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| **Carter, Elliott (Cook Jr.) (1908-2012)** |
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| Born in 1908 into a wealthy New York City family, Elliott Carter enjoyed a cosmopolitan childhood, spending time in Europe and learning French at an early age. The composer Charles Ives mentored the young Carter, taking him to concerts in New York and encouraging his developing interest in music. Carter’s childhood, characterised by immersion in a culturally enriched environment and exposure to the modern world, provided the elements from which his artistic aesthetic and musical language would later be forged. When Carter entered Harvard College, he focused his studies on English literature, Greek, and philosophy, although musical activities continued in the form of lessons with Walter Piston and Gustav Holst, as well as singing with the Harvard Glee Club. Carter completed a master’s degree in music at Harvard in 1932, after which he moved to Paris to study composition with Nadia Boulanger for three years. He received a doctorate in music from the École Normale de Musique in Paris in 1935. |
| File: carter.jpg  Born in 1908 into a wealthy New York City family, Elliott Carter enjoyed a cosmopolitan childhood, spending time in Europe and learning French at an early age. The composer Charles Ives mentored the young Carter, taking him to concerts in New York and encouraging his developing interest in music. Carter’s childhood, characterised by immersion in a culturally enriched environment and exposure to the modern world, provided the elements from which his artistic aesthetic and musical language would later be forged. When Carter entered Harvard College, he focused his studies on English literature, Greek, and philosophy, although musical activities continued in the form of lessons with Walter Piston and Gustav Holst, as well as singing with the Harvard Glee Club. Carter completed a master’s degree in music at Harvard in 1932, after which he moved to Paris to study composition with Nadia Boulanger for three years. He received a doctorate in music from the École Normale de Musique in Paris in 1935. In a 2010 interview, Carter discussed his early years and the development of his interest in composition.  File: <http://www.boosey.com/podcast/Carter-on-Carter-1-Early-Years/13082>  Returning to New York in 1935, Carter commenced a long career as a composer and educator. He held teaching positions at a several prestigious American universities, as well as residencies in Rome and Berlin. In 1939, Carter married Helen Frost-Jones, with whom he had one child. He lived in Greenwich Village in New York City from 1945 until his death in 2012. On 11 December 2008, Carter celebrated his 100th birthday. This rare milestone was commemorated by festivals dedicated to his music (notably the BBC Proms and the Tanglewood Music Festival), major performances in the United States, Europe, and Tokyo, and significant new recordings and interviews.  File: <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=98081089>  The composer made several public appearances, including at the December 11th Carnegie Hall performance of *Interventions* for piano and orchestra, which had been premiered a few days earlier by the Boston Symphony Orchestra (conducted by James Levine) and pianist Daniel Barenboim. On the eve of the composer’s birthday Charlie Rose hosted a conversation between Carter, Levine and Barenboim in tribute to the composer’s centenary.  File: <http://www.charlierose.com/view/interview/9774>  Over a career that spanned seventy-five years, Carter established himself internationally as a distinguished composer of contemporary classical music with an unrivalled reputation. He was twice awarded the Pulitzer Prize, and was the first composer to receive the United States National Medal of Arts. European honours include the Ernst Siemens Music Prize (Germany), the Prince Pierre Foundation Music Award (Principality of Monaco), and being made “Commandeur dans l’Ordre des Arts et des Lettres” in France.  Carter’s compositional voice evolved gradually during his early period. Inspired in his youth by the pioneering contemporary music of Stravinsky, Schoenberg, and Varèse, his rigorous instruction with Boulanger led to a distinctly neo-classical style in such works as his 1939 ballet *Pocahontas*. The Piano Sonata (1945-46, rev. 1982) occupies a pivotal position in Carter’s early development, referencing both the past and the future. His traditional contrapuntal studies are reflected in the Sonata’s fugal middle movement - the bright, pianistic style and harmonic language echo those of his contemporary, Copland, while aspects of rhythm and design show evidence of practices yet to find their full expression.  The Cello Sonata of 1948 reveals the strict counterpoint of earlier works being transformed into a mode of contrapuntal writing that persisted as a hallmark of Carter’s technique. The cello and piano each have distinct musical characters, defined by contrasting rhythmic behaviors and expressive styles - a technique Carter described as “extremely modern at that time.” In all of his later works Carter’s approach to texture is similarly linear, although the linear entities are frequently more complex than a single instrument.  In 1950-51 Carter secluded himself in a remote area of Arizona, separating himself from his routine life in order to free himself creatively. This liberating experience resulted in his first String Quartet, a landmark composition for which he won the Pulitzer Prize in 1960. The String Quartet signifies Carter’s arrival as a modernist composer, setting aside convention and establishing his dedication to innovation. Carter went on to compose another four string quartets, the most recent in 1995. The quartets are among the most well known and widely appreciated of Carter’s oeuvre, as are many of his orchestral works, including *Variations for Orchestra* (1954-55), *Concerto for Orchestra* (1969) and *Symphony of Three Orchestras* (1976). His *Double Concerto* for harpsichord, piano and two chamber orchestras, composed in 1961, Stravinsky praised as a “masterpiece.” In his mid-eighties, Carter embarked on his largest and most ambitious orchestral work: the massive, magnificent *Symphonia: sum fluxae pretium spei* (1993-96), which is loosely based on a poem by the 17th century English writer, Richard Crashaw.  From early in his career, Carter was intrigued by the concept of time and by temporal aspects of life and art. Influenced by literature, poetry and film, Carter’s experiments in the dual dimensions of horizontal succession and vertical simultaneity led to the establishment of a unique rhythmic language. Although, like many of his contemporaries, Carter’s music goes beyond regular meter, his rhythms are often organized by steady pulses, usually related in complex ways to the notated meter. He is well known for his technique of “metric modulation,” where one tempo transitions smoothly to another through a common rhythmic unit. Carter’s penchant for a vertically stratified musical texture frequently takes the form of simultaneous layers, or streams, with independent rhythmic and pitch profiles. In his second *String Quartet* (1959), the contrasting rhythmic layers of the *Cello Sonata* are extended to all four instruments, each of which has its own rhythmic character, with Violin 2 articulating a steady pulse. In later works, Carter focused on employing concurrent pulses to create large-scale polyrhythms - for example in his 1980 piano piece *Night Fantasies,* where the temporal flow is guided by a long-range polyrhythm in the ratio 216:175. In “O Breath,” the sixth song in *A Mirror on Which to Dwell* (1976), the instrumental ensemble presents three simultaneous pulses, MM 8.11, MM 8.37, and MM 8.31, which, although similar in speed, never meet, while the chamber orchestra piece *Penthode* (1985) features five concurrent pulse streams.  Carter’s organization of pitch materials is no less distinctive than his rhythmic language. Using Schoenberg’s “emancipation of the dissonance” as a starting point, Carter explored the use of recurring intervals and chords as a way of creating harmonic coherence in his compositions. In his *String Quartet No. 2*, for example, each instrument is assigned a specific repertoire of intervals, which, in combination with distinguishing rhythmic behaviors, define the instrument’s individual musical character. Other compositions systematically investigate the harmonic potential of different chord types, all of which are catalogued in Carter’s *Harmony Book*. His *Piano Concerto* (1964), for instance, divides the twelve trichords between the piano and the orchestra, associating each interval with a metronomic speed and expressive style. Four-note chords are featured in the *Double Concerto*, where the harpsichord and piano are each allocated one of two all-interval tetrachords. The structural possibilities of the all-trichord hexachord make this a popular source sonority in many of Carter’s compositions, including *Changes* for guitar (1983) and *Gra for Solo Clarinet* (1993). Harmony and register are coupled in *Night Fantasies* through Carter’s spatial projections of the eighty-eight symmetrically inverted all-interval twelve-note chords.  Although Carter derived pitch and rhythm systematically, unlike some of his avant-garde peers such as Stockhausen and the serialists, his use of technical devices is not an end in itself. Rather, the organizational systems not only provide a framework, but also play an integral role in expressing musically his understanding of the nature of life in the contemporary world. Carter’s literary background and love of poetry inspired both his vocal and instrumental works. As one of the leading musical interpreters of contemporary American poetry, his song cycles set texts by such figures as Robert Lowell, Marianne Moore, Elizabeth Bishop and William Carlos Williams. *In the Distances of Sleep,* his 2006 setting of poems by Wallace Stevens was performed at his centenary celebration at Tanglewood in 2008, together with several other of his song cycles.  File:<http://www.npr.org/player/v2/mediaPlayer.html?action=1&t=1&islist=false&id=98081089&m=98134190>  As with *Symphonia*, there are special connections between literary works and some of Carter’s large instrumental works, including the Concerto for Orchestra, which uses St. John Perse’s poem *Vents* as a point of departure. In a 2010 interview, the composer discussed the influence of Hart Crane’s poem *The Bridge* on his Symphony of Three Orchestras, and talked about the genesis of his only opera, *What Next?* (1997-98).  File: <http://www.boosey.com/podcast/Carter-on-Carter-2-Symphony-and-Opera/13083>  After labouring intensely to develop his compositional style in his early and middle years, Carter was rewarded in his later years by a remarkable prolificacy and range of artistic imagination. Not only did he complete some of his largest works, including his first opera at the age of ninety, but he also composed an extraordinary array of nearly fifty works after the start of the new millennium.  **Selected Works:**  **Orchestra**  *Pocahontas*, ballet (1938-39)  Variations for Orchestra (1954-55)  Concerto for Orchestra (1969)  Symphony of Three Orchestras (1976)  *Symphonia: sum fluxae pretium spei* (1993-96)  *Boston* Concerto (2002)  **Solo Instruments and Orchestra**  Double Concerto for harpsichord, piano and two chamber orchestras (1961)  Piano Concerto (1964)  Violin Concerto (1989)  *Dialogues* for piano and chamber orchestra (2003)  *Interventions* for piano and orchestra (2007)  Flute concerto (2008)  **Chamber**  Piano Sonata (1945-46)  Cello Sonata (1948)  String Quartet no.1 (1951)  String Quartet no. 2 (1959)  String Quartet no. 3 (1971)  *Night Fantasies* for piano (1980)  *Changes* for guitar (1983)  *90+* for piano (1994)  Quintet for piano and string quartet (1997)  **Voice**  Song cycles  *A Mirror on Which to Dwell* for soprano and ensemble (1976)  *Syringa* for mezzo-soprano, bass-baritone, guitar and ensemble (1978)  *In Sleep, In Thunder* for tenor and ensemble (1981)  *Of Challenge and of Love* for soprano and piano (1994)  *In the Distances of Sleep* for mezzo-soprano and chamber orchestra (2006)  *A Sunbeam’s Architecture* for tenor and chamber orchestra (2010)  **Opera**  *What Next?* (1997-98) |
| Further reading:  (Bernard)  (Bernard, The Evolution of Elliott Carter’s Rhythmic Practice)  (Capuzzo)  (Carter)  (Carter, Harmony Book)  (Link)  (Meyer)  (Schiff)  (Stone E. and Stone)  (Mead)  (Ravenscroft)  **Select Discography:**  (Elliott Carter: A Nonesuch Retrospective)  (Arditti String Quartet)  (Oppens)  (E. Carter)  (E. Carter, The Music of Elliott Carter, Volume 8: Sixteen Compositions, 2002-2009) |