

Review of George Crumb/Dreamtiger CD in American Record Guide March/April 2023

The Ensemble DreamTiger, which was together from 1973 to 1989, announces in the beginning of the program notes: "The sad news of George Crumb's death was announced on 6 February 2022, shortly after these recordings from a concert in Holland in 1978 were discovered in the KRO-NCRV archives in Hilversum." So these are not new performances. This is the first European performance of *Dream Sequence*, a dreamlike work invoking sounds of nature including insects, sea swells, and birds; the ensemble includes tuned wine glasses providing a high pedal as well as other novel shimmering effects from percussion and a piano played directly on the strings. The offstage glass harmonica is a typical Crumb touch. In this performance the strings quiver seductively, and the piano has a warm, forward sonority—a nice contrast to the shivery percussion.

The Cello Sonata, an early work from 1955, demonstrates that Crumb could write in an impassioned, lyrical style. The first movement is bold and forward, the second muted and pastoral, the final muscular and exciting. Rohan de Saram's cello virtuosity is thrilling, his musicality impeccable.

Vox Balanae from 1971, was inspired by the first recordings of hump-back whales "singing", and the flutist also sings while playing; this piece has ideas that were developed with more subtlety in *Dream Sequence*, giving the album a satisfying symmetry, especially since the 'Sea Nocturne' in *Vox Balanae* is one of Crumb's most beautiful creations. Sound is everything with Crumb. This recording is clear and warm, more than good enough to convey Crumb's otherworldly timbres. The performances are sensitive, natural, and unexaggerated, attuned to every spectral nuance.

Crumb's passing invites us to pause and assess his achievement. Over the past half of the 20th Century, he became the most popular and by the 21st century, the most prolific exponent of post-Debussy impressionist magic. In recent years, he enlarged his style a bit. The 2008 *Voices from the Morning of the Earth* combines Crumb's typically surreal elements with earthy American folk songs, demonstrating that he got more soulful without sacrificing his signature spookiness. The Cello Sonata on the DreamTiger album shows that the soulfulness was there from the beginning. Crumb was fond of eccentric movement titles ('Night of the Electric Insect', 'The

Phantom Gondolier') and bizarre directions to performers. In *Ancient Voices of Children*, a mezzo-soprano is told to chant "fantastic vocalise" into an amplified piano to produce "a shimmering aura of echoes"; in *Night Music I*, a vibrating gong is slowly lowered into water. Crumb loved silences, but he could also shock and provoke, as in *Black Angels*, where players shout mystical number sequences and electronically amplify their string instruments to reach "the threshold of pain". Sometimes performers have their own ideas: Crumb originally wanted *Vox Balanae* to be performed on amplified instruments, but Ensemble DreamTiger (happily) rejected this instruction, producing a sonority at once more intimate and mysterious, making this disc even more attractive.

Commentators speak of Henry Cowell and John Cage as influences, but the most important one was Debussy. In remarks made before the 1984 premiere of *A Haunted Landscape* (which could be the title of any number of pieces), Crumb spoke of his admiration for Debussy, whose music is "filled with a mysterious sense" and who specialized in "short phrases and short thoughts". Both of these characterize Crumb's aesthetic, which can be further traced back to Edgar Allan Poe. Crumb, like Debussy, was entranced by Poe—listen to his supremely creepy and poetic setting of Poe's *The Sleeper*, from 1984 (appearing in Bridge's ambitious Crumb Edition). Poe believed sound and atmosphere were supremely important, endearing him to Debussy, who actually spent much of his life trying to compose an opera based on "The Fall of the House of Usher".

This disc is a timely tribute to a recently departed American master. Even people who don't normally care for Crumb will want to sample it, as it has wonderfully communicative, recently discovered performances from long ago. © 2023 *American Record Guide*