

Jumping Off The Page to Become Sound

Frank J. Oteri in conversation with George Crumb
at his home in Media, PA

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Videotaped and transcribed by Amanda MacBlane

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1. The Goal of Music Notation

FRANK J. OTERI: Your music, more than that of any composer I can think of, is so sensitive to sound both to the ear and to the eye. It's completely original sounding and looking yet it's also extraordinarily beautiful. How did you come to be so concerned with the way music looks?

GEORGE CRUMB: With its appearance on the page? It may have something to do with my teacher, Ross Lee Finney. He was a stickler for notation and getting the music on the page to look like it sounded, and also to try to find an evocative notation that would convey something to the performers, to jump off the page and want to become sound. He was very much into that himself. He was a student of Alban Berg, whose pages were also rather interesting I think, visually.

FRANK J. OTERI: Now, what was the first piece that you did that defied conventional ideas about notation?

GEORGE CRUMB: I think it was a transitional work for orchestra, which happened to be my doctoral dissertation in Ann Arbor, Michigan; it was a work called *Variazione*, variations for orchestra, large orchestra. I think there the notation is already an important part of the music. But the first time I used bent staves was in a work called *Night Music I*. That was in 1963 and that's a few years after the orchestral work I mentioned. But certain aspects of my notation, like in the orchestral work, were already changing a bit in a visual way.

FRANK J. OTERI: So, even before you started doing this full-blown, do you feel that you came to this way of notating because of certain sounds that you were hearing that you wanted to convey that standard notation just didn't offer? Or was it, as you were saying, an extension of Ross Lee Finney's idea to convey something beyond what notation conveys to the performer—to make it jump off the page?

GEORGE CRUMB: I suppose all of my notation is concerned with being as clear as possible in communicating the necessary information to the performer. There are only a few pages of my music that are involved in what I would call these rather symbolic notations and I think you're referring to those specifically—circular notations that involve bending the staves on the page. And this may reflect what seemed to me a kind of a circular element in the sound itself, in the music itself.

FRANK J. OTERI: So it's to give the performer, or the listener following the score, a sense of the structure of the piece...

GEORGE CRUMB: It's also tied in with actual sound.

FRANK J. OTERI: Now, if a classically trained performer, who is used to playing standard repertoire like Mozart, Haydn, Beethoven, is all of a sudden confronted with one of your scores for the first time, it might not seem very clear to them at first. What were the initial reactions to these scores when performers...?

GEORGE CRUMB: Well, I'm trying to remember back all those years ago. Musicians were kind of interested, not being used to it would be the better expression, but they quickly assimilated that, like pianists who played my music a lot. They learned to memorize the pieces and avoid the impossible reading off the page, for example.

FRANK J. OTERI: Yeah, how would a page-turner deal with a circular score?

GEORGE CRUMB: Yeah, that's right!

FRANK J. OTERI: It almost defies sight-reading in a way...

GEORGE CRUMB: I think of it as more positive, as in a more positive way, as encouraging memorization, which pianists do a lot anyway, so....

FRANK J. OTERI: But then again, when you've memorized a score, you're no longer interacting with the visual element.

GEORGE CRUMB: That's right, then it's in your mind, I suppose. But a lot of these things are just in my piano music, so I'm thinking a little bit practically there, you know.

FRANK J. OTERI: So you wouldn't write those sorts of things in an orchestral score?

GEORGE CRUMB: Well, actually I might, in the score itself, Frank, but in the parts, I would tend to write those out on the horizontal.

2. Working with Performers

FRANK J. OTERI: You haven't written that extensively for orchestra, and maybe this is because of that. We have had the unfortunate situation in the U.S. where a piece of music will get commissioned and maybe you get two rehearsals, three if you're lucky. So there isn't that kind of time that you really need to probe into a score full of mysterious notations.

GEORGE CRUMB: That's true. I have only four, I started to say, representative orchestral works, but even the first of those is transitional, so I have all together only four works. It's true that not only in the notation, but in the sound itself one has less flexibility with orchestra. The minutes that go by are costing money and all these people are on stage. Whereas in small chamber groups it's easier to get at problems of timbre, projection, or rhythmic subtleties, coloristic subtleties, generally, notational things. All of these things would become simplified in a smaller chamber dimension.

FRANK J. OTERI: You've been very lucky to have musicians who have championed your music, which is the exact opposite of an orchestra rehearsing something twice or three times. You've had people who have devoted substantial portions of their performing life to your work. I'm thinking of Jan DeGaetani, whose fantastic recordings of your music really spread it around, more recently David Starobin who has been a real champion of your music and has got you writing for the guitar...

GEORGE CRUMB: Mmhmm. Yes.

FRANK J. OTERI: ...like the pieces about your dogs including the one who keeps wandering back into the room! (laughs)

GEORGE CRUMB: (laughs) That's right.

FRANK J. OTERI: Or the Kronos Quartet, who weren't the initial performers of *Black Angels*, but they certainly have spread it around.

GEORGE CRUMB: They played it quite a bit. Yeah.

FRANK J. OTERI: And they have gotten to know it in a way that allows them to live the music which brings me back to the question of the score. What should a score convey to a performer? What kinds of things should a performer be guided by in a score, in your opinion?

GEORGE CRUMB: Well, I used to tell my students when I was teaching at the University of Pennsylvania, if they would send their scores to Tokyo or Tel Aviv and couldn't be there themselves, they would receive in the mail a taped cassette and their notation is good if it conveyed enough information so that they recognize their piece. And if the essential content of their piece projects to, first of all the performers, and then eventually to the listeners—if it falls short of that, then it's under-notated.

FRANK J. OTERI: Now have you had experiences early on or even recently, when you've heard a performance and thought, "That's not my music?"

GEORGE CRUMB: You know, that may have occurred in earlier years, but I think after a while, Frank, the word gets around, the way your style goes, generally, or certain idiomatic things, certain technical things amongst performers, I'm sure through the grapevine. You know, "This is the way you do this." "There's an easier way to do this difficult thing," you know. It might be a question of harmonic projection, harmonics on the piano or something. So the word gets around, but in more recent years, even the last 20 years, I've generally had kind of solid performances. Not equally inspired, but not disastrous ever. Just very exceptionally... But in the early years, it was kind of a normal thing. After all, we were writing in a time when there were very few people amongst the performers who can do this music at all. You've already spoke of Jan DeGaetani. One could also say Gilbert Kalish, David Burge, you could say Paul Zukofsky. These people were kind of one or two in a category and that's all there were and of course, now they've had students and their students have had students, so that one can go to an out of the way place now and there might be a beautifully competent percussionist, for example, out in the wheat fields of Kansas or something, you know. So things have changed so remarkably that way.

3. Striving for Simplicity

FRANK J. OTERI: Yet despite what we've been talking about here, I wouldn't characterize your music as overly complex.

GEORGE CRUMB: Well, it's not intentionally complex at all. I'm always striving for simplicity. It can never be simple enough for me.

FRANK J. OTERI: The sounds may not necessarily be sounds that a performer is used to making, but they're not necessarily difficult sounds to make once you've figured out how to do them.

GEORGE CRUMB: Once you do them, once you know how to produce them. That's true. I think my music is never difficult in the old-fashioned sense of finger dexterity, you know. It's not difficult like a Chopin etude or any of Brahms...the difficulties are more in the area of timbral projection, balance, getting the fabric of the music, the kind of color projection also in terms of texture.

FRANK J. OTERI: Well, it's interesting. One of the charges that has gotten raised about a lot of contemporary music is that it's music for the eye, you can analyze it on the page but when you hear it, it doesn't pan out. Now, your music is very much about how it looks on the page, but it does pan out to the ear and looking at your score, you might get a structure, you see things like a spiral or circle and understand the structure that way, but it doesn't strike me as being overly structured music in that sense.

GEORGE CRUMB: Well, I suppose my model was always Mozart. I loved him even when I was a tiny kid. (laughs) I was writing in the Mozart style when I was 10 or 11 years old. I thought that was contemporary music, in West Virginia. You know, that was contemporary music. But I admire his economy—the fact that there were so few notes on the page. The fact that every note was expected to accomplish something.

FRANK J. OTERI: That's so funny because that famous accusation that the nobleman said about *The Abduction from the Seraglio*—too many notes.

GEORGE CRUMB: Too many notes, my dear Mozart. (laughs) That's right and Mozart said, "Which notes would you delete, your majesty?"

4. The Working Process

FRANK J. OTERI: Right. Now to that question then, the question of analysis. What does a listener get from your music following a score that say a listener not following a score might not get?

GEORGE CRUMB: I think that most listeners probably don't look at a score. Do they really? That's more, I suppose if you're a terribly dedicated amateur or an enthusiast about music, maybe you'd get into the notation somewhat, but I think of the score primarily for the performer and anything I invent in terms of the visual aspect I hope will focus musically then to the listener. I think you're implying another area too maybe, Frank. I never was much into a kind of analysis—self-analysis or any kind of analysis about music. It's been my experience that people who know nothing about music technically sometimes can have an incredible awareness of everything that's happening. I can understand that immediately because I feel that same way when I hear Indian music. I wouldn't know a raga from a balalaika, but I feel that that music is just as clear as a Beethoven, you know.

FRANK J. OTERI: Now in terms of this question, to get back to what you were saying about practicality and mailing your scores to Tokyo and getting a tape back and if it's your piece than you did something right—um, there's something delightfully impractical, I think, about your scores. I remember I was a high school student and I got a copy of the score of *Ancient Voices of Children* and I still have it and, in fact, I was going to bring it today and have you autograph it, but we're carrying all this stuff and I didn't want to damage it...it's so huge and it's hard to carry around!

GEORGE CRUMB: It's hard to carry, yeah.

FRANK J. OTERI: It's not exactly practical!

GEORGE CRUMB: Some of my scores I call master scores for kangaroos, you know. But it's true. Hasn't that become a common thing with lots of composers in our time?

FRANK J. OTERI: Well, it's interesting, because yesterday we went out to the Subito warehouse and they're doing all this stuff. They're providing a service for any composer who pays for their service to have their scores copied and bound and printed up and they have these fancy machines that staple the parts together and hand sew them and glue them and, I thought to myself, "Well, you couldn't do a George Crumb score." They certainly couldn't do the *Ancient Voices of Children* score. It's too big.

GEORGE CRUMB: Yeah, yeah. Yeah.

FRANK J. OTERI: So I guess the question for you then is, could these scores have been presented differently and still convey what you wanted to convey?

GEORGE CRUMB: No, in a way I think the size of the score, in a way, was linked to my concept of the notation. For example, there's a movement as you know, in *Ancient Voices*, that's based again on this circular thing.

FRANK J. OTERI: "Dance of the Sacred Life-Cycle."

GEORGE CRUMB: And that had to be on one page really, and that sort of demanded a certain size score page to accommodate that kind of notation and then that, of course, became the size for the score.

FRANK J. OTERI: You've been extremely fortunate, as have all of us in fact, to have had a publisher who's printed these things up. For the most part, all of your published scores are from your hand-written manuscripts.

GEORGE CRUMB: Yeah, they're either hand-written manuscript or in some scores I used a kind of transfer process, but even then most of that was even pen and ink.

FRANK J. OTERI: I notice on your piano an actual binder of blank score paper with a bunch of staves, but for most of your music you probably begin with a completely blank piece of paper with no staves.

GEORGE CRUMB: Oh, yes. Like, this representative page is all hand-drawn as far as the staves... I may sketch in a sketch book that's printed score paper to save time, but once I get to my own copy—this for example wouldn't show the structure of the piece which is involved in these little units of ostinato and it leaps out clearly that the piano, two staves reduced to the one, every time it occurs, you see? So in a way, it's a visual fortification or emphasis of a musical idea.

FRANK J. OTERI: Interesting, so do think there are any advantages to computer notation programs?

GEORGE CRUMB: Well, the computer notation now is very beautiful but in the early days it was atrocious. It looked scrawny and undernourished. It was horrible. Now it's almost as good as, let's say, German engraving in the great days, say the 1880s, 1890s, the characters are beautiful and it's possible to reproduce the highest standards of engraving. It takes time to do that just as in every process, but there's a charm in a more manual way of working too—one's own manuscript. I love to play Mozart from copies of his own handwriting. His rondos for piano... Of course, you have to learn to read the C soprano clef to do that, but that's easy to learn. You know, you get past that barrier and you're playing from Mozart's script! It gives you a different sense.

FRANK J. OTERI: Well, to get back to this, this thing we started with, this sensitivity—I find there's also a magical quality to almost all of your music and part of that magic is your personal touch and the computer kind of takes away the magic a little bit.

GEORGE CRUMB: Just like engraving erases the personality of all the old masters. You know, their original copy had so much character. Chopin, Brahms.

FRANK J. OTERI: Although those Beethoven scores were impossible to read.

GEORGE CRUMB: They would've been impossible, but they're just loaded with character. Of course, there's a limit of practicality. You know, one could hardly read Opus 111 from Beethoven's copy.

FRANK J. OTERI: But if he would've had *Finale* or *Sibelius*, it would have been very different.

GEORGE CRUMB: You know, it's interesting. All of my students use those ways of making scores nowadays and I guess, for me I've done the other way for so long I probably wouldn't ever consider converting, but generally, you're right, it's being done. And it's very useful. It makes very clean scores. They're ultra-legible.

FRANK J. OTERI: Do you feel something is lost though?

GEORGE CRUMB: Maybe something is lost, but it was lost anyway in the period of engraving. The thing we're talking about.

FRANK J. OTERI: Do you feel like if a composer starts creating a piece using this rather than working with pen and pencil...

GEORGE CRUMB: I don't know if there's a mistake in the actual writing that...I don't know. I know of composers that work directly into that machine, which I think probably is a mistake. I see it more as a copying device, not as a way of notating. Even when I was teaching, students would bring in sketches as if they were published things. They looked like engraved music and these were the most fleeting first sketches of a piece and, you know, here they are immortalized in beautiful type. It was disconcerting.

FRANK J. OTERI: Well, I make all my notes on one of these little hand-held devices and this has replaced a notepad for me.

GEORGE CRUMB: You know, maybe it's just what one is used to. Times change and however, you know, you work. I have to do a lot of sketching like, you know, I have these books and I throw away so much. I work very slowly. I'm a stumbling composer. It's like plodding. I have to work through all kinds of wrong ideas before I can find the right one. But people work in different ways.

5. Theatricality and Setting Texts

FRANK J. OTERI: Now, one of the unique aspects of your music which, of course, you can't really convey with computer notation and I don't know if you could even conceive of it if you were thinking directly into a computer are all of the visual elements that go along with so many of these pieces. From performers wearing costumes to the performers walking around while they're playing, being off-stage, singing, having the pianist suddenly sing or shout or having a clarinetist start playing another instrument, like a hand-held symbol or something. What prompted you to think of those extra elements, the elements beyond the actual instruments?

GEORGE CRUMB: My music accommodates many elements like that. It would be exactly analogous to opera. You know, like a recording of opera, you're missing a lot of what's going on. Sometimes things can be incorporated in a recording, like Bridge has done, is doing a series of my music now and later this summer they will be recording *Echoes of Time and the River*. Well, how do you record the processions? You have to have a sense of the music actually moving in space, and one should be able to hear that certain musicians are describing an actual change of position, you know. But they're going to work that out, I think, with a microphone technique rather than undergo the risk of the footsteps and the extra noises. But there are certain things, like if there are certain theater elements like lighting or some kind of costume, anything like that, of course, it's not sound related. That's lost like an opera décor or...

FRANK J. OTERI: It's interesting to me because there are all of these theatrical elements in your music, yet to the best of my knowledge, you've never written an opera or a musical theater piece.

GEORGE CRUMB: No, although in the early days two or three of my vocal works were called mini-operas of a new kind, referring to *Ancient Voices* and *Night of the Four Moons* as a kind of genre that wasn't precisely a cantata, but that pulled in dramatic elements and was a little bit operatic in a miniature way.

FRANK J. OTERI: Would you be interested at all in writing an opera?

GEORGE CRUMB: I used to say no. I've been looking recently...I won't even mention the subject because probably I will talk myself out of it. I might become attracted to it someday if I really feel myself pulled in that direction strongly.

FRANK J. OTERI: What pieces do you want to write that you haven't written yet?

GEORGE CRUMB: Oh, there are a lot of those. In fact, I'm working on getting back into a little more sustained writing again. And some of these are ideas that were sketched out a bit in earlier years, so I've just completed a new piano work and a new vocal work for my daughter Anne based on Appalachian songs, a cycle for percussion, piano, and voice.

FRANK J. OTERI: Texts have been very important to you; the poetry of Federico García Lorca, in particular, inspired nine different pieces of your music. That's an amazing amount of effort to devote to one person's work.

GEORGE CRUMB: The extended cycle, yes.

FRANK J. OTERI: What initially drew you to Lorca?

GEORGE CRUMB: It was during my student years, it was the setting of one poem by a classmate. A fellow student used "The Boy Wounded By the Water" — that's the English translation. And it was beautiful...well, I loved his musical setting and this got me into the poetry. It was set in English in his setting. And I got a bilingual edition then and got more and more into the poetry, but decided, as dangerous as it was, that it should be in Spanish. Because I have no real facility with Spanish, I read a little but and when I say dangerous, it is a leap to set another language that's not absolutely familiar to you.

FRANK J. OTERI: Yet in some ways, it's even more precarious for composers to set American English and make it work.

GEORGE CRUMB: Well, that's true too. That's true too! (laughs) That's right. I've often thought that the greatest models for American English settings would be the popular song literature of the '30s and '40s. It treats English as a parlendo language essentially which is not even as lyrical as German is, say, in Schumann and Brahms.

6. Tradition and Factionalism

FRANK J. OTERI: Now, in terms of setting the language, and this harks back to questions of performers' backgrounds, if you come to a piece in American English, with a bel canto background, or a heldentenor background, you know, singing Wagner or singing Puccini, it's not going to sound like American English and yet, if the score exists in a certain way on the page, those guidelines for interpretation are not necessarily there and this gets back to the question from the very beginning—how much do you convey on the page, what do you say. What kind of training, you are fortunate and we are fortunate as a result, that the sound of your music is familiar to so many players so you will get a performance that is characteristic of your style, but if somebody doesn't know your style, how do they get that without hearing it?

GEORGE CRUMB: Interesting question, but I think, you know, today recordings are considered a kind of an extension of publication, it's yet another source to clarify, particularly if the composer is in on those recording sessions, like the series I'm doing with the Starobins. I'm trying to be in on all those sessions as a way of kind of doing just that—making it a supplement to the publication. One could refer and say, well, this is really what he meant, you know. But it's a very good question. There's an erosion of time too. I've talked about what they call the performance tradition but also there's a certain erosion I think that maybe happened with composers like Beethoven to an extent, you know. Where the tradition is not so certain anymore about certain aspects. Tempos, mostly, in his case. We think his metronome was broken. But, maybe internally, if one knows the style, one studies a range of works, you could develop a sense of what seems appropriate.

FRANK J. OTERI: Well, this question of tradition, in all the things you've said this afternoon, you're definitely connected to that Western classical tradition, but your music is so its own thing. Where do you feel you connect to the rest of the Western classical music tradition?

GEORGE CRUMB: Well, I feel old music is interrelated and all of the classical tradition, whatever I know about tradition, is part of that, but also all of the non-Western music I've heard in all of my life—popular music, folk song, jazz, all music is interrelated. I've never believed in categories, you know. I think everything can come together. I have a recent piece on a Thelonious Monk tune, and I love the tune. It's just as elegant harmonically as anything by Chopin. And as a student even there were beautiful recordings in those days already of a vast range of Asian classical music, South American, African. And that entered my ear; I didn't study it. I'd never had a course in ethnomusicology.

FRANK J. OTERI: Well, it's so interesting because you've used instruments from other cultures. The *Lux Aeterna* uses a sitar and tabla, although it doesn't sound like any other sitar and tabla music there is! Or you use a banjo, but it certainly doesn't sound like Appalachian music or bluegrass.

GEORGE CRUMB: Yeah, yeah. Well, I think those things can happen. That's maybe an illustration of this crazy thing when you see all musics as kind of interpenetrating, you know. I think that's the characteristic of our own day—that we've broken categories.

FRANK J. OTERI: Well, it's so interesting because nowadays in so-called contemporary American classical, serious music (there's no real good word for it), there are so many different separate fiefdoms. There are the people who do 12-tone music still or the disciples of that, the post-serialists. There are people who do minimalist music. There are the people who are neo-romantics who have gone back to writing this big, expansive orchestral stuff using lush late-romantic harmonies. People doing stuff based on chance. People doing stuff with other tuning systems, microtonal stuff. You're somehow outside of all of that, yet there are elements of all of it, you know, that connect and I think that you are one of the few composers people in all of those camps respect.

GEORGE CRUMB: Well, it's just a philosophical view of my own. To me all music is philosophical, and philosophically contemporary. I've had students who, maybe a certain measure in Bach sets them off. You know, they make a connection themselves. They're interested suddenly...a whole world is opened to them, there's this big circle, arc, back into time and they've touched a point that sets them off on a way of their own. I believe this. I've always been reluctant to think of it in terms of schools, all that sort of thing—post-this or post-that. I see everything as interpenetrating. Maybe there's a penalty to pay for that, too, that I don't know about, but that's just the way I think.

FRANK J. OTERI: Well, it's interesting, because so many of these people in these various camps pretty much hate each other as we've discovered time and time again on our forum: we doing something about serialism and all the minimalists say that their stuff is terrible and we do something on minimalism and all the serialists say, "How dare you write about this stuff; that isn't music?" Yet, here you're essentially outside of all that, and you've been acknowledged with a Pulitzer Prize, you're in the *Norton Anthology of Music*, which is the canon! You've even won a Grammy award for *Star Child*...

GEORGE CRUMB: You know, I'd have to say Frank, there are contributions in all these areas. I was influenced by Webern in my early years. There are a lot of valuable additions to vocabulary that came through Schoenberg and the other guys, especially in my opinion, Alban Berg. The minimalists. It's a very interesting concept and all good music is kind of minimalist in a way. Sometimes you can violate the principle of economy for a special effect, but as a general principle, it's interesting... So even there I can't have this feeling that there's one way. I never believed in this idea that there's one central stream of music. Otherwise, there're all these composers you can't account for like Debussy and Mussorgsky and Berlioz and Chopin, they were outside this European mainstream. I think this is fictitious and I think that any excuse that there was for that way of defining music has completely evaporated by now. What is the central tradition today? There isn't such a thing.

7. The Future of Music

FRANK J. OTERI: Well, it's interesting because there's an area that you haven't explored in your music or at least in any of the stuff that's been published and is out there and it was certainly a very big undercurrent when you rose to prominence in the 1960s and that's the whole field of electronic music. I mean, you've certainly amplified instruments and I think you've even used an electric guitar here and there. But you've never really plunged into work on synthesizers or wrote tape pieces or computer music. That somehow stayed outside your work.

GEORGE CRUMB: Well, yes. I think because I need the human element underscored in my music, but even there I'd have to say that electronic music, the advent of that music, has had an enormous effect on all music today, including my music very much. I think probably we will hear Mozart differently because of this. Our ears are turned. And as a matter of fact, it started before the first synthesized sound; it started when records were first being made. Our hearing was already changing with the very earliest recordings. It gave us a different sense of sound and so forth. The microphone placed a little different, you know, or bringing out certain partials or qualities of attack or decay. Our hearing is totally changed and I've never been as attracted to the pure form of it. I mean, I can't admire the machine. I think music depends on the bravurial amount and we depend on performers to convey that element of excitement and the machine itself can't convey it excitement unless it's compositional.

FRANK J. OTERI: So then, the future of this music?

GEORGE CRUMB: Mmhhh. Who knows? I would say that it's limitless. It could go in any direction, but I suspect it's going to be rather totally, involving the total musical culture.

FRANK J. OTERI: A lot of music that's evolved in the recording studio, using electronics, is not notatable and as a result doesn't exist on the page. You might have people improvising in the studio or creating in the studio or shaping sounds in the studio. Brian Eno, who began his career making rock albums, once famously said his instrument is the recording studio, and this is true for many of today's composers including Paul Lansky and Virgil Moorfield whom we featured in *NewMusicBox* a few months ago.

GEORGE CRUMB: That makes sense. You know, in the sense that I think too, you know, it's not a detriment that it's can't be really notated conveniently, because jazz would have the same objection... Look, Gunther Schuller in his big book on jazz was trying to notate some of that stuff. It looked impossible in the actual, you know, you're getting into proportions and complex things, but it made what seemed simple by ear, a very complex, unnatural thing on paper. It wasn't invented for paper.

FRANK J. OTERI: Now in terms of the future of music, your son is a composer.

GEORGE CRUMB: Yes, uh-huh.

FRANK J. OTERI: Your daughter is a jazz vocalist and also a musical theater and classical vocalist. You've taught for many years, and you've talked about practicalities. What else should younger composers and musicians be thinking about?

GEORGE CRUMB: Well, I suppose that you could tell students a lot of things. One of the safest things to tell them is to really, what the bottom line is, is discovering their own persona. Who are they? There's nothing new about that. That's what the old Greeks talked about too, you know. Who am I? All about discovering yourself. And that's not so much in your control. You can just get at it obliquely, you know, and hope that it develops. But there are so many things that choke music. You mentioned the period of the '50s or the '60s that carried over where there was a sense that there was an international style that was kind of, you could describe it as either post-Schoenberg, or post-Webern. It choked the life out of a lot of composers because everybody was trying to do a style that was, first of all, done better already by those people. You know, you can't re-write that music and make it better. It had a lot to do with canceling out personality. I think it did incalculable damage. I was so happy when the idea became more prevalent that this is just a man-made definition of musical style. There could be a thousand styles... There may have been a very few composers, my colleague George Rochberg, I think, was the absolute master of the post-Schoenberg style. He did better than anybody else, in his early music when he was involved in that, it didn't dampen his energies as a composer and his personality came through very strongly in those early works.

FRANK J. OTERI: But then he certainly turned around.

GEORGE CRUMB: Oh, yeah. Then he did a complete about-face. Yeah. That's just an example of how some people can overcome that kind of suppressing effect that—it may be the idea that there is only one way. I always hated that idea...

FRANK J. OTERI: Well, it's funny. I'm finding out that even in my own music. When I was in college in the very early-'80s it was the very last gasp of that post-Webernian, pointillistic orthodoxy, and I did everything I could to avoid it, but now that that style has fallen from grace, I find it really interesting to listen to and perhaps even work in.

GEORGE CRUMB: I find it beautiful. I've always loved Webern especially and Berg! Good Heavens! What a composer! And moments in Schoenberg, so I'm not speaking against the origins of that, but it became a kind of university music...

FRANK J. OTERI: Are there any composers or styles of music that you are not at all interested in?

GEORGE CRUMB: It's hard to think of any that don't have something in them.

FRANK J. OTERI: Today's pop music. Do you listen to it?

GEORGE CRUMB: Oh, yes, I hear it because my son has an enormous collection of international rock. Anytime I make a trip to any country, I have to bring back what's going on in the contemporary field. He has maybe a couple thousand CDs.

FRANK J. OTERI: Wow.

GEORGE CRUMB: And that stuff's floating around the house.

FRANK J. OTERI: I want to look at that collection!

GEORGE CRUMB: (laughs) Yeah, you can take a peek! I can say my music has amplification too, so maybe there's a little influence in that direction.

FRANK J. OTERI: Any thoughts on rap music?

GEORGE CRUMB: Rap? I don't know anything about it much. I've heard a couple of examples. It didn't bowl me over but maybe I'm missing something, you know.

8. On Forms

FRANK J. OTERI: You've spoken quite a bit about Chopin and Mozart and Brahms; these names just keep coming up. And you've written solo piano music—although it's for an extended piano. You've written for string quartet, but again it's an amplified and somehow extended string quartet. And there are the handful of orchestral pieces. But you haven't really written anything in conventional forms. You haven't really written an absolute string quartet or a violin and piano sonata or a symphony or a woodwind quintet or anything like that. Do those formal structures and conventional combinations still have anything to offer younger composers or should we all be looking for new structures and combinations?

GEORGE CRUMB: It's an interesting point. I'm not sure I have an answer to it. It seems to have two parts. One thing is the actual kind of ensemble. Few people write piano trios anymore. There are a few exceptional ones in those categories, those genres, but... And the other thing is the forms that were attached—the sonata, the rondo, the scherzo. The forms probably would be hard to use these days because it depended on a functional tonality which is kind of lost to us now. But I think it makes us obliged to find other forms to fill, to make the music.

FRANK J. OTERI: Yet interestingly enough, someone like Roger Sessions wrote great 12-tone sonatas and symphonies.

GEORGE CRUMB: So did Bartók. Not 12-tone, but I mean, hugely complex in terms of dissonance and chromatic possibilities. But you're right, they were structured very much like the old forms.

FRANK J. OTERI: And as a corollary to that I would say that although your music definitely goes into new harmonic areas, it is essentially operating from the sense of a tonal center.

GEORGE CRUMB: I think so, yeah.

FRANK J. OTERI: One of the most beautiful things in all of your music is the end of *Voice of the Whale*, for flute, cello, and piano, which after a great deal of tonal ambiguity ends triumphantly in what is undeniably B major!

GEORGE CRUMB: It's used in sort of a non-functional way though, again. It's like one's taking a bath in the tonality of B major. In a sense, it's like you're bathing in that tonality. Um, I suppose that one can make that gesture still, but I would find it hard. I shouldn't speak for other composers, but I would find it hard to use some of the older forms in a modern way. I had too much influence from composers like Robert Schumann, all of his early works were kind of in the fantastic variety, you know. Carnival music and different kinds of dances and then weird images and poetically inspired and inventing new cycles that had nothing to do with conventional forms, very much to do with conventional forms. Although later on he of course wrote his symphonies and so forth and found his own way of using those forms. But nowadays, well, I think it's really just open. There'll be a renaissance maybe of the sonata form 10 years from now. Somebody will discover a new way to do that. It's hard to close off any possibilities, I think.

FRANK J. OTERI: Well, I hate to close this off, but that really is a closing thought, I think.

GEORGE CRUMB: Well, yeah. I like to think of it as encouraging, saying that it's all open really, you know, that nobody knows where music is going. But it's a nice thought to think that it can go so many directions still.