

NIGHT OF THE FOUR MOONS
GEORGE CRUMB

Analysis by David Mitchell

Night of The Four Moons was written during the Apollo 11 flight on July 16-24, 1969. This is the mission that Neil Armstrong first set foot on the moon. Apollo 11 landed in the sea of tranquility at around 4:00 pm on July 20th EDT. Neil Armstrong and Buzz Aldrin left the space capsule at around 10:00 pm and they collected moon rocks. They spent the night on the lunar surface and left the moon at around 1:00 pm on July 21st, 1969. George Crumb captures his feelings regarding this monumental event in *Night of The Four Moons* through: excerpts from poems by Lorca, unique scoring, timbre, and the use of referential collections.

George Crumb uses these poems by Lorca to project a sense of foreboding in connection with Apollo 11 mission. In these poems, the moon seems to be a friend of the child and is a kind of romantic image of mystery. To me, Crumb is the child and the obscure Adam. The astronauts are the bronze gypsies “coming on horseback”. The “necklaces and white rings” represent the rocks collected on the moon by the astronauts. It seems to me that Crumb believes landing on the moon takes away some of its mystery and romance. To Crumb “the moon is dead” as a romantic and mysterious place. In the end of the poem, the moon goes through the sky “holding a child by the hand”. This seems to represent the innocence of Crumb.

This score is a good example of George Crumb’s unique scoring technique. There are places in the score that are free from bar lines. For example, the second movement entitled *when the moon rises* has no bar lines. There are places in the score where Crumb indicates silence between entrances of instruments. He uses special cross

stave markings that indicate how many seconds should elapse before the next entrance. All of these characteristics introduce an aleatoric element to this piece. It is definitely not a score that could be written in Finale.

George Crumb uses the timbre of the instruments to capture the essences of the text and the moon landing. The best example is his use of stones by the percussionist. This seems to be a direct reference to the rocks that were collected on the lunar surface by Apollo 11. The hollow timbre of the alto flute, vibraphone and banjo capture the emptiness of space. The electric cello has a piercing sound like the rays of the sun.

Crumb uses whole tone and octatonic vocabulary like Rimsky Korsakov to create a dream like quality. In Sadko, Korsakov uses octatonic and whole tone vocabulary in association with the entrance of the Mer King. Octatonic and whole tone vocabulary create a dream like sound because of the fully diminished chords in the octatonic collection and the lack of a leading tone in the whole tone collection.

In *Night of The Four Moons*, Crumb uses the same octatonic and whole tone vocabulary as Korsakov. For example, the flute, banjo, alto, and cello enter the piece with four notes that fit into Oct. 0. The notes in the flute part, on stave 2 page 5, fit into Oct. 2 and contain the entire collection minus one note. The flute at the end of the first movement fits into WT 0. The Banjo in *When The Moon Rises*, staves 2 and 3, contains notes from Oct.0. In *Run Away Moon*, The cello and piccolo parts use Oct. 2. There are elements of WT0 and Oct. 0 in *El Nino*. *Musica Humana* contains vocabulary from DIA+6 in the mixolydian rotation. The cello part in *Musica Humana* contains notes that fit into WT 0 or Oct. 2 (with the exception of note G). The cello contrasts with the surrounding DIA+6 vocabulary of the other instruments. The cello is an echo of the

whole tone and octatonic vocabulary that characterized the first three movements. The diatonic vocabulary contains tonal centers with harmonic pull much like the gravitational pull of earth. All of the collections contain overlapping pitches and they give the piece continuity and a dreamlike quality.

Crumb seems to be using all of these elements in *Night of The Four Moons* to bring to life the excerpts from the poems of Lorca and express his own feelings regarding the Apollo 11 mission to the moon. The timbre of the instruments and use of referential collections create a dreamlike atmosphere. The poems express a loss of innocence and an end to childhood fantasies about the moon. The human race has been there and done that. We have the T-shirt at home.

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