

CHAPTER NINE

INTERVIEW: CRUMB / TAKENOUCHI

April 14, 1986

Media, Pennsylvania

Aleksei Takenouchi: To start, can you tell me something about your early musical training? ...and about your experiences with instrumental studies, and how it affects your present-day composing?

George Crumb: Well, I was trained as a pianist, that is my instrument...I'm no virtuoso pianist, but my training was all in piano, in other words, it was quite traditional. In fact, we in the house also studied clarinet with my father...you can picture there...he was a clarinetist, and my earliest studies were really on the clarinet, and then soon after that, piano studies. I still think it is very important for a composer to have piano as a kind of a principal instrument.

AT: How did this training, playing the piano, alter your conception of color produced on the piano? What did you find lacking in the pieces...in the music... that...?

GC: Well..., I think in studying composers like Debussy and Bartók, and Chopin, they were all innovators within the color possibilities of the piano in a more traditional context, but nonetheless, these composers were exploring the possibilities of color...through the damper pedal, and...the spacing of music, and this led me, I think, to ask myself, "How further can I...mm...what further...."

AT: You mean "an evolution?"

GC: Yes, aha, I have the feeling that all instruments are truly inexhaustible, and that the next generation always discovers new possibilities with instruments. It is constantly moving in that direction.

AT: If you were trained as a pianist and a clarinetist, why did you start to compose?

GC: Well, I think people compose because of an impulse, and...I think that you can't say anything more. You compose because you have to.

AT: What was the musical environment in which you were growing up when you started to compose?

GC: It was a small town, and my parents were both musicians, and so, there was a lot of chamber music and traditional background...without the kind of that extra dimension if you were growing up in a large city. We were a little bit isolated.

AT: You always mention Chopin, Debussy, and Bartók; I see the connection with Chopin and Debussy, but how does Bartók fit in...into the possibilities of color?

GC: I think that Bartók was very important in history of music for his use of percussion instruments, and he

was one of the very early people to write expressively for percussion, and even his piano writing, like the Out of Doors Suite, are investigating the special coloristic aspects of the piano...as an extension of the Debussy language. He always concentrated on the coloristic aspects....

AT: And so, these composers will always be as an ideal for you?

GC: Well, they are the composers that have influenced my own music quite a bit.

AT: Any other composers?

GC: ...oh...I suppose...yes! I mean probably Mahler, speaking not about my piano works; Mahler in a general sense, and Charles Ives....

AT: Charles Ives? In what sense...ah...which pieces of Charles Ives?

GC: I would say in the sense of quotation and, you

know, in the sense of a collage. Perhaps not a large influence...but nonetheless...and it wouldn't show up in the piano works.

AT: And yet, I would now say that looking at Ives' First Piano Sonata, and its use of "The Barn Dance," and your Makrokosmos with the Chopin quotation...I see a relationship.

GC: Yes, there are these points of contacts. My music does not sound like Charles Ives'...these are oblique influences.

AT: I would like to ask something about poetry. Garcia Lorca was just one in the line of development of Spanish poetry. There were others before him, as well as, after him. Why did you choose Lorca? Was it because of his revolutionary ideas, his assassination?

GC: Well, Lorca is the most well known of the Spanish contemporary poets in The United States. It is the

one name that was known to me in my student days, but beyond that, I was attracted by the poetry...for his special characteristics.

AT: There is a certain relationship between the poetic rhythm and the melody, and that the rhythm in the poetic line has influenced the development of the melody. For example, the melodic line in Chopin's music does follow a poetic rhythm. Only with Schoenberg, Webern, Berg, the melodic line begins to disintegrate in the sense that it becomes more disjointed....And yet, in your music, there is this continuity of line, is it because of your interest in poetry?

GC: I am not sure...I am not sure. Each composer's melodic style, if you can put it that way, each composer's treatment of melody...it would be a personal matter. My own thinking is not disjunct, but rather, I suppose, more traditional...really, more traditionally vocal, as opposed to the expressionistic line, which tended to the opposite.

AT: In your poetic selections, why did you choose those particular poems, or sections thereof?

GC: ...I don't know...just attracted...poems that provoked musical imagery.

AT: In your music...Voices of the Whale (Vox Balanae), Makrokosmos, or even A Haunted Landscape... there is a kind of social implication, and in Lorca's poetry, there is also a social implication...can you please speak something about your social philosophy?

GC: Only to say generally that music is not an abstraction, that it has to relate to the world, all of the concerns of the world. It has to relate to the most basic concerns...origins of life...death...love, all those things, never old, always fresh, and it doesn't change. I think my point is that music must relate to the world, whatever the real world is!

AT: Could you please speak something about sound quality and color in your music? For example, why should the sounds be beyond the normal capacities of the instrument? How did you come to the idea that the tone color of an instrument can be extended?

GC: Oh, I find even in the earlier composers, again let's take Debussy as an example, timbre is becoming an almost structural thing. Let's consider his orchestral music, chamber music, even beyond his piano music...timbre has become exalted to a much different thing than it was for much earlier composers.

AT: What do you think about electronic music? Will it ever substitute the color aspects of instruments?

GC: No. The possibilities are interesting in electronic music, but the one element missing is the element of danger that comes from performance...the idea that things can go wrong...it psychologically keeps the audience on their toes, so to speak, and you see, this is the one element...although electronic

sounds can be beautiful, but they can be a tiny bit sterile because the danger element is missing. It is the element that things can go wrong, and it is tour de force for the performer that things go right. There is this psychological excitement that comes from a live performance.

AT: Have you ever used a "prepared" piano?

GC: Not in the "Cage" sense, well, as you know in the Makrokosmos there are certain things, objects...that is really a prepared piano. The one disadvantage of the "prepared" piano is that it is set for the whole piece. It is very beautiful...some of the sounds like in the Cage, but the pianist has absolutely set those pitches, and you cannot adjust those pitches during the performance...that is a given thing...so, the things that interested me the most were the things that can change within a performance, within a piece.

AT: When you try to create a certain timbre, do you experiment in various ways, or do you know already instinctively that this is the way a specific timbre will be produced? For example, in Echoes of Time and the River, where you submerge an instrument into the water....

GC: Speaking of John Cage, there was a "Cage" invention, and I stole that device from John Cage. He used it before I did. As regards to special piano techniques, sure, I would experiment myself.

AT: Do you ever get several choices as to which special technique to use?

GC: Well, over the years, I guess, you tend to codify, and you have certain techniques, and these special sounds will have a special meaning for a particular passage in a musical work. I think the very timbre of a sound has a certain emotive sense. A muted note on a piano has a certain tension, a certain meaning in the harmonic world.

AT: If someone cannot whistle, what do you advise them to do in Makrokosmos?

GC: In a case where a performer cannot whistle, I suppose, either the pianist doesn't play those works, or there should be some auxiliary whistler engaged for the performance, or a pre-recorded version of that part.

AT: Would it be very different if for the whistling parts, the pianist just played them on a different instrument?

GC: Well, the whistling has such a special timbre, I can't imagine off-hand, how it can be quite reproduced on another instrument...perhaps on a good electronic, live electronic...maybe then, it could be approximated.

AT: How and why is a particular form chosen for a specific musical idea that you want to develop?

GC: Well...you are getting into a very mysterious area...composers do these things by instinct and hard work because the finding of a form, in my case, for me for example, is the most difficult aspect of writing a piece of music.

AT: Do you work from a large form to the small details, or from small details to the overall architecture?

GC: I would say both...both! You have ideas for details, and you have a general idea for the larger form....

AT: Do you have a totality of a concept...for example, for A Haunted Landscape, do you have the whole idea in a flash, at once?

GC: No, you have a presentiment, or a very general idea of the large form.

AT: Do you ever alter your ideas while in the process of writing?

GC: Oh yes...habitually I would say.

AT: In setting a text, do you follow the poetic accents?

GC: I follow the accents, but the duration of the spoken syllable may be expanded to be a long melisma in music, of course, and so, the proportions are completely changed in a musical setting...ah...perhaps the listener loses all sense of the meaning of the poetry if you give one syllable an epic melisma.... This I would call, a composer's license.

AT: In which direction is your music now going?

GC: I don't know...(laughter)...I don't know!

AT: Do you plan to compose more piano works?

GC: I would hope to...eventually.

AT: Looking at Five Pieces for Piano, and going through Makrokosmos, Christmas Suite, and Gnomic Variations, there is a sort of evolution. Can we expect some return to Makrokosmos style, or possibly something more new?

GC: Well...(laughter) I think that depends on the imagination of the composer! I think, I hope, I should say "I hope" that there might be some new things.

AT: Why would you say that in A Little Suite for Christmas, you didn't write any "extra-curricular" activities for the pianist?

GC: ...ah...maybe it was the feeling that in the Makrokosmos I had explored this area, and ah, it would be interesting to write a work without using any extra vocalizations....

AT: About Tora! Tora! Tora!, I know that it was a secret code for the Japanese when they attacked Pearl Harbor, but why in your piece, does the pianist have to exclaim those words?

GC: Well, it was a dramatic gesture first of all, it was a code word for the Pearl Harbor attack, as a young kid, this was an epical moment in my life. It was something very important in the history of the world, and I guess, it became a symbol of turmoil in the world...

AT: ...and is still continuing...

GC: ...it never stopped...never stopped!

AT: Can you tell whether any other aspects of art have influenced you? I know Christmas Suite was inspired by Giotto, are there any other painters?

GC: Not so much...not really. I can be sometimes a

little blind because painting, the least of all the other creative things, seems to have had little influence on my thinking...much less than literature, poetry, and the books I read.

AT: May I ask what books?

GC: Yes, a fairly wide range, I love historical books, and literature of certain areas...the Russian literature.

AT: Can you talk something about the relation between the performer and the composer? To what extent are liberties allowed?

GC: I would say that in my music, the liberties are allowed in exactly the same proportions as they would be allowed in Chopin...in other words, there is room for the performer....

AT: Do you set any limits for yourself when you start composing? ...to work within a specific medium or do you ever enlarge a piece?

GC: There are changes in the sketching process that may have to do with the size of the forces involved, or the dimension of the work, or the division of movements, or whatever.

AT: Professor Crumb, a final question, the signature-motive (D sharp - B natural - A natural - F natural), that so often occurs in your music, ...it is so mysterious...mm...what was the inspiration for this?

GC: I don't know from where that comes ...perhaps it is a little bit oriental? That's a sixth chord, an augmented sixth...but I don't know...really I don't know.

AT: ...but you haven't used it in your latest works?

GC: I am not sure....

AT: Well, thank you very much...

GC: Thank you...(laughing)...sure...yes....