

Elliott Carter
What Next?
Asko Concerto

Valdine Anderson: soprano; Sarah Leonard: soprano; Hilary Summers: contralto;
William Joyner: tenor; Dean Elzinga: baritone; Emanuel Hoogeveen: boy alto
Netherlands Radio Chamber Orchestra, conducted by Peter Eötvös

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*“The score's unceasing flow is one indicator of its refinement, others being the fastidious blend of tone-colour and Carter's spare, late, scintillating polyphony... **One takes away the impression of an opera whose exploitation of ensemble-singing is radically new.**”*
 Sunday Times

Released in time for the 95th birthday (on December 11th) of America's greatest composer, this ECM New Series release is comprised of two premiere recordings. Both of them – the one-act opera “What Next?” and the Asko Concerto, a virtuoso ensemble piece - testify to the sustained inventiveness of Elliott Carter. As the Economist recently noted, “Today Carter is writing music of dazzling brilliance and subtlety: music that speaks with a playful and even youthful directness. His productivity has increased as he has struck into new fields and forms, pouring forth a stream of pieces... No world-weary swansong, this is an invigorating explosion of creativity.” In his liner note for the acclaimed ECM Carter/Yun collection “Lauds & Lamentation” issued earlier this year, Heinz Holliger spoke of “the miracle of Elliott Carter's later works”: “With ever more wondrous serenity and freedom, he is creating music whose complexity attains an almost Mozartian oneness with the work and reveals itself quite simply and naturally to the responsive ear of the listener.”

Mr Carter, in a recent interview with the Philadelphia Inquirer, attributed his new prolificness to a change of emphasis in the work. “I've become more concerned with the expression of music and less with the formation of details. I'm trying to be more spontaneous...” Spontaneous, and fast-moving. “In general, my music seeks the awareness of motion we have in flying or driving a car, and not the plodding of horses, or the marching of soldiers that pervades the motion patterns of older music.”

“What Next?” Carter's first opera, written in 1997 and 1998, begins with a car crash and follows, obliquely, the development of six survivors crawling from the wreckage. The chain of events has a dreamlike quality. “The survivors are five adults and a child. Mama (a dramatic soprano) is the most insistent of them: as she understands things, the adults were all on their way to the marriage of her son, a clownish baritone who calls himself Harry or Larry, to Rose, a self-absorbed performing artist (a lyric soprano). The glib guru-like tenor Zen is Mama's former husband, and the astronomer Stella (a contralto) is his current girl friend. The sixth figure, Kid, a twelve-year-old boy alto, is a mystery to Mama, who repeatedly tries to focus everyone's attention on their joint predicament. While the others generally concede that Mama's assessment of their relationships may be correct, they have other agendas. Zen seeks to maintain his status as ‘a teacher, a master.’ Rose doesn't really care who the others are; she is still grooving on the triumph of her last performance, and expects the others to be similarly appreciative. Stella thinks she was on her way to work at her astronomical observatory. Harry

or Larry doesn't care. Eventually, two Road Workers arrive and poke around in the percussive wreckage, initially ignoring the importuning of the crash victims, who finally walk away, still disputatiously engaged.”(David Hamilton, in the CD booklet notes).

“Carter's music, from the opening crash of the prelude, remains active throughout the entire single act - in the spasms and splinterings of the percussion, where the coalescing of the sounds are continually being torn asunder again... So the central interlude of the work provides a great surprise: the lost characters abandon the stage, the dreamlike scenery becomes even more unreal, the wrecked car seems to explode in slow motion. Here Carter suddenly develops, in extraordinarily skilfully constructed music, a powerful sense of poetry, whose magic is sustained through soft sounds and melodic lines. It is the sound of transformation...” Wolfgang Schreiber, Süddeutsche Zeitung

Words for the opera were written by Paul Griffiths, the British novelist and music critic (and librettist of Tan Dun's “Marco Polo”) who has long been one of the most astute commentators on contemporary composition. Griffiths understands Carter's oeuvre well. In fact, the lively, argumentative nature of the text helps to elucidate the way in which the composer's music works. Carter has often described his instrumental works as scenarios to be acted out by performers; the defining of character roles within the opera makes this more explicit.

“An astounding composition of great mastery, impact and originality... ‘What Next?’ is a masterly study in human expression...Paul Griffiths's tersely lyrical libretto is excellent, and Carter has responded with a score teeming with drama, invention, colour, pace, instrumental personification, characterisation, psychological insight, and a finely communicative penetration of the characters' minds...” Robert Matthew-Walker, Musical Opinion

“What Next?” was first performed in Berlin in 1999. The present recording of the opera was made the following year during a live performance at the Amsterdam Concertgebouw, with the Netherlands Radio Chamber Orchestra brilliantly directed by Peter Eötvös. “What Next?” has also been staged or semi-staged in New York, Chicago, Berkeley, Paris, London, and Bruges, with conductors including Daniel Barenboim (who commissioned the work), Kent Nagano and Oliver Knussen.

After completing the opera, Carter received a commission from the Dutch ASKO Ensemble, and subsequently wrote his Asko Concerto in New York City in January 2000. Of the work, the composer writes, “My Asko Concerto for sixteen players features each one of them participating in one of the following groups – two trios, two duos, a quintet or a solo. These six sections are framed by the entire group playing together. Although the music is in lighthearted mood, each solistic section approaches ensemble playing in a different spirit.”

CD package in slipcase includes 54 page booklet with Paul Griffiths's “What Next? Journal” and the complete libretto of the opera, plus statements by Elliott Carter, liner notes by David Hamilton, photos, and manuscript facsimile pages.

Praise for Elliott Carter/Isang Yun “Lauds & Lamentations” ECM 1848/49:

“With Carter, age has withered or staled nothing: energy rushes through the profusion of ideas in these playfully complex and lyrical pieces. The oboe quartet from 2001 comes partnered with remembrances of musical colleagues for solo instruments, miracles of invention in a confined space.” Geoff Brown, The Times

“Carter’s oboe quartet has all the qualities we associate with his astonishing late music – the buoyant, effortless invention, perfectly characterised for every instrument, the melding of musical episodes into a single, perfectly seamless span, the sheer delight in creativity that is conveyed in every note.” Andrew Clements, BBC Music Magazine

“Carter’s late Oboe Quartet– a sequence of six different duets possible to the players – is a marvel of witty texture, as capricious, unruly and spot-on as the late poems of Yeats. No mistaking that the players are soloists – they bring the music fiercely yet funnily to life.”
Paul Driver, Sunday Times

„Auf den ersten Blick scheinen Isang Yun und Elliott Carter wenig gemeinsam zu haben - hier der 1995 verstorbene Koreaner, der asiatische und europäische Elemente zu einem unverwechselbaren Stil verband, dort der mittlerweile fast 95-jährige Amerikaner, dessen Werke asketische Höhenluft atmen und der sich nach wie vor ungebrochener Schaffenskraft erfreut. Es vereint sie jedoch - ganz abgesehen davon, dass keiner von ihnen jemals irgendwelchen Schulen und Ideologien gefolgt ist - ein besonderer Umstand: Beide waren bzw. sind Freunde des großen Oboisten (und Komponisten) Heinz Holliger, für den sie jeweils ein Oboenquartett komponierten, und diese beiden Stücke zählen zu den bedeutendsten Spätwerken ihrer Schöpfer. Yuns Quartett - die vorletzte Komposition, die er vollendete - fasziniert vor allem durch seinen langsamen Mittelsatz, in dem die Musik quasi entkörperlicht in Regionen schwebt, die durch Töne nur angedeutet werden können. Das ist zu purem Geist gewordener Klang, aller Materialität enthoben. Demgegenüber begeistert Elliott Carters Komposition durch beinahe jugendliche Vitalität und - im Vergleich zu früheren Werken des Komponisten - unmittelbare Fasslichkeit. Carter hat in seinen Neunzigern zu einer Gelassenheit gefunden, die ihn - bei allem intellektuellen Anspruch, den seine Musik nach wie vor stellt - erfrischend frei formulieren lässt. Diese Einspielung ist ein wertvolles Dokument in mehrfacher Hinsicht: der Musik zweier großer Komponisten, der Kunst eines unvergleichlichen Interpreten sowie der Freundschaft, die diese Werke zustande gebracht hat.“ Thomas Schulz, Applaus

„Carters Quartett ist von einer Leichtigkeit und Brillanz, wie sie viele seiner späten Arbeiten auszeichnet. Polyphone Strukturen verwebt er in einer Abfolge kurzer Duette für alle nur möglichen Instrumentenkombinationen zu immer neuen Konstellationen. Der Oboenpart ist außerordentlich sanglich gehalten, obgleich in dem polyphonen Gewebe alle Instrumente strukturbildende Aufgaben übernehmen. Das Werk ist ein schönes Beispiel dafür, dass sich Heiterkeit und Komplexität keineswegs ausschließen müssen...“ Martin Demmler, Fono Forum (Stern des Monats)