

DAVID PATRICK
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MUSIC

THE PHILADELPHIANS ON THE AIR

1-3 p.m. Sunday on WRTI-FM (90.1): The Philadelphia Orchestra performs Mahler's *Symphony No. 9 in D*. Yannick Nézet-Séguin conducts.



Composer George Crumb, whose approaching birthday is the inspiration for "Zeitgeist: George Crumb at 90," at the Annenberg Center for the Performing Arts. SARAH SHATZ

A milestone celebration

"Zeitgeist: George Crumb at 90" festival focuses on the visionary Pulitzer-winning composer.

His music evokes landscapes where something sinister lurks at every turn. But in real life, the Pulitzer Prize-winning composer George Crumb has been haunted by a greater nightmare throughout many of his 90 years: Will the listening public find his titles more interesting than his music?

He laughed about that — kind of — the other day when talking from his home in Media as a three-day festival in his honor approached, presented by Bowerbird, the University of Pennsylvania Department of Music, and the the Annenberg Center for the Performing Arts.

Some titles on the program for "Zeitgeist: George Crumb at 90" (Oct. 10-12) are, indeed, unbeatable. *Eleven Echoes of Autumn* is one, though the music suggests an autumn that, like many Crumb pieces, seems well beyond earthly experience.

Crumb's music asks performers to play instruments with alternate techniques and with an attitude that some compare to that of a shaman: "Someone who is interpreting myths for the festival, describes it, expanding on observations made by early Crumb intervenes between the divine and the audience."

"That's always the case with music in general, but even more intensely with the deeply visionary way that George's music goes," Primosch said.

A single Crumb piece requires as many as 130 percussion instruments, which is what Orchestra 2001 assembled for *The River of Life* at the Cherry Street Pier in September. So the thought of three concerts might seem overwhelming, even for Bowerbird, which has produced ambitious festivals celebrating John Cage and Morton Feldman.

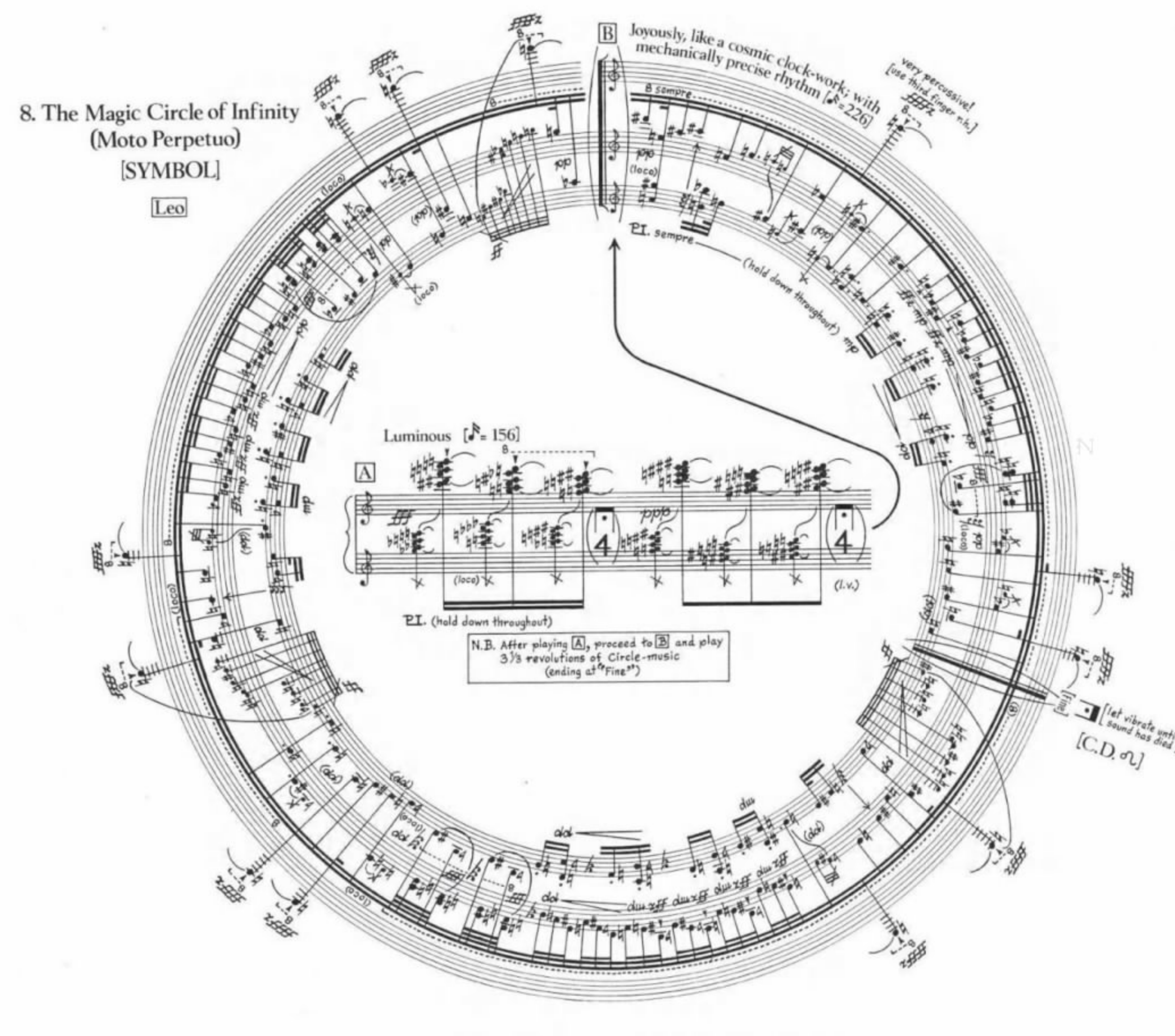
This is its first partnership with the Annenberg Center, whose Harold Prince Theater in University City will be the 90th birthday festival venue.

A present to a Philadelphia presence

Crumb's Philadelphia presence during his Penn faculty tenure (1965-1997) and productive post-retirement years (he just finished a major new piano work) means that performances of his music happen even without a landmark birthday (Oct. 24) on the horizon. So a three-day Crumb fest feels almost practical — not something one associates with Crumb.

Penn's resident Daedalus Quartet already knows the challenging *Black Angels*, which employs eerie sounds from crystal glasses as well as vocal exclamations. Crumb's recent *Metamorphoses Book I* will be played by Margaret Leng Tan, who premiered the piece in 2017.

The predominance of keyboard works in the festival might sound practical, too. But because Crumb pieces ask to have the strings played inside the piano, each pianist needs markers showing what string to play — and what part of the string to pluck. "So if you have three or four different pianists, they all need to mark ahead of time and need to know whose marks are whose," said Dustin Hurt, Bowerbird founder and co-curator of the festival. "I



knew there would be some surprises."

The reward is an experience like none other. "When *Black Angels* was done two years ago [at the Penn Museum] there was a line out the door," noted Christopher Gruits, executive and artistic director of the Annenberg Center.

Such audiences don't have the barriers to the music that audiences once did, and are bound to attend this festival given the low ticket prices of \$10 to \$20. "*Black Angels* is not strange to me," says Hurt. Recordings are a key factor — the leader is the Bridge label, whose George Crumb Edition is up to Vol. 18 — that sets new standards of performances.

"The musicians aren't put out by some of the strange sounds that I want from string instruments ... which sometimes go a little over the edge. They play it as music, which is the way I heard it," said Crumb. "Now there are 24 recordings of the *Makrokosmos*. And they're wonderful. I couldn't believe it myself."

Crumb for the 21st century

The April premiere of Crumb's newest work at Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center, *KRONOS-KRYPTOS*, was the talk of Curtis Institute percussionists in the days to follow: A great new work had been born for this sometimes-overlooked instrument.

Ancient Voices of Children, which is considered his masterwork, turned up alongside the Mahler's *Symphony No. 4* in Stuttgart earlier this year, conducted by the fashionable young Teodor Currentzis.

That's a particularly encouraging development: *Ancient Voices of Children* is emerging from the long shadow cast by the singular, passionate Crumb advocates who first brought his works into being, such as mezzo-soprano Jan DeGaetani. (And she was so musically astute that she could accurately guess the pitch of any given florescent light.)

Crumb puts everybody on a steep learn-

Musical score for "The Magic Circle of Infinity." Courtesy of C.F. Peters Corp.

CLASSICAL MUSIC

► Zeitgeist: George Crumb at 90

The festival consists of three themed programs, all at 8 p.m. at the Annenberg Center, 3680 Walnut St.

"Out of Darkness" (Oct. 10) by the Arcana New Music Ensemble, featuring *Eleven Echoes of Autumn* and *Madrigals, Book I-IV*.

"Kosmos" (Oct. 11) with keyboardists Margaret Leng Tan and Adam Tendler, featuring *Makrokosmos, Book I* and *Metamorphoses, Book I*. The program includes an intermission interview with George Crumb and James Primosch.

"Black Angels" (Oct. 12) by Daedalus Quartet, and friends, featuring *Black Angels*.

Tickets: \$10-\$20.

Information: 215-898-3900, annenbergcenter.org, bowerbird.org

ing curve: Annotator James M. Keller once described Crumb's *Vox Balaenae* as "beyond that of strictly human experience ... there's no composer whose music comments so specifically on the world of three billion years ago."

Early works at the "Crumb at 90" festival, though, are strangely normal. As a teenage composer from West Virginia, he wrote perfectly charming French art songs. What changed him was a cold-sweat realization that he was writing music that might as well have been written by others before him.

Then came exposure to non-Western music: "When I was a student at the Universi-

ty of Michigan, I picked up a lot of things that I later stole — instruments and sounds and harmonic possibilities from every nationality — African music, Chinese, Japanese, music from India."

Poets, painters, music in the round

Also during his doctoral years at the University of Michigan, Crumb discovered the poetry of Federico Garcia Lorca (1898-1936), beginning an unlikely but hugely fruitful beyond-the-grave collaboration.

Lorca's contemporaries and contacts were both earthy (composer Manuel de Falla) and surreal (filmmaker Luis Buñuel and painter Salvador Dali) — qualities that were quite in step with the American avant-garde of the 1960s and '70s.

The Crumb/Lorca fusion will be most apparent at the festival in *Madrigals, Book I-IV*, performed Oct. 10, which has many of the Crumb tropes: exclamatory, extravagant vocal settings; percussion that's searing, glistening, and rumbling in the distance; foreboding silences; whistling that seems to wander in space ...

His most recent jumping-off points have been paintings. *Metamorphoses Books I and II* are what he calls his *Pictures at an Exhibition*. The just-finished one includes movements inspired by Paul Klee, Marc Chagall, and Andrew Wyeth (yes, *Christina's World*). Look for it to premiere by Marcantonio Barone at a date to be determined, with a recording to follow.

Less easily explained than Crumb's inspirations is how his music is printed.

"There are spectacular whimsical graphic elements to it," said Primosch. "In his first book of *Makrokosmos*, there's a movement written in a circle. When I was learning it I had to photocopy the page and take scissors to it. I suppose there are some people who can memorize the music without having done that, by spinning the music around in a circle."

The original reason for that format is that the movement is titled *The Magic Circle of Infinity*, with the request that it be played "like cosmic clockwork."

'I've always envied Mozart'

And that's one of Crumb's more lighthearted moments. His music has a pronounced dark side that's hard to square with his easygoing personality, love of animals, and stable home life. (He and his wife Elizabeth have been married since 1949.)

Asked to talk about the dark stuff, Crumb tends to sidestep. "I hope I have some joyous pieces," he says.

So composing, for him, is instinctive and visionary but ... easy?

"It seems like everything is resistant. You have to fight your way to get to the meaning of what you want to do," Crumb said. "I've always envied people like Mozart, whose music just rolled off his fingers. It's not easy for me to write anything."

"There are some Lorca things I still might get around to. I'd love to do something with the *Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam*. But it takes me a long time to write a piece. I'm not sure if I'll ever do all the things I'm interested in. But I'll do what I can."

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