Carter, Elliott Cook Jr. (1908-2012)

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 (<http://www.boosey.com/podcast/Carter-on-Carter-1-Early-Years/13082>) Carter discussed his early years and the development of his interest in composition.

Returning to New York in 1935, Carter commenced his 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 (<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 (<http://www.charlierose.com/view/interview/9774>) between Carter, Levine and Barenboim in tribute to the composer’s centenary.

Over a career that spanned 75 years, Carter established himself internationally as a distinguished composer of contemporary classical music with an unrivaled 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, particularly in counterpoint, 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 the Variations for Orchestra (1954-55), the Concerto for Orchestra (1969) and the Symphony of Three Orchestras (1976). His Double Concerto for harpsichord, piano and two chamber orchestras, composed in1961, was praised by Stravinsky 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 by both being based on a common small 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 4 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 3 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 5 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 12 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 the 2 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 88 symmetrically inverted all-interval 12-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* (<http://www.npr.org/player/v2/mediaPlayer.html?action=1&t=1&islist=false&id=98081089&m=98134190>), 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. 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 (<http://www.boosey.com/podcast/Carter-on-Carter-2-Symphony-and-Opera/13083>) 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).

After laboring 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 90, but he also composed an extraordinary array of nearly 50 works after the start of the new millennium.

**Further Reading**

Bernard, J. W. (1990) ‘An Interview with Elliott Carter’, *Perspectives of New Music* 28 (2): 180-214.

\_\_\_\_\_ (1988) ‘The Evolution of Elliott Carter’s Rhythmic Practice, *Perspectives of New Music* 26 (2): 164-203. (Discussion, with analytical examples, of the development of Carter’s rhythmic language from the Cello Sonata of 1948 to the Double Concerto, 1961.)

Capuzzo, G. (2012) *Elliott Carter’s “What Next?”: Communication, Cooperation, and Separation*, Rochester: University of Rochester Press. (In-depth study of Carter’s only opera.)

Carter, E. C. (1997) *Collected Essays and Lectures, 1937-1995*, J. W. Bernard (ed.), Rochester: University of Rochester Press. (Supplements and expands the earlier Stone collection of Carter’s writing, listed below.)

\_\_\_\_\_ (2002) *Harmony Book*, N. Hopkins & J. F. Link (eds.), New York: Carl Fischer. (Carter’s personal catalogue of his interval and chord vocabulary, with explanatory essays by the editors.)

Link, J. F. (2000) *Elliott Carter: A Guide to Research*, New York and London: Garland.

Meyer, F. and Shreffler, A. C. (eds.) (2008) *Elliott Carter: A Centennial Portrait in Letters and Documents*. Woodbridge, Suffolk: Paul Sacher Foundation/Boydell Press. (This collection of previously unpublished archival materials, with commentary, provides insight into Carter’s working practices, his musical language, and his development as a composer.)

Schiff, D. (1998) *The Music of Elliott Carter* (2nd ed.), London: Faber. (Comprehensive study of Carter’s music up to his 90th birthday, written with the cooperation of the composer by his friend and former student.)

Stone E. and Stone, K. (eds.) (1977) *The Writings of Elliott Carter: An American Composer Looks at Modern Music*, Bloomington, IN: University of Indiana Press. (Includes essays and articles written by the composer up to 1976.)

***Sample Analytical Articles***

Mead, A. (1983) ‘Pitch Structure in Elliott Carter’s String Quartet No. 3’, *Perspectives of New Music* 22 (1): 31-60. (Examination of the organizational role played by intervals, tetrachords and vertically ordered 12-tone sets in the Quartet.)

Ravenscroft, B. (2003) ‘Setting the Pace: the Role of Speeds in Elliott Carter's *A Mirror on Which to Dwell*’, Music Analysis 22 (3): 253-82. (Study of rhythm, pulse and text-music relations in two songs from the *Mirror* cycle.)

**List of Key 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)

**Selected Discography**

*Elliott Carter: A Nonesuch Retrospective*, Nonesuch Records. (Four-disc collection of most of the Carter recordings made by Nonesuch from 1968-85, including orchestral, chamber and vocal works, plus an informative 58-page booklet.)

*Elliott Carter String Quartets No’s 1-4*, Arditti String Quartet, Etcetera. (Noted performers of Carter’s string music, the Arditti Quartet commissioned his String Quartet no. 5).

*Oppens plays Carter: the Complete Piano Music*, Cedille Records (Oppens, a leading interpreter of Carter’s piano music, performs his early Piano Sonata, the seminal *Night Fantasies* of 1980, as well as several more recent solo piano pieces from the 1990s and 2000s.)

*The Music of Elliott Carter, Volume 1: the Vocal Works (1975-81)*, Bridge Records. (Speculum Musicae recordings of *A Mirror on Which to Dwell;* *In Sleep, In Thunder;* *Syringa;* *Three Poems of Robert Frost*.)

*The Music of Elliott Carter, Volume 8: Sixteen Compositions, 2002-2009*, Bridge Records (Includes orchestral, chamber and vocal works.)

Suggestion for photograph

From Boosey and Hawkes site: <http://www.boosey.com/images/composer/CarterSquare2000.jpg>

