

**A Performance Guide of George Crumb's *Metamorphoses Book II, for Amplified Piano*
with Critical Perspectives on its Visual Inspirations**

By

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines George Crumb's *Metamorphoses, Book II* through the relationships between musical interpretation, visual art, and representation of artists within the classical canon. Through score analysis, performance study, and interdisciplinary comparison, the paper explores how Crumb translates visual imagery into music. The study addresses the Eurocentric and predominantly male focus of the paintings chosen for *Metamorphoses*, arguing that alternative visual frameworks that are more inclusive of women and broader in representation, can expand possibilities for performers and scholars alike. Furthermore, the paper includes a previously unpublished letter by Crumb that offers insight into his artistic process and selection of artworks.

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Introduction

Metamorphoses (Book II); Ten Fantasy-Pieces (after celebrated paintings), for Amplified Piano was George Crumb's final piano solo piece, completed in 2020. As of now, there is limited research on the piece, and there are few available recordings. Marcantonio Barone, to whom the second book is dedicated, recorded both *Book I* and *Book II* in 2021. Margaret Leng Tan, to whom the first book was dedicated, recorded *Book I* in 2018. Each book consists of ten solo piano pieces inspired by paintings by artists such as Marc Chagall, Pablo Picasso, and Paul Klee.

The purpose of this study is to explore George Crumb's last piano work *Metamorphoses (Book II), Ten Fantasy-Pieces (after celebrated paintings), for Amplified Piano* through his piano techniques as well as through the connection between art and music within the cycle. George Crumb is known for his visionary ideas about the piano and how it can be used to create a wide array of timbres, with techniques not thought-of before. In line with innovators around the use of the piano such as Ludwig van Beethoven, Claude Debussy, and Bela Bartók, Crumb added to a body of piano works that may turn into standard repertoire for generations to come.

In his *Metamorphoses* he explores techniques, used items, and added instruments not previously used in his piano repertoire for solo pianist, adding to his already existing ideas of piano techniques such as glissando, pizzicato, and overtones. An overview of these techniques, existing and new, will be presented in this paper.

Furthermore, this paper will explore the connection between art and music through Crumb's ten chosen paintings that connect to the corresponding movements. The composer chose artworks by painters such as Paul Klee, Pablo Picasso, Simon Dinnerstein, and Georgia O'Keeffe. The piece includes no works of art by people of color, and O'Keeffe is the only woman included in the set. Therefore, the paper will explore a different angle that George Crumb could have taken

for his last piano work, if he had prioritized a broader and more representative scope of contemporary art.

The paper includes four chapters that discuss the background of the composer in relation to his piano works, the techniques used in *Metamorphoses Book II*, the connection between art and music within Crumb's chosen artworks, and a comparison of his chosen artworks with ten new, proposed artworks.

Chapter 1: George Crumb and his piano works.

1.1 Biography

George Crumb is an American composer born in 1929 in West Virginia, known for his avant-garde contemporary classical music. He grew up in a musical family playing the clarinet and piano, and started composing at the young age of 10 or 11. Later he studied music at Mason College, the University of Illinois and the University of Michigan. He had a long career in which he won a Pulitzer Prize, a Grammy Award, and an Edward MacDowell Medal. Crumb made major contributions to the American music-and-art scene, especially with his piano works. He lived to be 92 years old and passed away in his home in 2022.

Crumb's compositional output includes orchestral works, chamber music, piano solo and vocal works. His style is inspired by acoustical and abstract concepts. Among his piano works are *Five Pieces for Piano*, *Makrokosmos I and II*, *Celestial Mechanics (Makrokosmos IV)*, and *Metamorphoses Book I and II*. These were often dedicated to the musicians he worked closely with. For example, *Makrokosmos I* was written for David Burge, *Metamorphoses Book I* for Margaret Leng Tan, and *Metamorphoses Book II* for Marcantonio Barone.

According to the composer, *Five Pieces for Piano* (1962) was the start of his mature writing style¹ in which he uses an array of extended piano techniques. In tradition with Beethoven, Chopin, Debussy, and Bartók, Crumb found new ways to utilize the developing piano. He experimented with playing-techniques using the inside of the piano and using all three pedals in such a way that he was able to create new sonoric effects.

Ten years after his *Five Pieces for Piano* he started his next piano solo work titled *Makrokosmos I*, directly inspired by Bartók's *Mikrokosmos*. This piece explores musical form and

¹ Durant, Yati. "Interviews with George Crumb 2013-2018." *Contemporary music review* 41, no. 1 (2022): 108–26.

shape, sometimes quite literally in the form of a circular score, and sometimes sonically in gestural or mirrored effects. Between 1972 and 1979 he composed four volumes of *Makrokosmos*; two books for amplified piano, one for amplified pianos and percussion, and one for piano four-hands titled *Celestial Mechanics*. Between 1980 and 2003 he wrote six more solo piano works and in 2015 he started the first book of *Metamorphoses*, his last cycle for piano solo. In 2018 he decided to write a second book. He considered writing a third book for pianist Simone Dinnerstein, according to a personal letter he sent to Simon Dinnerstein, but changed his mind: “since there are other non-piano pieces I hope to get around to, I decided to only do two of the *Metamorphoses*.”²

1.2 Metamorphoses

Ovid’s Latin epic poem *Metamorphoses* from 8 CE has been a source of inspiration for composers such as Jacopo Peri, Monteverdi, Richard Strauss, and Philip Glass. George Crumb does not draw direct inspiration from the poem; rather he chooses to transform visual art into sound, creating a musical connection with art much as he had previously connected poetry with music in earlier works such as *Ancient Voices of Children*. *Metamorphoses* is the first work Crumb created that takes visual art as an inspiration. While it is noteworthy that later in life Crumb decides to include visual art in his extramusical inspirations, there are little to no signs in the score as to the meaning of the title, *Metamorphoses*, and its relationship to Ovid’s exploration of fluid identity and transformation of humans into animals in the natural world.

The first book covers ten movements that are based on paintings by Paul Klee, Vincent van Gogh, Marc Chagall, James McNeill Whistler, Jasper Johns, Paul Gauguin, Salvador Dali, and Wassily Kandinsky. He finished the first book in 2017 and started the second book immediately thereafter, in 2018. The second book features many of the same visual artists, and he adds Andrew

² Appendix A.

Wyeth, Simon Dinnerstein, Gustav Klimt, Pablo Picasso and Georgia O'Keeffe. When he finished the second book in 2020, with some revisions in 2021, it would prove to be Crumb's last piece.

Chapter 2: Playing Techniques

This chapter will explain and explore the piano techniques used in each movement. The work incorporates percussion instruments as well as extended techniques performed inside the piano. Furthermore, this chapter addresses the question of Crumb's continuing innovative use of the piano in the context of his earlier works.

2.1 Overview of Extended Piano Techniques used in *Metamorphoses Book II*

As mentioned before, George Crumb mentioned his *Five Pieces* as the first piece he wrote where he found his mature writing style.³ Within this work, we can already find techniques and ideas he would continue to use in his piano pieces up to *Metamorphoses Book II*, such as amplification, pizzicato, glissando, and overtones.

Amplification of an acoustic instrument, particularly the piano, would become one of Crumb's trademark sounds. In the performance notes for *Five Pieces*, he writes: "If FIVE PIECES is to be performed in other than a very small hall, it is most strongly recommended that the piano be amplified so that the many delicate sounds will project. The microphone should be suspended over the bass strings of the instrument."⁴ Later, in pieces such as *Makrokosmos I*, amplification is specifically required for all performances to be able to hear all timbres. In *Metamorphoses*, he even indicates this in the title specifically: "for Amplified Piano."

Both pizzicato and the use of overtones stem from his *Five Pieces*. In the performance notes, he explains the difference between pizzicato played with the fingertip and with the fingernail. This is indicated by f.t. (fingertip), and f.n. (fingernail). Overtones are produced by pressing one finger on a partial node while hitting or plucking the string. Crumb suggests using a piece of tape

³ Durant, Yati. "Interviews with George Crumb 2013-2018." *Contemporary music review* 41, no. 1 (2022): 108–26.

⁴ Crumb, George. *Five Pieces for Piano*. New York: C. F. Peters Corp., 1973.

on the string to indicate where to find the correct overtones. Some pianists use chalk instead, which also clearly shows where to find the overtones without leaving residue on the strings.

In the fifth movement of *Five Pieces*, Crumb introduces the glissando over the strings. This is a technique where the pianist strums the strings in a single direction. As seen in our discussion of pizzicato, Crumb uses “fn” and “ft” to indicate whether to use the fingernail or fingertip. The way he notates this glissando over the strings in 1962 as opposed to in *Metamorphoses* has slightly changed; from several sharps, flats, and naturals in front of each note, to a single large accidental combining the sharp and natural symbols in front of several notes and a line ascending or descending. Nonetheless, the effect remains the same. This can be seen in Example 1.⁵ Oftentimes a chord is sustained by PII (the sostenuto pedal), while a glissando is being played on the strings of the same range as the chord. Since the dampers of the chord are being held up, the chord will clearly sound, without it having been played on the keys.



Example 1: Glissando in *Five Pieces, V*, mm. 1, compared to *Metamorphoses Book II, I. Ancient Sound, Abstract on Black (Paul Klee)*, m. 94.

2.1.1 Pizzicato

In *Metamorphoses*, pizzicato is used in several movements, most strikingly in *Purple Haze*.

This fourth movement, inspired by Simon Dinnerstein’s painting with the same name, is inspired

⁵ Because Crumb’s musical calligraphy is distinctive and essential to the aesthetic world of his music, I have chosen to use facsimiles of his handwritten scores for examples in the work, along with his corresponding clefs when they are not immediately present in the example.

by the blues. The use of melodic pizzicato adds to the timbre of the movement and is reminiscent of the sound of a guitar (Crumb was inspired by Jimi Hendrix for this movement).⁶ The indication of fingering helps the performer pick the correct movement of the right hand. When using the thumbnail, the wrist turns to the right, and when using the fingernail, the wrist turns to the left. This playing technique can be compared to guitar players; using the thumbnail when moving down and using the fingernail when moving up.

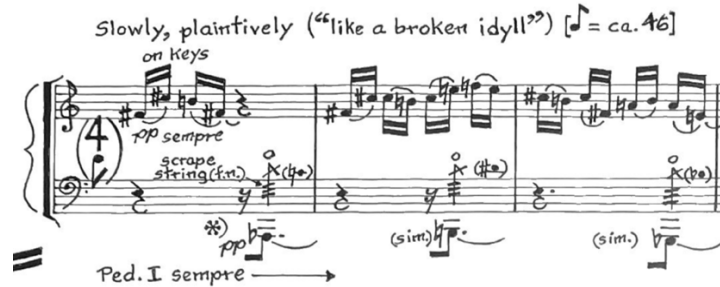


Example 2: Pizzicato in 4. *Purple Haze* (Simon Dinnerstein), m. 7.

2.1.2 Overtones

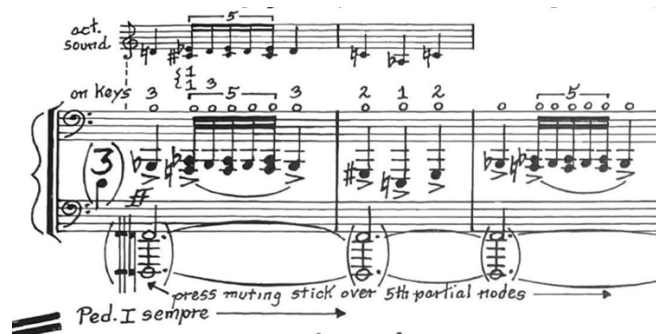
In *Metamorphoses*, overtones first appear in *Christina's World*. This technique creates a special timbre very suitable for slow and quiet passages, especially when scraping the string to produce the overtone. The scrape string-overtone effect is created by pressing the side of the thumb on the node while scraping the string with a fingernail and immediately releasing the thumb. This is notated by combining the standard overtone notation (a circle above the written note), a slashed grace note flag, and a three-line tremolo marking across the stem. Crumb also indicates the sounding pitch next to the played note, which is helpful for the performer during the practice process.

⁶ Durant, Yati. "Interviews with George Crumb 2013-2018." *Contemporary music review* 41, no. 1 (2022): 108–26.



Example 3: Overtone in 3. *Christina's World* (Andrew Wyeth), mm. 1-3.

In *Easter*, Crumb uses a device known as a muting stick to reach several overtones at once. The idea of the muting stick will be explained later in this chapter. By pressing down multiple strings across the partial nodes, a melody of overtones can be heard. In this case, with help of the muting stick, the keys can be struck with force resulting in an effect resembling church bells. This is extremely suitable for *Easter*, since Marc Chagall often depicted villages and religious imagery.



Example 4: Overtone with muting stick in 9. *Easter* (Marc Chagall), mm. 1-3.

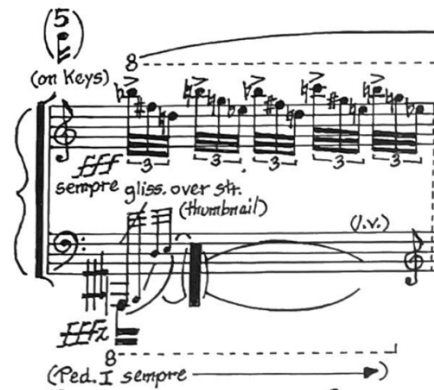
Another striking use of overtones in *Metamorphoses* is the single-string overtone glissando. This is the equivalent to the seagull technique on bowed strings. It is also used in *Christina's World*. The pianist starts by pressing their finger on a partial far removed from the damper, and while pressing the key to the corresponding string with the other hand, starts moving their finger that is on the string towards the damper. When sliding from the far end towards the dampers, multiple pitches are heard. Crumb indicates three of them in the score that form a major chord, as seen in Example 5.



Example 5: Overtone glissando in 3. *Christina's World* (Andrew Wyeth), mm. 20-21.

2.1.3 Glissando

Different glissando techniques on the piano produce varied timbres. One way to produce a glissando is by using the fingernail; this results in a slightly more grating sound than when using the fingertip. Crumb varies the glissandi through the use of the thumb, one finger, or four fingers which result in different dynamic worlds. To produce the biggest dynamic glissando in the piece, specifically in *Guernica*, the author of this paper recommends the use of a pick or a plastic card instead of their thumbnail, as seen in Example 6.



Example 6: Glissando in 7. *Guernica* (Pablo Picasso), mm. 61.

In addition to specifying finger techniques, the timbre of a glissando can be influenced by the place where the glissando is produced. Placing the hand close to the pins results in a drier sound, while playing the glissando towards the end of the dampers will make it sound more reverberant.

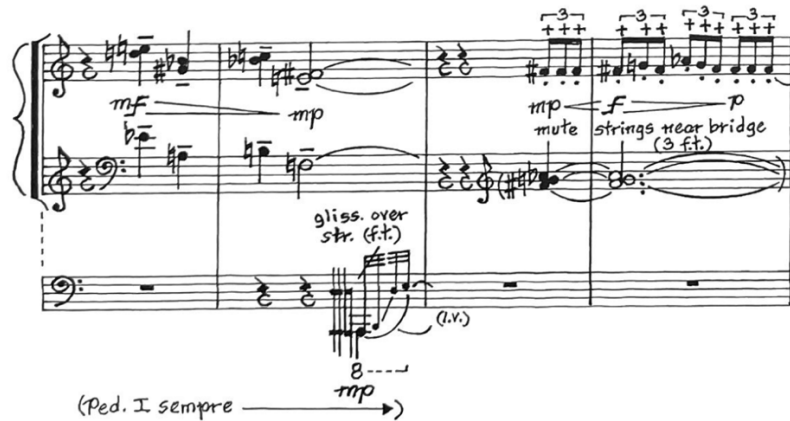
To play a glissando further away from the dampers, the pianist might have to stand up to reach the strings inside the piano. David Burge, the pianist who Crumb worked closely with during his career, first proposed the “no-standing rule” for pianists.⁷ Since Crumb was a pioneer in the field of extended piano techniques, there was no existing performance practice for his techniques yet. Even though it might be a small distraction for the audience if the pianist needs to stand up and sit down several times during a performance, there is good reason for the modern pianist to break the no-standing rule. Firstly, people are built differently, and some might not be able to reach the inside of the piano without standing up. Secondly, this “dance” can add to the theatricality and excitement of the performance, if done in a smooth manner.

2.1.4 Muting

In addition to the aforementioned use of the muting stick, there are three distinct ways in which Crumb uses muting: with multiple fingers covering a range of notes, with one finger in a percussive manner, and as a grace note immediately before plucking a string.

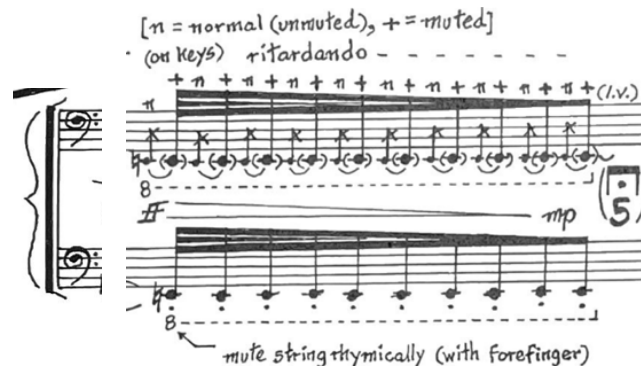
In the ninth movement, *Easter*, a small range of notes is muted with the left hand while the right hand plays a melody on the muted pitches. Notes affected by the muting are indicated with a “plus” sign. It slightly resembles the opening passage of the same movement, but this time not using any specific partials.

⁷ Matthews, Nell Wright. “George Crumb’s Makrokosmos Volumes I and II: Considerations for Performance, including Observations by David Burge, Robert Miller and Lambert Orkis.” DMA diss., The University of Oklahoma, 1981. ProQuest (8209431).



Example 7: Muted notes in 9. *Easter* (Marc Chagall), mm. 77-80.

At the end of *Guernica*, Crumb creates a throbbing effect by alternating normal and muted notes. While the right hand plays a note on the key, the left hand reaches into the piano on the same string, pressing and lifting the hand, resulting in a rhythmically strong muting technique.



Example 8: Alternating normal and muted notes in 7. *Guernica* (Pablo Picasso), m. 61.

The third variation of using the muting technique is first used in this collection in *Christina's World*. It is the opening of a new scene after a slow A section. The muted note is utilized as a grace note before a pizzicato is played on the same string, with the same hand. The muted note is often indicated to be played *fz*, because of the nature of a muted note; it will sound softer than a non-muted note. The pizzicato note in this same section is to be played *mf*; still much louder than the notes played on the keys that are indicated as *pp*, as seen in Example 9. This detailed use of dynamics clearly shows Crumb's understanding of writing for timbral piano; he

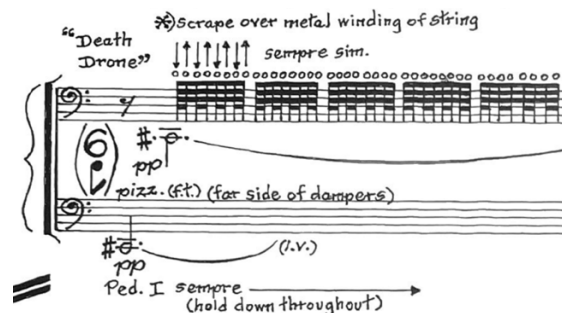
understands what the total effect of the dynamic picture will be. Instead of choosing to write a general idea of loudness or softness for a measure, he carefully chooses dynamics per technique, thinking symphonically.



Example 9: Muting and pizzicato in 3. *Christina's World* (Andrew Wyeth), mm. 17-19.

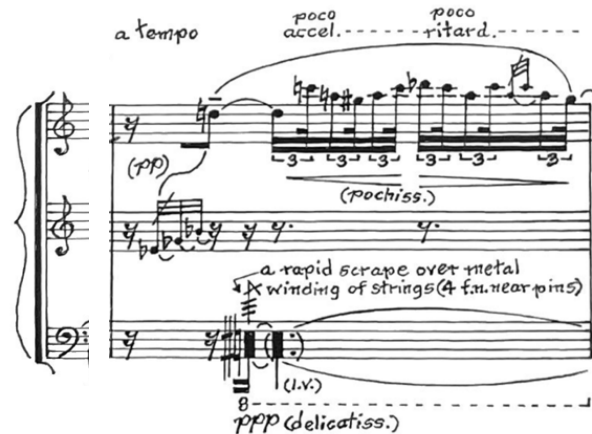
2.1.5 Scraping

The last piano-specific extended technique is scraping. Sometimes used to scrape one specific string in one direction, such as in *Purple Haze*, the scrape can be heard in many different versions. In *Spirit of the Dead Watching*, Crumb writes a “death drone;” a repetitive, quick, rhythmical scrape along a bass string. Both nail and flesh of the finger touch the string, creating a spectrum of overtones. The “death drone” can be traced back to *Songs, Drones, and Refrains of Death*, a piece for amplified instruments and percussion that is based off Federico García Lorca’s poetry, written in 1968.



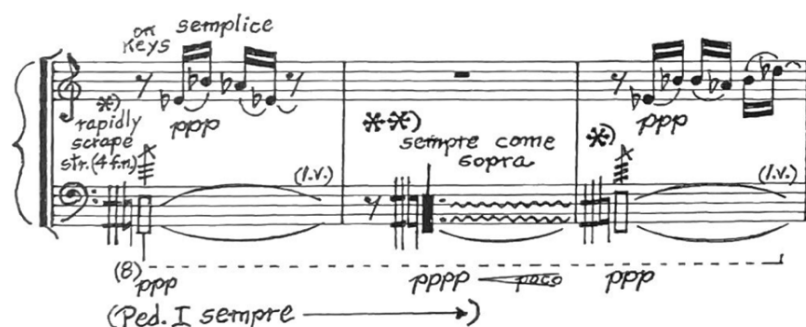
Example 10: The death-drone in 6. *Spirit of the Dead Watching* (Paul Gauguin), m. 1.

Another scraping technique that produces many overtones is the “rapid scrape;” a small cluster of notes played by four fingernails that extend from the metal pins towards the dampers. It is a quick way to reinitiate overtones with a small, quiet attack, that were already being held by PII.



Example 11: Rapid scrape in 2. *Landscape with Yellow Birds* (Paul Klee), m. 3.

The following scraping technique is a reverse from the rapid scrape by placing the hand far into the piano and slowly dragging the fingernails towards the performer. When the nails are moving towards the performer and the fingers slowly bend inwards, the hand can open again, reversing into the rapid scrape, as seen in the closing passage of *Christina's World*, possibly portraying the slow dragging of Christina's body across the field.



Example 12: Two different scraping techniques in 3. *Christina's World* (Andrew Wyeth), mm. 36-38.

2.2 Items

For more timbral variation, Crumb uses items that can be placed inside the piano. In his *Five Pieces* he started experimenting with a paperclip; an item he later used in his writing for

strings as well, in pieces such as *Black Angels* and *Vox Balanae*. In *Metamorphoses Book II* the instructions call for a jewelry chain, multiple metal rulers to cover all the strings, and a DIY muting stick, previously used in *Metamorphoses Book I*.

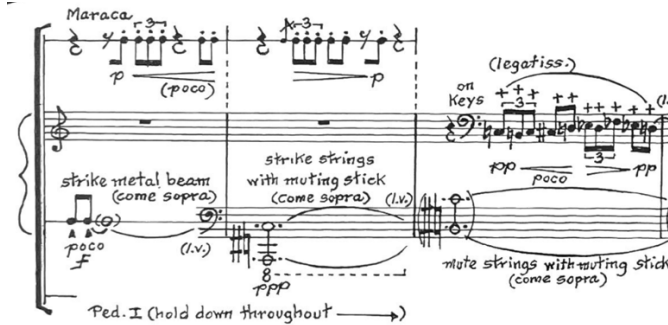
The muting stick consists of pieces of wood and felt that are glued together. The felt is attached to the bottom of two parallel long pieces of wood of the same size, while a shorter piece of wood is attached as a handle to the top of the long pieces of wood. Throughout the piece, the muting stick is used as a damper and a percussion instrument. When pressed on the strings, an entire range of notes can simultaneously be muted. In *Easter*, this is how a range of overtones can quickly be played. In *Guernica*, the muting stick is used as a drumstick; an entire range of strings gets struck while PI (the sustain pedal) is being held down, creating a lot of noise and overtones. It is an aggressive sound that in this case fits the mood of the movement.

The jewelry chain needs to be placed inside the piano before the piece begins, on a specific range of strings in *From the Faraway, Nearby*; the movement inspired by Georgia O'Keeffe's depiction of a dry desert in New Mexico. Laying down a jewelry chain on the strings while muting those strings makes for a metallic but short and dry sound. The jewelry chain covers the exact range covered by the muting stick; while the notes in this range are being played on the keys with the right hand, the left hand presses the muting stick on the strings near the pins, resulting in a dry sound.

 The jewelry chain (taped to a crossbeam) should be layed over the following range of pitches (about an inch beyond the dampers) to produce delicate vibrations:

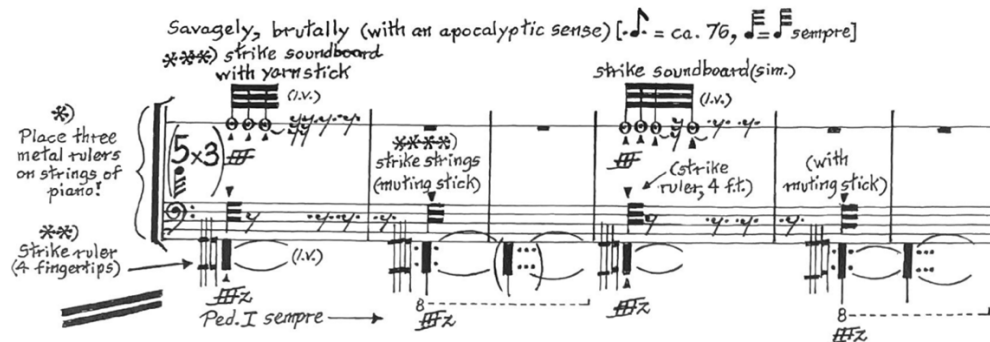


Example 13: The range of the jewelry chain in 6. *From the Faraway, Nearby* (Georgia O'Keeffe).



Example 14: Muted passage in 6. *From the Faraway, Nearby* (Georgia O'Keeffe), mm. 8-10.

In *Guernica*, the pianist needs to arrange metal rulers on the strings. Previously used in *Celestial Mechanics* (*Makrokosmos IV*), the rulers create a rattling sound with every key that is pressed. The rulers may be used in two ways: 1) vibrating freely in response to the keys being played normally, or 2) striking the rulers with the fingertips as a percussive effect. With cork glued to the back of the ruler, the dampers of the piano are protected from the moving metal items inside the piano.

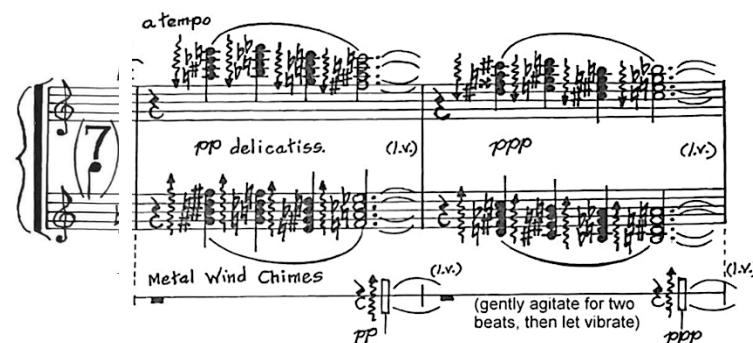


Example 15: Notation of metal rulers in 7. *Guernica* (Pablo Picasso), mm. 1-6.

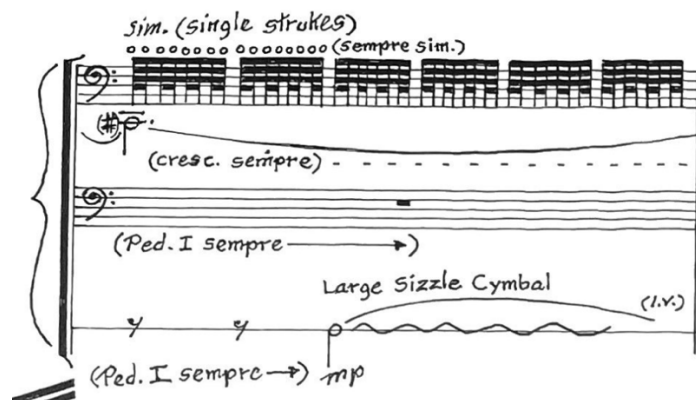
2.2 Percussion

Like Bela Bartók, Crumb wrote many pieces for piano and percussion such as *Makrokosmos III* and *Night Music*. In *Metamorphoses* the percussion instruments are played by the pianist. The setup is best placed to the left of the pianist, since most percussion elements are played with the left hand while alternating between right hand passages on the keys. The performer needs metal wind chimes, bamboo wind chimes, a spring coil drum, a large sizzle cymbal, a maraca, and several

percussion sticks that are used to hit either a percussion instrument, or the sound board of the piano. While none of these instruments are new to Crumb's musical language, this is the first piece to require them to be played by a single pianist. The result is a theatre-like dance that is an added challenge for the pianist. Crumb writes these percussion elements in two different ways. Whenever an instrument plays several unspecified notes, an empty rectangular box is displayed, sometimes with an arrow next to it indicating the direction of the movement, as seen in Example 16. When a single stroke is needed, a normal note is written with the requested length on a single line under the piano part, with an indication to what kind of stick the pianist needs to use. Sometimes a wave is written after the note to show that the pianist should let the instrument vibrate.



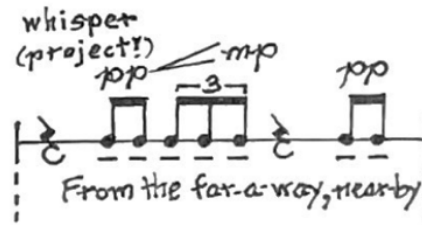
Example 16: Notation of metal wind chimes in 5. *Portrait of Adele Bloch-Bauer (Lady in Gold)*, (Gustav Klimt), mm. 2-3.



Example 17: Notation of a single stroke in 6. *Spirit of the Dead Watching* (Paul Gauguin), m. 10.

2.3 Voice

The use of the voice for instrumentalists is applied throughout Crumb's repertoire, in pieces such as *Vox Balaenae* and *Makrokosmos*. There are three different types of writing for voice in *Metamorphoses Book II*: spoken, whispered, and pitched whispered. Appearing for the first time in *Guernica*, the sound of the voice comes as a shock. The pianist speaks the word "Guernica" after the loudest section of the whole piece. The amplification ensures the voice can be heard well in the concert hall, even when spoken *pp* at the end of the movement. In *From the Faraway, Nearby*, the title is used as whispered text. To project the sound of a whisper crescendoing from *pp* to *mp* within two beats, the performer needs good breath support. The effect of the whisper in this movement is less shocking, since the audience is now accustomed to the sound of the voice from the previous movement. In this movement, the dynamics are much softer overall, which makes the whispered voice fit in well with the timbre of the prepared piano, maraca, and spring coil drum.



Example 18: Whisper in 8. *From the Faraway, Nearby* (Georgia O'Keeffe), m. 7.

Though it does not appear in *Easter*, the voice returns in the last movement *Starry Night*; this time as a pitched whisper. This "ghostly wind music" is likely written in the bass clef because of Crumb writing for a male pianist.⁸ Although ending the piece on a low E#3 may be challenging for performers with higher voices, it can still be achieved as a whispered pitch without requiring

⁸ Büyükyıldırım, Barış "Makrokosmos I: George Crumb'in Eserinde Gelişmiş Piyano Teknikleri." *Konservatoryum: (Online)* 7, no. 2 (2020): 105–26.

⊗ a ghostly "wind music" (like a pitched whisper on the syllable "who")
(sounds two octaves higher)

(on keys)

(18) mp ppp pizz. (ft.)

pp who who

(come Sopra)

mp ppp pizz. (ft.)

pp who who

mute (ft.)

(Ped. I, Ped. III sempre $\longrightarrow$)

Chapter 3: Original Artworks in Metamorphoses Book II.

Metamorphoses (Book II), Ten Fantasy-Pieces (after celebrated paintings), for Amplified Piano is a continuation of Crumb's *Metamorphoses Book I* that similarly explores paintings. Like Book I, Book II takes as its inspiration paintings that were created mostly in the 20th century.

Crumb uses the original titles for the paintings as the titles for the corresponding movements in his collection in the following order:

1. Paul Klee – *Ancient Sound, Abstract on Black* (1925)
2. Paul Klee – *Landscape with Yellow Birds* (1923)
3. Andrew Wyeth – *Christina's World* (1948)
4. Simon Dinnerstein – *Purple Haze* (1991)
5. Gustav Klimt – *Portrait of Adele Bloch-Bauer (Lady in Gold)* (1907)
6. Paul Gauguin – *Spirit of the Dead Watching* (1892)
7. Pablo Picasso – *Guernica* (1937)
8. Georgia O'Keeffe – *From the Faraway, Nearby* (1937)
9. Marc Chagall – *Easter* (1968)
10. Vincent van Gogh – *The Starry Night* (1889)

In general, he chooses pieces with a theme, both in the work itself and the title. No untitled works are used, and for a reason. Crumb writes:

If it's too abstract it could be anything and you could add any music and call it by that name. But these things that I am using here, they have a psychological background, like the bombing of the Spanish town [referring to *Guernica*]. Or it could be like in the first volume you know, a fish; you can describe a fish and there

is one in this volume about bird singing. That sort of thing can easily be converted into music.⁹

In the interviews that Yati Durant took with George Crumb between 2013 and 2018, Crumb draws a parallel between *Metamorphoses* and the *Pictures at an Exhibition* by Modest Mussorgsky. The paintings that Mussorgsky's work is based on are unknown. Even so, according to Crumb, Mussorgsky still conveys the feeling of the artwork through the paintings' titles. This begs the question as to whether the images themselves are essential to the music, or whether a pictorial title would suffice. When asked about the direct musical relationship with the actual images he said: "Maybe the emotions that these paintings create are in you, in me. The composer is looking for a way to express that musically, I guess. It can be a very loose connection. But the more abstract the painting the less definitive you can be about it."¹⁰

This perspective leaves the work open to interpretation for the pianist and the audience. There are only some specific ideas, known to us by the same interview, that relate the art pieces directly to the composition. Crumb's loose interpretation of the artwork leaves an opportunity to speculate about what other artworks he could have chosen to transform into music. That will be discussed in chapter 4. In this chapter, all original artworks selected for the cycle in relation to the music will be examined.

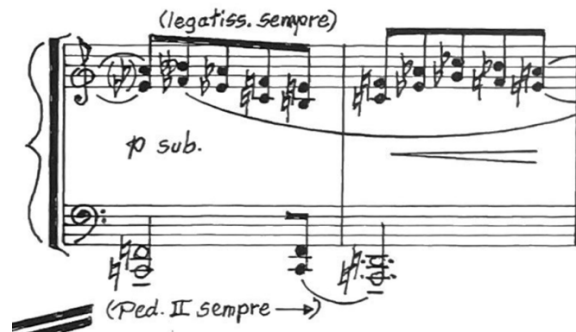
3.1 Paul Klee: Ancient Sound, Abstract on Black

The cycle opens with a strong glissando over the bass strings while the sostenuto pedal sustains two chords, one in the bass and one in the middle register. Crumb uses perfect fourths throughout the piece to create the so-called "ancient sound" from the title, a sound reminiscent of music of the Middle-Ages. The darkness that the painting conveys can be heard in his use of the

⁹ Durant, Yati. "Interviews with George Crumb 2013-2018." *Contemporary music review* 41, no. 1 (2022): 108–26.

¹⁰ Ibid.

low register, while the stark lines could possibly be interpreted as the clashing intervals in the left and right hand.



Example 20: Perfect fourths in *I. Ancient Sound, Abstract on Black* (Paul Klee), mm. 25-26.

Paul Klee (1879-1940) started playing the violin at a young age. His parents were musicians, and his wife was a pianist, so he was surrounded by music during his lifetime. His painting *Ancient Sound, Abstract on Black* has been known to invoke a sense of rhythm with viewers.¹¹ Despite Crumb's 'aversion' to pick abstract art for his cycle, he chose an opening piece that has the word "abstract" in its title; it is an exemplar of the Abstract Art Movement. Even though the work is abstract, Crumb interprets it as a piece of music through its title.



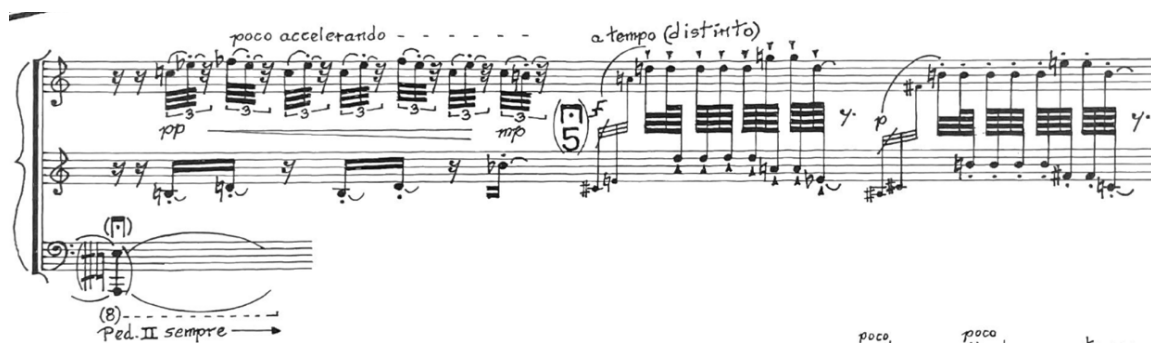
Figure 1: Paul Klee, *Ancient Sound, Abstract on Black*, 1925.

¹¹ Arnason, H. H., and Mansfield, Elizabeth, author. *History of modern art: painting, sculpture, architecture, photography*. Seventhed. Pearson, 2013.

The movement is written in a 5/8 time signature, an interesting decision given that the painting is full of squares; why not use 4/8 or 8/8 to refer to four lines and four corners? Since Crumb refers to music from the Middle Ages as his inspiration for this movement, perhaps this is his way of including a freer sense of time that is commonly heard in plainchant.

3.2 Paul Klee: *Landscape with Yellow Birds*

In the second movement, a full bass cluster is quietly pressed down and held by the sostenuto pedal. Quick running patterns in the higher register represent bird sounds that are being reverberated by the overtones of the piano with the use of the sostenuto pedal. Crumb uses several different touches throughout the movement in small gestures such as staccato, legato, tenuto, and staccatissimo; perhaps to represent different types of birds.



Example 21: Touches in 2. *Landscape with Yellow Birds* (Paul Klee), m. 1.

Relating music to birdsong quickly evokes the work of Olivier Messiaen. In comparison, Crumb's writing is more gestural and freer; the pitch material is structured, but it does not employ actual transcribed bird song, unlike Messiaen. Crumb is more concerned with the overall mood of the piece, and "transforming" this into music, than with specific parameters found in nature.



Figure 2: Paul Klee, *Landscape with Yellow Birds*, 1923.

As opposed to Klee's *Ancient Sound, Abstract on Black*, this composition is less abstract, and more expressionistic in its depiction of emotions. With its vibrant colors, the piece shows a fantastical interpretation of the natural world, rather than attempting to show a realistic landscape. The piece is set at nighttime, similarly to many of the pieces Crumb selected for this cycle, perhaps giving him more rein to use darker tones in the music.

3.3 Andrew Wyeth: Christina's World

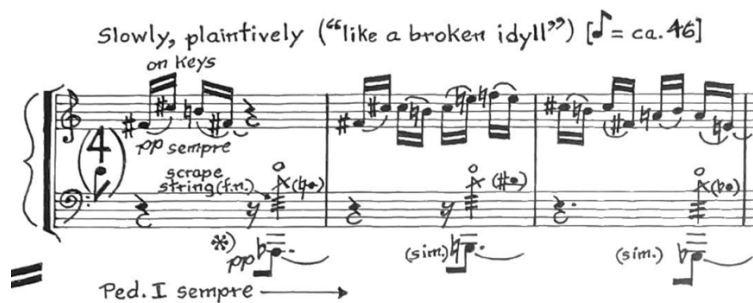
Movement 3 is based on Andrew Wyeth's (1917-2009) painting depicting his neighbor Anna Christina Olson. As a young girl she developed a degenerative muscle condition that left her unable to walk. Instead of using a wheelchair she preferred to use her arms to drag herself around. Wyeth portrays the subject's strong state of mind in an otherwise hopeless situation.¹²

¹² MoMA. "Andrew Wyeth, Christina's World, 1948." Accessed 18 March 2026, <https://www.moma.org/collection/works/78455>.



Figure 3: Andrew Wyeth, *Christina's World*, 1948.
 © [2026] Wyeth Foundation for American Art / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

Crumb translates this into his music by his tempo marking: slowly, plaintively (“like a broken idyll”)¹³ as well as with the use of overtones and a scraping technique on the strings. It is almost as if you can hear Christina drag herself around through the slow “dragging” of the nails over the low bass strings.



Example 22: Overtones and scraping technique in 3. *Christina's World* (Andrew Wyeth), mm. 1-3.

Laura Hoptmon, from the Museum of Modern Art, explains that this painting was not just about portraying Wyeth’s neighbor’s disability:

The Museum of Modern Art, when we buy work by a living artist, we send the living artist a questionnaire," she says. "And we sent Wyeth one, and he was very forthright about the fact that he was painting a person who was horrifically crippled, I think he said, but that he wanted to make sure that this was not a painting

¹³ Crumb, George. *Metamorphoses* (Book II). New York: C. F. Peters Corp., 2021.

specifically about a crippled person — that it was a painting about, in a way about aspiration.¹⁴

Crumb shows this in his music; it is not an eerie or painful piece of music. It has a quiet and slow opening, played so quietly it is reminiscent of a person humming, that is full of overtones. Towards the end of the movement, there is an outburst of energy, paired with loud dynamics. If this is a piece about aspiration, perhaps this could portray Christina's power of will, and not a portrayal of her suffering.

3.4 Simon Dinnerstein: Purple Haze

Purple Haze is the last in a three-picture series by Simon Dinnerstein (1943). The other two paintings titled *Dream Palace* and *Wildflowers*, in which he explores different psychological states that can be generated by changing the ambience around a figure. The figure remains in the same position which makes the viewer wonder how the context influences the relation to the subject.¹⁵

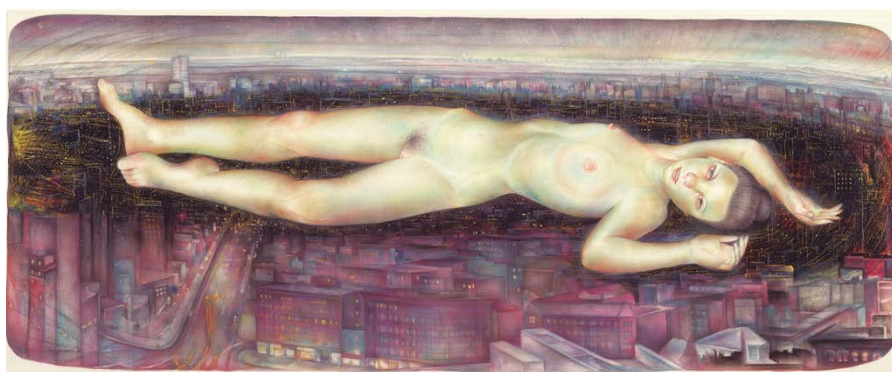


Figure 4: Simon Dinnerstein, *Purple Haze*, 1991.

¹⁴ Michel, Karen. "Fascinating and Also a Little Bit Uncomfortable': Andrew Wyeth at 100." 2017, Accessed April 26, 2026, <https://www.nepm.org/2017-12-23/fascinating-and-also-a-little-bit-uncomfortable-andrew-wyeth-at-100>.

¹⁵ Dinnerstein, Simon. "Purple Haze." Accessed 18 March 2026, https://www.simondinnerstein.com/purplehaze_reflections.html.

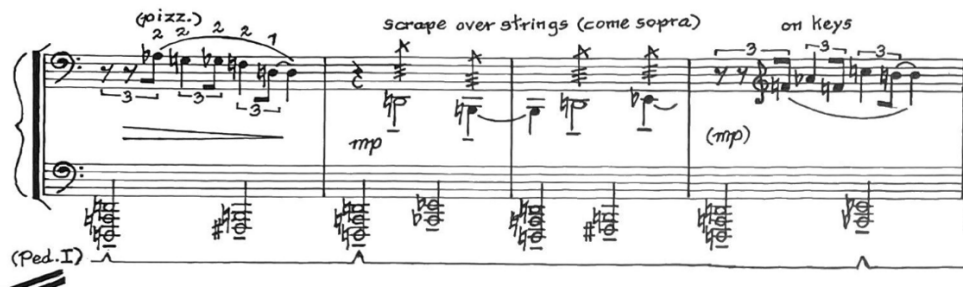


Figure 5: Simon Dinnerstein, *Wildflowers*, 1991.



Figure 6: Simon Dinnerstein, *Dream Palace*, 1989.

Crumb himself knew Dinnerstein personally: “He is a New York painter, and his paintings are influenced by this jazz [sic] player, Jimi Hendrix! So, I decided to make that into a blues number and make it a little jazzy.”¹⁶ The bluesy influence can be heard in the fourth movement of *Metamorphoses Book II* through the use of blue-notes and slow triplets.



Example 23: Blue-notes and triplets in 4. *Purple Haze* (Simon Dinnerstein), mm. 8-10.

¹⁶ Durant, Yati. “Interviews with George Crumb 2013-2018.” *Contemporary music review* 41, no. 1 (2022): 108–26.

One might contemplate why the composer didn't decide to do anything with Dinnerstein's original idea: the connection of his three artworks, and the meaning of context. Crumb himself was more concerned with the emotions behind an artwork; not so much with a direct musical interpretation.¹⁷ Simon Dinnerstein himself is open to perceptions of his work other than his own, giving creative freedom to the composer.¹⁸

3.5 Gustav Klimt: Portrait of Adele Bloch-Bauer (Lady in Gold)

Gustav Klimt (1862-1918), known for his Art-Nouveau style, was an established decorative painter in Austria. He is known for his involvement in the group *Vienna Secession*, as well as for his murals and his portraits. During Klimt's time Sigmund Freud was working on his dream interpretation theories. Many of Klimt's subjects were also Freud's subjects, according to art critic Arnason: "In Klimt's portraits those citizens of *fin-de-siècle* Vienna—who so preoccupied Freud in his clinical practice—are seen as the psychoanalyst might have seen them: hovering between the realms of dream and waking existence."¹⁹

This dreamlike state can be seen in *Portrait of Adele Bloch-Bauer (Lady in Gold)* and translates into Crumb's fifth movement through his use of the pedal (holding PI, the sustain pedal, down throughout the entire movement), whole-tone scales, the use of metallic windchimes, arpeggios, and grace notes. Making the music dreamlike and impressionistic rather than expressionistic (the art style that is more closely aligned with Klimt's style) might be because of Crumb's personal emotional connection to the work rather than an interest in the relation between

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Dinnerstein, Simon. "Purple Haze." Accessed 18 March 2026, https://www.simondinnerstein.com/purplehaze_reflections.html.

¹⁹ Arnason, H. H., and Mansfield, Elizabeth, author. *History of modern art: painting, sculpture, architecture, photography*. Seventhed. Pearson, 2013.

Klimt's Vienna and its *zeitgeist*. It also could have been a purely personal style decision with Crumb's own musical inspiration largely coming from Debussy.

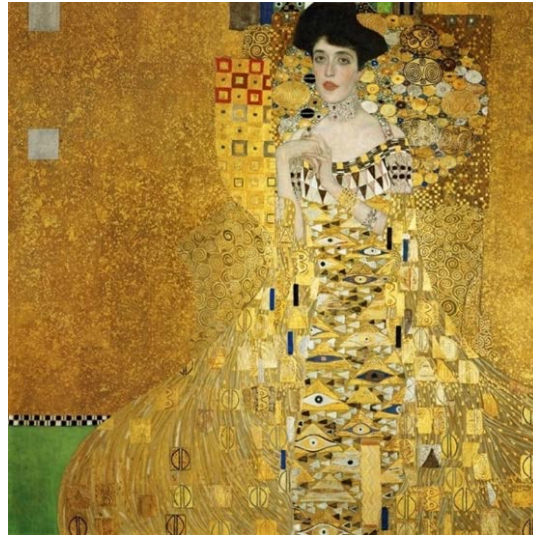
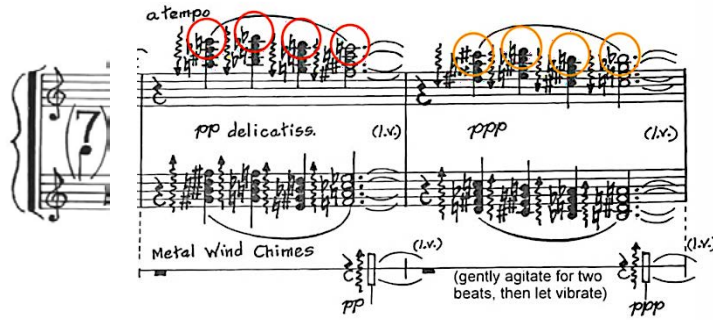


Figure 7: Gustav Klimt, *Portrait of Adele Bloch-Bauer (Lady in Gold)*, 1907.

As we will see in the next movement, *Spirit of the Dead Watching*, Crumb uses the ‘B-A-C-H theme’ intentionally, that is commonly used to refer to J.S. Bach in a musical way by incorporating the notes B-flat, A, C, and B as a motive. However, in this movement, *Portrait of Adele-Bloch*, he uses the transposed D-S-C-H theme all throughout the piece. This is a theme used by Dmitri Shostakovich as a musical self-portrait by incorporating the notes D, E-flat, C, and B. In measure 2, this motif is used in transposition: G, A-flat, F, and E, indicated below in the red circles. In measure 3 the motif is transposed into the notes C-sharp, D, B, and B-flat, indicated below in the orange circles. Since Crumb explicitly warns the performer he is using the “Bach-motif” in the *Spirit of the Dead Watching*, the “Shostakovich-motif” might not have been a purposeful decision but is nonetheless worth noting.



Example 24: The "Shostakovich-motif" in 5. *Portrait of Adele Bloch-Bauer (Lady in Gold)*, (Gustav Klimt), mm. 2-3.

3.6 Paul Gauguin: Spirit of the Dead Watching

Paul Gauguin's (1848-1903) painting depicts his child-wife Teha'amana looking at him while the "spirit of the dead" is watching in the corner next to the bed his bride is laying on, naked. Gauguin's primitive art is something he identified himself with; within the Western art world, he became known as a rebel artist against society, in search of the life of a "savage." He traveled to Tahiti, among other islands, looking for a more simple and more elemental lifestyle, and to paint abstract art inspired by the primitive landscape and its indigenous people.²⁰

Nowadays we can't help but think of the social issues that arise when looking at this painting; not only was Gauguin a white European male in Tahiti while the French were colonizing the island, Teha'amana has also widely been known to have been around 15 years old in this painting. Even more so, according to recent research, she would not have been older than 13, making Gauguin a pedophile.²¹

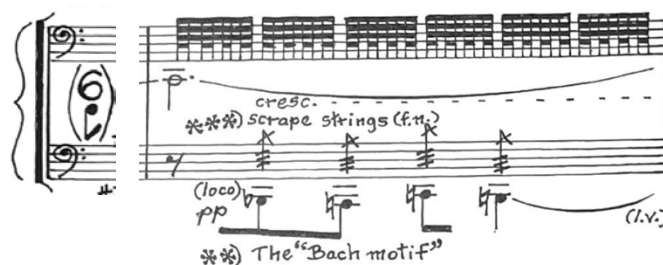
²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ponnambalam, Devika. "Gauguin's 'Child-Wife': In Search of the Muse That Inspired a Masterpiece." (2023). Accessed 18 March 2026. <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2023/mar/18/gauguins-child-wife-in-search-of-the-muse-that-inspired-a-masterpiece>.



Figure 8: Paul Gauguin, *Spirit of the Dead Watching*, 1892.

The question remains if Crumb was aware of this background info. Whether he knew or not, the composition can be interpreted in two different ways. In the beginning of the musical piece, Crumb introduces the “deathdrone,” a playing technique requiring the right hand to continuously “trill” with your nail and finger bed on the wiring of a bass string. The aforementioned “Bach-motif” “adds emptiness to the music in a way that very few motifs have,” according to Crumb himself.²²



Example 25: The Bach-motif in 6. *Spirit of the Dead Watching* (Paul Gauguin), m. 3.

If he *did not* know about Gauguin’s subject being a child-wife, the scratchy, empty atmosphere might have been Crumb’s version of the “spirit of the dead” watching the girl, perhaps

²² Durant, Yati. “Interviews with George Crumb 2013-2018.” *Contemporary music review* 41, no. 1 (2022): 108–26.

scaring the girl. If he *did* know, it adds an eeriness and a deep sadness to the music; perhaps Teha'amana isn't scared of the spirit but of the colonizer.

3.7 Pablo Picasso: Guernica

Pablo Picasso's (1881-1973) *Guernica* is one of the most well-known paintings of the 20th century. It was inspired by the violence of the Spanish Civil War under fascist Francisco Franco, specifically when the Germans came into Spain and bombed the town Guernica, destroying the Basque town. Picasso supported the Republicans against the fascists and made *Guernica* for the Spanish Republican Pavilion. In the cubist painting, there are motifs such as a mother who has lost her baby, a screaming horse, and a bull representing brute force and aggression.²³



Figure 9: Pablo Picasso, *Guernica*, 1937.

Perhaps because of its depiction of war and fascism, the seventh movement of *Metamorphoses Book II* is by far the loudest and most aggressive movement, fitting the background story of *Guernica*. In contrast with the previous movement, *Spirit of the Dead Watching*, the cultural pain here is immediate and confrontational, and the violence of the act appears to translate into sharp and aggressive music. The piece requires rulers on all the strings, turning the music into metallic noise, and starts with the pianist hitting these rulers while striking

²³ Arnason, H. H., and Mansfield, Elizabeth, author. *History of modern art: painting, sculpture, architecture, photography*. Seventhed. Pearson, 2013.

the soundboard with a stick. It uses accents, staccatissimos, clusters, Crumb's invented muting stick hitting the bass strings, the palm of the hand striking the strings, and the use of the voice of the pianist, making this piece a cacophony of sound. When the movement nears the end, the pianist speaks the word "Guernica" with the marking of *doloroso*. While the use of the title of the artwork as a lyric within the music seems overly explicit at first, the name of the town 'Guernica' comes close to the Spanish word for war, which is "guerra," adding an extra symbolic meaning to the title. The word "Guernica" needs to be spoken with sorrow, indicated by the musical term *doloroso*.

Handwritten musical score for the spoken text "Guernica" from Pablo Picasso's 7th movement. The score is written on a grand staff with various performance instructions. It includes tempo markings like "Poco lento" and "doloroso, lamentoso", dynamic markings like "pp", "ppp", and "mp", and specific instructions such as "strike strings gently with muting stick", "scrape over metal", and "winding of strings". The spoken text "Guer-ni-ca" is written above the final notes, with "doloroso" and "mp" markings above it. The score also includes a "Ped. I sempre" instruction and a "black keys" marking.

Example 26: Spoken text in 7. *Guernica* (Pablo Picasso), mm. 62-65.

3.8 Georgia O'Keeffe: From the Faraway, Nearby

Georgia O'Keeffe (1887-1986) is well known for her depictions of the New Mexico desert. For many years, she travelled between New York City and New Mexico before eventually settling there after the death of her partner, Alfred Stieglitz. He had a major influence on her professional career; beginning in 1916, he exhibited her work and helped bring it to public attention. This reflects a broader pattern in art history, where many women artists relied on recognition or support from father, brothers, or partners to gain access to the professional art world. O'Keeffe ultimately became one of the most celebrated American artists, through her modernist paintings of flowers, desert landscape, and the American Southwest.

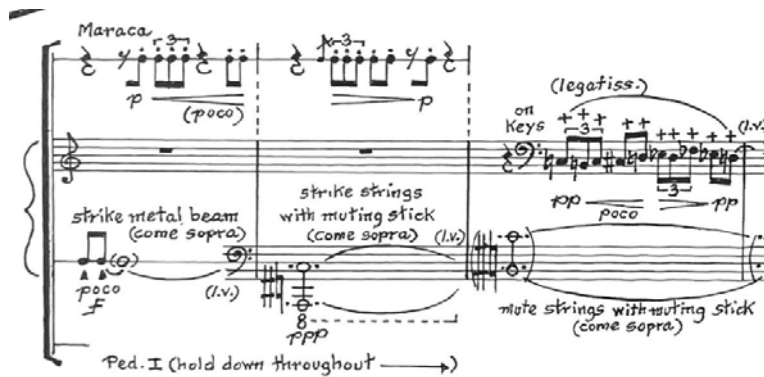
In *From the Faraway, Nearby*, we see a deer skull with too many antlers that is enlarged, covering the desert. O’Keeffe was a collector of animal bones and wooden crosses set up by Catholic sects.²⁴ The infinity of space in northern New Mexico made her call this place “The Faraway.”



Figure 10: Georgia O’Keeffe, *From the Faraway, Nearby*, 1937.

This movement is the shortest piece, taking up just one page and uses the fewest notes and keys, compared to the other movements. Crumb experiments with timbre to a larger extent in this movement than in the other movements. The piece has an improvisatory feel, requiring the performer to move continuously between instruments while remaining quiet and composed in order to preserve the work’s soft atmosphere and delicate dynamics. The thematic material is all introduced in the first system; the other two systems repeat the same themes. This is the only movement that uses the maraca; the effect of it being a sharp, dry, rattling sound. The landscape is interpreted through this sound as well as through a rattling jewelry chain, the muting stick (which makes the attack of the hammer on the strings drier), the bamboo chimes, the spring coil drum that rattles, and the whispered voice.

²⁴ Grosenick, Uta. *Women artists in the 20th and 21st century*. Taschen, 2001.



Example 27: The use of the maraca in 8. *From the Faraway, Nearby* (Georgia O'Keeffe), mm. 8-10.

O'Keeffe was an advocate of a synaesthetic theory of art, in paintings such as *Music—Pink and Blue, II*, and she loved ragtime music. She “once referred to her art works as ‘music,’ adding that ‘Since I cannot sing, I paint.’”²⁵ Crumb knew about Paul Klee’s affinity with music, and incorporated the blues in *Purple Haze* because of (according to him) Dinnerstein’s interest in Jimi Hendrix. Unlike these other examples, however, there is no indication that Crumb was directly inspired by O'Keeffe’s own musical interests or her experience playing the violin.

In this collection O'Keeffe stands out as the only woman among the artists whose work was chosen for *Metamorphoses*.

3.9 Marc Chagall: Easter

Easter starts with a melody played on the lowest register of the piano with the help of the muting stick, but heard by the audience in a higher register through overtones. According to Crumb, this effect is supposed to resemble church bells.²⁶ Chagall, a Jewish man, often references both Jewish and Christian spirituality in his paintings. Recurrent themes are flying or floating figures, animals, musicians and instruments, the circus, and sacred imagery. In his painting from 1968 we see a yellow horse, a blood-red moon, a flying angel, and a dinner table in the town of Vitebsk.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Durant, Yati. “Interviews with George Crumb 2013-2018.” *Contemporary music review* 41, no. 1 (2022): 108–26.

While *Easter* sounds “Boldly resounding, joyously (like cathedral bells)”²⁷ at first, a passage of dense chords changes the mood, possibly portraying the brutality of the bible story.



Example 28: Dense chords in 9. *Easter* (Marc Chagall), mm. 62-64.

The movement ends quietly and meditatively with a melody played *ppp*, perhaps portraying the role of the angel in the painting. This section sets up the musical tone of the next movement which uses variations of *ppp* and *pppp* throughout. This meditative section at the end of *Easter* gets interrupted by the loudest dynamic used in the entire cycle; clusters that are violently hammered on the keys with a dynamic of *ffffz*.



Figure 11: Marc Chagall, *Easter*, 1968.

²⁷ Crumb, George. *Metamorphoses (Book II)*. New York: C. F. Peters Corp., 2021.

3.10 Vincent van Gogh: The Starry Night

Vincent van Gogh (1853-1890) wrote to his brother Theo: “In a picture, I want to say something comforting as music.”²⁸ How fitting that Crumb turned his painting into music 131 years after the fact. As an artist Van Gogh was trying to look for a way to symbolize the eternal.²⁹ He painted *The Starry Night* in 1889, after having his second breakdown, as he suffered from mental health problems. The painting features vibrant colors that move in waves.



Figure 12: Vincent van Gogh, *The Starry Night*, 1889.

Crumb says:

In *Starry Night* the music suggests both the humanity and a little bit of a city there, but it's mostly the cosmos, you know. So that is what I did with it. ... there is a serenity in the music despite that it looks like a lot of activity, but the harmonic sound is rather static. ... That's the night effect. ... I call it 'Slowly pulsating desireless with infinite calm'. So, the tempo is slow, ... it doesn't move very fast, and the harmonic structure is mostly made up of fourths.³⁰

He creates a meditative, nearly-silent soundscape with a combination of pizzicato, glissandi, overtones, and playing on the keys that requires perfect control of the sound by the performer to

²⁸ Arnason, H. H., and Mansfield, Elizabeth, author. *History of modern art: painting, sculpture, architecture, photography*. Seventhed. Pearson, 2013.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Durant, Yati. "Interviews with George Crumb 2013-2018." *Contemporary music review* 41, no. 1 (2022): 108–26.

Slowly pulsating; desireless, with infinite calm [$\text{♩} = \text{ca. } 72$]

on Keys

15 *pppp sempre (legatiss., senza accent)*

pizz. (ft.) *actual sound* *gliss. over strings (4 ft.)*

ppp *ppp (5th part harmonic)* *pppp delicatiss.*

20 *pppp* *(come sopra)* *gliss. over str. (4 ft.)* *(come sopra)* *gliss. over str. (4 ft.)*

pizz. (ft.) *ppp* *ppp* *ppp* *ppp*

Ped. I sempre

38

Chapter 4: Alternate Artworks

This chapter will explore alternative works of art that Crumb could have chosen. His selection of artworks for both volumes reflects the limitations of the traditional Western art canon and reveals how systems of representation shape artistic choices. In describing his process, Crumb explained that he chose works from the art books on his shelves based on which paintings he admired and which seemed most compatible with his musical ideas: “I have about 25 books with reproductions of artworks, and I chose the ones that seemed more like things that I could use in connection with musical ideas that I was working around.”³¹ The resulting selections consist almost entirely of works by white male artists: nineteen by white men, one by a woman, and none by artists of color. Because Crumb’s choices were drawn from canonical art books that historically privileged European male artists, examining alternative artworks becomes worth exploring. This is not to speculate about his intentions, but to contextualize the piece within broader traditions embedded in art history and classical music.

This imbalance is particularly notable in the movement *From the Faraway, Nearby*, after Georgia O’Keeffe’s painting of the same title. The movement is the shortest in the second book, lasting for only one page in contrast to the longer movements surrounding it. Although this does not imply lesser value, the contrast invites to consider thinking about the historical marginalization of women within the Western music tradition, where women were often restricted in opportunity and scope of artistic projects. Furthermore, in a letter that Crumb wrote to Simon Dinnerstein³² we read that Crumb had originally planned for Jackson Pollock’s *Enchanted Forest* to be part of the *Metamorphoses Book II*. Georgia O’Keeffe was not included in his original sketch, and *Enchanted*

³¹ Medwin, Marc. “The Bedrock of Tradition and the Mortar of Memory: A Conversation with George Crumb and Marcantonio Barone.” *Fanfare (Tenafly, N.J.)* 45, no. 4 (2022): 48–55.

³² Appendix A.

Forest was replaced by *From the Faraway, Nearby*. This leaves the impression that O'Keeffe's work was included more as a symbolic gesture than as a fully integrated part of the work. Whether this was an intentional or unconscious decision by Crumb, the imbalance shows the importance of examining how representation and underrepresentation can operate.

This numeral imbalance is notable in Crumb's selection, particularly given the increasing public and academic attention to questions of representation during the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. It raises the question whether Crumb would have done better to select a different set of paintings, entirely.

In order to address this, paintings are selected that were created roughly around the same time, addressing the same themes, using similar color palettes, evoking similar emotional effects, and in some cases created by artists working in the same circles or cities. In this chapter, a list of artists he could have considered is explored, using several parameters to make the selection. The list consists of artists Sophie Taeuber-Arp, Gabriele Münter, Alice Neel, Tamara de Lempicka, Broncia Koller, Frida Kahlo, Faith Ringgold, Emmi Whitehorse, Leonora Carrington, and Yayoi Kusama. Some of these artists are widely celebrated, others have only recently been rediscovered, and some of them are currently active in their artist communities. Since 1971 there has been growing attention to women artists thanks to the efforts of writers such as Linda Nochlin, through her article *Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?* This is a foundational feminist art history essay in which the author argues that the absence of women from the traditional canon results not from a lack of talent, but from systemic barriers that excluded women from artistic recognition. Since Crumb finished his *Metamorphoses Book II* in 2020, about fifty years after Nochlin's publication, he could have addressed the more important question: "Why have these great women artists never been included?"

In considering this thought experiment in relation to the discussion of *Metamorphoses Book II* above, these questions will be asked: first, whether Crumb's music would maintain its effectiveness if paried with works by different artists; second, how the use of alternative artworks might shape a performer's engagement with the music; and third, how reconsidering these choices might inspire future composers to approach composition with broader representation.

4.1 Sophie Taeuber-Arp: Composition en taches quadrangulaires

Sophie Taeuber-Arp's (1889-1943) work, *Composition en taches quadrangulaires*, was made in 1920, completed five years before Paul Klee's *Ancient Sound, Abstract on Black*. Both Swiss-German artists, they worked on abstract art at the time. Taeuber-Arp was one of the first artists who was closely associated with dadaism, abstract, and concrete art. She joined various artist collectives and created a meeting place at her house for fellow artists such as Piet Mondrian, Joan Miró, and Marcel Duchamp.

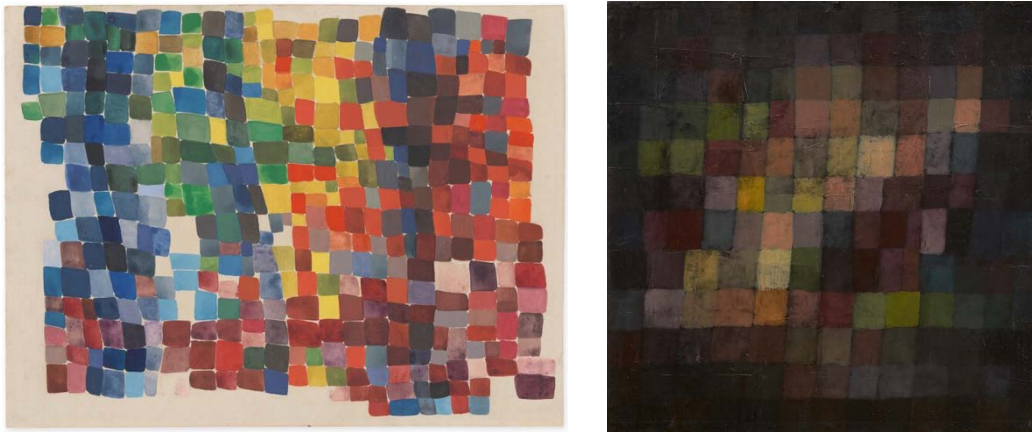


Figure 13: On the left: Sophie Taeuber-Arp, *Composition en taches quadrangulaires*, 1920. On the right: Paul Klee, *Ancient Sound, Abstract on Black*, 1925.

Her composition is visually very similar to Paul Klee's *Ancient Sound, Abstract on Black* in its form, while different in its background color. Her work is so significantly brighter and therefore might not necessarily directly relate to Crumb's first movement with its dark tones. The

artworks are very similar in style though, and Taeuber-Arp's affinity for geometric design reflect in the music through the parallel fourths moving up and down.

4.2 Gabriele Münter: Breakfast of the Birds

Gabriele Münter (1877-1962) was one of the founding members of the expressionist group “Der Blaue Reiter,” a group of artists that were considered pioneers of modern art in the 20th century. Münter's *Breakfast of the Birds* was painted in 1934, while Klee's *Landscape with Yellow Birds* was created in 1928. Paul Klee joined *Der Blaue Reiter* after it was formed by Münter, Wassily Kandinsky, and Franz Marc in 1911. Even though Münter had made a name for herself in her circles, she was not widely considered as a pioneer, until she gained fame more recently.

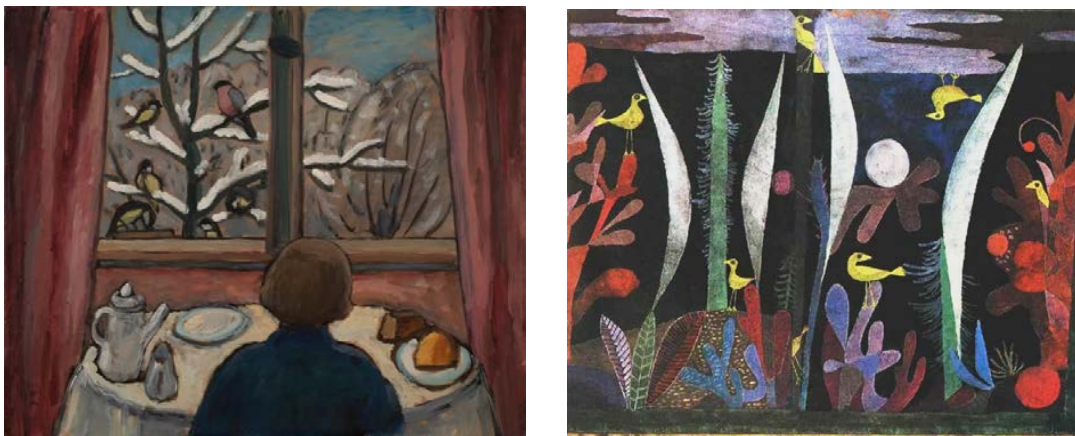


Figure 14: On the left: Gabriele Münter, *Breakfast of the Birds*, 1934. On the right: Paul Klee, *Landscape with Yellow Birds*, 1928.

A cluster of bass notes is silently depressed at the beginning of the movement, held by the sostenuto pedal, to create overtones throughout the piece. Glissandi and scrapes are played on those bass strings in the slow sections of the movement. Does the presence of a person looking out at the birds in Münter's painting as opposed to Klee's *Yellow Birds* influence the perception of the piece for the audience? A human being inside the frame creates another level of interpretation. The contrasting sections between “nervously, finely etched” and “slowly, languidly” suddenly seem to portray the contrast between outside the window, where the birds chirp, and inside the house,

where a person drinks their morning tea. Furthermore, it is wintertime. In that regard, Mnter's scene aligns effectively with the contrasting sections of the movement.

4.3 Alice Neel: Ginny

Artists Andrew Wyeth (1917-2009) and Alice Neel (1900-1984) were both originally from Pennsylvania and both well-known artists during their lifetime. Both *Christina's World* (made in 1948), and *Ginny* (made in 1984) focus on the inner world of women who the artists personally knew. Even though *Ginny* was created in 1984, it is still older than Dinnerstein's *Purple Haze*, which was created in 1991, and thus would not be out of place in Crumb's collection.

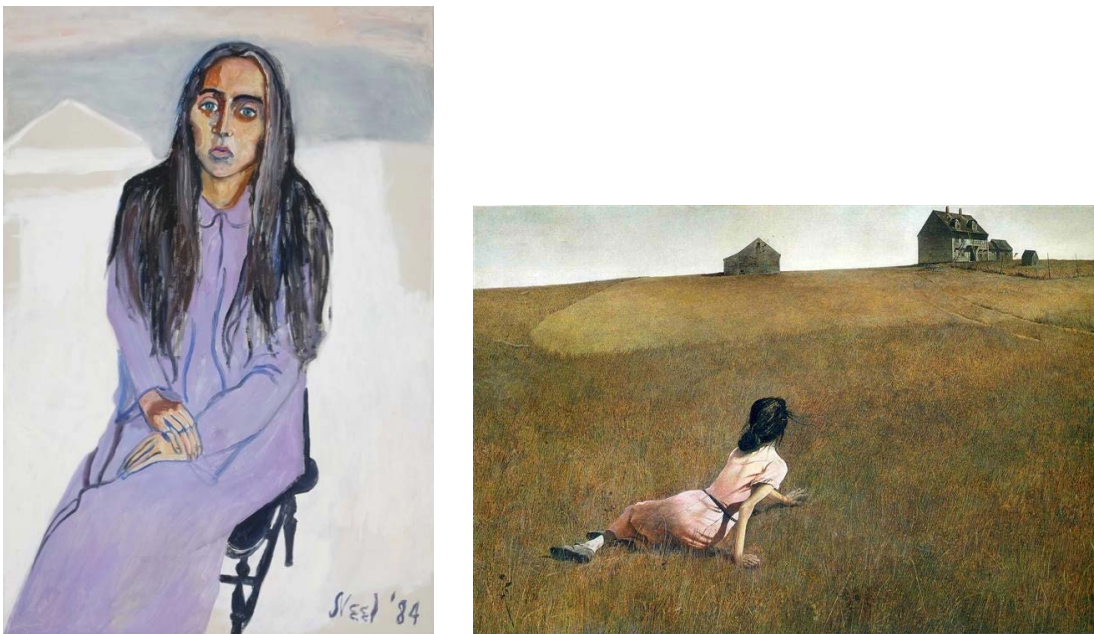


Figure 15: On the left: Alice Neel, *Ginny*, 1984. © The Estate of Alice Neel, Courtesy The Estate of Alice Neel and David Zwirner. On the right: Andrew Wyeth, *Christina's World*, 1948. © [2026] Wyeth Foundation for American Art / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

Christina, Wyeth's neighbor, suffered from a disease that left her unable to walk. Ginny, Neel's daughter-in-law, had lost her mother right before her portrait was made. Towards the end of the movement, Crumb introduces a long, slow scrape that may be understood as a musical representation of physical or emotional struggle. In relation to Wyeth's painting, the scrape can evoke Christina's movement across the field and her refusal to use a wheelchair. In Neel's portrait

of Ginny, however, the scrape suggests a different framework, one centered in grief and emotional exhaustion seen through Ginny's expression.

4.4. Tamara de Lempicka: Portrait of Arlette Boucard

Tamara de Lempicka (1894-1980) was a Polish artist who spend most of her life in the United States and was known for her sensual girls.³³ In her *Portrait of Arlette Boucard* from 1928 we see a woman laying down with a city in the background, clothed except for her legs. She holds a powerful pose, while the woman in Dinnerstein's *Purple Haze* radiates surrender.

Crumb's depiction of the musical inspirations for Dinnerstein's work finds overlap with De Lempicka, who was also inspired by music. She created paintings such as *Blue Woman with a Guitar* (1929) that features a woman in a blue dress with a city as a background.



Figure 16: On the top: Tamara de Lempicka, *Portrait of Arlette Boucard*, 1928. © Tamara de Lempicka Estate, LLC. On the bottom: Simon Dinnerstein, *Purple Haze*, 1991.

³³ Grosenick, Uta. *Women artists in the 20th and 21st century*. Taschen, 2001.

This movement begins *pp*, building up to a *ff*, and backing down to *pppp*, forming a musical wave. If this wave is applied to *Purple Haze*, perhaps it is a representation of the body hovering over the city. Applying it to *Portrait of Arlette Boucard*, the dynamics intensify her gaze, adding emotional desire to the piece.

4.5 Broncia Koller: Seated Woman (Marietta)

Broncia Koller (1863-1934) worked in Vienna during the turn of the 20th century. Her art shows close affinity with *Secession*, an artist collective that Gustav Klimt was a part of.³⁴ At the time, women weren't permitted by the system to study the naked human body. Instead of using human models, painting classes for women were taught by studying cows.³⁵ Koller presents her model in a non-eroticized way and uses a similar gold backdrop as that employed by Klimt. The result is a woman unornamented in a more simplified manner.



Figure 17: On the left: Broncia Koller, *Seated Woman (Marietta)*, 1907. On the right: Gustav Klimt, *Portrait of Adele Bloch-Bauer (Lady in Gold)*, 1907.

In this movement, Crumb uses grace notes and wind chimes to portray the metallic, golden aura of Gustav Klimt's portrait. The same score applied to a different painting influences how the listener interprets the ornamentation. While looking at *Seated Woman (Marietta)*, the silence

³⁴ Camus, Marianne, and Dupont, Valérie, editor. *Women in art and literature networks: spinning webs*. Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2018.

³⁵ Nochlin, Linda. "Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?". ARTnews, (1971).

between the ornamentation stands out, while in the *Portrait of Adele Bloch-Bauer (Lady in Gold)* thickness of the chords stand out.

4.6 Frida Kahlo: The Dream (The Bed)

As we discussed in chapter 3, the model, Teha'amana, used for *Spirit of the Dead Watching* could not have been older than fifteen years old at the time, more likely being closer to thirteen. While Crumb's marking of 'mysterious' likely refers to the background figure, the listener and performer are likely to respond with eerie revulsion as a response to Gauguin's pedophilia. Frida Kahlo (1907-1954) painted a similar scene but used herself as a model as an empowering act of self-determination. Kahlo suffered immense physical pain during her lifetime and projected her inner world and her suffering in her paintings.³⁶ In *The Dream (The Bed)* (1940), the "spirit of the dead" is watching her. Kahlo and Gauguin, both symbolist painters, created similar works with starkly different implications.



Figure 18: On the left: Frida Kahlo, *The Dream (The Bed)*, 1940. On the right: Paul Gauguin, *The Spirit of the Dead Watching*, 1892.

The "death drone," previously discussed, provides a continuous scrape across one of the bass strings. The effect of the "death drone" translates differently if the paintings are exchanged.

³⁶ Grosenick, Uta. *Women artists in the 20th and 21st century*. Taschen, 2001.

Without the spectre of colonialism and sexualization of a child, Kahlo's painting better depicts the intent of Crumb's music.

4.7 Faith Ringgold: American People Series #20: DIE

Faith Ringgold's (1930-2024) *American People Series #20: DIE* confronts race relations in the 1960's in the United States. It is a mural-sized painting, just like Picasso's *Guernica*. Blood splatters everywhere, across an interracial group of men, women, and children, suggesting no one is free from this struggle. Ringgold takes inspiration from Picasso, with the background referring to *Guernica*. It could not be a more excellent choice to substitute Ringgold's *American People Series #20: DIE* for *Guernica*, because it is directly patterned on Picasso's work.



Figure 19: On the top: Faith Ringgold, *American People Series #20: DIE*, 1967. On the bottom: Pablo Picasso, *Guernica*, 1937.

Ringgold puts two crying children grasping each other towards the center of the painting, centering the tragedy of violence. In *Guernica*, a mother carrying her dead child can be seen on the left. Since Ringgold, like Crumb, was American, this painting could have been an interesting choice for this violent movement. Ringgold's work honors the meaning of the music through its themes of war and suffering.

4.8 Emmi Whitehorse: Jackstraw

Emmi Whitehorse (1957) is a Navajo artist born in New Mexico. Whitehorse's work called *Jackstraw* (2000) is reminiscent of the desert in its color scheme. Her work has always been about land, awareness of our surroundings, and appreciating the beauty of nature.

As we saw in [chapter 3](#), the dryness of the desert is portrayed by the use of the maraca, bamboo wind chimes, and a jewelry chain on the strings, producing a dry, rattly sound. Whitehorse's painting could be viewed as abstract art, but just like Paul Klee's *Ancient Sound*, *Abstract on Black*, has a title that can musically be interpreted.



Figure 20: On the left: Emmi Whitehorse, *Jackstraw*, 2000. On the right: Georgia O'Keeffe, *From the Faraway, Nearby*, 1937.

Even though Georgia O'Keeffe is a woman included in the set, it is important to find a replacement work for this movement as well for the following reason: Georgia O'Keeffe is world famous, and even though her work deserves to be known, there are other artists who do, and who

have not yet been widely discussed on forums, in journal articles, or been printed in books. This is mostly the case for people of color. A list that includes less-represented artists is attached in Appendix B.³⁷

4.9 Leonora Carrington: The Meal of Lord Candlestick

A comparison between Marc Chagall and Leonora Carrington (1917-2011) presents us with two feasts; one that of Easter, the other a feast of rejection of an artist's Catholic upbringing. Leonora Carrington was raised in a mansion in a catholic household, abandoned this lifestyle, and became a surrealist painter. Marc Chagall was an early modernist painter with hints of surrealism, often portraying angels, animals, and people flying in the sky. *Easter* centers an angel and a horse, its people tucked away in the corner, while *The Meal of Lord Candlestick* centers the table and the guests. It is not known if the religious connection behind Chagall's *Easter* held personal meaning to Crumb. He did not consider himself religious, but he was a very spiritual person.³⁸



Figure 21: On the left: Leonora Carrington, *The Meal of Lord Candlestick*, 1938. On the right: Marc Chagall, *Easter*, 1968.

³⁷ See Appendix B.

³⁸ Crumb, George. "Composer George Crumb, Avant-Gardist American Talks About His Love for Bartok, Bach and the Violated Piano." Interview by Toronyilalic, Igor. *theartdesk Q&A*, November 29, 2009. <https://theartdesk.com/classical-music/theartdesk-qa-composer-george-crumb>.

The feast can be heard through the loud overtones, or fifth partials, on the bass strings, that should resemble cathedral bells, and through the bright melody in the right hand. The piece closes with a soft repetitive gesture, interrupted by loud clusters. When replaced by Carrington's painting, this movement sounds like a mad feast. This substitution fundamentally changes the nature of the interpretation of the music.

4.10 Yayoi Kusama: Summer Night

While Yayoi Kusama (1929) was born about forty years after Vincent van Gogh (1853-1890) died, some parallels can be drawn between the two artists. Their works use repetitive patterns and interpretations of the natural world, and Kusama's work, like Van Gogh's, has been influenced by the painter's struggles with severe mental illness. Kusama's body of work is immense; she is currently 97 years old and is still actively creating. One of her works is titled *Summer Night* (1979), reminiscent of Van Gogh's *Starry Night* (1889).



Figure 22: On the left: Yayoi Kusama, *Summer Night*, 1979. On the right: Vincent van Gogh, *The Starry Night*, 1889.

The challenge of this last movement is to play *pppp* and *ppppp* throughout, creating a special atmosphere of quietness and silence. Kusama's painting uses brighter colors, but uses similar shapes in the background with a blue and yellow color palette. *Metamorphoses Book II* ends with a whisper.

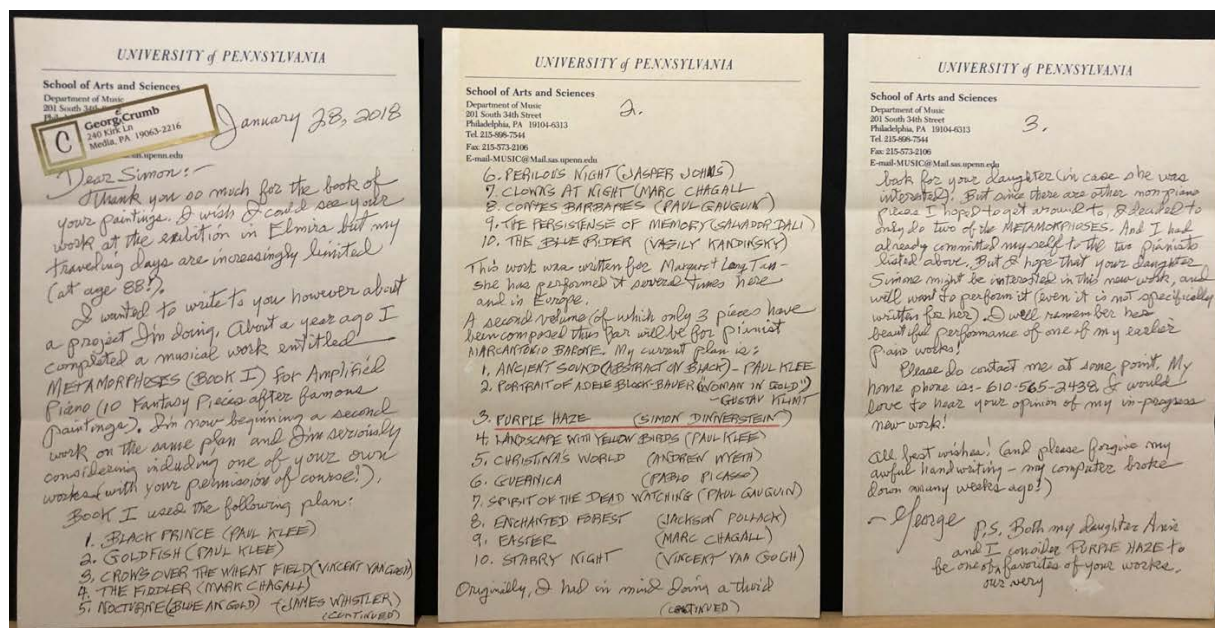
Conclusion

George Crumb's long career made a significant impact on 20th and 21st century music, especially through his innovative approach to piano timbre and technique. His continued curiosity about the instrument, even at the end of his life, shows a deep commitment to exploring the piano's possibilities. This creativity not only expanded what the piano can do but also pushed listeners and performers to think differently about sound and expression.

Crumb's relationship with other art forms also shows an interesting shift. Despite earlier skepticism towards using the visual arts as musical inspiration, his later decision to base an entire work on paintings suggests a change in perspective and an openness to different kinds of artistic inspiration. At the same time, his choice of these visual inspirations raises questions about representation. As a white male composer working within a historically Eurocentric tradition, it is possible that his choices reflect limitations, namely the absence of works by artists from more diverse backgrounds.

While we cannot change the works themselves, we can change how we engage with them. By rethinking how the work is presented, studied, and performed, we have an opportunity to broaden the context and meaning of it. Looking ahead, one way to build on this is by creating projects that actively include artists from a variety of backgrounds, whether through collaborations with a single composer, or by commissioning several composers. In doing so, Crumb's spirit of exploration can be honored while also moving towards a more inclusive artistic landscape.

APPENDIX A: HANDWRITTEN LETTER TO CRUMB FROM DINNERSTEIN



Appendix A: Handwritten note from George Crumb to Simon Dinnerstein, January 28, 2018. Received by the author via email on April 27, 2026. Published with permission from Simon Dinnerstein.

APPENDIX B: LIST OF ARTISTS CONSIDERED FOR CHAPTER 4

Tarsila do Amaral (1886–1973, Brazilian)
Emma Amos (1937–2020, American)
Anna Ancher (1859–1935, Danish)
Anna Boch (1848–1936, Belgian)
Rosa Bonheur (1822–1899, French)
Lee Bontecou (1931–2022, American)
Christine Bouteiller (1904–1971, Dutch-French)
Louise Bourgeois (1911–2010, French-American)
Marie Bracquemond (1840–1916, French)
Leonora Carrington (1917–2011, British-Mexican)
Mary Cassatt (1844–1926, American)
Georgette Chen (1906–1993, Chinese-Singaporean)
Angel De Cora Dietz, Hinook-Mahiwi-Kalinaka (1871–1919, Ho-Chunk, Native American)
Sonia Delaunay (1885–1979, Ukrainian-French)
Anita Fields (b. 1951, Osage/Muscogee, Native American)
Alyce Frank (1932–2024, American)
Helen Frankenthaler (1928–2011, American)
Leola Freeman (1900–1989, American)
Francoise Gilot (1921–2023, French)
Natalja Gontscharowa (1881–1962, Russian)
Julie Heffernan (b. 1956, American)
Barbara Hepworth (1903–1975, British)
Lubaina Himid (b. 1954, British)
Hannah Höch (1889–1978, German)
Frida Kahlo (1907–1954, Mexican)
Mary Kelly (b. 1941, American)
Broncia Koller (1863–1934, Austrian)
Käthe Kollwitz (1867–1945, German)
Elaine de Kooning (1918–1989, American)
Lee Krasner (1908–1984, American)
Yayoi Kusama (b. 1929, Japanese)
Jean LaMarr, Pahime Gutne (b. 1945, Northern Paiute/Achomawi, Native American)
Marie Laurencin (1883–1956, French)
Margaret Lefranc (1907–1998, American)
Tamara de Lempicka (1894–1980, Polish)
Judith Lowry (1948, Mountain Maidu/Pit River/Washoe, Native American)
Linda Lomahaftewa (b. 1947, Hopi-Choctaw, Native American)
Felice Lucero-Giaccardo (b. 1946, San Felipe Pueblo, Native American)
Elena Luksch-Makowsky (1878–1967, Russian)
Florence McClung (1894–1992, American)
Mary Blood Mellen (1819–1886, American)
Nathalie Micas (1824–1889, French)
Joan Mitchell (1925–1992, American)
Paula Modersohn-Becker (1876–1907, German)

Berthe Morisot (1841–1895, French)
Gabriele Münter (1877–1962, German)
Alice Neel (1900–1984, American)
Louise Nevelson (1899–1988, American)
Amy Nimr (1898–1974, Egyptian)
Emily Mary Osborn (1828–1925, British)
Agnes Lawrence Pelton (1881–1961, German-American)
Suzanne Perlman (1922–2020, Hungarian-Dutch)
Florine Stettheimer (1871–1944, American)
Sophie Taeuber-Arp (1889–1943, Swiss)
Dorothea Tanning (1910–2012, American)
Alma Thomas (1891–1978, American)
Cynthia Tom (b. 1960's, American)
Suzanne Valadon (1865–1938, French)
Remedios Varo (1908–1963, Spanish-Mexican)
Pablita Velarde, Tse Tsan (1918–2006, Santa Clara Pueblo, Native American)
Gerda Wegener (1886–1940, Danish)
Laura Wheeler Waring (1887–1948, American)
Emmi Whitehorse (b. 1957, Navajo Nation, Native American)
Olga Wisinger-Florian (1844–1926, Austrian)
Barbara Zaring (b. 1947, American)

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