

UDC: 78.08

It May Sound Scary: Gothic Underpinnings in George Crumb's *Madrigals*

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Summary:

Musicologists often reveal a certain degree of helplessness when considering the music of contemporary American composer George Crumb due to its seemingly obvious structural and expressive means in which he creates musical coherence using symmetrical, parallel, circular and mirror constructions, easily detectable through pitch-class analysis. Crumb employs music and visual symbolism, theatricality, and ritualistic references, often derived from his reading of literary sources such as the works of the writer Federico García Lorca. Informed by a framework of Neo-Gothic literary theory, which examines the representation of lurking repressed desires as latent indicators for prominent cultural and societal tendencies, this paper contextualizes structural and expressive parameters in Crumb's Madrigals, Vol. 2, written to the selected lines from Lorca's oeuvre. We argue that Crumb's Neo-Gothic reading of the text intensifies large-scale semantic elements of Lorca's poetry, creating its uber-layer, while offering insights into the poet's complex and ambiguous imagery, especially centered on themes of inversion and perversion.

Keywords: *Crumb, Lorca, analysis, interpretation, neo-Gothic, uncanny, intertextuality, modernism, baroque.*

For years, I have been battling with my students' descriptions of music through adjectives, such as "happy," "sad," "scary," or worst of all, "emotional." I always thought of these references as amateur, unprofessional, intellectually helpless. It was not until my friend Stephanie Saunders-Pandolfi de Rinaldis, professor of Spanish Language and Literature, and I decided to pursue a collaborative project on George Crumb and Federico García Lorca that I changed my views. After listening to Crumb's music, Stephanie thought that it sounded "gothic" and it blew my mind. Her remark suggested a completely new and unexpected for me framework for interpreting music of a composer, whose music has intrigued me for a while, both for its unconventional structural properties and its connection to the poetry of Lorca. This paper explores one of Crumb's Lorca compositions through the prism of its "gothic" – or "scary" – underpinnings.

Interpretation of George Crumb's music is a difficult task for musicologists to tackle. Crumb (b. 1926) has been long celebrated as an eminent contemporary American composer; yet, his music is often dismissed by analysts as one lacking structural intricacy and mainly based on timbral novelties, performative theatricality and notational symbolism. Crumb himself described his compositional style as "mosaic": "...this method of construction consists of the elaboration and expansion of minute pitch and rhythmic elements. From these I tend to build larger shapes, as opposed to beginning with and working with larger units" [Shuffett 459]. In other words, from a purely structuralist analysis, there is not much going on: Crumb's score manifests itself from its first pitches, often filled with dissonant harmonies and melodic shapes, particularly favoring minor seconds and major sevenths. Crumb organizes his pitch and rhythmic material in either a parallel or symmetrical manner, utilizing inversion- and motive-saturation techniques. Successful pitch-class analyses of Crumb's music have

shown tight coherence in his works, but these explorations have done little to contextualize the composer's music, to advocate its uniqueness beyond stylistic and structural nonconformity.

The literary ground of Crumb's *Madrigals*, twentieth-century Spanish poet, Federico García Lorca (1898-1936), a zealous member of the Generation of '27, a group of poets who implemented avant-garde styles in their works, remains one of the most prolific and internationally renowned writers of Spain's long, celebrated literary corpus. Although Lorca's most passionate medium was music, he is most recognized for his poetry—often laden with resonating images of the otherwise ephemeral Gypsy ethnic group and his home region of Southern Spain—and later for his plays. As a dramatist, whose works were censored throughout the majority of Francisco Franco's dictatorship, Lorca exposed the misgivings of the bourgeois and portrayed families as metaphoric substructures of extreme oppression. The writer's own persecution, as a left-leaning artist, culminated at the age of thirty-eight when he was executed by Nationalists.

Since Crumb spent many years of his long professional career setting texts by Federico García Lorca, these works usually become the subject of analytical explorations.¹ Starting in 1963, Crumb's Lorca-inspired oeuvre includes four books of *Madrigals*, *Songs*, *Drones*, and *Refrains of Death*, and *Ancient Voices of Children*, among other compositions. Then Crumb came back to Lorca in his *Federico's Little Songs for Children* (1986) and *The Ghosts of Alhambra* (2008). While it is evident that there is something in Lorca's poetry that resonates with Crumb on a deep level, very little has been done by scholars to conceptualize and contextualize this connection beyond the recurring theme of a circular nature of life and death, often manifested by the composer through both his text choices and his striking graphic notation. For example, a recent 2012 MA thesis on the Crumb-Lorca connection by Amy Fleming postulates that "Crumb used his music above all else to serve the text...while his approach to composition was—and still is—in many ways intuitive, the music itself is highly systematic" [4]. This study, naturally based on preexisting Crumb scholarship, manifests established analytical tradition of recognizing Crumb's Lorca settings as an "enhancement" of the poetic text, but fails to offer a large-scale framework of Crumb's dealings with the complexities and subtleties of Lorca's poetry – the poetic phenomenon that overshadows any artistic reinterpretation of it. Crumb's own rather vague description of his compositional process leaves room for creative analytical thinking: ". . . there was a long gestation period. I tried several times and I couldn't find the match, I couldn't find the way to approach it, so eventually I went to the poetry, always referred to the poetry, and tried to capture the images and the musical thematics" [Fleming 21].

The objective of this paper, however, is neither to interrogate nor typify Crumb's compositional decisions, but rather contextualize his Lorca-inspired "images and musical thematics" informed by Neo-Gothic literary theory, which examines the representation of lurking repressed desires as latent indicators for prominent cultural and societal tendencies. We maintain that Crumb's Neo-Gothic reading of the text intensifies large-scale semantic elements of Lorca's poetry, creating its uber-layer, while offering insights into the poet's ambiguous imagery, especially centered on themes of inversion and perversion.

The term "gothic" often evokes a sense of terror through its fantastical creations and dark surroundings, arousing our physiological reactions to fear [Moers 77]. While this description applies to a traditional gothic construct, it is less applicable to some twentieth century works. Neo-Gothic literature, like the Gothic texts of the nineteenth century, remains concerned with the fear of the perverse and the return of the repressed. However, confronted with less strict limits concerning the

¹ For insightful interpretaton of Crumb's Lorca-inspired compositions, see Adamenko [2005], de Dobay [1984], Johnston [2012], and Pearsall [2004].

transgression of moral values, which often results in monstrous realities, Neo-Gothicism no longer depends on super-natural, phantasmal beings. What provokes particular feelings of haunting often remains undefined. Frightful reaction when facing that which is familiar is reflected in the Freudian concept of *unheimlich*, or the “uncanny.” David Morris, in “Gothic Sublimity” [1985], recognized the importance of the *uncanny* to the gothic canon, because it is a theory of terror not of the unknown, but rather of the familiar that exists in an alienated state because of the process of repression. Another element of the uncanny appears when the poetic I, “doubts whether an apparently animate being is really alive; or conversely, whether a lifeless object might not be in fact animate” [Freud 141].

Johnston [2012] indirectly refers to gothic elements in Crumb’s non-Lorca work *Black Angels* (1970) as “romantic,” maintaining that “Crumb has spread the trappings of “romanticism” – its darker pole, at least – thick throughout the work. The titles of some movements recall the nightmare scenes common in nineteenth-century art and literature, others suggest ancient or lost” [2]. This insightful view of Crumb’s music suggests consistency in the composer’s aesthetics of 1960s-1970s, which may be either the primary source or the consequence of his affinity with Lorca’s poetry.

The second book of *Madrigals* (1965), henceforth referred to as *Madrigals II*, is written for soprano, flute (doubling alto flute and piccolo), and percussion. Crumb uses a few selected lines each from three early Lorca works. Crumb, by selecting verses from three different early Lorca poems, provides a deconstructed interpretation. Although such displacement of text might appear startling, Crumb selects verses with eerie undertones and provides thematic unity:

I. “Bebe el agua tranquila de la canción añeja” - “Drink the tranquil water of the aged song”

This is from the “Ballad of the Little Plaza” (1919), an imaginary dialog between Lorca (or the poetic I) and the children that sing in the plaza. The poetic I is sad with despair and a desire to recuperate childhood. When the children ask him what he feels in his red and bloody mouth, the poetic I responds with “The taste of bones of my great skull,” signaling his consciousness of his own mortality. The command of the children, “drink,” is a remedy for his angst. This poem alludes to Freud’s concept of doubling or “a preservation against extinction” [143]. Such a wish is narcissist in nature, and Lorca’s imagery of water as an answer to aging angst alludes further to the original character of Narcissus.

II. “La muerta entra y sale de la taberna” - “Death goes in and out of the tavern. Death goes in and out, and out and in goes the death of the tavern.” These lines are taken from “Malagueña” (1921), a short poem with circular structure (the death verse begins and ends the poem with a slight variation). Crumb selects the repetitious first and last verses, the lurking death that hangs around, and keeps reminding the poetic I of her presence (“her” because of the feminine article in Spanish).

III. “Caballito negro ¿Dónde llevas tu jinete muerto? Caballito frío. ¡Qué perfume de flor de cuchillo!” - “Little black horse. Where are you taking your dead rider? Little cold horse. What a perfume of a flower made of knives.” These verses are taken from the “Song of the Rider (1860)” published between 1921 and 1924. This poem consists of nine stanzas, each alternate with the refrain of the “little black” and “little cold horse.” Crumb incorporates his interlaced verses as the final fragment of the cycle.

On one hand, Crumb chooses Lorca’s verses that contain typical for the poet and favored by the composer references to childhood--horses and death--and three fast-slow-fast movements create symmetrical, arch-like musico-poetic construction. On other hand, Crumb’s poetic dramaturgy opens the structure up with the uncanny narrative of death. In the first movement, it is as a timeless (aged, ancient) song that is drunk (consumed) by children like water; the second movement’s lexical-semantic palindrome suggests Kafka-esque omnipresence of death; and the final movement celebrates death as a fragrant flower through striking lexical juxtapositions. There may be different levels of the structural-semantic interpretation of these texts as a whole. The first model demonstrates a two-folded synchronic

(symmetrical) structure, outlining lexical-semantic pairs “song/flower” and “death/knives,” with “death/flower” in the center (Fig. 1).

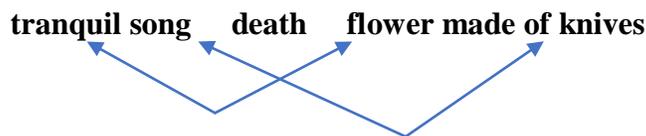


Fig. 1. Symmetrical/synchronic structural design of the Lorca texts in Crumb’s *Madrigals II*.

The second model articulates the diachronic progression from the “tranquil/aged” semantic pair to “death,” underscored by “synchronic” lexical palindrome in the middle (therefore superimposing another symmetrical inner structure), and finally to the imagery of the third movement, saturated by references of death as “black,” “dead,” and “cold” (Fig. 2).

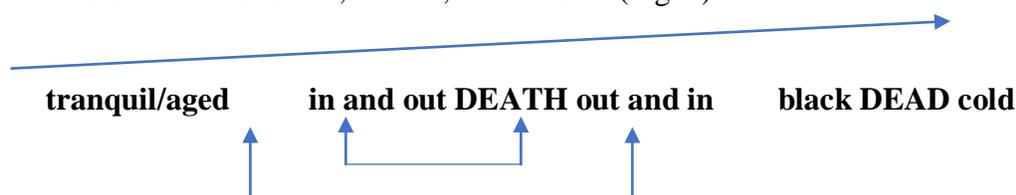


Fig. 2. Diachronic model of the Lorca texts with the palindromic middle in Crumb’s *Madrigals II*.

These two structural/semantic models – one synchronic and one diachronic – suggest a consideration of the musical counterpart of the cycle as also both a synchronic (symmetrical) structure and a diachronic (open) musical narrative.

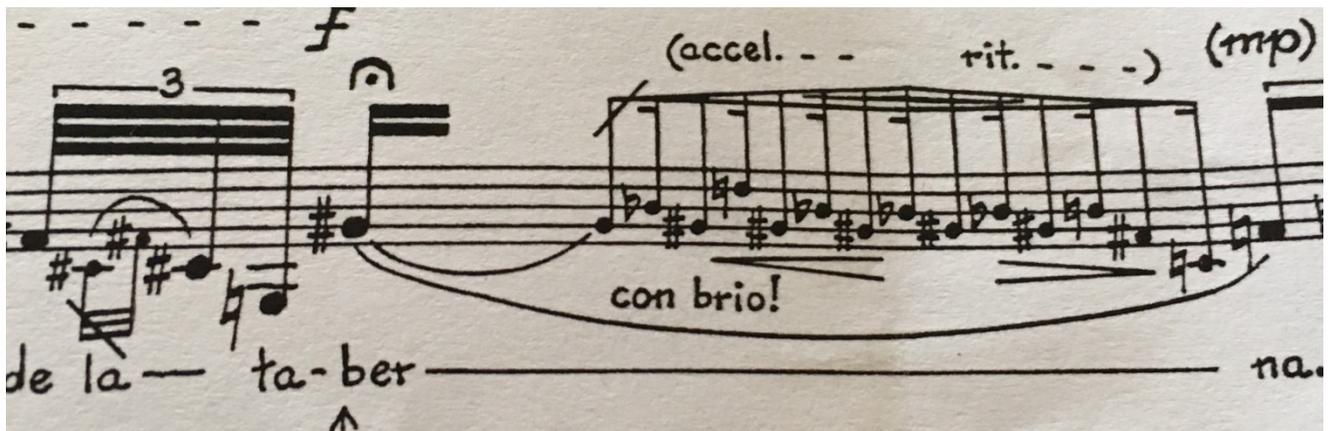
In the three movements of the cycle, Crumb organizes his predominantly dissonant pitch- and staggering rhythmic material into several distinctive representations: 1) angular gestures, 2) Webernesque pointillistic motion, 3) dissonant shrills, and 4) intertextual techniques. The latter one is, perhaps, most semantically significant, as it signals Crumb’s contextualization of his poetic imagery. Since late 1960s, when the term “intertextuality” was first introduced by Julia Kristeva, intertextual approach to literary criticism has expanded to all other arts, including music. Intertextual links, in relation to music compositions, may reveal themselves in various ways, including direct quotations and more subtle allusions to another composer’s technique and/or aesthetics. In our view, intertextuality is a non-directional concept; it is not from one piece of art to another; it is in-between the two. We maintain that in *Madrigals II* Crumb creates complex intertextual space between baroque and modernism, which provides a solid grounding for the composer’s exploration of Lorca’s poetry.

The first movement’s soundscape signals the composer’s preoccupation with the grace-note gestures that saturate all vocal/instrumental layers and introduces his pitch-vocabulary that is common to the composer’s style in general – melodic and harmonic abundance of interval classes 1, 2 and 6. Grace-notes signify two intertextual spaces: one of the heavily ornamented, possibly quasi-Andalusian-Arabic folk singing and one of baroque-inspired virtuosity. Alto flute functions as the second contrapuntal “voice” to the soprano part that creates a continuous dialogic undertone and introduces a soft but insistent version of the shrill-gesture – one that appears in the second movement. Also, the first movement initiates passages of pointillistic instrumental motion that fully flourish as the little horse/death galloping in the last movement of *Madrigals II*. Considering a musico-poetic aspect of this fragment, the “death” masked as a “tranquil aged song” finds its musical embodiment in an uneasy

dissonant serenity of the quiet, airy utterances of the voice and alto flute, punctuated by the metallic sounds of the antique cymbals and glockenspiel.

The last movement may be considered a variation of the first one, with all its elements intensified: alto flute becomes piccolo, which, similarly to the first movement, creates a contrapuntal dialogue with the soprano and this time, with marimba that carries a “dead little horse riding” motion through long runs of pointillistic passages. The shrieks of the piccolo are balanced out by the woodiness of the marimba and whisper of the soprano, echoing whispering heard in the second movement. The most striking paratextual element of this movement, from the large-scale point of view, is Crumb’s articulation remark on the word “negro” (“black”) in the phrase “little black horse.” The composer specifies, “like neighing of horse,” explaining in the footnote, “Monteverdi trill, i.e. ‘ne-he-he-he(etc)-gro.’” On one hand, in this movement Crumb utilizes traditional word-painting, and both the motion of the galloping horse and reference to a particular baroque ornamentation technique are or may be just that – a means to convey the imagery. However, in our view, this incidental articulative remark is the constituent part of the intertextual continuum that forms semantic uber-structure of this piece, one that was initially introduced by Crumb’s insistent grace-note saturation in the first movement. This intertextual aspect of the piece, however, is fulfilled most strikingly and yet most subtly in the second movement of *Madrigals II*.

In the middle movement of the cycle, the composer scatters his homages to the contrapuntal art of baroque by using some of its techniques – specifically, sequential patterning and compound melody – in the most peripheral points of the piece, as embellishments at the end of the word “de la taberna” (the tavern). Crumb manipulates his instrumental forces to single out the repetition of the first sentence “Death goes in and out of the tavern,” where instruments pause until the soprano enunciates “de la taberna,” represented as quasi-baroque compound melody, and then the timpani join in in a slow glissando (Ex.1a). The ending of this fragment is also articulated by the soprano’s “coda,” this time presented as a quasi-baroque sequencing passage, also corresponding to “de la taberna,” with the minimal instrumental participation (Ex.1b).



Ex.1a: A quasi-baroque compound melody on “de la taberna” in *Madrigal II/2*. Copyright©1971 by C.F. Peters corporation. All rights reserved. Used by permission.



Ex. 1b: A quasi-sequencing passage on “de la taberna” in *Madrigal II/2*. Copyright©1971 by C.F. Peters corporation. All rights reserved. Used by permission.

Crumb

centers this setting on the second occurrence of the first line and not on the second line of the Lorca text (Crumb’s third sentence) that contains lexical palindrome. Rather, the palindromic part is heard as a nonsense, perverted afterthought, even though the composer still recognizes the phrase’s symmetry in a loose palindromic pitch-construction. In this movement, Crumb instructs performers to create “Lentamente, con alcuna licenza (slow, with some freedom), eerie, spectral” an atmosphere, which is the most direct reference to the “gothic” essence of this cycle. The sound of uncanny is generated through slow, four pianissimo-soft ostinato utterances of the flute, employing a special grace-note technique to achieve oscillating effect, and replicas of the timpani that play “quasi lontano” (as if from a far) and “quasi niente” (as if fading).

Johnston [2012]

notes that “without abandoning post-tonal influences, during the 1960s Crumb embraced stylistic pluralism – a bringing together of self-consciously diverse material and methods within a work” [4]. In *Madrigals II*, this postmodern tendency is much different from what Johnston refers to as tonal quotations/pastiche, evident in some of Crumb’s some other compositions. In *Madrigals II*, however, Crumb grounds his cycle’s dramatic essence in the tradition of early baroque opera – think Monteverdi’s *Orfeo and Euridice* (1607), with its allegorical negotiation of life and death and a mythological underworld that can be entered and left using one’s will. In Crumb’s work, “death” is one that is first heard as “the aged song” (first movement) that “goes in and out, and out and in” (second movement), and is dangerously exquisite as a “flower made of knives” and ultimately unstoppable (third movement).

In Crumb’s

extraction of Lorca’s verses, the composer constructs a reminder of the ominous guarantee of death that looms over every life. While there is no escape from this dismal reality, gothic theory highlights the dichotomous undercurrents that lie in the somber nature of death. In Freudian terms, we are both repulsed by and attracted to the uncanny: “Many people experience the feeling [the uncanny] in the highest degree in relation to death and dead bodies, to the return of the dead, and to spirits and ghosts” [148]. In the final movement of *Madrigals II*, the dead rider is carried off with the poetic I to question to where he will be taken. In the midst of this dreary prospect, Crumb and Lorca leave us only with the scent of death’s chilling perfume.

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Article received: 2017-11-30