

Elliott Carter



Photo credit: Meredith Heuer

An introduction to the music of Carter by Jonathan Bernard

Any composer whose career extends through seven decades -- and still counting - has already demonstrated a certain staying power. But there are reasons far more compelling than mere longevity to regard Elliott Carter as the most eminent of living American composers, and one of the foremost composers in the world at large. His name has come to be synonymous with music that is at once structurally formidable, expressively extraordinary, and virtuosically dazzling: music that asks much of listener and performer alike but gives far more in return. Carter, born into comfortable circumstances in New York, was brought up to appreciate the arts but not necessarily to make them his life's occupation. When he decided to become a composer, it was much against the wishes of his family. Like many aspiring composers of his generation, Carter went off to Paris after college to study with Nadia Boulanger, an experience which lent his work a conservative, neoclassical style for a time. Eventually, however, the modernist influences he had absorbed as an adolescent -- notably as the result of his contact with Ives and Varèse -- proved the more telling: beginning with the first glimmerings of change in the late 1940s and continuing through the 1950s, Carter invented a harmonic and rhythmic language uniquely his own, one that firmly repudiated the prevailing taste of the pre-War era yet also kept its distance from (then) ascendant post-War serialism. And ironically, it was precisely Carter's stubborn insistence on going his own way that brought him international fame. The implications of his new language were at times slow to work out -- Carter spent most of the 1960s working on just two pieces -- but they yielded music of enormous power, and eventually they also yielded a technique both fluent and flexible, as the growing number and variety of his compositions during the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s attest.

In a musical age dominated by simplification, what has made Carter's music increasingly attractive is, paradoxically, its very complexity: the sense it often conveys of many different things going on at once, producing the most violent sorts of contrast alongside the smoothest of continuities, offering not an escape from the demands of modern existence but a meaningful engagement with them. In particular, Carter's concern to express "character" and "behavior" brings to his work a notably human aspect; that the collective exigencies of his music can never, in the end, suppress the individual voice is, for the listener, a source of deep involvement and satisfaction.

Over the past dozen years or so, Carter has been more prolific than ever. During

this period he has produced many more pieces of relatively modest scale, such as *Esprit rude/Esprit doux*, the *Enchanted Preludes*, and a clutch of solo works, than at any time since the early years of his career. These have proved widely appealing, to judge from the number of performances they have received -- but then so have the larger works of this same period, including two concertos and a fourth string quartet. Carter has arrived at a working method that is in some sense definitive, a summa of all that has preceded it -- or, as some have called it, a "new classicism", among the hallmarks of which are a certain structural and formal directness, conveyed in textures that are almost transparent in their clarity. Yet the lustre of this late style signals no reduction at all in sheer energy, as the astonishing *Quintet* for piano and winds demonstrates. With the passing of his 85th birthday and the premiere of his remarkable new *Partita* by the Chicago Symphony, Carter's creative forces are at their peak of vitality; one can expect to hear much more from this giant of contemporary music in the years to come.

Jonathan Bernard, 1994

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