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ELLIOTT CARTER

A Bio-Bibliography

WILLIAM T. DOERING

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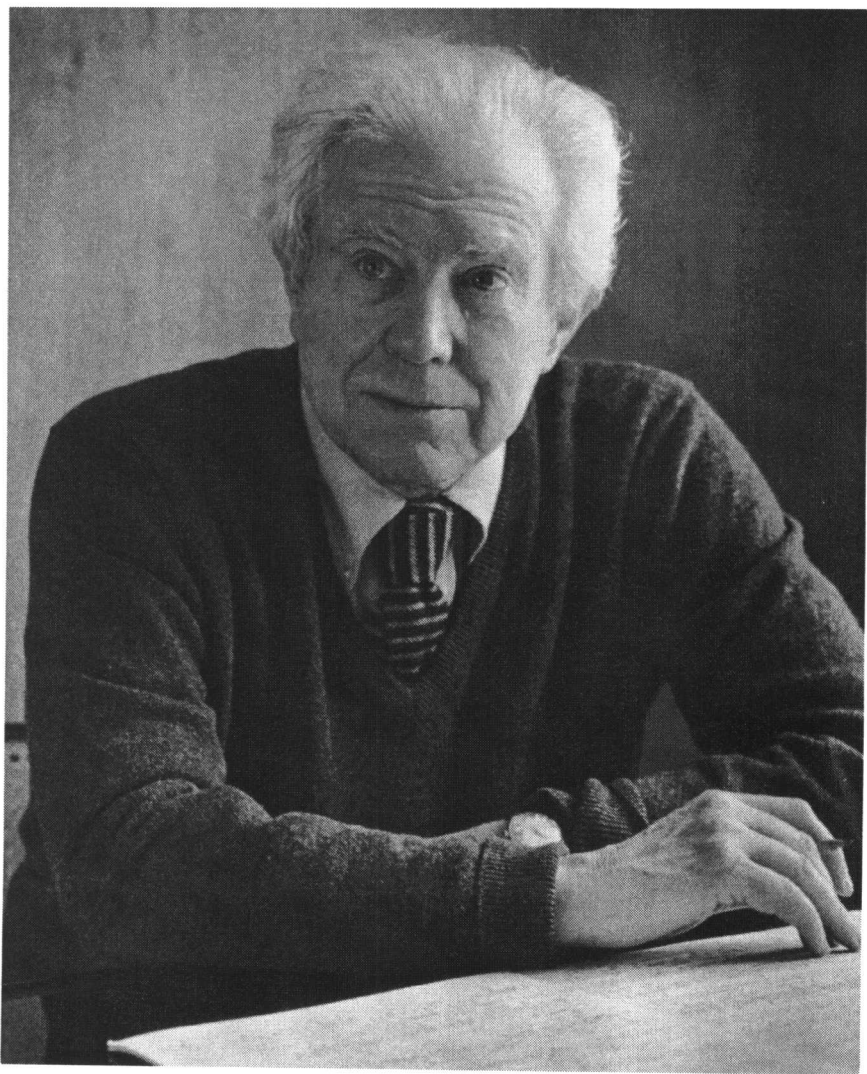
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Elliott Carter. Photo: Misha Donat/Boosey & Hawkes.

Preface

Elliott Carter holds a prominent place in modern music. His compositions have been performed and recorded worldwide. Carter's writings, primarily those appearing in the periodical Modern Music, reveal the thoughts of a major composer and music critic. This book was written, organized and annotated to provide students and scholars better access to the compositions, recordings and writings by and about this distinguished twentieth century American composer.

This book is arranged in five sections: biography, works and performances, discography, bibliography of material by Carter, and bibliography of material about Carter. The first section is a short biography. The purpose of this biography is not to duplicate the other fine biographies available to scholars, but rather to outline the development of Carter's musical career and thus to place the remainder of the work in perspective. The second section is a complete list to date of Carter's works and their significant performances. The section is arranged by genre which is subdivided by the date of completion. Each entry is preceded by a "W" (e.g. W1, W2, etc.) and provides information on the vocal text of the work, dedicatee, medium of performance, and premiere and publication dates. "See" references are provided to facilitate access to the reviews of performances and recordings. The third section is a complete discography of commercially produced recordings and is arranged alphabetically by composition with cross references to the works and performances section. Each entry is preceded by a "D" (e.g. D1, D2, etc.) and provides names of performers, contents of the recording, date of issue, album title, series title, record label number and bibliographic citations for reviews. The fourth section contains a bibliography of writings by Carter and is arranged alphabetically by the title of the article. Some writings have been reprinted. Appropriate citations along with the reprint title are provided. Each entry is preceded by a "B" (e.g. B1, B2, etc.) and includes a short annotation and/or quote from the article. "See" references refer to important citations from other sections of this book. The fifth section is a bibliography of substantial writings about Carter and is arranged by author with anonymous articles interspersed by title. Each entry is preceded by a "C" (e.g. C1, C2, etc.). Each entry includes a short annotation and/or quote from the article. "See" references refer to other sections of the book and are included for reviews of premiere performances.

Several appendices are included. Appendix I provides a list of archival sources valuable to Carter scholarship. Appendix II provides an alphabetical list of Carter's works, and Appendix III is a chronological list of Carter's works. Each entry in Appendix II and III is followed by a "W" number which refers back to the works and performances section. Appendix IV provides addresses current with the publication of this book for publishers of Carter's scores. The book concludes with an index of subjects, and personal, corporate and geographical names.

Throughout this book I have deviated from traditional uses of italics, underlining and bold face type to provide a text which is easier not only to read but also to locate Carter's works within citations. Underlining has been used for titles of books, dissertations and periodicals. I have used italics to highlight Carter's musical works, and have used bold face type to distinguish sections within a particular chapter, such as separating each of Carter's works in the discography.

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Proofing bibliographies is not an easy task so a special thanks to my wife Anita Taylor Doering, and Maurice Monhardt, Luther College Music Department, for their efforts. Misha Donat, photographer, has kindly provided the portrait found at the front of this book. Translation of some articles was provided by my wife, Anita, and Elizabeth Jackman Doering. I want to thank the editorial staff at Greenwood Press including: Maureen Melino (Coordinating Editor), Marilyn Brownstein (former Humanities Editor), Don Hixon (Series Adviser) and Mary Blair (former Acquisitions Editor, Music). They have guided me through the publication of this book and have been patient with me during these past years.

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Elliott Carter

Biography

"[Elliott] Carter composes three kinds of music:
discards, studies and masterpieces."¹

During his lifetime, internationally recognized American composer Elliott Cook Carter, Jr. has composed over three dozen substantial pieces, ranging from stage and choral works to ballets, symphonies, and chamber music. Carter has been the recipient of two Guggenheim Fellowships, two Pulitzer Prizes for Music, and numerous other music awards and honors. Even at age 85, he continues to pioneer trails into new territory in modern American music. Modern music scholars would argue that Carter's greatest influence on twentieth century musical composition is his use and refinement of metric modulation and novel use of sonorities. As David Schiff, a scholar and student of Carter, remarked:

[To Carter]...any music that is reducible to a few easily imitated tricks fails to achieve the full potential of musical expression. Music has to have the complexity of natural phenomena....And it has to be as intellectually challenging as the best poetry or philosophy.²

However, Carter has done more than compose music. Like many of his American contemporaries, he has spent a large amount of his life trying to improve the condition for American composers of modern music, especially in regard to music education. During his long career of over six and a half decades, he has served on numerous faculties, established music curricula, and written and spoken on the need to properly educate Americans, particularly new composers. He has also contributed articles to various music journals and enjoyed a long career as music reviewer and critic.

¹David Schiff, The Music of Elliott Carter (London : Eulenburg Books, 1983), p. 21.

²Ibid., p. 19.

4 BIOGRAPHY

Elliott Cook Carter, Jr., one of the premier American composers of concert music in the twentieth century, was born in New York City on December 11, 1908, the son of Elliott Cook Carter, Sr. and Florence Doris Chambers. Although Carter did not come from a particularly musical family, he enjoyed music and learning from a young age. Elliott Jr. decided early in his youth not to pursue the family business for which he had been groomed. This apparently met with disapproval at home.

Carter's paternal grandfather, Eli, began a successful lace importing business after the Civil War in New York City, and his son, Elliott Sr., carried on the tradition and eventually bought out his father's interests. When Elliott Sr. died in 1955, he left the company to its employees. Many Carter scholars use harsh words in describing Carter's parents, suggesting that Carter was virtually cast out by them. He was disinherited when he began serious music study abroad. However, Carter explained that:

I do remember...taking my father to hear a performance of *The Rite of Spring* and his saying that 'only a madman' could have written anything like that. Now as I look back on it, though, I see that my parents were really very patient and must have suffered a great deal...they had to sit through my practicing of Scriabin for hours on end, which I imagine they found hard to bear--though they never said so.³

While being educated at the Horace Mann School from 1920-1926, young Carter was encouraged by Clifton Furness, music teacher at Horace Mann, to direct serious study to music. Furness recognized his student's interests and talents and introduced him to Charles Ives in 1924. Between Furness and Ives, Carter was exposed to modern music at Carnegie Hall when the Boston Symphony performed there:

...I became immediately interested in modern music--up to that time, I had been quite bored with any kind of music, never having heard any modern music.⁴

Although he had taken piano lessons at home, he had not been strongly urged to follow a musical career. Carter credits Ives with pushing him to seriously study composition, and Ives remained a great influence in Carter's musical career. Carter admired Ives' determination to write music for himself and not to impress an audience. Ives wrote a letter of recommendation for Carter to enter Harvard University. In the letter Ives described the young man as an "exceptional boy. He has an instinctive interest in literature and especially music that is somewhat unusual."⁵

³Allen Edwards, Flawed Words and Stubborn Sounds: A Conversation with Elliott Carter (New York : Norton, 1971), p. 40.

⁴Ibid.

⁵Elliott Carter, "Documents of a Friendship with Ives," Tempo, no. 117 (June 1976), p. 2 ; originals at Yale University Music Library collection.

By this time, Carter had already begun to live a different lifestyle than that of his parents, and he certainly embraced opposing cultural values. Carter was caught up in the avant-garde world of art in Greenwich Village. Katherine Ruth Heyman, a pianist and mystic who held a weekly salon in New York, performed music by Scriabin, Ives, Ravel, Griffes, Schoenberg and others. Teen-aged Carter was most impressed at that time with Scriabin. Carter practiced Scriabin's piano scores diligently and attempted to analyze his works. He enjoyed modern music and was able to purchase new scores during family business trips to Europe. As a result of these jaunts to the Continent, Carter became proficient at several European languages. Before he could write English, Carter learned to speak French at home in training for the family business.

Many scholars agree that Carter began writing music in 1925 or shortly after hearing Stravinsky's *The Rite of Spring* and being very impressed:

...Rite of Spring was a very important and meaningful work, as were several of the works of Varèse...and certainly the later works of Scriabin...as well as Ives' *Concord Sonata* and some of his songs.⁶

Carter attempted to compose an advanced piano sonata as well as some simpler settings of Joyce's chamber music. After preparatory school, Carter began his studies at Harvard in 1926 and majored in English literature, despite a strong background in the classics. During his undergraduate years, he studied piano with Newton Swift and Hans Ebell, performed with the Harvard Glee Club, and attended as many of the Boston Symphony concerts as he was able. Since Harvard's music department was too conservative for Carter's tastes, the young Elliott took theory courses and oboe lessons at the Longy School.

...I began to...discover that the [Harvard] professors...considered Koussevitsky's modernist activities at the Boston Symphony an outright scandal.⁷

It was through Carter's acquaintances that he became familiar with Middle Eastern, Arabic, East Indian, and Chinese music traditions and theory during his undergraduate years, and thus became exposed to non-Western music. Carter even spent a summer transcribing Arab music for the Baron Rudolphe d'Erlanger in Tunisia.

It was during his senior college year when Carter decided to become a composer, although he had entertained the idea before going to Harvard but didn't dare admit this to his parents.⁸ After receiving his Bachelor of Arts degree in 1930, Carter continued lessons at Harvard as a graduate student under the direction of Edward Burlingame Hill,

⁶Edwards, p. 45.

⁷Ibid.

⁸Ibid.

Gustav Holst (then a visiting professor), and newly appointed professor Walter Piston. Harmony and counterpoint were the focus of Carter's studies.

In 1932, after earning his Master's degree, Carter acted on the suggestion of Piston and began studying privately with Nadia Boulanger in Paris. Thus, Carter's musical training led him to Europe to follow in the footsteps of American composers Aaron Copland, Virgil Thomson, and Piston. During this neoclassical period in the arts, Carter began to develop an interest in the "overt" American styles of Copland and Roger Sessions. However, Carter's main purpose was to learn counterpoint and the basic techniques of Western musical composition. Boulanger used choral music, particularly of Bach, to drive home the lesson. Carter later destroyed all of his compositions written during his Parisian days and many pieces created in of the 1930s.

While in Paris, Carter also earned a *license de contrepoint* from the Ecole Normale de Musique. Carter did not abandon performing music entirely as he sang in a madrigal group directed by Henri Expert and led a chorus of his own. Carter composed incidental music for the Harvard Classical Club's production of Sophocles' *Philocetes* during his time of study with Boulanger. This piece, for oboe, percussion and men's chorus, was performed at Cambridge, Massachusetts, in the winter of 1933. It was written in Greek, and Carter carefully examined and researched ancient Greek music to incorporate into his first publicly performed composition. He had already explored the Greek language and other classical studies while an undergraduate at Harvard.

Carter returned to the United States in 1935, hoping to find gainful employment during the great Depression. Carter wrote another piece of incidental music while in Cambridge, Massachusetts, titled Plautus' *Mostellaria* for chamber orchestra and men's voices in Latin. This was performed by the Harvard Classical Club in April 1936. A boisterous excerpt from the score, Tarantella, became a favorite of the Harvard Glee Club for many years. *Tarantella* was later rewritten as a piece for piano four hands and four part men's chorus and performed by the Club April 1937.

In the autumn of 1936 Carter returned to New York City, and he, like many of his peers in the 1930s, launched upon a lengthy career as part-time music reviewer and critic for Modern Music to help earn a regular income. Simultaneously he began to compose a ballet score on the subject of Native American legend Pocahontas which was commissioned by Carter's Harvard associate Lincoln Kirstein. It was originally composed for piano solo in 1936 and had its debut in Keene, New Hampshire.⁹

The piece was later rewritten, and *Pocahontas*, Carter's first major composition, was successfully premiered in New York on May 24, 1939, by the Ballet Caravan, for which Carter served as musical director from 1937 to 1939. A suite from the score received the Publication of American Music Award from the Juilliard Foundation in 1940 and was later incorporated into Carter's *Symphony #1*. Unfortunately the piece was a bit overshadowed by another ballet on the program that evening--that of Aaron Copland's Billy the Kid.

⁹Schiff, Music, p. 97.

Carter and Charles Ives had remained on good terms and Carter had identified with Ives' musical ability throughout his young adulthood. However, as Carter grew professionally and his music began to take on a personality of its own, he began to have mixed feelings about Ives' music. As a music critic for *Modern Music*, it was Carter's unenviable job to write a review of Ives' Concord Sonata in 1939. At that time, Ives had been heralded by the media as a "great American original" and there was much publicity surrounding the Concord premiere. Carter was forced to give a balanced review of the music and burst the enormous publicity bubble.¹⁰

As a whole, the work cannot be said to fill out the broad, elevated design forecast in the composer's preface....In any case, it is not until we have had a much greater opportunity to examine and hear his music, that Ives' position as a composer can be determined. The present canonization is a little premature.¹¹

This event created a rift between Carter and the Ives' family. As Schiff noted:

[This] haunted him both in his subsequent relations with the Ives' family and also in his own evolving senses of creative mission. It would be another decade before Carter could come to terms with Ives' creative legacy and use it in developing his own idiom.¹²

Many years later Carter summarized his feelings towards Charles Ives' music:

Sometimes, as in the Concord Sonata, his music seems like the work of an extraordinary accomplished and skilled composer....And then there are other pieces that seem to wipe all this aside and do something else.¹³

On July 6, 1939, Carter married Helen Frost Jones, a sculptor and art critic, in Chatham, Massachusetts. A son, David Chambers Carter, was born to the couple on January 4, 1943. The elder Carter accepted a teaching position at St. John's College in Annapolis, Maryland, in 1940.

Carter's next important work, apart from *Pastoral* for English horn and piano, was *The Defense of Corinth* written in 1941. Abraham Skulsky explains that Carter, using a seventeenth century English translation of a text by Rabelais, "uses the chorus in many

¹⁰Ibid., p. 18.

¹¹Elliott Carter, "The Case of Mr. Ives," *Modern Music*, v. 16, no. 3 (March/April 1939), p. 175-176.

¹²Schiff, *Music*, p. 19.

¹³Edwards, p. 63.

novel ways....The result is extremely lively and spirited, expressing the outspokenly satiric content of the text with great humor."¹⁴

Carter left his teaching post at St. John's College in 1941 because he felt the demands of teaching were too great to allow enough time for serious composition. At St. John's, Carter supervised all musical endeavors and taught Greek and mathematics. Carter discovered that there simply wasn't enough time to devote to both activities and saw his first priority as composition. During World War II Carter was the music consultant for the Office of War Information and also taught at the Peabody Conservatory from 1946-1948. From there he accepted a post at Columbia University from 1948-1950.

One of two orchestral pieces Carter wrote in the 1940s was *Holiday Overture* written while on vacation on Fire Island in the summer of 1944. Carter composed the piece to celebrate the liberation of Paris from Nazi occupation. *Holiday Overture* won the Independent Music Publishers' Contest in 1945 and was premiered by the Frankfurt Symphony in Frankfurt, Germany, the following year. Part of the contest prize was to be a performance of the winning piece by conductor Sergey Koussevitsky and the Boston Symphony, but the conductor never played the work, and "Carter had to steal the parts from the orchestra's library so they could be duplicated for performance elsewhere."¹⁵ Unfortunately, as with a number of Carter's pieces, conductors felt his works were too technically difficult, structurally complex and modern to be performed. Carter recollected:

Indeed, I'll never forget taking my *Holiday Overture* to [Aaron] Copland and going over it with him, only to have even him tell me it was just another one of those "typical, complicated Carter scores."¹⁶

Scholars agree that the two most celebrated compositions written during Carter's 1936-1948 period were his *Piano Sonata* and *The Minotaur* ballet. The *Piano Sonata*, composed in 1945-1946 during Carter's first Guggenheim Fellowship, was noted by critic Arthur Berger as "one of the most distinguished achievements for the keyboard."¹⁷ Incorporated into the *Piano Sonata* was the beginning of what was later to become known as metric modulation.¹⁸

¹⁴Abraham Skulsky, "Elliott Carter," ACA Bulletin, v. 3, no. 2 (Summer 1953), p. 4.

¹⁵Schiff, Music, p. 113.

¹⁶Edwards, p. 58.

¹⁷Skulsky, p.5 quotes Arthur Berger from an article in the Saturday Review of Literature.

¹⁸Edwards, p. 91-92, notes that only the term "metric modulation" was new and not the technique. However, Carter is best known for his innovative and optimum use of it.