

Music and Spirituality

13 Meditations around George Crumb's *Black Angels*

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Things were turned upside down. There were terrifying things in the air . . . they found their way into *Black Angels*.

—George Crumb

“Somewhere there has to be a place for Music, for the world of the unexplainable and unreal, that which feeds the human soul,” craved Galja once again. Somewhere Music must, as a reward for her healing powers, have the right to exist peacefully. Somewhere Music must certainly be declared sacred.”

—Borislav Čičovački, *U starini, ime mu bee Haemus* (translation mine)

1. DEPARTURE

Every time I hear George Crumb's string quartet Black Angels: Thirteen Images from the Dark Land, I am fascinated by it. Fascinated, as I'm thrown into an

abyss upon hearing its abrupt, surprising beginning. Fascinated. According to the OED, that means that I am deprived of the power of escape or resistance. Powerless. Perhaps one could say that this music is beyond my control. Out of control. Beyond thinking (in the ordinary sense). When I listen to the sounds of this music, I am caught in an event in which I cannot not participate. I cannot not respond. An encounter that does not appeal to (my) freedom (“my will”) for an alliance. I am in relation (Buber 1958, 11).¹ That is, I am created (for example as a listener) in this relationship (just as music is created in this relationship) and, simultaneously, I am dissolved in it. Beyond control. It is the music that encounters me. But it is I who relates to it, who offers it hospitality. So, the relationship entails both choice and being chosen, activity and passivity.

Fascinated. Beyond control. That is, beyond rationality, controllability, measurability. An encounter with music beyond the words that frame, name, and contain it as music. A relationship with music beyond theories, methods, and categories that try to get a grip on it, that seek to suture all contingencies. Beyond (or between) the casualness—sometimes even carelessness—by which music scholars apply language and try to lay bare its structures, secrets, Truth.² In short, beyond musical pornography. This is my confession of faith, my credo: it is in the awareness of this fundamental uncontrollability of music that we can come into contact with the spiritual—with a space between listener and music that could be called spiritual. In my opinion, so-called “spiritual experiences, aspirations, and values” do not refer to a reality beyond the material world (of music), to some otherworldliness, but to a reality beyond its categorical frameworks. They refer to a space between category and reality, language and being, a space that cannot be filled by definition—an empty space.

Music: always more and less than the categories, theories, and methods that name and divide it, beyond and between the knowable and the already known, an always available (re)source of difference and resistance. Music: being-otherwise-than-being. It is in this excess of being overthought (and vice versa) that I situate or recognize music’s spirituality (Finn 1996, 152–65).

Oh, no, no. No emancipation of music. Of music in the margins. Of this music by George Crumb. No liberation from the chains with which (this) music is reduced to what can be measured, designated, enclosed. No, that is not my aim. Nor do I want to get rid of music theories and categories. I am not dreaming of