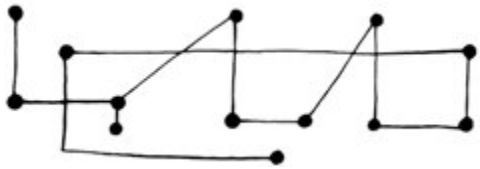
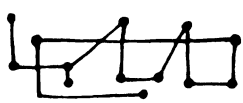


Ernst Křenek—In Retrospect



Jann Pasler

Ernst Křenek, still active and productive as he enters his eighty-fifth year this fall, continues to be a catalyst for new music making in Southern California where he has made his home since 1947. At the University of California, San Diego, his involvement began in 1965 when John Stewart, Provost and Professor of Literature, consulted him for advice on starting a music department. Křenek's suggestions inspired both its teaching philosophy and the appointment of its first faculty. His belief that a musical education must be based on direct experience with the compositional process led to the idea of a department consisting primarily of composers and practicing musicians, rather than historians and theoreticians. Three of his students from Hamline University—Will Ogdon, Tom Nee, and Robert Erickson—were hired and composition as the core of instruction became the department's guiding principle. Křenek has been personally involved with the UCSD music department ever since, and not only

through numerous performances of his music. In 1966, he lectured on Webern's sketchbooks, the following year he became one of five founding fellows at Muir College, and in 1970 he served as a Regents Lecturer. The University of California Press later published these talks as *Horizons Circled*. Among his other gifts to UCSD is the Křenek Archive, over four hundred literary manuscripts and all the correspondence from his American years.

On 6–8 December 1985, the Music Department of the University of California at San Diego paid tribute to the composer, one of the most prolific and influential of his generation. The festival included a retrospective of his lesser-known works, a symposium on his influence as a teacher, an exhibition of selected documents from the Křenek Archive, and a musical festschrift of short works composed for the occasion by his students and colleagues from throughout the United States. Directing its organization were Provost John Stewart, who is currently completing a major biography on Křenek, the composer Will Ogdon and the conductor Tom Nee, both former students of Křenek, and the music librarian Garrett Bowles, who is director of the Křenek Archive at UCSD.

I

During the three days of concerts, the works chosen suggested that the composer experienced three phases in his career. Early works performed, such as his *Merry Marches* (1926), the folk-like *Reisebuch* songs he wrote after touring his native Austria (1929), and the Fifth Quartet (1930), showed the strong influence of Schubert, while in the Piano Sonatas and Violin Sonata of around 1950, one could detect a fascination with serialism. Recent works, like *The Arc of Life* for orchestra (1981), reveal a composer preoccupied with his own life and work in retrospect. Even though the coherence of his musical language is ever apparent, these works demonstrated that Křenek changed in the course of his career perhaps as radically as Stravinsky.

Among the early works performed, the most stunning was the Fifth String Quartet, opus 65. In many ways, the work could be said to be Schubert-Křenek. After Křenek began to experience doubts about his own atonal explorations, Schubert became a model for his own brand of neoclassicism. The first movement of this quartet, a sonata allegro, recalls the *Trout* Quintet with its harmonies, its melodic structures, and especially its texture of harmonized chords over a pizzicato cello. From time to time, however, and never for very long, Křenek interrupts this beautiful illusion by reharmonizing a melody or by changing one or two notes of a chord, and then leads one unexpectedly into very dense counterpoint and dissonance. The Thouvenal Quartet from Texas accomplished this floating in and out of Schubert impeccably and self-assuredly. The second movement, again tonal, is a set of variations on a short motive and the series of chords that accompany it. The variations include a quicker alternation between the parts

of the theme, a slower more lyrical version of the motive, an augmentation of the motive and its use as accompaniment to a new melody in the violin, and a finale of imitative counterpoint. The third movement is a fantasy, but a very slow contemplative one with full lush chords and a strong tonal resolution at the end.

A transitional work from 1931 that flirts with dodecaphony but remains predominantly romantic and almost Brahmsian is the song cycle of Karl Kraus poems, *Durch die Nacht*, opus 67. Whether or not Křenek identified with Schoenberg who, in his Second Quartet, struggled with the dilemma of continuing in the tonal system or launching out into the unknown, the poems Křenek chose to set in this cycle reflect a similar feeling: "So lonely, I am lonely / What awaits me I can not surmise. / Ah still the doubt comes jeering..." Anxiety about the future permeates these texts; the speaker fears missing "the last train through all my dreaming" and dreaming "through the Judgement Day's last gleaming / And in waiting-room's endless await my redeeming / And you are going hence and I've waited in vain." Křenek's music follows the structure of these poems closely, respecting recurring imagery, parallelisms, and refrains. Piano interludes divide the individual stanzas and link the seven songs. The last song, both poetically and musically, suggests a spiritual rebirth: "Behold the lilacs blossoming again! / The mystery I'm discovering again! / They all but killed it with their blight / And brought the world to what a plight / But now the lilac's blossoming again!" Musically, however, Křenek's discovery was quite different from Schoenberg's, as the work reverts exhuberantly to tonality in this song. The piano begins it with an ecstatic harp-like flourish oscillating in the soprano and returns with the same flourish to accompany the last reference to the lilacs. The cycle concludes with a strong tonal cadence. The rich voice of mezzo soprano Elizabeth Mannion from UC, Santa Barbara, together with the sensitive accompaniment of Dale Dictert from the same campus, found the right marriage of tone and word that made the final ecstasy very satisfying.

Křenek's experimentation with the twelve-tone technique is more pervasive and convincing in his middle-period works. At the festival Charlotte Zelka, for whom the work was written in 1950, gave a stunning performance of Křenek's Fifth Piano Sonata, opus 121. In this work, one hears real echoes of Schoenberg—large lyric gestures, dynamic shaping of phrases, and constantly contrasted registers. But Křenekian counterpoint is never contained for long, and independent lines in the bass return regularly. Ms. Zelka beautifully balanced the lyrical passages with the aggressive ones, the song-like duets with the masterful counterpoint. Her rhythmically vibrant playing kept the pace lively and prevented the recurring phrase shapes from becoming too monotonous. Carolyn Horn from UCSB performed the Fourth Piano Sonata (1948), opus 114, with less bravura, but the work itself was less dazzling. Its four movements are based on a twelve-tone row and use segments of the row as basic patterns. The first two are somber and meditative, the third employs a quicker tempo and a spectacularly resounding bass for great contrast, and the fourth is a minuet with five

variations, the second of which is a strict canon by inversion. The Second Sonata for Violin Solo, written the same year, also uses a twelve-tone row, while following the structure of a sonata. János Négyesy, Professor at UCSD, used a rich full sound and energetic pacing to bring out the work's vitality.

Spätlese, opus 218—another song cycle suggesting Kraus's influence, but whose texts Křenek wrote himself—signals a new period in the composer's career in 1973. As with the earlier cycle, the text gives a clue as to what was on Křenek's mind: "So spät"[So late], it opens, exactly as in the first Kraus poem of *Durch die Nacht*. But here the work does not reflect anxiety about being at a crossroads, but hope that his compositions will mature in time as good wine does: "The writer has outlived himself. / Thus his writing will survive him / . . . awaiting the light that is due to it." As the work develops the metaphor in its title (meaning both late harvest and late reading, used in conjunction with late writing), it unveils an autobiographical message: "I, a provisional, wander and read what has early been sowed. / Here where under the palm tree the sand whirls away / I, a transitory, sit and write late what should be permanent, / Uncautiously relying on the southern sand / For what northern fog did not grant." Baritone Michael Ingham and pianist Carolyn Horn, two UCSB faculty, performed the work (they gave the American premiere in 1979). The final piece of the festival, *The Arc of Life* (1981), also showed the composer looking back over life, exploring different archetypal situations such as "conflict," "serenity," and "shock and solace" in twelve short programmatic movements. From "To start with" to "Exit, gracefully," Tom Nee led the La Jolla Civic-University Orchestra through the *klangfarben* maze and sequence of moods with sensitivity and clarity.

Of the three recent works performed at the festival, all more accessible than the earlier strict twelve-tone compositions, the Eighth String Quartet (1980) stood out as most striking, in part due to the superb performance by the Thouvenal Quartet, for whom the work was written. A twenty-six minute piece in one movement, the quartet is very lyrical and highly imaginative with a phrase structure that recalls that of the Fifth Piano Sonata. The strings as often as not work as a group, rather than as a melody with accompaniment, forming melodic lines that arch up to the soprano, either recede into chordal sections of haunting beauty or disintegrate into bits of canonic imitation, and then fall back dramatically to the low bass where they began. The breathing of these phrases, with their varied textures and musical ideas, gives the piece its sustained movement and vitality. At the end of the composition, the return in retrograde of the first section's special timbre—the trills and pizzicati—together with its twelve-tone sequence, imitated in inversion, makes the form audible and reminds one of the scherzo in the Berg *Lyric Suite*. The sound forged by violinists Eugene Purdue and Edmund Stein, violist Sally Chisholm, and cellist Keith Robinson was balanced and well-coordinated even as the relationships between the parts changed rapidly throughout the quartet.

In spite of the diversity inherent in such a variety of works, several threads of

continuity prevail in this music. Most of it is organized by phrases that vary in length and character but often begin and end in registral extremes. In sequence, the phrases have a relentless momentum. Also an ardent lyricism—expressive, but without angst, and often harmonized in a unique manner—frequently alternates with a distinctive kind of counterpoint that is angular and more rhythmic in nature. This alternation provides large structural contrasts in works such as the Fifth Quartet, and momentary variety in the later sonatas. In more recent works, the lyrical sections again become longer, the dissonances less biting, and the counterpoint sometimes takes the form of strict canons. The wide sampling of different genres in this festival and the excellent performances by either those for whom the works were written or those who specialize in such music revealed many hidden treasures in an oeuvre that has come to be known more for operas and large-scale choral or orchestral works than for chamber music.

II

Although Křenek claims to have founded no school and created no imitators, the festival brought testimony to his significant influence as a teacher in this country. On Saturday morning, December 7, three Křenek students—one from each period of his teaching career—gathered to discuss the impact that Křenek had on their compositional development. John Stewart opened the symposium by giving a brief overview of Křenek's activities as a teacher in the United States. After four years at Vassar College from 1938 to 1942 and a number of summer sessions at the University of Wisconsin and University of Michigan, Křenek moved to Hamline University in Minnesota to become Chair of the Music Department and Dean of Fine Arts. Five years later, he moved to Los Angeles and, failing to win Session's position at Berkeley and Schoenberg's at UCLA, he taught there at a number of smaller schools and colleges. Gradually, however, except for visiting positions at Darmstadt and around the States, Křenek left teaching and for the last thirty years has devoted himself to full-time composing, conducting, and free-lance lecturing.

It was clearly not difficult for Křenek's students—Mildred Kayden from Vassar days, Will Ogdon from Hamline, and Beverly Grigsby from the Southern California School of Music and Arts—to remember what had made their studies with the composer so memorable and his impact on their lives so significant. With enthusiasm and great admiration, Mildred Kayden explained how Křenek made her, as a young composer, feel part of a larger world in which new music was a cause for which to fight. Even as beginning composers, she and her classmates toured neighboring colleges proselytizing and performing their own music. When, at Křenek's invitation, professional musicians came to visit, he

asked them to play the students' works. He also went so far as to have one of Kayden's sonatas published in an undergraduate publication, even though he had to copy it out himself because her unorthodox notation was unacceptable. Kayden emphasized that Křenek did not force the twelve-tone technique on his students and, in fact, only in their senior year allowed them to write one exercise using the method. Instead, he encouraged them to explore their own creativity. Nonetheless, his teaching was not unmethodical. Sophomore year he taught them to write small miniatures; junior year it was medium-sized forms such as a quartet, theme and variations, and one movement of a sonata.

A number of young composers who had been in correspondence with Křenek, or who had worked with him at one of his summer seminars, followed him to Hamline. Will Ogdon remembered particularly how, in his teaching there, Křenek emphasized the music, rather than theories about it. To do this, he played score after score at the piano, read from microfilms of old music as it was being projected on a screen, and, when analyzing operas, sang along with as many of the vocal parts as feasible. Selections from music history and ethnic music were as integral to his curriculum as new music. Thanks to his broad humanistic education, he exposed his students to original sources, regardless of what language they used. In his teaching, Křenek believed that one learned by making music, not just by completing dry exercises. For this reason, he eschewed species counterpoint. In order to create a Palestrinian environment, Ogdon recalled, Křenek had his students compose their melodies to Latin texts.

How Křenek taught probably impressed his students as deeply as what he taught. At the December 5 UCSD Music Departmental Seminar, Křenek claimed he had no method and that all a teacher can do is to stimulate a student's imagination. But, according to Robert Erickson (quoted by Stewart), in reality Křenek offered much more to his students—a great deal of interest, a good ear, quick understanding, and a brilliantly analytical mind. Intrigued by practical solutions more than by broad theoretical issues, he might suggest an orchestral texture. But he was never overbearing. Ogdon called attention to how gently Křenek led his students. Often a single word was enough. The mere hint that one of his passages resembled Mahler's Sixth Symphony gave the young Ogdon great hope. However, when Křenek heard Schumann in one of Kayden's early works, she swore never to forget the necessity for finding her own inner voice. Křenek's confidence and trust in his students was great. Beverly Grigsby recounted how, even before it had been performed, he lent her his newest composition to study, as she wanted to learn about the twelve-tone technique. The fact that Křenek was able to bring out a voice in each of his students bears witness to the success of his approach.

III

The musical festschrift on December 7 offered further evidence that, while Křenek has no formal body of followers, many of today's composers consider him one of their most important teachers. To create such an event, Garrett Bowles consulted a number of American music encyclopedias in search of all those who may have studied with Křenek and, over a year in advance, wrote to these composers informing them of the festival and inviting them to write a piece for the occasion. The composition was not to exceed three minutes and could call upon soprano and seven instruments—flute, trumpet, trombone, piano, violin, cello, and doublebass—to be played by UCSD faculty. Bowles also wrote to composers with whom Křenek had a significant correspondence. The result was a very interesting evening of twenty-two works that Tom Nee grouped into six mini-sections depending on their instrumentation. Small chamber ensembles with piano were placed stage left, soloists performed stage center, and a chamber orchestra, slightly larger than that orginally intended, was conducted by Nee stage right.

The form of the tributes to Křenek varied widely, as did their styles. Martin Bernheimer, critic of the Los Angeles Times, introduced the program, weaving a selection of Křenek titles into his humorous essay. Tom Benjamin, Richard Swift, Roque Cordero, and Garrett Bowles used tone rows or serial techniques borrowed from Křenek. Theodore Antoniou's little pointillist gem used the soprano Beverly Ogdon to highlight the words "For Ernst" in a light chamber orchestra setting, while William Bland buried Křenek's name together with Mrs. Ogdon's delicate voice in the loud brass and percussion of his *Festschrift*. Glenn Glasow, another Křenek student from Hamline University, employed quotations from Křenek pieces including "The Moon Rises" to underline the meaning of various images in the twelfth-century Buddhist poem he set. This text, together with the fifteenth-century Aztec one set by Sergio Cervetti (both exquisitely sung by Mrs. Ogdon), meditates on the transitory nature of this life. Other texts chosen by Aurelio de la Vega, Jerome Rosen, Peter Odegard, David Burge, and Will Ogdon also seemed to be making indirect statements to Křenek. Soprano Ann Chase and pianist Stefani Walens beautifully articulated De la Vega's setting of Octavio Armand's "Poem with dusk," which ends with "My erased body is wind, / the name dispersed, / the breathing growing. / Wind, only wind." Within a light chamber ensemble, Mrs. Chase also animated Jerome Rosen's setting of Donald Babcock's more humorous text, "In a garden," as well as Peter Odegard's delightful version of Edward Lear's "The Owl and the Pussy Cat," the same text Stravinsky set to song at the end of his life. David Burge and Will Ogdon chose more serious texts. Cellist Peter Farrell and violinist Linda Cummisky accompanied Mrs. Chase in these short but moving Eugenio Montale lines, "The sun, on high, and a dessicated shore. / So my day is not yet past. / Best is the hour beyond the little wall, / which in a plaster twilight

holds us fast." Unfortunately Will Ogdon's piece, requiring both the soprano and baritone to play percussion, could not be performed on this concert. The Hart Crane poem "Hurricane" would have made a nice conclusion to the concert with its final lines, "Thou ridest to the door, Lord! / Thou bidest wall nor floor, Lord!"

Mildred Kayden's homage was explicitly autobiographical. "Who was I, introductory I, / when you tapped my creativity?" Mrs. Chase sang, calling to mind Kayden's lecture on Saturday. Just after the line, "I followed my muse poco uninhibited," a tape interjected a collage of her recent works for musical comedy. Beverly Grigsby was the only other composer to use tape. Her *Occam's Razor* was produced by computer generated orchestra.

Among the strictly instrumental pieces, Marc-Antonio Consoli's *Lauda* stood out. Along with William Bland and Sergio Cervetti, the Italian Consoli studied with Křenek at the Peabody Conservatory of Music. Yet even though he wrote to Bowles calling Křenek one of his "most important and influential teachers," one hears very little Křenek in this work scored for violin, cello, and piano. Waltz-style rhythms and harp-like figurations in the piano give the work almost a French allure. Japanese composer Joji Yuasa's contribution, *Projections for Seven Players, Nos. 3 and 6*, (written in 1955 shortly after he had finished reading Křenek's *Studies in Counterpoint based on the Twelve Tone Technique*) also showed originality in building a counterpoint consisting of the movement from one group of sounds to another more than the interweaving of melodic lines. *Proton 2* for violin and piano by Christopher Kuzell, a student of Křenek's at Los Angeles City College/State College, held interest as well. Other short, unassuming pieces on the program were *One Possibility Emerging* for flute, cello, and piano by Dennis Kam, who studied with Křenek at the University of Hawaii in 1966, the first of *Two Curious Pieces* for violin and piano by Grant Fletcher, Křenek's student from the University of Michigan, as well as George Perle's *A Celebratory Invention* for solo piano. Nikola Ovanin's *Colors* for piano was not performed. All the manuscripts were presented to Křenek after the final concert of the festival. They will be on deposit in the Křenek Archive at UCSD.

Other larger works by Křenek students were performed throughout the festival. Between the Fifth and Eighth Quartets by Křenek, the Thouvenal group gave a brilliant performance of Robert Erickson's Second String Quartet, composed in 1956. The contrast with Křenek's works was striking: Erickson's music moves from one harmonic and timbral space to another, each with its own specially placed solo and unique accompanimental pattern, almost making one forget the phrase orientation of his teacher's quartets. Here the four strings come together not for some large dramatic gesture, but so that they might exchange roles, new soloists might emerge, and a variety of accompanimental patterns and textures might be explored. In many ways, the interest of this music stems from the great variety in what would normally be considered secondary ideas, that is, the accompaniments or the contexts created for the soloists, rather than from the

solos themselves. In one section, for example, a low cello droning under a series of highly placed chords in the upper strings allows the subsequently entering viola to sound remarkably strange, all alone in the middle register. In another section, the violin and viola drop out as the second violin and cello discover themselves in exact contrary motion and repeat their short pattern over and over. Even as the first violin gradually planes over them, this accompaniment maintains one's attention. Again later, all three strings hush as the cello reiterates a tonal cadence numerous times in succession, turning it into an unusual accompaniment for the next emerging soloist.

The orchestral concert on December 8 included works by Křenek disciples George Perle, Glenn Glasow, Will Ogdon, and Gladys Nordenstrom (Křenek's wife). Perle's two solo monodies come from the early sixties, clearly a fruitful period for the composer. Ann Laberge played the languishing long lines of the first for flute with subtle expression, while Bert Turetzky infused the more dramatic, highly idiomatic doublebass piece with great drive. Glasow's *Rakka*, composed in 1970, was perhaps the most unusual composition of the festival. Four speakers produced the sound of chimes from a variety of ambiguous locations, creating for the lone violin, expertly played by János Négyesy, a full musical space resembling that of nature. As the violin played against these sounds with lyrical verve, one could hear in them at times prerecorded violin harmonics, which also sounded bell-like, resulting in remarkable continuity between the live and the taped performances. Négyesy was also the soloist in Ogdon's *Five Preludes for Violin and Chamber Orchestra* (1985), a set originally written for violin and piano in 1982 and dedicated to the UCSD violinist. These miniature masterpieces sparingly use xylophone, light brass, and a large array of percussion, allowing the listener to concentrate on the harmonic ebb and flow originally led by the piano. Nordenstrom's *Elegy for Robert F. Kennedy*, written in 1968, required the largest orchestral resources during the festival. Tom Nee adroitly led the La Jolla Civic-University Orchestra in the many effects required by this music, from the delicate harp and celesta timbre of the opening, the ominous doublebasses which follow, and the numerous string tremolos that recur throughout the work, to the sudden interruptions of any budding melody, the building of massive textures, and the tutti climaxes. The cake with eighty-five candles that surprised both audience and composer at the end of this concert was a fitting conclusion to the birthday tribute.

When asked, as a footnote, what his current and future projects might be, Křenek replied with his dry wit, "That's classified information." For those who cannot be allayed with such an answer, rumor has it that he is working on a string trio and another large composition. Whether these works continue in the vein of his current late works or launch out in a new direction remains to be seen, perhaps at the next birthday celebration.