



Solitude Transformed. George Crumb's *Makrokosmos III* (*Music for a Summer Evening*) from the Perspective of the *Topos per aspera ad astra*¹

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Abstract

According to the programme note authored by George Crumb, *Makrokosmos III* (*Music for a Summer Evening*) “projects a clearly articulated large expressive curve;” its three main parts (I, III, V) “might be interpreted as a kind of cosmic drama,” whereas the intermezzi-like inner section (II, IV) are more subjective in nature.

In this 1974 cycle, Crumb took up Beethoven's *topos per aspera ad astra*, i.e., the path from darkness to light or from suffering to joy. The ideological context of this narrative is the modern conflict between religion and science, to which Crumb refers through philosophical and literary mottos, performance notes, musical allusions, quotations and self-quotations (with particular emphasis on Bach's *Fugue in D sharp minor*, DWK II). The central idea of the work is the transition from Pascal's dramatic “eternal silence of the infinite space” to the restored *musica mundana*, presented in Part V, “Music of the Starry Night,” containing the motif of galactic bells, derived from a modified quotation of Bach's fugue. This new spiritual vision is brought by the Star-Child, whose birth is celebrated with awe in Part III (*The Advent*). The Star-Child seems to be Crumb's interpretation of the Christian idea of the Second Coming. The good news it brings is the

¹ This text is a modified version of the essay published originally in Polish: Marcin Trześciok, “Samotność przemieniona. *Makrokosmos III* (*Music for a Summer Evening*) George'a Crumba jako obrzęd przejścia,” in *Formuły i harmonie. Księga jubileuszowa profesor Marty Szoki*, ed. Ewa Kowalska-Zajac and Ryszard Daniel Goliańek (Akademia Muzyczna im. Grażyny i Kiejstuta Bacewiczów w Łodzi, 2025).

prospect of a quasi-nirvanic mystical union between man and cosmos, presented musically at the end of the work.

Keywords

George Crumb; musical hermeneutics; musical analysis; 20th century music; spirituality

A Summer Serenade A.D. 1974

A few words, and you get a poem. A few lines – a picture. A few notes – music. The power of allusion, the art of subtle combinations, the spatial dimension of music. The magic of George Crumb's works results not just from what lies within the notes, but equally from what lies between them – it is the charm of what the composer conveys in “otherworldly resonances.” A pupil of Debussy and Messiaen in this respect as well, Crumb was a “great miniaturist.” That witty term, which Nietzsche levelled against Wagner, seems wholly pertinent in relation to Crumb. The summer serenade, *eine nicht so kleine Nachtmusik*, that is his *Makrokosmos III* (1974) for two amplified pianos and percussion also constitutes a mosaic of “great miniatures.” The mind of the listener who contemplates this work, turning within the classic hermeneutic circle, is constantly switching between the part and the whole, moment and form, the little pieces of stone polished by a master's hand and the great picture that emerges from the arrangement of those pieces.

Of the four books of *Makrokosmos*, it is *Music for a Summer Evening* that stands out for its organic musical-philosophical conception. This was emphasised by the composer himself:

I feel that *Summer Evening* projects a clearly articulated large expressive curve over its approximately 40-minute duration. The first, third, and fifth movements, which are scored for the full ensemble of instruments and laid out on a large scale, would seem to define the primary import of the work (which might be interpreted as a kind of “cosmic drama”). On the other hand, “Wanderer Fantasy” (mostly for the two pianos alone) and the somewhat atavistic “Myth” (for percussion instruments) were conceived of as dream-like pieces functioning as intermezzos within the overall sequence of movements.²

Admittedly the other volumes of *Makrokosmos* are also connected by many internal references of a notional character (Crumb enumerates them in his commentary to the first volume: they include “the ‘magical properties’ of music; the problem of the origins of evil; the ‘timelessness’ of time; a sense of the profound

² Programme note to the disc George Crumb, *Ancient Voices of Children; Music for a Summer Evening* (*Makrokosmos III*), Elektra Nonesuch 9-79149-2, published 1990.

ironies of life”³) and of a technical nature (motivic *idées fixes*, periodic returns of graphic elements, various kinds of symmetry, the regulatory formal function of the 12 signs of the zodiac), but there they do not possess such a strongly narrative character as in *Makrokosmos III*. Moreover, this volume includes several significant references to the two preceding sets; hence it can be perceived as a visionary synthesis and centre of the whole macro-cycle. Consequently, *Makrokosmos IV*, composed later, is like an elaborate coda, a joyous and solemn celebration of the groundbreaking insight achieved in *Music for a Summer Evening*.

That narrative constitutes Crumb’s version of the Beethovenian *topos per aspera ad astra*.⁴ Yet Crumb’s sensitivity absorbed everything that occurred in music and in the world since the time of the *Fifth* or the *Ninth Symphony*. Therefore, his joy at breaking through the darkness toward the light is devoid of that emphatic grandiloquence, nourished by the vain hopes of the Age of Enlightenment; during the second half of the twentieth century, it was more than difficult to share Beethoven’s enthusiasm for a social utopia. But Crumb did not abandon Beethoven’s maximalism – that attempt to inscribe man within the cosmic whole (and it matters not that the composer of *Black Angels* could no longer set with conviction Schiller’s words from *An Ode to Joy*: “Brothers, o’er the stars unfurl’d / Must reside a loving Father”⁵). In his summer serenade of AD 1974, Crumb offers his own take on the problem of man’s place in the world – in the face of the erosion of Christianity, the scientific revolution, the appearance of Romantic spirituality (in which the key to the enigma of existence lies within the self) and twentieth-century neo-mythologism. In a word, Crumb poses here, quite plainly, all of the key questions that torment the minds of the denizens of Blake’s mythical Land of Ulro, as interpreted by Czesław Miłosz.⁶

³ Programme note to the disc George Crumb, *Makrokosmos I*, Nonesuch H-71293, published 1974.

⁴ See Hermann Danuser, “Dur/Moll im Horizont der musikalischen Topik,” and Stefan Keym, “Von der langsamen Einleitung zur Schlussapotheose. Die zwei Typen der Moll-Dur-Dramaturgie in Pariser Opernouvertüren des späten 18. Jahrhunderts und ihre Relevanz für Beethoven,” in *Dur versus Moll. Zur Geschichte der Semantik eines musikalischen Elementarkontrasts*, eds. Hans-Joachim Hinrichsen and Stefan Keym (Böhlau Verlag, 2020); Hermann Jung, “‘Per aspera ad astra’. Ein philosophisch-literarisches Denkmodell und seine kompositorische Ausprägung in geistlichen Schaffen von Johannes Brahms,” in *Religion – Literatur – Künste II. Ein Dialog*, ed. Peter Tschuggnall (Müller-Speiser, 2002).

⁵ “Brüder, überm Sternenzelt / Muss ein lieber Vater wohnen” (F. Schiller, *An die Freude*).

⁶ Czesław Miłosz’s *Land of Ulro* is the author’s highly personal essay on the spiritual crisis of modernity, as seen from the perspective of several writers who strongly influenced Miłosz’s own outlook: Emanuel Swedenborg, William Blake, Adam Mickiewicz, and Oscar de L. Miłosz. As Miłosz explains: “The name Ulro is from Blake. It denotes that realm of spiritual pain such as is borne and must be borne by the crippled man. Blake himself was not one of its inhabitants, unlike the scientists, those proponents of Newtonian physics, the philosophers, and most other poets and artists of his day. And that goes for their descendants in the nineteenth and twentieth

Taken as a whole, *Music for a Summer Evening* represents an example of teleological form in which the greatest stress is placed on the last movement, which towers over its predecessors in terms of weight, complexity and duration⁷ (the same procedure would be employed in *Makrokosmos IV*). This final movement, “Music of the Starry Night,” has two parts, somewhat reminiscent of the two movements of Beethoven’s *Sonata, Op. 111*: a dramatic introduction is followed by reconciliation (“Song of Reconciliation”), which Beethoven’s peer, Georg W. F. Hegel, would have called *Aufhebung* or *Versöhnung*. In order to fathom the deeper meaning of this rediscovered harmony, and consequently to ponder how it differs from nineteenth-century solutions, one must look not only at the actual breakthrough moment itself, but also at the way in which it is prepared in the foregoing movements.

Nocturnal Sounds (The Awakening)

The first movement, “Nocturnal Sounds (The Awakening)” – furnished with the instructions *Magical, suspenseful* – takes the form of a textural and dynamic crescendo, divided into smaller phrases punctuated by percussion “interventions” (the most important caesurae are threefold entries of the tamtam – large and small, the third time replaced by suspended cymbals – followed by the motif of Japanese temple bells). This process is crowned by a culmination, which is followed by a short, fading epilogue. The short opening staccato motifs evoke the sounds of a mandolin or guitar – instruments connoting a serenade character. But that is the only pleasant association, as the entire movement is permeated by harsh, dissonant harmonies that become quite deafening.

Philosophically speaking, the most crucial sound symbol is the effect of reverberation (the bottom register of the pianos has the dampers raised on the middle pedal), noted in the motto from a poem by Salvatore Quasimodo, *Isola di Ulisse* (“Ulysses’ isle”): “Odo risonanze effimere, oblio di piena notte nell’acqua stellata” (“I hear ephemeral echoes, oblivion of full night in the starred water”).⁸ The culminating exclamation (a big gong strikes as clusters erupt in the bottom

centuries, up to and including the present.” Czeslaw Milosz, *The Land of Ulro*, trans. L. Iribarne (Farrar, Strauss, and Giroux, 1984), 32.

⁷ Duration of the successive movements in the recording by the group Berlin PianoPercussion (live, March 24, 2009; telos musik, TLS 093): 5’33” – 5’40” – 8’34” – 5’15” – 11’46”.

⁸ Crumb quoted lines 2 to 4 of the first strophe. But it is worth noting the opening line: “Ferma è l’antica voce” (“The ancient voice falls silent”). As we will see, in *Music for a Summer Evening*, Crumb tackles the drama of the disenchantment of the world. The omitted line poses this problem quite bluntly – perhaps too bluntly for Crumb’s narrative purposes, as he prefers at first to merely hint at the thesis it contains, before conveying it explicitly in the motto to the third movement (in the form of a quotation from Pascal).

register of the pianos) is a moment of awakening. But this is not an awakening in the sense of Buddhist enlightenment or liberation, but rather a sort of Kantian waking from dogmatic slumber: the supposed subject of the drama realises that he is left alone in the face of eternal mysteries, unaware whence he comes, whither he is heading and who he is.

Wanderer-Fantasy

The second movement, “Wanderer-Fantasy,” continues the narrative: the titular wanderer is that subject woken into existential disquietude, who can still hear “risonanze” (the motto from Quasimodo still clearly obtains), but this time they are not so fleeting: it is no longer just an echo on strings, but concrete motifs present themselves in a sequence of calls and responses and in palindromic patterns (hence the marking: *Calling, echoing*). The reference to Schubert is significant, though at the same time discreet, as no quotation appears – be it from the song or from the piano fantasy. But we should still remember that the poem by Georg Philipp Schmidt (von Lübeck) that Schubert set to music speaks of man’s alienation on the Earth and the unattainability of happiness.

Crumb uses primarily two topoi. In the outermost episodes: the slightly ironically sounding wailing of slide whistles (in “call and response” style). In the middle section: a mosaic of delicate (*pizzicato* on the strings) ostinato formulas of rocking rhythm and pentatonic aroma (the pentatonic idyll is disturbed by tritone relations and octatonic additions), expressive of an unattainable ideal. Also prominent is the Romantic topos *aus der Ferne* (Crumb has *As from afar, gently wafting*).⁹

The Advent (I)

The third movement, “The Advent,” gives us a foretaste of the formal concept of the finale, as it similarly comprises two contrasting sections. The first one (*Very slow, majestic, like a larger rhythm of nature*) is highly diverse: short “interventions” from loud musical gestures are superimposed over long, continuous “out-of-time” ostinato formulas based on an open fifth *F sharp₁-C sharp* in the bass register (the ostinato is also subject to the principle of resonance, as it is the fading of thunderous fourths that erupt in the “interventions” on the notes *C sharp₁-F sharp₁*). Crucial gestures here are glissandos on the strings over two octaves and a tritone

⁹ See Richard Kramer, “A Poetics of the Remote: Goethe’s *Entfernte*,” chap. 4 of *Distant Cycles: Schubert and the Conceiving of Song* (University of Chicago Press, 1994), 85–101; Charles Rosen, “Mountains and Song Cycles,” chap. 3 of *The Romantic Generation* (Harvard University Press, 1995), 116–236; Berthold Hoeckner, “Schumann and Romantic Distance,” *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 50, no. 1 (Spring, 1997): 55–132.

(from A_2 to E flat), piled up on both the ostinato formula and the “interventions:” this glissando motif is an *idée fixe* which had already recurred several times in *Makrokosmos I* and *II*. It belongs to a group of dark, portentous symbols (its first two occurrences, almost at the very beginning of “Primeval Sounds,” the first miniature in *Makrokosmos I*, are initially disturbing and then overtly menacing).¹⁰

The inner title of the second section reveals whose arrival we were awaiting in the first one: “Hymn for the Nativity of the Star-Child.” Yet before that hymn is heard, Crumb introduces a short intermezzo, in which he quotes the luminous, piercing repeated fifth motifs from the fourth movement of *Makrokosmos II*, from the graphic score of “Twin Suns (Doppelgänger aus der Ewigkeit)” – specifically from the first of the disc-suns represented there. This is another discreet allusion to Schubert, this time a double allusion: to the songs “Nebensonnen” (from *Winterreise*) and “Doppelgänger” (from *Schwanengesang*). Both of those compositions belong to the dark, even gnostic, side of romanticism. The semantic modification of the repeated fifth motif is indicated not just by the change of notation (a graphic form in “Twin Suns,” traditional in “The Advent”), but also by the adjustment of the expressive indication: *Majestic* in “Twin Suns,” *stark, luminous!* in “The Advent”. This change indicates an intensification, a turning-point. Or perhaps even – a revelation.

The Advent (II): Hymn for the Nativity of the Star-Child

The second part of “The Advent,” “Hymn for the Nativity of the Star-Child,” was also prefigured in “Twin Suns” – in the second of the solar discs in the graphic score. Here as well, two minor differences in the description are significant. First, in “Twin Suns,” this music bears the title “Hymn for the Advent of the Star-Child,” from which we learn that it was only in *Makrokosmos III* that the hymn of expectation became a hymn celebrating the Nativity *accompli*. Secondly, while the hymn theme in “Twin Suns” was to be performed in *Solemn* fashion, in “The Advent,” the specification is *solemn, fateful*. This ambiguous addition bids us remember about Crumb’s *unde malum*.

Although this Augustinian question about the origins of evil (mentioned in the preface to *Makrokosmos I*) has haunted Crumb throughout his life, it is difficult to formulate this problem within a cohesive hermeneutic interpretation. However, one crucial aspect should be noted: in the “Hymn,” the portentous glissandos over a tritone expanded by two octaves fade away, with perfect consonances of fourth and fifth coming to the fore. The appearance of these

¹⁰ In *Makrokosmos I*, this figure has an enharmonically equivalent notation: *a-d sharp*, not *a-e flat*. We cannot rule out the possibility that this is a deliberate, semantically motivated device (luminous *d sharp* vs dark *e flat*).

Pythagorean perfect consonances is linked to a stylistic quotation that serves at once both to archaïse and to sacralise; the theme of the “Star-Child” is an allusion to the mediaeval technique of fauxbourdon. Two types of three-note chords (emerging mysteriously out of resonance, triggered by a glissando on the strings) occur within it: an octave filled with an open fifth and a minor triad in first inversion. This minor colouring casts a shadow over the fact of the Star-Child’s birth. Indeed, there is more darkness here, since only in the first phase does the “Hymn” continue the harmonic centralisation on *C sharp*₁-*F sharp*₁-*C sharp* (quasi F sharp major), while towards the end it “modulates” towards the fifth *B flat*₁-*E flat*-*B flat* (quasi e flat minor).¹¹ This closing centre, besides the traditional mournful (“fateful”) connotations, should also be linked to the motif of the tritone glissando (*A*₂-*E flat*).

The key to interpreting “The Advent” is the motto from Pascal: “Le silence éternel de ces espaces infinis m’effraie” (“The eternal silence of infinite space terrifies me”). Noting this famous sentence, Crumb suggests an interpretation both within and without the work. As for the former, the contrasts – soft ostinato figurations vs loud interventions, perfect consonances vs tritone – seem to represent, respectively, eternal silence vs terror; and the mysteriousness of the “Hymn” (emerging out of the resonances) is a suggestive sign that the birth of the Star-Child is accompanied by the silence of the heavens. As for the latter, we are dealing with an historical diagnosis, that is, with a highlighting of the cultural and philosophical crisis triggered by the scientific revolution of the seventeenth century. That crisis was the result of the rise of mechanistic physics and the transition “from the closed world to the infinite universe.”¹² “Eternal silence” is a formula summing up the effects of that revolution: the concept of the “music of the spheres,” which had underpinned both cosmological and musical thought from antiquity to the Renaissance, was negated. In other words, the wanderer from the first movement experiences in “The Advent” the essence of the modern drama: deprived of the authority of tradition, he finds himself in an incomprehensible world in which a fundamental conflict arises between

¹¹ Crumb emphasises the weight of these two tonal centres in his commentary: “In its overall style, *Summer Evening* might be described as either more or less atonal, or more or less tonal. The more overtly tonal passages can be defined in terms of the basic polarity F sharp major – D sharp minor (or, enharmonically, G flat major – E flat minor). This (most traditional) polarity is twice stated in *The Advent* – in the opening crescendo passages (‘majestic, like a larger rhythm of nature’), and in the concluding *Hymn for the Nativity of the Star-Child*. It is stated once again in *Music of the Starry Night*, with the quotation of passages from Bach’s D sharp minor fugue (*Well-tempered Clavier*, Book II) and a concluding *Song of Reconciliation* in G flat major (overlaid by an intermittently resounding *Fivefold Galactic Bells* in F sharp major).”

¹² Alexandre Koyré, *From the Closed World to the Infinite Universe* (Johns Hopkins Press, 1957).

value and fact. Erich Heller, who coined the expression “disinherited mind,”¹³ preceded his memorable book with a motto from the Seventh Duino Elegy by Rainer Maria Rilke. It is fitting to quote it here; after all, Rilke is an important poet for Crumb:

Jede dumpfe Umkehr der Welt hat solche Enterbte,
Denen das Frühere nicht noch nicht das Nächste gehört.

Each torpid turn of the world has such disinherited children,
to whom no longer what's been, and not yet what's coming, belongs.¹⁴

The Star-Child should be regarded unambiguously as the new Christ. The myth of his Second Coming is perhaps the most important motif for a hermeneutic interpretation of the whole of *Makrokosmos*. In the face of the religious crisis, it brings some message, wisdom, insight, change. This is precisely what Crumb is relating in the last two movements of *Music for Summer Evening*.

Myth

The fourth movement, “Myth,” was furnished with the terms *Adagio isoritmico; lonely, bleak*. This composition is subject to the constructivist principles taken from the fourteenth-century *ars nova*. As Crumb writes, it “consists of simultaneously performed *taleas* of 13, 7, and 11 bars”¹⁵ (let us add that two of these rhythmic patterns are palindromes). The second “work-dream” inserted between the supporting pillars of the odd-numbered movements is of ambivalent suggestiveness.

The mechanical nature of the construction exudes coolness, hence the terms *lonely, bleak*. This contrasts with the meaning ascribed to isorhythm during the *ars nova* epoch, when it was expressive of metaphysical order (despite the criticism it attracted from Pope John XXII). With Crumb, isorhythm appears to symbolise a Weberian disenchantment of the world, the mechanical laws of Newtonian physics, the inaccessible God of the deists – that great watchmaker whom William Blake called *Nobodaddy*.¹⁶ Hence the domination of the “mechanical” sounds of the percussion, reminiscent of the ticking of a cosmic clock, dispersing in the “eternal silence of infinite space.” Stumbling through this cold

¹³ See Erich Heller, *The Disinherited Mind. Essays in Modern German Literature and Thought* (Bowes & Bowes, 1975).

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, VI.

¹⁵ Crumb, *op. cit.*

¹⁶ William Blake, “To *Nobodaddy*,” in *The Works of William Blake* (The Wordsworth Poetry Library, 1994), 93.

world is the wanderer whose autoreflexive presence is symbolised (in the part of the alto recorder) by quotations of palindromes from the “Wanderer-Fantasy” and above all by the helpless momentary eruptions of *quasi improvisando* interjections of prepared piano (suggesting the sound of an “Alto African thumb piano”), contrasting with the cold, percussive, mathematical aura of this movement.

Why does this movement carry the title “Myth,” which would tend to suggest the re-enchanting of the world? And how does one reconcile the rigours of the palindromes with the term *like a sound of nature, as from afar* that accompanies them in the score (the first phrase probably refers to Mahler’s “wie ein Naturlaut” from his *First Symphony*): The multitude of exotic instruments, evoking non-European cultures, should also be inscribed within the world of myth. Paradoxes and enigmas? Or perhaps the suggestion that this gloomy landscape will shortly be transformed? After all, the Star-Child has now been born, and news of the event will spread to the ends of the earth. And the sky will again be filled with music.

Music of the Starry Night (I)

“Music of the Starry Night” consists of two phases: the first is termed *fantastic, oracular*; the second bears the title “Song of Reconciliation” and should be played *joyous, ecstatic, with a sense of cosmic time*. The first phase continues the prophetic tone of “The Advent.” It even seems that the change of “fateful” to “oracular” means that the predestination, previously only vaguely sensed, has become the irrevocable fate announced by the prophet at the very start of “Music of the Starry Night” – in the opening “oracular” motif of three chords (subsequently returning in different variants, presented a total of three times).

In this movement, which constitutes a sort of collage, there occur four other repeated modules: a falling cascade, the *idée fixe* of a tritone glissando on the strings (from “Primeval Sounds” – the realm of darkness), the *idée fixe* of transfixing repetition (from “Twin Suns” – the realm of luminosity) and quotations from the *Fugue in D sharp minor* from the second book of Johann Sebastian Bach’s *Das Wohltemperierte Klavier*.

The falling cascade of notes and chords that occurs immediately after the “oracle” (multiplied through echo) seems to vanish into a wilderness or an abyss. This figure appears seven times (its third iteration is a glissando variant on the strings of the pianos). The key to its symbolic interpretation is a motto from Rilke – an excerpt from the poem “Herbst” (“Autumn”), from the volume *Neue Gedichte*:

Und in den Nächten fällt die schwere Erde aus allen Sternen in die Einsamkeit.
Wir alle fallen. [...] Und doch ist Einer, welcher dieses Fallen unendlich sanft in
seinen Händen hält (And in the nights the heavy earth falls from a multitude of

stars into aloneness. We are all falling. [...] And yet there's one who with infinite tenderness holds this falling in his hands).

The falling and disappearing cascade corresponds to the first two sentences of that quotation, and thereby also to the sentence from Pascal – only this time the statement about the music of the spheres falling silent will be laden with consequences (including in the music) concerning the lonely Earth. This fall into the abyss creates all the greater an impression in that it follows “Myth” – a movement filled with a solid, horizontal network of palindromes. At the beginning of “Music of the Starry Night,” the Earth almost literally gives way beneath our feet.

Particular attention is due to the fragments of the Bach fugue (played on a piano prepared by means of pieces of paper inserted between the strings, which consequently sounds, as indicated in the score, “like a ghostly-surreal harpsichord,” and additionally resonates with a “dream-like echo” in the vibraphone). Quotations from the fugue appear three times, but they are three different snippets. Their selection was determined by two aspects: the melodic contour of the upper voice and the harmonic meaning of the whole. The first two excerpts from the fugue describe an arc: they rise and then – in keeping with Rilke’s motto – fall, which Crumb marks with two schematic vectors (arrows placed above the quotation), marked *striving* and *but falling*. In the first extract, the music passes from D sharp minor to G sharp minor; in the second, from G sharp minor to D sharp minor (both break off on the dominant of the presumed target key). The third quotation brings a breakthrough: the melodic contour consistently rises; hence the entire excerpt finds itself beneath just a single vector, and the markings are *striving* and *attaining!* In the harmonic aspect, this third quotation from the Bach leads from G sharp minor to F sharp major (again breaking off on the dominant). Both of these factors (the ascending contour and the modulation to F sharp major) suggest an end to the hopeless descent into nothingness and bring a hard-found solution. At the same time, it becomes clear that the tonal plan of “Music of the Starry Nights” constitutes the reverse of the tonal plan of “The Advent:” before, we had passed from F sharp major to D sharp minor (E flat minor); now, we go from D sharp minor to F sharp major (or, as it will turn out, G flat major).

Music of the Starry Night (II): The Fivefold Galactic Bells

Before Crumb’s *lieto fine*, a breakthrough occurs during the solemnly celebrated fermata: *sursum corda*, the sky once more resounds with music! This music resembles a gong for the Elevation of the Host – it is a three-note motif (in the part of the piano and the crotales), which Crumb marks in the score as “The Fivefold

Galactic Bells.” This idea, comprising the notes $e\ sharp^3$, $d\ sharp^3$, $b\ sharp^2$, of equal length, is a variant of the opening motif of the fanfare prophecy $a\ flat^3$, $e\ flat^3$, f^3 (in transposition and at the same time conjunction, since $e\ sharp^3$ equates to f^3).

Yet these two cells have a different harmonic and textural raiment. The fanfare is harmonised by major chords with a minor seventh situated in a high register, preceded by a similar chordal “anacrusis” at a tritone, which attests to the subliminal effect of the octatonic scale (visible particularly in the harmonic stacks of the crotales part, which exceed the material of a dominant seventh chord, although, just like that chord, they are combinations of notes belonging to the octatonic scale). And with Crumb (as with Stravinsky, for instance), the octatonic scale, with its “uncanny” (Freud would have said *unheimlich*) symmetries, connotes a negative, magical, fatal realm. The motif of the galactic bells, meanwhile, is harmonised by the fifths $B_1-F\ sharp$, A_1-E , $F\ sharp_1-C\ sharp$, placed in a low register, which means that the melodic layer forms a “Lydian” tritone in relation to the harmonic drone. As a consequence, the tritone, which had earlier connoted the realm of evil, acquires archaic, euphonic and idyllic traits, while the nascent breakthrough opens up the prospect of a return of the perfect consonances.

The motif of the galactic bells, in line with an annotation in the score, will sound five times, in unaltered form, heard every so often during the “Song of Reconciliation,” though its audibility is gradated: auditive the weakest is the third (middle) iteration, while the most distinct are the first and the fourth, introducing the coda, in which the bells appear for the last time “as from afar.” These procedures, as well as the fact that the galactic bells motif is highlighted with a heading written in capitals, may suggest that Crumb’s intention was to superimpose in this finale two separate and disproportionate compositions (“The Fivefold Galactic Bells” and “Song of Reconciliation”). This simultaneous leading of two independent narratives underscores the fact that the song of the wanderer transformed by the Star-Child sounds synchronously with the galactic bells.

Music of the Starry Night (III): Song of Reconciliation

“Song of Reconciliation” takes the form of a large arc: like “Nocturnal Sounds,” it swells gradually in a textural and dynamic crescendo, before gradually fading away (in this respect, it departs from the pattern of the first movement).

The tonal centre is G flat major. The texture indicates the gamelan style introduced into Western music by Debussy (the most familiar example being “Pagodes” from *Estampes*, 1903). This style is characterised by pentatonics, poly-ostinato and the principle of rhythmic gradation (the higher the register, the shorter the rhythmic values). We find all of these features in exemplary form in the “Song of Reconciliation”.

An alternative, but by no means contradictory, interpretation of this poly-*ostinato* is Messiaen's concept of temporal layers, set out in the first chapter of his *Traité de rythme, de couleur, et d'ornithologie* ("Treatise of rhythm, colour and ornithology"). Messiaen distinguishes the time of stars, the time of mountains, the time of man and time in microphysics, indicating – in reference to the philosophy of Henri Bergson – on the one hand the diversity of the commensurate periods of (objective) physical time and on the other hand the homogeneity of incommensurate (subjective) durations, that is, time as experienced. In the conclusion of his considerations, we read:

The ephemeral who lives a few hours, the man who lives a few years, the mountain that lasts for a few centuries, and the star that lasts millions of centuries, have each accomplished their complete function before they cease to exist. Their duration is then the same. These superimposed times will be different only for a foreign observer. They are identical for those who live them, each one in the totality of its function, power, and duration.¹⁷

The term "with a sense of cosmic time" could refer precisely to such a "gamelanian" temporal multiplicity, or superimposition of incommensurate durations.

But an interpretation of "Song of Reconciliation" ought to take account of at least two other aspects, both of them closely dependent on the use of the gamelan style: first, the recurring motif of a chord cascade from the first phase of "Music of the Starry Night;" secondly, the transformations of the Bachian fugue.

The first question is the simpler of the two, which does not make it any less important. The return of the cascade motif probably refers to the second sentence from the quotation from Rilke: "And yet there's one who with infinite tenderness holds this falling in his hands." The soft, elastic texture of the gamelan style (several layers of differing density) is like an equivalent of those tender hands that hold the falling. In addition, the key (or, more accurately, the tonic) of G flat major, which lasts uninterrupted until the end of the work, marks the attainment of some sacred plane of blissful peace, thanks to which – as in the pentatonic *ostinatos* of Wagner's *Parsifal* – time turns into space.

Against the background of this tensionless, nirvanic pentatonics, there appear (gradually fading) other scalar orders, the most important of which is the whole-tone scale – tensionless like the pentatonic, but not arousing a sense of such bliss. Within this very context, the question of the transformation of the theme of Bach's fugue arises. This is undoubtedly one of the main keys to an interpretation of "Music for a Summer Evening."

¹⁷ Melody Baggech, "An English Translation of Olivier Messiaen's *Traité de rythme, de couleur, et d'ornithologie*, Volume 1" (PhD diss., University of Oklahoma, 1998), 47.

not only the modification of the scale (tonal “gravitation” vs whole-tone “weightlessness”), but also the fact that the subject is altered in the codetta, as a result of which its soft, whole-tone “falling” is extended (*vide* the motto from Rilke).

Also significant are the rhythmic deformations to which Crumb subjects the Bachian theme. As a result of these deformations, the three notes of longest value are highlighted (both audibly and graphically): *c*², *e flat*², *f* (see Example 2b). We are dealing here with something like selective augmentation: the value of each of the highlighted notes of the subject is twice as long as in Bach, whereas the value of the other notes remains unaltered. So why were these specific notes doubled in value? Well, it was probably because they form a retrograde of the galactic bells motif (the bells sound *e sharp*, *d sharp*, *b sharp*, while the highlighted sounds of the altered fugue subject are *c*, *e flat*, *f*; see Example 2a and 2c). This also indicates a continuation of the palindromic techniques from the “Wanderer-Fantasy” and “Myth.” In actual fact, structures of this type occur throughout the finale.

Example 2a George Crumb, *Makrokosmos III: Music of the Starry Night*, p. 18 – galactic bells motif, © Copyright by C.F. Peters Corporation.

Example 2b George Crumb, *Makrokosmos III: Music of the Starry Night*, p. 18 – retrogradation of the bells motif inscribed in the modified fugue subject, © Copyright by C.F. Peters Corporation.

Example 2c George Crumb, *Makrokosmos III: Music of the Starry Night*, p. 22 – symmetry of the bells motif in the source version and hidden in the modified fugue subject, © Copyright by C.F. Peters Corporation.



The following picture emerges: in “Song of Reconciliation,” the Bach subject, which paved the way to the titular reconciliation (by reaching the dominant to F sharp major / G flat major), thereafter fades away, blending into the background, as if it has already fulfilled its role and is going to give way to that which is brought by the newborn Star-Child. Such a reading is confirmed by the further metamorphoses that it undergoes. Immediately after the said iteration, this subject appears in the part of the vibraphone in a form that is even more curtailed and deformed in respect to intervallic structure, this time set entirely within the whole-tone scale.

This process culminates with a grand augmentation of the fugue subject (again irregular: the body of the subject undergoes single augmentation, while the codetta introduces double augmentation), furnished with the performance instruction *like a ghostly presence*. It appears already in the fading phase of “The Song of Reconciliation”, that is, of textural decrescendo (but in a place that is crucial in formal terms, as it comes immediately before the coda): the first piano presents the subject in its complete form, but re-scaled into whole-tone material (as a result, the pentatonic transformation of the fugue’s subject resembles a distorted “low-resolution image” of the original modal theme). That is why its codetta appears in a version expanded by falling notes of the whole-tone scale, that is, in a form close (deprived of its last component) to the earlier occurrence of a modification of this type, which in a way initiated this process of moving the subject from a “theistic” tonal order into a “pantheistic” whole-tone setting (cf. Example 1b). In addition, each note of the subject is harmonised with a six-note chord containing the complete material of this scale (see Example 3).

Example 3 George Crumb, *Makrokosmos III: Music of the Starry Night*, part of the first piano, p. 22 – augmentation of the altered (expanded and whole-tone) fugue subject, lengthened by a bar with an echo effect
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The musical score for Example 3 consists of two staves: Piano I (top) and Piano II (bottom). The key signature is three flats (B-flat, E-flat, A-flat). The time signature is 7/8. The score begins with a 'p sempre (like a ghostly presence)' instruction. The Piano I part features a complex harmonic structure with whole-tone clusters and a pentatonic polyostinato. The Piano II part features a 'quasi-arpeggiated five-note chord in quartal harmony'. The score includes a 'rallentando' marking and a 'Pl. sempre' instruction. The score ends with a '3 = ♩' marking.

Most crucially, in subjecting Bach's theme to such a thorough metamorphosis, Crumb brought it close to the exclamation motif of the whole-tone clusters which in *Makrokosmos III* first appears in "Nocturnal Sounds," where it serves as a double quotation – from "Magic Circle of Infinity" (*Makrokosmos I*, no. 8) and from "Litany of Galactic Bells" (*Makrokosmos II*, no. 11). This exclamation plays a dual role also in "Song of Reconciliation," as it is the last motif of that piece (though utterly devoid of its original "will to power").

To return to the whole-tone augmentation of the subject of the Bach fugue: simultaneously to its presentation, the vibraphone plays a rising whole-tone scale harmonised in three-part chords, but in its alternative transposition (the sum of these two transpositions yields the full 12-tone aggregate); the second piano presents a pentatonic polyostinato, while the glockenspiel and the second piano play a "dismembered," *quasi*-arpeggiated five-note chord in quartal harmony. All of these coincidences and synchronisations (there are more of them: the hand of the gamelan polyostinato soothes, for example, the portentous tritone glissando on the strings) suggest completeness, integrity, the archetype of the Jungian Self, a unity of opposites, a fusion of the shattered modern picture of the world. The arch of crescendo and decrescendo, that great flow and ebb (with no point of climax!) to the song of reconciliation, seems to suggest the expansion of the Self through the acceptance of contradictions – like snowflakes disappearing in the sea, all the conflicts dissolve in the delicate, mysterious hand that holds the whole.

The Unanswered Question

But what exactly is Crumb's solution? In the narrative unfolding on the level of motifs and themes, scales and harmonies, titles and quotations, something appears to be missing. We still do not know what is the content of the New Gospel

which the child-star has brought and which has led to such a harmonious conclusion.¹⁸ And if we don't know that, then it is probably for some reason, and not due to oversight. After all, words, especially those solemnly proclaimed as Words of Truth, sometimes (though not always) lead one astray. In this situation, what does intuition tell us? That we should therefore listen closely to the undertones of the music itself. The coda of this summer serenade is a gradual silencing of dynamics and motion. The composer defines it with the words *serene, desireless*. This is something like nirvana, so literally an "extinguishing of the fire:" resolving the enigma not by finding an answer to it, but by breaking the bonds (fears, desires) that tie us to the enigma. And that is precisely why Crumb's mutation of the topos *per aspera ad astra* could not end with a scene of Dionysian elation, like the finale of the *Ninth Symphony*.

One may, and even ought to, note that this whole sense of liberation is effectuated *in effigie*, in a rite of passage that is merely imagined, in a sublimated mental experiment, in an act of purely aesthetic contemplation. But one may also, and even ought to, add that such "merely" and "purely" are by no means trifles in the conditions of the twentieth century.

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¹⁸ The oratorio *Star-Child* (1977), Crumb's biggest work in terms of scoring, written to Latin liturgical and biblical texts, which expands on the issues addressed in *Makrokosmos*, carries more Christian overtones. Yet the similarities to *Music for a Summer Evening* are manifold: the overall framework is also constituted by the idea of passing from darkness into light, and the closing resolution (to the text "Libera me, Domine, de morte aeterna") is also a liberation, assuming the form of extinguishing.