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George Crumb – between reflection upon nature and contemplating it

ABSTRACT: The author investigates the unique aesthetic program of George Crumb, one of the most important contemporary American composers. Crumb certainly occupies a unique place in the music of 20th century, not only because of his cultural background, or originality of artistic expression, but first of all, due to the presence of most dilemmas of the contemporary culture in his music. The question about the form of a relationship between human beings and nature at the turn of 20th/21st century is one of them. In his artistic output Crumb remains an advocate of a concept of music which, as the most spiritual and magical of all arts, derives from deep reserves of human psyche on the one hand and from primal forces of nature, on the other one.

The analytical aspects of the paper concern the problems of onomatopoeic imitation of the sounds of birds and a whale, symbolic allusions to the other composers (Debussy, Mahler), the concept of “larger rhythms of nature”, the phenomenon of echo and its forms in Crumb’s music, his search of natural pre-sounds of music (resulting in using non-traditional instruments), the idea of distant music, etc. Especially three pieces: *An Idyll of the Misbegotten*, *Vox balaenae* and *Echoes of Time and the River* are considered as the most characteristic.

KEYWORDS: philosophy of nature, George Crumb, syrinx, the moon, acoustic environment, symbolism, *Vox balaenae*, echo, distant music

George Crumb certainly occupies a unique place among contemporary composers; not only because of his cultural background, or originality of artistic expression, but first of all, due to the presence of most dilemmas of the contemporary culture in his music. The question about the form of a relationship between human beings and Nature at the turn of 20th/21st century is one of them.

“In a broader sense, the rhythms of nature, large and small - the sounds of wind and water, the sounds of birds and insects – must inevitably find their analogues in music”¹. Crumb’s unique aesthetic program, restricted to registering examples of onomatopoeic use of the sounds of a whale or a dove, could be easily found trite. Whereas, Crumb consequently, in all his artistic output,

¹ George Crumb, ‘Music: Does It Have a Future?’ in *George Crumb. Profile of a Composer*, ed. Don Gillespie (New York, London, Frankfurt, 1986), 19.

remains an advocate of a concept of music which, as the most spiritual and magical of all arts, derives from deep reserves of human psyche on the one hand and from primal forces of Nature, on the other one. It is Nature that, along with ontological necessity attributed to it, constitutes the highest ideal including beauty with which the beauty of a man-made art cannot be compared – this view brings the composer closer to the ancient philosophy of nature (Ionian philosophers) and to the early Renaissance art concept of *Natura naturata*. Similar dilemmas are also present in modern art (see: Stefan Chwin: “incurable helplessness of beauty produced by a man” in the presence of absolute beauty of God-made sculptures, e.g. Grand Canyon²). Within this scope there should also be considered, for example, the concept of so-called natural music remaining in opposition to speculative, conventionalized, ‘artificial’ music. Along with music structurally analogous to the world of nature, remaining in harmony with deep layers of a human nature, there can also be found ‘new simplicity’, repetitive music, ‘new tonality’, or ‘ecological music’ trends. Among eight criterias of natural music, formulated by Krzysztof Szwajgier with reference to the music of the 1970s, only two of them refer directly to the scope in which Crumb’s case is being considered. Those are already mentioned ‘naturalism’, understood as “analogy between natural phenomena and pieces of music”, and ‘gravity’ – “a return to the pre-sources of music, to a single tone, to sequential constructions formed upon the physiology of breath, to basic scales”³.

In Crumb’s case his individual experience was of no small importance, too. “I am certain that every composer, from his formative years as a child, has acquired a „natural acoustic” which remains in his ear for life. The fact that I was born and grew up in an Appalachian river valley meant that my ear was attuned to a peculiar echoing acoustic; I feel that this acoustic was „structured into” my hearing, so to speak, and thus became the basic acoustic of my music”⁴. Traces of communing with a certain type of surrounding nature in the childhood, impressed on artist’s sensitivity, can be also found in e.g. Dutch paintings – in which case it would be more about diffuse light, typical of northern countries. The dimension of individual experience is connected by Crumb with a cultural dimension; in the music by Charles Ives, Aaron Copland, or poetry by Walt Whitman there is, however, an important influence of transcendentalists’ concepts, their mystical and pantheistic belief in the spiri-

² Stefan Chwin, *Dziennik dla dorosłych* (Gdańsk, 2008), 458.

³ Krzysztof Szwajgier, ‘Muzyka naturalna – marzenie i fakt’ in *Przemiany techniki dźwiękowej, stylu i estetyki w polskiej muzyce lat 70*, ed. Leszek Polony (Kraków, 1986), 45–46.

⁴ Crumb, ‘Music: Does It Have a Future?’, 19.

tual unity of the world and the primacy of the forces of nature⁵. Many American poets of different generations share a common view that Nature, in its beauty, should be an object of nearly religious worship (e.g. R. Jeffers), at the same time being a source of satisfaction for metaphysical yearnings (e.g. Denise Levertov). Crumb is not an idealist, like Ives, but promoting the idea of human brotherhood with all forms of life (especially with animals) he combines beliefs as distant in time and space as the views of ancient philosophers, Christianity of a 'poor man' from Assisi, works by R. W. Emerson and Thoreau, or contemporary ecological movements.

A typical example of his exceptional involvement is *An Idyll for the Misbegotten* for flute and drums from 1985. The term "misbegotten", understood as "bastard", "rejected", refers here to the situation of a contemporary human. "Mankind has become ever more "illegitimate" in the natural world of the plants and animals" – that is what we can read in the composer's comment on the piece⁶. The sense of brotherhood mentioned above eroded "and consequently we find ourselves monarchs of a dying World", those who still hope that a mankind will come to its senses. Tracey Schmidt draws our attention to the contradiction underlying a cross between the genre of *Idyll* along with the situation of 'rejected' outlined and the contemporary world heading for a fall, and claims that it is more like *elegy*⁷; by the way, which idyll starts with a fierce and gradually ceasing drumming? Another interpretative perspective is opened by the fragment of Claude Debussy's *Syrinx* for flute solo quoted in the piece. The choice of flute and percussion, represented mostly by different drums and bongos, results not only from the fact that, according to Crumb, these are the instruments best evoking the sounds of nature, associated simultaneously with ancient music, but also from the reference to Debussy.

⁵ See the following characteristics of the contemporary Lithuanian music by Krzysztof Droba: "Feeling a strong bond with nature, pantheistic attitude towards it, is accompanied by the feeling of threat by contemporary civilization. Hence, lamentation familiar to this music – over dying trees, dying out birds, suffering landscape, disappearing world of culture integrated into harmonious cohabitation with nature. The authenticity of composer's stance is enhanced by a realistic depiction of the natural world – there is no doubt that we can hear the Lithuanian landscape and nature through sounds". See Krzysztof Droba, 'Nowa muzyka litewska' in *W kręgu muzyki litewskiej. Rozprawy, szkice, materiały*, ed. Krzysztof Droba (Kraków, 1997), 102. That refers especially to the output of Feliksas Bajoras and Bronius Kutavičius. See Marta Szoka, 'Continuum czy novum? Twórczość Feliksasa Bajorasa po 1989' in *Duchowość Europy Środkowej i Wschodniej w muzyce końca XX wieku*, eds. Krzysztof Draba, Teresa Malecka et al. (Kraków, 2004), 223-232

⁶ After: George Crumb, *An Idyll for the Misbegotten* for horn (originally flute) and drums. C. F. Peters Corporation 1998.

⁷ Tracey Schmidt, 'Debussy, Crumb and Musical Borrowing in 'An Idyll for the Misbegotten'' in *George Crumb & the Alchemy of Sound*, eds. Steven Bruns and Michael D. Grace (Colorado Springs, Co, 2005), 174.

Syrinx (fragment of music for *Psyche*) appeals to the ancient myth about a beautiful nymph who, running away from Pan's obtrusiveness, asks water nymphs for help and gets turned into a lakeside reed. Angry Pan cuts the reed down and makes a syrinx out of it – thus commemorating the voice of Syrinx in the sound of pipes. Therefore, "Crumb redefines the genre of idyll to include a pastoral scene with a subtext of violence"⁸; adding that it is about violence and havoc which is caused by a mankind in the natural environment. Whispered phrase: "The moon goes down. There are shivering birds and withering grasses", taken from the Chinese poetry from 8th century (Ssu-K'ung Shu), evokes Crumb's favourite symbol – the moon, and is a picture of the nature falling asleep at the same time. By chance, regardless composer's intentions, the symbolic message of *Idyll* got reversed in the transcription for horn suggested and made by Robert Patterson. While flute stands for the nymph's voice, horn's connotations with hunting make it the symbol of a hunter, Pan, i.e. a mankind bringing danger. And it takes us even further away from an idyll. We should add that Crumb has already spoken out before on human interference in the secrets of Nature, violation of its rights; in *Night of the Four Moons* for alto, alto flute, banjo, cello and percussion from 1969 the context of interpretation of four poems by Federico Garcia Lorca⁹ was constituted by composer's "ambivalent feelings" about landing of Apollo 11 on the moon¹⁰.

Being responsive to the natural acoustic environment of a man determines the specific timbre of Crumb's music. It is not a big city hustle and bustle with its inherent drone of traffic, whirr of engines, roar of an underground train. Varese's fascination with urban traffic and technology ("I don't like the countryside... I live in the hustle and bustle of civilization... I live in the city and I like the city – ... That is my nature"¹¹) is worlds apart from Crumb's attitude, who undoubtedly tends to be closer in this matter to Debussy, or Olivier Messiaen, feeling uneasy in the urban hustle and bustle. But also here we can find a difference. Crumb seems to minimize the visual aspect of our contact with nature, with the images of its beauty or terror. We cannot find in his works (in the titles or personal comments) any references to the colors and

⁸ Ibidem, 191.

⁹ Especially the poem I: *La luna está muerta, muerta...* (the moon is dead, dead), II: *Quando sale la luna...* (when the moon rises) and IV: *Huye luna, luna, luna!*... (run away the moon, the moon, the moon) seem to be prophetic.

¹⁰ Steven Bruns shows multiple references to the last part of Joseph Haydn's Symphony 'Les Adieux' and Gustav Mahler's *Das Lied von der Erde*. See Steven Bruns, 'Les Adieux: Haydn, Mahler and George Crumb's 'Night of the Four Moons'' in *George Crumb & the Alchemy of Sound*, 101-132. They concern, among others, certain theatrical gestures, extramusical poetic references, the structure of motifs.

¹¹ Georges Charbonnier, *Entretiens avec E. Varèse* (Paris 1970), 42. See Stefan Jaroński, *Orfeusz na rozdrożu* (Kraków, 1974), 96.

shapes of the surrounding world, it is no use looking for descriptions of landscapes, colors, symbolism of a rainbow, or “a cloud procession that is melancholy and slow, but concluding with an anguished grey softly fading...”¹². Inspiration with nature does not originate, in this case, from visual perception (anyway, it is not the main source), even though covered with beech woods Appalachian hills in autumn provide unforgettable sights. It does not mean that Crumb cannot notice the surrounding beauty; in the comment on *A Haunted Landscape* for orchestra he wrote about the landscapes of Andalusia, Jerusalem, or Greece he remembered, but in his memories they blend into one – there is only an imaginary picture evoking the secret lying beneath the past of these places. That is why the music picture *A Haunted Landscape* is characterized by exceptional aura and not by visual suggestiveness which is typical of programme music.

As a consequence of the taken stand, searching for “natural”, primal sound excludes using by the composer electronically – generated sounds. Despite a frequent use of amplification, Crumb has never decided to reach for a synthesizer, or a computer, since the sound potential of conventional instruments still seems unlimited to him. The reason for amplification is of practical nature: many of the sounds are characterized by a low level of dynamics and without amplification they just would be inaudible. Crumb generally writes exceptionally subtle, sensual, hypnotic music, with strong color and dynamic nuances – especially in the ppppp – p register, with prolonged phases of sound and silence. Listening to the slightest murmur, rustling leaves, buzzing insects, echo led him to the domain of the search of the tones generated with the help of sophisticated articulation techniques, but always with musical instruments already existing either in the tradition of Western music, or in exotic cultures. Our attention is drawn especially by the latter one: making use of instruments present in old magical and religious rituals, primal in their relation with a man and nature at the same time (Tibetan prayer stones, Japanese kabuki, African mbira). For Crumb the essence of natural sound is not only its color quality, or the material from which the instrument is made, but also organic relationship with human physicality (e.g. touching the piano strings), mentality, morals, or even religiousness. What also matters is the participation of a living, feeling and emotionally responsive performer.

Ideological and aesthetical aspects of Crumb’s fascination with nature, visible in his music, will be considered on three levels: **acoustic**, **time-spatial** and **symbolic** one. They are strictly connected, but for the sake of clarity we will try to single them out. The most noticeable sound level is an

¹² Claude Debussy, comment on *Nocturnes*. Quotation translated by Roman Kowal, after Peter Holmes, *Debussy* (Kraków, 1999), 88.

onomatopoeic imitation of animals' and birds' calls. It most often appears in a certain poetic (literary) or semantic context in the pieces with lyrics:

- the croaking of frogs (*Unto the Hills*),
- the hoofbeat of horses (temple blocks in *Unto the Hills*, crotales in *Madrigals II/3*)
- the neighing of horses (part III of *Songs, Drones and Refrains of Death* titled *Cancion de jinete –The Rider's Song*, *Madrigals II/3*)
- the chirping of crickets and the cry of a vulture (*Federico Little Songs for Children*)
- a dove (*Apparition*)
- the rain (*Madrigals I/2*)

or instrumental ones:

- the singing of birds in *Eleven Echoes of Autumn* (the birds are undefined as for their species, a sort of stylization after Messiaen's "bird" motifs)
- the tapping of a woodpecker (*Echoes of Time and the River*)
- the cry of seagulls (*Vox balaenae*).

The call of a dove finishing *An Idyll for the Misbegotten* is an expression either of a faint hope, or a final farewell to the natural world. The five humoresques *Mundus canis* for guitar and percussion from 1997 have a completely different meaning; they are portraits of Crumb's five successive dogs, humorous characteristics of their rich temperaments and personalities, which obviously goes beyond copying sounds, even though we can find there imitations of some typical canine behavior such as scratching (part II), whimpering (III), or chasing one's tail (V). A thin streak of piercing glissandos sul ponticello at the beginning of the *Black Angels* quartet can be easily associated with unpleasantly shrilling buzz of a mosquito, but this piece belongs to another thematic field. In *Apparition* fluctuating glissando on the strings of the grand piano suggests gentle swoosh of the sea – almost like in Debussy's work. The score of an orchestral piece *Echoes of Time and the River* from 1967 is extremely abundant in the imitations of the sounds of nature (the swoosh, whistle and howling of the wind, the rumble of thunder in the distance, rising and falling murmurs, the buzzing of insects, cicadas, etc.). And finally *Vox balaenae* for cello, flute and piano from 1971, the piece composed under impression of the first ever recording of a whale song.

"When listening to a whale song, it's hard to believe that a single organism produces all those sounds. The whale's register is tremendously wide, extending from low „pedal" tones to high piercing shrieks. Then there are rising and falling portamentos, echoes, clicks, gurgles, bubbles and other effects"¹³.

¹³ Russell Strinberg, 'Meta-Counterpoint in *Vox balaenae*' in *George Crumb & the Alchemy of Sound*, 215-216.

Crumb's music performed by the three players in black masks, which symbolizes the absence of a human element and timeless, "impersonal" forces of Nature, does not make a simple imitation of the authentic sound of a whale. The sound is amplified and produced thanks to sophisticated articulation techniques. The first part, *Vocalise*, is the closest one to the "illustration" of the whale sound – the flutist solo plays and sings "to" the instrument at the same time (see Example 1).

Example 1. Crumb, *Vox balaenae*, p. 6, flute part

The image of the whale sound is juxtaposed with "movement structure symbolizing the creation of the World"¹⁴. The form of the piece: a theme with five variations (the final *Sea-Nocturne* with its subtitle "for the end of time" is, in fact, the sixth variation) would be surprisingly classical if it weren't for the introductory vocalise subtitled "for the beginning of time" with separate tone material and use of "singing flute" technique mentioned above. In addition, equipping consecutive variations with titles referring to geological epochs (*Archeozoic*, *Proterozoic*, *Paleozoic*, *Mesozoic*, *Cenozoic*) allows us to include the piece in the same, favourite thematic range as *Makrokosmos*, or *Echoes of Time and the River*. The problem of time could be interpreted through the idea of timelessness of the sea – Nature (low consonances of the fifths-octaves in the piano part of *Sea-theme* clearly refer to Debussy's *La Cathedrale engloutie*, See Example 2) through the idea of archetypal whale, or the beginning of a human history on Earth symbolized by the quotation from *Also Sprach Zarathustra* by R. Strauss repeated three times. What is more, *Vox balaenae* is an example of Crumb's typical predilection for silence; it's an apparent paradox regarding music, since silence in his music is meaningful, allows sounds to last, to contemplate the echo phenomenon, to feel the sense of being suspended in time, and finally to immerse into listening to imaginary music. In *Vox balaenae* the element of time flow involves, for example, precisely measured rests. Gradually lengthened, in the last phase of *Sea-Nocturne* they represent what Crumb calls "larger rhythm of nature" (see Example 3).

¹⁴ Edith Borroff, *Three American Composers* (New York, 1986), 241.

Variations on Sea-Time

[SEA THEME] Adagio ($\text{♩} = 50$); solemn, with calm majesty

The musical score for 'Variations on Sea-Time' is written for Electric Cello and E. Pno. The Electric Cello part begins with a 'sempre L sul A' instruction and features a melodic line with a 'poco f' dynamic. The E. Pno. part includes a 'rapid gliss. over strings (fingertip)' instruction and a section marked 'depress keys silently'. Both parts include 'p' dynamics and 'Ped.' markings. The score is divided into measures, with some measures containing '(l.v.)' or '(4 p)' markings.

Example 2. Crumb, *Vox balaenae*, p. 8, the beginning of Sea-theme

(dying, dying - - -)

The musical score for the ending of 'Vox balaenae' shows measures 3, 4, 5, and 7. Measure 7 is enclosed in a dashed box with the instruction 'play in pantomime (absolutely silent!)' and 'hold attitude'. The score includes performance instructions like 'poco f' and 'p', and dynamic markings like 'poco f' and 'p'. The score is divided into measures, with some measures containing '(3)', '(4)', '(5)', and '(7)' markings.

June 1971
Media, Pa.

Example 3. Crumb, *Vox balaenae*, p. 15, the ending

In *Echoes of Time and the River*, in spite of an intriguing title, Crumb does not confirm literary - program background. Composer's idea was to express "the various qualities of metaphysical and psychological time"¹⁵ with music. The last part of the title is tricky: it is hard to state whether it is about

¹⁵ Comment on the piece in *George Crumb & Alchemy of Sound*, 291.

“echoes of time and of river”, or about “echoes of time, **and** the river”. After all, the river is also a symbol of passing time, eternity (Styx). But it does not appear in the titles of particular movements of the piece: *Frozen Time*, *Remembrance of Time*, *Collapse of Time*, *Last Echoes of Time*. Time is, then, the central theme – from frozen one until the end. But this “end” does not bring us closer to the Messiaen’s sense of ‘*fin du temps*’, reaching mystical destination, reaching eternity. It is rather a standstill – the final whistle of musicians is gradually dying out, fading away like a clock which is slowing down to stop finally. So what is the significance of a river – is it a background, something that flows permanently and endlessly? Is it about the “river of time”, or is the river here in opposition to time? Time in its psychological, subjective aspect (as my time, my life, my memories, my end) while the river keeps flowing?

Time is obviously connected with space, hence the concentration of theatrical effects in *Echoes of Time and the River*: some part of music action comes from behind the stage and musicians move around while playing. Echo is the embodiment of the link between time and space. “If you come from Charleston, West Virginia, located in a river valley with sizeable hills around ... this must influence a person in very subtle ways, but I think it’s in my music. An echoing quality, or an interest in very long sounds, haunting sounds, sounds that don’t want to die; this is all part of an inherited acoustic, I think”¹⁶. No wonder that Crumb’s music “materializes” the acoustics of mountains with all the nuances of direct experience, especially murmurs, hums, and echo; for example in *Notturmo I* from *Night Music I* repetition of the same sound forte (on the piano) and piano (on the xylophone) is one of the most evident examples. Along with an immediate reference in the titles of two important compositions: *Eleven Echoes of Autumn* and *Echoes of Time and the River* this realization often manifests itself on the technical level of a composition and its form. And here are a few examples:

- a. use of canon (in the seventh *Echo* from *Eleven Echoes of Autumn*),
- b. layered overlapping of similar motifs in the part of the same or various instruments,
- c. dialogues of motifs and structures – e.g. in the piano and vibraphone parts in 3rd movement of *Unto the Hills*, harp and vibraphone parts in *Madrigals III/3*,
- d. the last part of the cycle as a repetition of the first one – in *Unto the Hills* with the ‘echo’ reference in the title (alike *Night Music I* and *Apparition*),

¹⁶ After Andrew Stiller, ‘Where’s That Sound Coming From? John Cage, George Crumb, and the World of Timbre’ in *George Crumb & Alchemy of Sound*, 49.

A peculiar consequence of his predilection for echo acoustics is an idea of “distant music” – remote music, coming from the distance, mysteriously intangible. Then appear expressions typical of Crumb: *distant music*, *quasi lontano* (*Eleven Echoes of the Autumn*), *lontanissimo* (in *An Idyll for the Misbegotten*), *ghostly, as from afar, like ghostly bells* (in *Echoes of Time and the River*), from which it is not far to the title of 9th movement of the *Black Angels* quartet – *Lost Bells (Echo)*. In his comment on *An Idyll for the Misbegotten* the composer writes that the piece should be heard as from afar, “over a lake, on a moonlit evening in August”¹⁷. He likes locating instruments outside the stage to make their sound come from afar: this is what glass harmonica in oneiric *Dream sequence* and Mahler-like lullaby in *Night of the Four Moons*, and also an oboe solo in the last movement of *Ancient Voices of Children* sound like. However, the meaning of the “distant music” expression may be also more metaphoric and refer to oblivion, distance in time, emotional distance, or dim memory of past matters. This is why Crumb often distorts quotations from other composers’ music¹⁸: the past, however important, gets distorted, dispersed, becomes “distant”.

Finally, we should give some thought to the metaphor of mountains, even though not so frequent in Crumb’s music like water (sea, lake), or night and the moon, but still equally significant. Apart from the acoustic quality (mountains and valleys as places of natural occurrence of echo), it is meaningful that he used a motto taken from *Psalm 121* in his *Unto the Hills* cycle: “I will lift up mine eyes unto the hills, whence cometh my strength”¹⁹. Let’s add that *Unto the Hills* is the third part of the large-scale collection called *American Songbook* on which Crumb was working from 2002 to 2004. The first part, *The River of Life*, contains arrangements of traditional American hymns, spirituals, and religious songs, part II *A Journey Beyond Time* – arrangements of melodies from Afro-American tradition, part III – of local tunes from the Appalachian region, and part IV *The Winds of Destiny* – songs from the American Civil War period, folk and religious tunes. In the last song of that part, and the last song of the whole collection simultaneously, the motif of wandering towards the mountains’ tops, to “the promised land” takes on a new meaning; contemplation of the natural beauty turns into metaphysics.

The use of formula “*Montani semper liberi*” taken from the state of Virginia’s motto, repeated in a rhythmic whisper quasi staccato by percussionists in *Echoes of Time and the River*, has still another meaning (see Example 5):

¹⁷ As Tracey Schmidt points out *Syrinx* by Claude Debussy as a fragment of music for *Psyche* was to be played from behind the stage during the performance (see footnote 7).

¹⁸ Steven Bruns draws our attention to it in ‘*Les Adieux*’, 114.

¹⁹ From the introduction – the score.

Handwritten musical score for "Echoes of Time and the River" by Crumb. The score is divided into three systems. The first system features four staves for percussion: (Fl. III) & Ant. Cym., (2-plate), (Tpt. II) & Ant. Cym., (2-plate), (Cl. II) & Ant. Cym., (2-plate), and (Horn III) & Ant. Cym., (2-plate). It includes dynamic markings like *fffz* and *fffz (vibr.)*, and a note to "Shake Cymbals rapidly after rest is struck". The second system includes "Vbph." and "Ant. Cym." parts with dynamics *ppp* and *fffz (vibr.)*. The third system shows vocal lines for "Mon-ta-ni sem-per li-be-ri?" with dynamics *ppp*, *mp*, and *pp*, and a "whisper in unis" instruction. A "7" in a box is present on the right side of the score.

Example 5. Crumb, *Echoes of Time and the River*, p. 2

Mountains are here the synonym of freedom, and this reflection seems to be shared by Crumb with many other artists, Mahler for instance. Quotations and allusions to Mahler's music appear in Crumb's works often enough to hazard a guess that there is some psychological affinity between the two. *Das Lied von der Erde* is one of Crumb's favourite pieces, especially the last movement *Der Abschied*. Inspired by the 8th and 9th- century Chinese poetry from the collection of paraphrases *Die chinesische Flöte* by Hans Bethge (just

to remind you: motto of *An Idyll for the Misbegotten* was taken from the poem by the 8th-century Chinese poet), Mahler composed a piece of great affirmation of life and sublimation of the world at the same time. In *Der Abschied* “beauty that sublimates pain and dilemmas of the world leads us to great reconciliation with existence, to this wonderful moment in which own subjective sense of pain is overcome. (...) Those endings – dying out, “hiding”, “falling asleep” – are extremely representative of the whole late Mahler’s style”²⁰. The compilation of Chinese poems²¹ starts in the vocal part with the words:

*Die Sonne scheidet hinter dem Gebirge,
In alle Täler der Abend nieder
mit seinem Schatten die voll Kühlung sind.
O sieh! Wie eine Silberbarke schwebt
der Mond am blauen Himmelssee herauf. (...)*

and next:

*Wohin ich geh’? Ich geh’, ich wand’re in die Berge. (...)
Ich wandle nach der Heimat, meiner Stätte. (...)*

We can encounter here some of Crumb’s favourite symbolic motifs (the moon, mountains, evening), while famous “ewig” motif from *Der Abschied* ending – falling major 2nd – can be found in the endings of at least a few Crumb’s works: *Ancient Voices of Children*, *Eleven Echoes of Autumn*, *Echoes of Time and the River*. Transfiguration of the eternity motif and the idea of “serene” death (*sérénité*) seems to be obvious. Death does not mean annihilation, even though it is the end of life in an individual, biological sense, it is the beginning of, or a return to a universal vital force. The forces of Nature remain: movement, consciousness, physicality, there remains life as a continuous circulation of deaths and births, low and high tides, moonrises and moonsets, hums and silence. That is why in *Apparition* the text of the first song comes back at the end of the cycle, that is why when the piece (not only this one, by the way) nears the end, when the last tones of Crumb’s music keep sounding we are still sitting motionless, listening to the silence that remains full of life.

Translated by Elżbieta Fesnak-Przybylska

²⁰ Bohdan Pocij, *Szkice z późnego romantyzmu* (Kraków, 1978), 177.

²¹ The poets are: Mong-Kao-Jen and Wang-Wei.

