: I've noticed that you stretch the possibilities of the voice a lot more than many composers do. Your vocal writing is not necessarily classical in style, and singers need to be really flexible.

G: Yes, that's right. I remember when you first did the New Orleans piece (*The House of the Rising Sun* from Songbook V), and we said it needed to be more smoky. You switched over to a new style almost immediately. That's what is needed in so many of these songs.

(We discuss Crumb's vocal writing further:)

G: You'll see expanded voice in every dimension in the songbooks. You'll find drifting tonality. Not really so much in your cycle (Songbook V), but more in other songbooks, where the tonality is constantly changing.

J: And there's lots of very soft singing and certain effects with the voice. There's very little forte singing.

G: That's true. And the wind singing you have in *Beautiful Dreamer*, that's certainly not an every-day way of using the voice. I borrow from Schoenberg and the *sprechstimme* devices. There's spoken or shouted text, and I sometimes use purely phonetic sounds, just for the color it achieves. All of these are vocally produced. I write humming, for example, and also, in an un-conventional way, humming that flows directly into singing as part of the same phrase. Words seem to come right out of the humming or disappear into the humming.

J: This happens in Patrick's (baritone, Patrick Mason) *Song of Thunder* (Songbook V).

G: Yes, those are things I hear as beautiful aspects of the voice. Part of it is probably just the influence of more popular forms of music: jazz, blues, and gospel - all those things that I heard growing up in West Virginia. The country styles were on the radio all the time, so I heard a lot of that.

J: Do you find these styles pouring into the American Songbooks a little more than in your earlier works or your Spanish pieces?

G: Yes, there's probably more in the American Songbooks, but the styles were still present in the earlier pieces. For example, I use the musical saw here and there; I like to bend the sounds. That comes out of country music, Appalachian country music from West Virginia.

J: In your earlier pieces, you sometimes had the instrumentalists participate outside of just playing their instruments. They'd march in processions, wear masks, sit in a certain way on the stage, or speak/shout/hum as part of the music. When did you start doing this? Have you always thought of the instrumentalists as part of the theatrics of a piece?

G: Yeah, I would say even as far back as *Night Music I* (1963), the percussionists whistle. They at least do that much vocally. But there's also a theater element there, too. First of all, for them to play their instruments is already like theater for me. They're like dancers. I've always thought that the percussionists' movements are like ballet, or something.

Appendix D:

Personal Interview II with George Crumb

March 9, 2012

This interview took place in Media, Pennsylvania at the home of George Crumb on March 9, 2012. Any text within parentheses was not part of the actual interview, but was inserted in this transcription for the sake of clarity.

Jamie Van Eyck (J): How has your writing style changed into the 21st Century?

George Crumb (G): Basically, my way of writing hasn't changed all that much. I've always quoted things - you know, hymn tunes, or a couple of folk song quotations, almost as a musical signature. It's part of what I grew up with. That came out in my writing pretty early on.

J: In earlier pieces, you'd sometimes reference other composers' works, just as you do in some of the American Songbooks. You also reference folk songs in your earlier pieces.

G: Yes, I've always done that. For example, the hymn tune *Will There Be Any Stars in My Crown* appears in the first volume of *Makrokosmos*. It's whistled by the pianist. And I use *The Riddle* in another piano work.

J: You mentioned that you ended Songbook VII with the repeated text "Forever, forever, forever..." which was influenced by Mahler. Do you quote the music of other composers in the American Songbooks?

G: I quote *Dies Irae* (13th Century Latin Hymn) in *Go Down Moses* (Songbook II). "Day of wrath" seemed appropriate to that text, as if the Lord is coming down strong. There

are references to blues styles in some of the instrumental interludes, but no literal quotations of the blues. I quote myself here and there. There are bits of *Echoes of Time and the River* at the end of *Were You There When They Crucified My Lord* (Songbook I).

J: As you are writing, do these other tunes just come into your head, and you then decide to incorporate them?

G: It's just an association, rather than planning it or thinking it out.

J: I understand that in Songbook IV, there's a motive that is hummed throughout.

G: There are motives that are shared between the songbooks, like these 4 notes. (He plays them.) I'd sometimes construct chords on those, and it may become a tri-tonal thing. This is found in most of the songbooks, not always as primary material, but its there. I think of it like the technique in art when you overlay something on top of something else... there's a lot of that technique in the songbooks. I'll overlay something that's complimentary, but normally not associated with the tune itself.

J: All of the American Songbooks have their primary title, then a subtitle describing the kinds of songs found in that volume. Songbooks V and VI have the same subtitle: *American Songs From North and South, East and West*. Does book VII have the same subtitle?

G: No, I decided to be more specific there: *A Cycle of Hymns, Spirituals, Folksongs, and American Indian Chants*. All those elements are in the songbook, so that's what I used.

Songbooks V and VI had broader subject matter within them, so that's why I chose the broader title.

G: The first four songbooks make a set, in a way. Of course they're *all* related. They are all still the American Songbooks, but the later ones (Songbooks V, VI, and VII) are structurally different.

J: And the first four songbooks seem like they were composed in sort of a compacted or shorter time period.

G: Yeah, these two (Songbooks I and II) were written in the same year (2003).

J: And the greatest time gap is here, between books VI and VII?

G: Yes, I wrote the two Lorca pieces during that time, in 2009 (*The Ghosts of Alhambra* and *Sun and Shadow*).

J: You've called all of your Lorca works a *cycle*.

G: Yes, and I think there are now 11 of those works, with maybe one or two still to go. There are still Lorca texts that I'm interested in.

J: Did you start thinking of your Lorca works as a cycle at an early point?

G: Yes, pretty early on. The first work was, of course, *Night Music I*, and that was a single work. Then I wrote the four *Madrigals*, which are like a little cycle within the larger, overall Lorca cycle. I was so much attracted to the Lorca poetry as a vehicle for my music. I seem to identify with the world of those poems, so that's why I keep setting them.

J: In the Lorca, much of the focus is on death, life, and more profound topics like the earth and the stars. There's a lot of depth, darkness, and complexity. It's funny, because now I'm here in your home and I know your family and have spent time with you, and you are so normal! You live quite a traditional life. Yet you are drawn to these intense and profound texts...

G: (He laughs.) Yeah, Becky Starobin (of Bridge Records) says that most composers are like their music, but George is *not* like his music. I don't know where it all comes from. (He smiles and shrugs.)

J: The first four songbooks were written for your daughter Ann and for Barbara Ann Martin, female voices. Thomas Hampson recently performed portions of those songbooks in New York City. Did you intend for the early songbooks to be sung only by the female voice?

G: I did, originally, but I heard a performance in Germany with a baritone named Nicholas Isherwood. He did the best *Songs, Drones and Refrains of Death* I'd ever heard. He recorded it in Germany. He also did the Appalachian songs (American Songbook III: *Unto the Hills*), and I realized it could work for middle voice. Really only two of the songbooks are suitable for male voice: the Appalachian tunes (*Unto the Hills*) and the spirituals (*A Journey Beyond Time*). Also, I remark in later editing that I don't mind if people take songs from different songbooks and construct their own set. I'll put that in all the notes to the songbooks, eventually. Barbara (Martin) did it, and it's also ok to excerpt just a couple songs.

J: Could you ever imagine writing a sort of reduced version, like a piano reduction, so that the songbooks could be performed without the entire ensemble? The ensemble is marvelous, of course, but it's complicated to organize a performance and bring the whole ensemble together. I wonder if the songbooks would be performed even more often if the ensemble were easier to bring together.

G: Well, that would be hard for me. Generally the idea of arrangements is not appealing to me. I think of it as more of a 19th century idea. The music in the songbooks is so fixed, and its meaning is bound up in the instrumentation. The meaning has as much to do with the percussion instruments as it does with the voices.

J: When I tell people that I perform your music, many assume that it's incredibly difficult. The scores are so big in size, and I think the visual aspect of the score can be intimidating to some people. I want to show people that the American Songbooks are really not terribly complicated to perform.

G: Yes, I always try to make it as practical as I can. I don't think it's difficult in a technical way - not as much as a lot of other music. It takes good rhythmic control and a good ensemble. But just in terms of sheer velocity, it's no Chopin etude.

J: Since the focus of my writing is on Songbook V, I wonder if it stands out to you in any way among the songbooks.

G: Oh sure, it explored some different areas. Some of the songs had different sounds with a different cast, and different colors. And there were finally some songs that were less somber. Like *'Tis the Gift to Be Simple*, and the *Firefly Song*. Or *Hallelujah, I'm a*

Bum! And especially because this was the first volume that had the Native American texts, which was *needed* in an *American Songbook!*

J: Did any of the texts come to you in Native American languages? Did you have to translate them?

G: No, I received them or found them all in translation.

J: Did you ever think to include any in the original tribal language, or was it important to keep them in English?

G: No, I manufactured some quasi-Indian phonetics in the late songbooks, but they're not real sounds of any Indian language. The [ti-u-wi] in the *Firefly Song* is purely phonetic. Even Longfellow knew of that poem in "The Song of Hiawatha," and he loved that little poem. Barbara (Martin) sent that one to me.

J: Other than Jan (DeGaetani), Ann (Crumb), Barbara (Martin), and Patrick (Mason), were any of your pieces written for a particular singer?

G: *Star Child* was written for Irene Gubrud. The first two books of *Madrigals* were written for Elizabeth Suderburg, Bob Suderburg's wife. Jan did so many. I wonder how Jan would've reacted to the songbooks. She loved folk songs, like Stephen Foster, and she'd sung the Berio. I think she'd really have liked the idea.

J: I've been curious about your beautiful score writing and calligraphy. How do you begin writing out your scores? Are the staves pre-done? Do you use rulers?

G: It's all hand drawn. I draw the staves using a ruler, one line at a time. I use these very fine Japanese technical pens. In the old days I used the dipping pots.

J: Do you sketch it in pencil first?

G: Well some I did in pencil, but then had to re-copy because pencil doesn't photograph very well for a published edition. The edges aren't sharp enough. I cost myself a lot of work because I had to do a lot of re-copying. The first four books had to be re-copied for that reason. It took me almost a year to re-copy them. Now the last three songbooks were all done with ink in the first place, so I learned my lesson.

J: And do you use a protractor for the circles?

G: Yes. (He takes one out of a drawer.) It's fitted with the Japanese pen. I had to find one that would fit this special pen.

J: How long does it take you to do a page?

G: Oh, a long, long time. It's easy to spend two days on just one page.

J: And you never thought of doing it any other way?

G: No, I never liked the looks of the computer notation. What I have against it is it all looks alike. No matter who the composer is, it all looks the same on the page. It looks dry and has no vitality. It's undernourished. It has no personality. Even the old engravings had more personality than the computer generated printing of today, because the engravers gave it their own personality. They were punching things into a wax-covered sheet, so the look of it would vary a little, depending on the person. The spacing was accurate and quite varied. But on a computer, the spacing is too regular. It's actually hard to read. It's just not very beautiful.

J: And why did you decide to take out the instrumental interlude and the visual score element in Songbooks V, VI, and VII?

G: No special reason, I just didn't think they needed it, especially with the two voices. There were added possibilities of sound and contrast with two voices.

J: I've heard you talk about how everyone's DNA code is different, and his or her compositional style should also be very individual. How do you keep your style in tact and recognizable, yet not predictable?

G: I think that's automatic. If you write something, then your own way of working comes out. I try not to let myself get in a rut.

J: Where did you learn to play percussion?

G: Well, I'm not a percussionist. I've only played on a couple pieces in the past, once on a book of *Madrigals*. I also played percussion on *Lux Aeterna*. It didn't involve anything fancy; I wouldn't be able to do that. I'm really a pianist; I also trained on clarinet early on. My father was a clarinetist.

J: When did you first find the inspiration to make your scores look this way, with the circular notation and such?

G: Well, that first appeared in *Night Music 1*, where there's a quasi-circular arrangement. The staff wasn't in the shape of a circle yet. The text had to do with the sun and the moon. Also in *Songs and Drones*, I've got the same thing. It reflected all of those things that were circular. The shape of the notation always comes out of the text.

J: So now you've written *The Ghosts of Alhambra*, a Spanish Songbook. And also *Sun and Shadow*. Will there be other Spanish Songbooks?

G: Yes, I think so. There are others that I want to write, so I'll probably call those Spanish Songbooks III and IV. But they're *all* really Spanish Songbooks (referring to the whole Lorca cycle).

J: Will they also be unified by the same ensemble?

G: No, there are different ensembles.

J: What is it about amplified piano that's so attractive to you when writing?

G: Well, it projects the more delicate sounds. Harmonics, glissandos, and pizzicatos need more projection. It allows for so much more to be done on the piano, when you can amplify the soft sounds. It also makes it more percussive, and it allows it to act more like an orchestra. It really can sound like a quasi-orchestra.

J: You've said that an artist is the sum of his or her experiences, and clearly, a lot of the songs in the American Songbooks come from your childhood. Are there other ways that the American Songbooks were influenced by your life experiences and childhood?

G: Sure, the classics that I love are all a part of my upbringing and the music that I've heard. I wondered at some point if I was inspired by Boris Godunov, with all of the bells and ringing (in the American Songbooks). And there are many other composers who have influenced the pieces, like Debussy, Chopin, Bach, and there's lots of Mahler influence. And also the Russian composers, like Stravinsky, who utilize their own country's folk music so well. These associations are inevitable, because I have memories, I love music, and it all stays in my head.

J: You've also said that you don't think of music as being old or new, that it's all part of a continuum.

G: In one way all music is contemporary, because it's all a part of *now*, as long as memories can bring it up in the moment. And performances are done right *now*. It's all interconnected in a crazy way.

J: How do you feel about your music performed live vs. on recording?

G: Recordings are nice, but they can never match the kind of psychological intensity of a live performance, because it's more a danger situation. But recordings are nice to have, because a lot of things you'd never get to hear at all. And you want to hear it when you want to hear it. But (in recording) you don't get the interesting visual element of the live performance. I think the American Songbooks would work well on DVD - maybe showing images that accompany the songs, like Appalachian images. That would maybe be a next step. Ann and I have talked about that.

J: How did you learn about the workings of the voice and how to write for it?

G: My wife is a singer, and I started writing for voice early on. I've always loved the voice. Again, it's all the music that I've learned in my lifetime. Once you hear *Winterreise* you never forget it, and you understand some of what the voice can do, how it can express a concept and project it. Mahler was another lesson for me. I just love his vocal writing. There's a lot of Mahler in the songbooks. There are some moments right out of the *Wunderhorn*. Mahler's military songs, for example, that comes right into

When Johnny Comes Marching Home (Songbook IV). Some of the percussive effects, too - I learned that from Mahler. I'm a Mahler lover from way back.

J: Teaching has been a big part of your life and career. Do you feel that your teaching informs your own writing?

G: To a certain extent. I rather enjoyed teaching. Some composers don't enjoy it as much. I probably should've retired 10 years earlier than I did. By the end, the students and the school were draining a lot of my energy, and I couldn't compose. I really enjoy being "retired" in a way. (He chuckles.)

J: Since you can't really hear the timbres and sounds of some of your music until a rehearsal for a performance, how do you go about composing?

G: You're balancing probabilities. There's such a thing as an inner ear. You can hear music in your head, but it's not as vivid as the actual sound. Explaining that to non-musical people, you can say: there's nothing that special about it, because you can read a page in a book and hear all the sounds in your head if you want. Music just goes beyond the linear. It has depth too. It's a question of hearing chordal things, and harmony, and counterpoint, and all of those things. Written things are always linear, but you can hear sounds of words in your head, we all do that. When it comes to mixtures of timbres and combining instruments, you'll find that some ideas work well, and some you definitely have to revise. Balances may be wrong, or the effect is just not as exciting as you thought it would be. So you just change it.

J: Performers really enjoy and get a kick out of the descriptive instructions in your scores: tempo titles and such. There are places where you write, for example, “As if on a deserted battlefield...” (*When Johnny Comes Marching Home*, Songbook IV). This creates a strong image in my mind. You could’ve just said: senza vibrato, or bleak. But your instructions are so much more evocative. Where does that come from?

G: It’s probably an influence of Debussy. I loved the Debussy Piano Preludes when I was young, and all his titles were so imaginative. And Mahler’s *First Symphony* opens with, “Like the sounds of nature,” then he gives similar special verbal descriptors to explain what he wants.

J: We get this type of language in your song titles as well. They became quite descriptive at some point, maybe around the mid 1960’s.

G: Yes, for collections. That just kind of emerged.

G: You know there’s one notable failure in my vocal output. It’s called, *Yester Year*, for soprano. It just didn’t work. It contained too much material that was too similar to my previous vocal works. It didn’t hold together. I’d really like to re-think the whole thing at some point. The ensemble was three percussionists and piano, but with a minimal number of percussion instruments.

J: Are the American Songbooks the largest percussion ensemble you’ve written for?

G: Yes, except maybe for *Star Child*, which has six percussionists and quite a few instruments. But the songbooks are a much longer composition.

J: You've mentioned Mahler's use of nature sounds. I've also noticed many nature sounds in your compositions.

G: Yes, I include nature sounds often, when it comes out of the poem. If it mentions an animal sound or the sound of the wind, I'll put it in. Songbook IV mentions the sound of the owl, and I use that.

J: In *Bringing in the Sheaves* (Songbook V), we do the cicada sounds vocally.

G: Yes, and lots of instrumental effects are supposed to represent the cicadas or quasi cicada drones.

J: In looking at the progression of the last three songbooks, which are for two voices, I've noticed differences in the duet writing. Patrick (Mason) and I didn't really sing together at all in Songbook V, even in the songs involving both voices. But books VI and VII contain some real duets, with the voices intertwining and singing together. Did you intentionally treat the duet writing in this way?

G: I suppose I didn't really think of the voices in duet in book V. I had the two voices to use, but I wasn't compelled to combine them in true duet quite yet. I did decide to write more true duet singing in Songbooks VI and VII, for different kinds of expression to come out. I hadn't ever done any vocal duet writing previous to Songbook V. I just found other ways of working within the songbook model.

(More on nature sounds:)

G: I imitate the sound of the crows in *Ghost Camp* in book VII. I included the sound of thunder in *Song of Thunder*, and I also use it in *Somebody Got Lost in a Storm* (both from Songbook V), which is a “Sturm und Drang” kind of piece. I express the ferocity of nature in every way I can. In one of the songs, I use bowed timpani to make an eerie sound. I once saw a percussionist experiment with it. I asked them how they might use a bow on the instrument, so they showed me, and I liked it and used it.

J: Everyone thinks of the word *timbre* with regard to your music. You’ve said that timbre has a bewitching effect and appeal. Can you talk about that?

G: Well, timbre is very hard to talk about because it’s not quantitative. I’m convinced that it’s an important element of music, just like melody, harmony, and rhythm, because it’s so potent and powerful in its own right. There’s the English horn in the *New World Symphony*, the slow movement. Nothing else could produce that sense of loneliness - it had to be the English horn. Or little touches like the crotales on the last page of *Afternoon of A Fawn*. Or the high trumpets in the *Rite of Spring*, that particular written gesture combined with those very high Bach trumpets. All those special colors that you even get in a Beethoven string quartet. People always overlook that. He was doing a Bartok track there! Timbre is important. It was beginning to merge already in the late 19th century, especially with Mahler and Debussy, and certainly more modern composers like Messiaen. Bartok totally reinvents the string quartet in terms of timbre. He totally reinvents the sound, I think. Timbre interests me, and those were my influences; it comes out of that music.

J: I think of your use of timbre as being so new, and a not typical of most traditional or 18th and 19th century composers. Yet you think of yourself as a *traditional* composer.

G: Yes, in the general sense, I do think in terms of tradition. And I think that all music is interrelated – it's all just music. Really, any of the so-called popular forms of music morph over into classical music easily.

J: You're extremely articulate when you talk about music. Is it true that you don't really like writing about music very much?

G: Yeah, I don't really even like writing liner notes or program notes. I find it like pulling teeth.

J: But you've written essays.

G: Yes, but I'm not really proud of them, or happy with them. I think composers probably talk too much. If you'd have asked Beethoven to explain the *Eroica Symphony*, he might have said, "here's what it's about, just listen." (He chuckles.) I'm exaggerating a little. You get people like Schumann who wrote beautifully about music. Berlioz wrote humorously about certain things. But the main message is always through the music.

J: I know that this is one of the few interviews you've done since finishing the American Songbooks – maybe it's even the first! Is there anything you'd like to mention about the songbooks that you feel may be relevant to my project?

G: Well, there's the interaction between the traditional poems and how they're treated. Or the element of the timbral things. Or the invented musical things that are superimposed on the original. There are new themes introduced, or counter themes, or connective devices; all of that is there to fill out the structure. Or you could get more technical and talk about the actual compositional aspects, but that might be more for a composer and a composition dissertation.

J: The poetry and the timbral aspects interest me a lot, and also your treatment of the folk tunes.

G: Yes, or any references made to specific ideas or words in the texts of the folk tunes. There are references to sounds of nature that may be expressed in the music, like in the little piece about the horse, I used the buffalo clops of the old radio days: the half shell, empty coconuts.

J: Regarding text, are there any particular pieces in Songbook V that stand out to you?

G: *Tis the Gift to Be Simple*: Here we've got the repeated text. I carried the idea of a canon even farther than Chopin, it reached six or seven canonic statements. Several are at the tritone.

J: Those loud, bright, shimmery bells really stand out in *'Tis the Gift to Be Simple*.

G: Yes, there are invented little thematics and motives that I add that aren't in the original song. Like the very beginning measures in the marimba and xylophone, and some similar measures throughout. These are things I built into the setting that aren't necessarily affiliated with the original text.

G: A more general issue may be the fact that I rarely preserve the harmonies of the folk songs. They're radically changed. I'm not using the common chords and conventional tonalities. I'm usually spicing those up. I may use a chord with a tritone instead of a standard triad. It varies all the time. Or I might juxtapose a whole tone formation, or use symmetrical structures of any kind. (He plays an example.) This will pull your ear right away out of any sense of the traditional tonalities.

J: There seems to be a lot of mirror imaging as well.

G: Yes, and that is sometimes chordal. There are chords built on 4ths and 5ths, these are different ways of constructing harmony, to enlarge the harmonic space of these tunes.

G: So there's timbre, then the harmonic issues, and a sense of drifting tonality - the tunes go out of focus because the key is changing. The first one, *Softly and Tenderly* (Songbook VII), is drifting all over the place. The primary one for that is *Shall We Gather By the River* (Songbook I), where each phrase is in a different key. Each time the singer comes in, she's in a different key. There's a little of this in *Bringing in the Sheaves* (Songbook V). You start in D Major, then the next appearance might be a whole step lower. Also, *The Demon Lover* has opposing keys for the male and female. You're in C# a lot, and that's opposed to the male key. Or we rely on some modality; the *Firefly Song* is largely just pentatonic. *Beautiful Dreamer* is almost without harmony, entirely. There's the wind singing for the melody, and very fragile, non-harmonic things happening in the orchestra. So each one is a little different.

G: And some of them are also *types* of music: *Somebody Got Lost in a Storm* is from the storm genre and is related to the opening of *Die Walküre*, or the storm movement in the Beethoven *Pastoral Symphony*. It's a genre. There are jazz and blues genres involved, too. *Song of Thunder* and *The House of the Rising Sun* each reflect a genre.

G: *Shenandoah* might be my favorite of all the songs in all the books. It uses layers of different rhythms. I think Charles Ives called it "music of the spheres." Instruments are never playing the same rhythms together. It's like a drifting continuum.

J: What is it about *Shenandoah* that makes it such a standout song for you?

G: The music is just floating there in space in a strange way, like I hadn't ever been able to do before. It's suddenly sitting there. And yet when the tune comes in, you hear all the traditional relationships in the singer's notes, but the surrounding sound is like it's in another world. It's like the two worlds are colliding, and they don't have much to do with one another. I love that sense and the loneliness that it projects. The voice is there, yet it's so estranged from the music in the background. It's kind of a psychological presentation of the poem. The ensemble is not really used to support the voice in the standard way, but to actively pose something against the traditional sense of it. There's something else going on. We've also got *I Wonder as I Wander*, which is very open, and *'Tis the Gift to Be Simple* is either bombastic or comes down to just the voice, it seems. Those elements are in all of the American Songbooks to unify and connect them.

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