

Music as Memory: Composing American Life

BY ALYSSA TIMIN

AMONG THE MANY REASONS that people make music, one is to remember a social experience. This year, the Philadelphia Music Project provides support for four programs that commemorate collective moments in very different ways. At the Mann Center for the Performing Arts, Wynton Marsalis and the Jazz at Lincoln Center Orchestra, in collaboration with Yacub Addy and Odadaa!, celebrated one of the birth sites of American music; Mendelssohn Club of Philadelphia performed John Adams' "On the Transmigration of Souls," composed in memory of September 11th; the Kimmel Center will host Phil Kline's "Zippo Songs," which honor American soldiers in Vietnam, and Orchestra 2001 premiered the fifth volume of George Crumb's "American Songbook," in which he re-visions turn-of-the-century popular music. Spanning several centuries of political misdeeds, cultural contestation, and artistic invention, these projects highlight the role of memory itself in social change.

On June 15th, the Mann Center for the Performing Arts jumpstarted the summer with a collaborative concert by the Jazz at Lincoln Center Orchestra and the Ghanaian percussion ensemble Odadaa!, both based in New York. Jazz at Lincoln Center's artistic director, Wynton Marsalis, put down his trumpet to conduct the sprawling ensemble, which performed his jubilant composition, "Congo Square." Beginning from Yacub Addy's traditional rhythms, driven by the cowbell, Marsalis built a raucous mélange of African, Caribbean, and Latin grooves that sought both to allow each ensemble to shine separately and bring them together in adventurous new hybrids.

The 14-movement suite commemorates the public square in New Orleans where, from the mid-1700s until the late 1800s, slaves collected freely on Sunday afternoons to sing, dance, and conduct open-air markets. These weekly gatherings allowed slaves to celebrate their community and produce their own art, fostering a creative climate that grew strong under the French colonial government. Despite suppression under the United States government prior to the Civil War, vibrant musical forms continued to develop among the populations of African and French Creole descent. Famously, at the beginning of the 20th century, these groups brought forth jazz.

To Marsalis, Congo Square encapsulates the history of lively cultural fermentation for which New Orleans, his hometown, is known all over the world. "The history of New Orleans people," he affirms, "is that we've always been a resilient people, so it was important that 'Congo Square' took on that feeling of a celebration—even in the face of adversity." Sadly, the image of adversity was forcefully renewed as Marsalis composed the piece, when Hurricane Katrina struck the Mississippi Delta in August 2005.

The disaster, of course, had a major effect on the piece and its premiere performance at the site of its namesake—

Left: Wynton Marsalis, photo by Clay Patrick McBride

Right: John Adams, photo by Deborah O'Grady

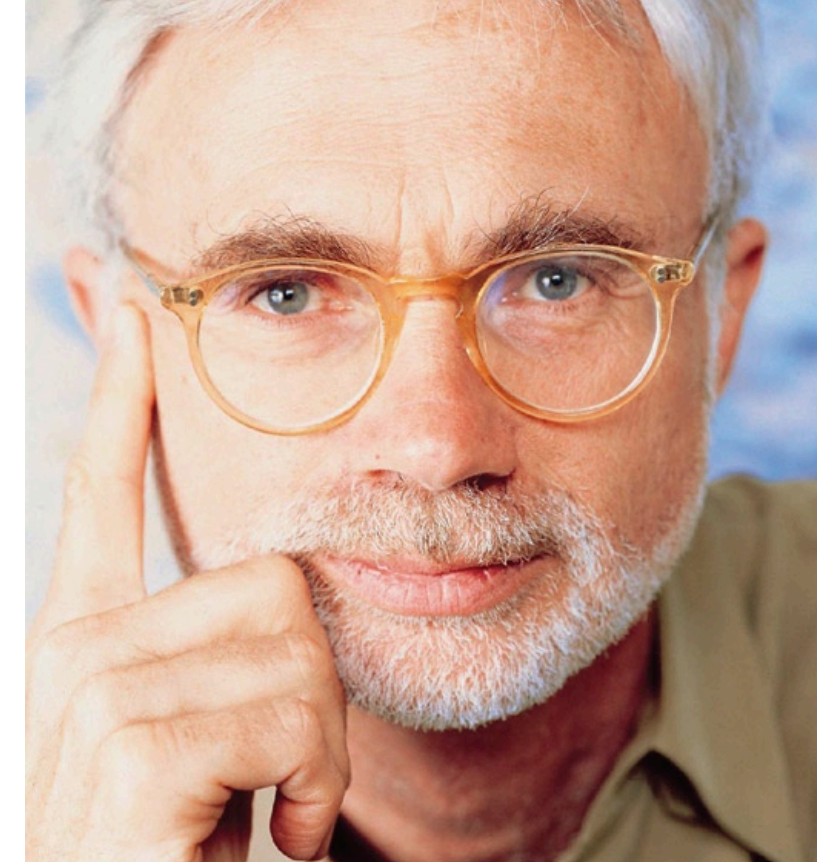
now part of Louis Armstrong Park—in April 2006. Ever the optimist and defender of the elevating, democratic spirit of jazz, Marsalis chose to focus on how Katrina brought people together and elicited, as he states, "... so much support from the private sectors in America and help from all over the world." The two ensembles capitalized on their size and performed the piece as a parade through the city, involving as many people in the occasion as they could. The collaboration culminates with Marsalis's "sanctified blues," a playful, "country-type of tune" that does what the blues do best—get us through the darkest moods and harshest moments with a tune that keeps us afloat and a beat that propels us on.

Despite its uplifting swing, however, "Congo Square" also voices protest, inviting shame on the Federal Emergency Management Agency for the poor quality of aid that residents received after the storm. Even now, Marsalis notes, "It's very important to remember that the city still needs support and that there is a great amount of work to be done." Touring with "Congo Square" has allowed Odadaa! and the Jazz at Lincoln Center Orchestra to remind the world that New Orleans still needs rebuilding and that it was among the city's poorest residents that one of America's most important art forms was born. The project commemorates both the slave communities in which African and French musical traditions fused to become jazz and the recent trial that Hurricane Katrina has posed for American solidarity. Whether the creativity of Congo Square can inspire triumph over the destruction of Katrina remains to be seen.

Marsalis is hardly alone in his desire to honor and, to a certain extent, redeem historical tragedies through music. This season will feature works by three additional American composers that similarly commemorate significant moments in the life of the nation. On November 3rd, the Mendelssohn Club of Philadelphia performed a major choral work by John Adams, "On the Transmigration of Souls," which he wrote as a response to the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001.

Adams has long been known for his complicated attitude toward the political sphere. His operas, including "The Death of Klinghoffer," "Nixon in China," and "Doctor Atomic," unfailingly explore charged events but pointedly resist taking sides and in fact strive to point out how the individuals at the heart of these events do not fit easily into the absolute attitudes toward which politics tend. For "On the Transmigration of Souls," Adams likewise avoided any partisan commentary.

The piece came about in early 2002. The New York Philharmonic had planned a concert of Stravinsky's Symphony of Psalms and Beethoven's Symphony No. 9 for September 19th of that year. However, as Adams explains, "[T]he Philharmonic felt that these concerts needed something that would directly respond to the emotional nature of that an-



niversary" (see <http://www.earbox.com/W-transmigration.html>). The Philharmonic cut the Stravinsky and, with Lincoln Center's Great Performers series, co-commissioned Adams. "I didn't require any time at all to decide whether or not to do it," the composer states. "I knew immediately that I very much wanted to do this piece—in fact I needed to do it."

Looking for a point of entry, he visited Ground Zero in March and observed remnants of "the many little shrines and spontaneous memorials and handwritten messages" that the victims' family and friends had left. He chose some of these eulogies as his text, as well as a single sentence from a flight attendant on American Airlines Flight 11, "I see water and buildings..." He scored the piece for choir, children's chorus, and orchestra and recorded sounds of the city—traffic, voices, and footsteps. Again focusing on the individuals caught up by destructive social forces, he aimed not to compose a direct memorial or requiem for 9/11. These terms, he argues, "... too easily suggest conventions that this piece doesn't share."

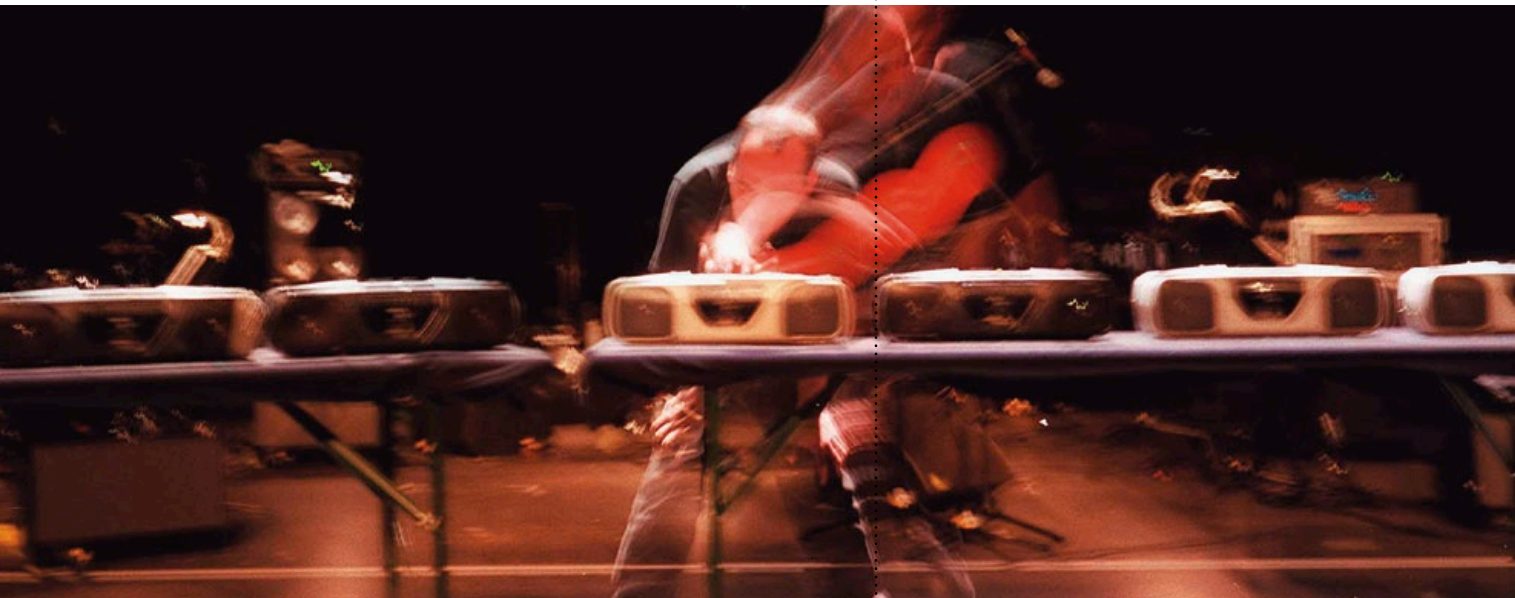
Instead, Adams refers to "On the Transmigration of Souls" as "a 'memory space'... a place where you can go and be alone with your thoughts and emotions." He compares the large work to a cathedral. In these sacred buildings, he comments, "You feel you are in the presence of many souls, generations upon generations of them, and you sense their collected energy as if they were all congregated or clustered in that one spot." Carefully subduing both the national outrage that 9/11 has inspired and the specific religious context of the cathedral, his guiding metaphor, Adams evokes the tragically grand scale necessary for thousands of people to mourn the deaths of thousands of others.

This is the sense that the composer intends the word

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“transmigration” to take in his title, “the movement of the soul from one state to another.” He explains, “And I don’t just mean the transition from living to dead, but also the change that takes place within the souls of those that stay behind, of those who suffer pain and loss and then they come away from that experience transformed.” His piece attempts to speak directly to the inner transformation that grieving people undergo. Adams suggests that death and grief form two equal, comparable motions, as though feeling and its expression in music can contain trauma and obviate the dangerous entry into politics.

Alan Harler, the artistic director of Mendelssohn Club, heard Adams’ piece soon after its premiere and immediately wanted to perform it. November 3rd, 2007 marked



his first chance. “After this amount of time [since 9/11],” he remarks, “it’s important that people start to hear the piece as music.” As the United States begins to move on from its “post-9/11” mentality, listeners can dissociate “On the Transmigration of Souls” from its cathartic function and begin to appreciate it purely for its beauty, perhaps as good a sign of social healing as any.

While Adams deemphasized the political aspects of the subject he commemorated, New York composer Phil Kline is responsible for some of the most incisive commentary to hit Philadelphia’s concert halls this season. Instead of Adams’s humanist austerity, much in line with his minimalist roots, Kline favors black humor. Having begun his music career as a guitarist in the 1980s downtown rock scene, he retains the informal stance and rough edges of an experimental musician.

On April 5, 2008, the Kimmel Center’s “Fresh Ink” series presents Kline’s “Zippo Songs,” as well as a new song cycle based on writings by Hunter S. Thompson. The

seven “Zippo Songs” also use expressive primary texts from American history; here, short poems that soldiers in Vietnam inscribed on their lighters. Sleek with anger or tender with thoughts of home, the songs are unflinching portraits of men who faced death daily: “Let me win your heart and mind or I’ll burn your hut down.”

The “Zippo Songs” cycle also features a setting of David Shapiro’s poem, “The Funeral of Jan Palach” and Kline’s three “Rumsfeld Songs,” with texts from former Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld’s Pentagon briefings. Rumsfeld’s statements make for dizzying found poetry, hopelessly circular while nonetheless entrancing. In “Near-Perfect Clarity,” he intones:

*I think what you’ll find
I think what you’ll find is,
Whatever it is we do substantively,
There will be near-perfect clarity
As to what it is.*

Kline has a keen ear for Rumsfeld’s poetics but cuts him no slack for speaking in such pseudo-mystical riddles. “Rumsfeld is such a closet case,” Kline says. “He missed his calling. He should have been a chorus boy in an off-Broadway show about Gertrude Stein. Of course, he said all that fanciful gibberish to amuse the press and distract everyone from the truly tragic lies he was endorsing.”

Kline doesn’t shy from putting his opinions on the line. When asked whether he set out to be provocative with his recent songs, he responds, “In that my feelings and beliefs are always running like a spring beneath everything I do, and that some might find those beliefs provocative, I guess the answer is yes.” By way of conclusion, he adds, “It seems like a time when if you don’t act upon your beliefs, overtly or covertly, you’re an idiot.” Kline has decidedly lost patience with the past four decades of fatal evasions and invasions. “Zippo Songs” pay bleak homage to the experience of American G.I.’s while calling out the current administration for getting us into

the same war all over again.

Unlike the highly charged subjects that Kline, Adams, and Marsalis confront with their compositions, octogenarian George Crumb has been at work on a rather different project, which he calls his “American Songbook.” Long recognized as one of the country’s most brilliant and idiosyncratic composers, Crumb has spent the past five years setting a variety of his favorite folk tunes in his signature style, which emphasizes extended technique, unusual timbres, and amplified instruments, especially piano.

Regarding the fifth “book,” “Voices from a Forgotten World,” which Orchestra 2001 premiered on September 15th and 16th, the composer himself admits that he set songs that seem distant to most people and that have lost most of their cultural cache. Like “Congo Square,” in fact, the project makes a long-past musical moment vivid once again. The songs all spring from the decades when popular music, as we now know it, was in its infancy and no one yet knew how thoroughly these little ditties would permeate the airwaves. This ghostly quality seems to appeal to Crumb; he obviously enjoys cultivating the atmospheric potential of these old tunes, eerily pregnant with the era of radio.

“Voices from a Forgotten World” comprises an astonishing breadth of moods. Crumb says that he has always been drawn to extreme contrast in all levels of music. “It’s something I picked up from the composers I love... Bartok, Mahler, Debussy, and Charles Ives.” For the spiritual, “Somebody Got Lost in a Storm,”—“a real storm of a piece,” he affirms—he makes heavy use of percussion, as well as a wind machine. The comic “Hallelujah I’m a Bum” is sung “as if through an alcoholic fog,” and his setting of Stephen Foster’s “Beautiful Dreamer” should be “barely audible, almost subliminal” at five pianissimos.

The current volume came as a surprise to Orchestra 2001 and its artistic director, James Freeman, who in 2005 premiered “The Winds of Destiny” as the project’s final installment. Crumb, however, soldiered on, finding two more books worth of songs that sparked his imagination. After Book VI, he says, he will have used all the songs he was in love with. The surprise, at least, was pleasant for Freeman. “Naturally,” he says, “we’re honored to be so involved in this music.” He adds, “There are very few instances of a composer writing so much for a particular ensemble.”

Crumb speaks enthusiastically about the orchestra and his project. His style, he notes, requires “lots of fine tuning and adjustments,” so that working closely with Orchestra 2001 has meant a great deal to the success of the Songbook. For the premiere in September, the composer collected over 150 percussion instruments, keeping Freeman’s performers busy with endless drums, bells, and blocks. Looking over his list, he names some of his more curious choices: steel drums, Native American rattles, a “lion’s roar” made by pulling a rope through a drum membrane, Tibetan prayer stones, Southeast Asian ankle bells, a wooden buffalo bell, the Appalachian jug, *kabuki* blocks, a surf drum, and Japan’s *kokiriko*, which, Crumb explains, sounds like dominos falling over.

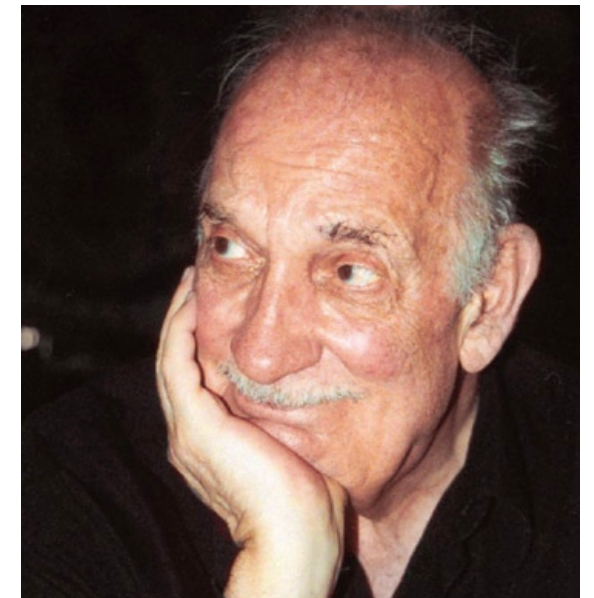
In the midst of this wonderful spectrum of sound,

Left: Composer Phil Kline

Right: George Crumb, photo by Becky Starobin, courtesy of www.bridgerecords.com

scored with all the dissonant and atonal resources of contemporary composition, Crumb shelters the old American melodies. His aim has been to “leave the songs intact,” to preserve them in a way that, as he puts it, “their innocence isn’t violated.” He adds, “These tunes are beautiful in their own right, as good as a Beethoven symphony.” He thinks of his settings as a way “to explore psychologically certain depths and clues in the poetry, to bring out the beauty of text in the melody, and to make them truly orchestral in weight.” Peering deeply into the musical capacities of these fragile melodies, the Songbooks are his version of a crossover, just as, he says, “Yo-Yo Ma can play country music on his cello.”

Crumb’s project pays a profound compliment to the



early popular music of the United States, revealing how even the most idiosyncratic contemporary composers are willing to look beyond superficial distinctions toward formative moments of their culture. “Voices from a Forgotten World,” “Congo Square,” “On the Transmigration of Souls,” and “Zippo Songs” all commemorate these moments, whether the poetic roots of pop, the creative milieu of Louisiana slaves, or the many recent traumas that have tested the mettle of our nation. They ask us to remember the terrible losses and tremendous gains we have all undergone, as well as the subtle powers of recollection itself.

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