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PRESS REPORT

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Short Title: Crumb: Makrokosmos I, II & III "Music for a Summer Evening"

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Reviewer: Rob Haskins

I like Crumb more and more. The music always struck me as intensely theatrical and outre, though in the best way. After the cleansing stainless steel of minimalism, his excesses initially seemed embarrassingly gauche. Yet his excitement and compassion as a composer has weathered changes in fashion very well, and I now find him a wonderful post-1945 composer—a breath of fresh air demonstrating that innovations in sonority need not be divorced from a sense of music's classic priorities. His music is resolutely expressive and moving.

This is a fine contribution to the number of recordings of Makrokosmos available. She has the right feeling, the right sense of theater for these works, as in 'Tora! Tora! Tora' and 'Crucifixus'. The sound is fine; I find the microphones are set a little too close, but maybe that's the only way to get the residue from the amplification to sound as vibrant as it does. Still, moments of real tenderness—like the triads and intrusions of Chopin in 'Dream Images'—sound a bit too close-up to make the effect they should. It's possible, too, that the sound is a little too midrange.

For Makrokosmos 3—scored for two pianos and two percussionists and subtitled 'Music for a Summer Evening'—Shimizu and Struber play both parts, overdubbing them in the studio. They also employed a third performer, Natsumi Shimizu, who took over the obbligato whistling, slide whistle, and alto recorder called for in the score (and who contributes more whistling in volumes 1 and 2). In general I'm not much in favor of this sort of creative cheating; I think this music allows for the interactions and energy of four performers. But since Crumb's music fits so nicely in the orbit of Magical Realism, the use of technology seems somewhat appropriate.

And certainly the careful editing and sound control allows me to hear details that usually escape my notice: for instance, the canonic imitation of the Bach Fugue in D sharp minor (from WTC II) shared by the pianist and the percussionist (on vibraphone)—I hear it not so much as a canonic imitation as a kind of electronic echo effect. But the singing and spoken words in the piece could have been more prominent, especially since the whole was essentially created in the studio. Even so, the feeling in the piece is right—and maybe that's the most important thing.

My first choice for this music remains the concert performance by Berlin Piano-Percussion on Telos (Sept/Oct 2011) as well as the premiere recording of Makrokosmos 3 on Nonesuch.

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