

The Classical Beat

By Stephen Dankner

ELLIOTT CARTER REVEALS NEW MUSICAL WORLDS

In 1798, Franz Joseph Haydn completed what many consider his greatest work, the oratorio “The Creation.” Haydn was deeply religious, and in the opening section, ‘Die Vorstellung des Chaos’ (Representation of Chaos) the composer resorts to the use of dissonance and delayed cadences to musically depict the unformed cosmos. A bit later, the Almighty intones the words “Let there be Light!” At that moment Haydn scores a gloriously resplendent C Major chord, thus bringing order to chaos, to humanity’s relief.

The cosmos we probe today via radio astronomy and the Hubble space telescope appears infinite, and it’s also more violent and dangerous than one could have imagined two hundred years ago. Similarly, music has progressed – if you believe that like science, there is such a thing as progress in the arts – not simply stylistic evolution. It has taken tonality (keys, scales, Major and minor) 1000 years to become “exhausted” (so saith Schoenberg,) but only 100 for atonality to reach the same dead end.

Elliott Carter’s music epitomizes, as did Haydn’s two centuries ago, the concept of using the most advanced musical style to take listeners to forbidding places, and in the process transforming the art itself. Unlike Haydn, Carter is not going to save us with an affirmative blast from the past; there are no C Major chords in his composer’s arsenal. We’ll have to fend for ourselves.

Carter is much in the news these days. He just turned 99, and the Boston Symphony will be celebrating his centenary big-time this summer at Tanglewood, with James Levine directing the Festival of Contemporary Music in a one-man show of some 46 Carter scores during the weeklong festival in July.

I was a student at Juilliard when Carter taught there, and though I did not study with him, all the composition students keenly felt his forceful influence. He would occasionally present a new piece in the weekly ‘composer’s forum’ to admiring students eager to one-up each other with

ever more complex musical schemes and devices, though none could hope to outdo the Master. I once had the temerity to blurt out “But Mr. Carter, does it have to be so difficult?” “Beethoven was considered difficult in his day!” he snapped back. That shut me up. OK – Carter is Beethoven. Better not ask any more dumb questions, I thought, as I shrank back in my seat.

Carter embraces musical complexity and difficulty to a degree nearly impossible to explain in a brief column. I think a comparison with the New York School abstract expressionist painter Jackson Pollock might help. In the late 1940s, both painter and composer gradually developed new techniques to transcend traditional modes of expression. Pollock developed his “action painting” technique of dripping paint directly onto the unstretched canvas laid on the floor from above, achieving a tremendous sense of fluidity and motion. Carter, around the same time innovated a new rhythmic procedure, later dubbed “metric modulation,” wherein the notes in a piece sped up or slowed down not by taking more or less time to play them, but by a planned inter-relationship with each other, depending on the flow of what came before and what comes next - action composing, if you will. The big difference was that Pollock’s work was close to jazz improvisation - his paintings were finished relatively quickly - while Carter was always a pencil and paper composer, often spending up to three to four years on a single work by the 1960s.

Carter is often thought of as the ultimate avant-garde composer. I have a different opinion: I see him as one of the last and most prominent composers working in a defunct musical language – atonality, as mentioned above. For all his innovations with rhythm, he represents the end of a tradition of craft and supreme musical know-how; he is not the bridge to the future of music. His music is too personal; it is, really, inimitable.

When I was a teacher, I taught the ‘elements of music’ – a laundry list of devices composers use to organize their musical ideas. Here are some: rhythm, melody, harmony, counterpoint, texture, timbre (tone-color) and form. Carter has transformed all these elements – not just rhythm - into patterns and procedures that bear little or no resemblance to how music of the past was constructed. Can music thus composed be too original to be understood?

People today seem to have few problems with Pollock’s paintings. Also with Frank Gehry’s architecture, with its convoluted, crushed soda pop can

curves, original as Pollock and Gehry are. Not so with Carter's music. I think the eye is more easily intrigued than the ear, which, being less adventurous seems to require the solace of mostly familiar sounds to keep from getting lost. Music is the most abstract of the arts, and listeners have plenty to deal with even to make sense of a Beethoven symphony, given all the variables of performance. How to comprehend Carter when all the musical elements have been reprogrammed to do and to mean different things?

I've re-listened to about fifteen of Elliott Carter's works, score in hand, before writing this column, in order to again plunge deeply into the composer's world – rather, his alienated universe. He far out-Haydn's Haydn – Carter is the master Depictor of Calculated Chaos. Listen to the Double Concerto, the Concerto for Orchestra or the Third String Quartet. Out of amorphous percussion rustlings or woodwind twitterings evolves something, though often I find what it becomes to be alien, harsh, unforgiving and unrelentingly cold. The opera "What Next" (1997) has as its only action a car crash – a chaotic event. The Third Quartet (1971) has a train wreck of an opening - the most ear-splittingly dissonant 30 seconds of chamber music (along with George Crumb's "Black Angels," for electrically amplified string quartet) I have ever heard.

Love it or hate it, the music of Elliott Carter is a force of nature. The composer's perhaps extreme and errant genius must be reckoned with; his music is too significant to be avoided or dismissed. You should go to Tanglewood this summer and listen, then determine for yourself what this music means to you. It's that important.

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