A Focused Multiplicity: Reflections on Elliott Carter

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Immersing myself in Elliott Carter's music for the first time was like stumbling upon an overgrown garden that was intensely captivating and terrifyingly dense. I knew, once having heard his work, that my notion of what composition is had been irrevocably changed, a reality that left me both anxious and inspired. It was the year 2000, my second year as an undergraduate at the Eastman School of Music, a time when my mind was being regularly expanded by live performances of music by composers such as Berio, Cage, Xenakis, Wuorinen, Reich, and others. Hearing this music filled me with enthusiasm for what it meant to be a composer, and yet nothing prepared me for the experience of walking into the Sibley Music Library for a routine listening session, asking for the Carter Third String Quartet on a whim, and pumping the piece into my brain. The music systematically rearranged my nervous system.

I wore that piece out. I listened to it over and over again, with and without score, trying to parse the textures. It was the first time that I felt completely overwhelmed by a piece of music, and I felt compelled to aurally decode it; and yet, paradoxically, the rhetoric and the gestural impact of the music were somehow immediately, intuitively accessible. It is for these reasons that Carter's music has maintained its impact on me over the years: it bears the intense obsession with pitch organization that is the hallmark of American modernism, and yet its "mathy" quality is not at the service of explicating or realizing the geometry of a system, but just the opposite. I have always felt that Carter's technical play with all-interval tetrachords, the all-triad hexachord, and so forth, facilitates the dynamic, gestural—almost jazzy—musical multiplicity that is the nearly constant feature of his rich output.

The impact of Carter's music on my own was immediately felt. My junior year was spent writing *Fikr*, a 16-minute work for chamber orchestra that was in direct response to Carter's music. Throughout the work, a steady, chorale-like music moves quietly along in one tempo while other dramatic textures are heard against it in different tempi. In my piece the chorale symbolizes meditative, inner focus while the dramatic music represents the chaos of the outside world—and it was Carter's music that inspired me to explore these musical impulses simultaneously and in the same piece.

Carter's music and Carter the person continued to affect me regularly over the next decade. My father lived in Peterborough, NH from 1982-2012, and when I would visit him in the summers, I would often attend concerts at Monadnock Music, directed at the time by James Bolle. It was a strange and lovely festival, housing traditional repertoire alongside serious contemporary music, including frequent performances of Carter's work, in the local town hall of a city of 6,000. But then again, a New England town hall, with its history of genuine democratic action, was in many ways the perfect place to hear Carter, whose music is often likened to a democratic system in which the instruments (or groups of instruments) speak in individual voices at the same time. Hearing Carter at the town hall always seemed *right* somehow; iconically American, the town hall's small Peterborough audience-sizes lent to these performances the aura of a

town meeting and seemed to express Carter's ruggedly individualistic commitment to forge ahead with his music regardless of external circumstances.

I went to an open rehearsal at the town hall in the early 2000s and found Carter there among approximately ten other people. Though I don't remember which piece was being rehearsed (it was for soprano, and I believe newly written), I had the opportuity to sit behind Carter and look over his shoulder at the score. The experience of being so physically close to Carter in such a small, intimate space was unforgettable. Over the years, I heard a number of performances of Carter's music in Peterborough, including a stellar 2011 performance by David Fulmer and Christopher Gross of *Tre Duetti,* an astonishing piece completed by Carter in 2009.

In 2002, I was in attendance at the Columbia University's Miller Theatre as the Pacifica Quartet brilliantly played all five of Carter's string quartets. Hearing the Third Quartet live would have been enough for me, and to hear all the quartets in one sitting amounted to a near overdose. I vividly remember the cellist having problems with one of his contact lenses in the middle of a quartet, reaching up and throwing the contact to the floor without pause, and continuing the performance in brilliant fashion—a complicated, visually contrapuntal gesture that added an additional voice to the dense quartet writing. Carter was in attendance, ceremonially receiving long applause at the end of the evening.

Other experiences of being in close proximity to Carter included hearing him speak at Harvard University when I was a graduate student (approximately 2005); his appearance in a wheelchair after a premiere of *Poems of Louis Zukofsky* (completed in 2008), premiered by soprano Lucy Shelton and clarinetist Thomas Martin as part of the 2009 Festival for Contemporary Music at Tanglewood; and as a Tanglewood Fellow in 2011, when I often stopped to gaze at the pictures of Carter and friends that abound in the various structures on the TMC grounds and where Carter's presence looms large.

Elliott Carter was an American composer, but he was also an international composer. In many respects, Carter is the only composer in my mental landscape who occupies this position. Other experimental composers such as Charles Ives seem distinctly American, and other American modernists, like Charles Wuorinen and Milton Babbitt, while certainly being known abroad, seem to attract less attention in Europe. John Cage, Morton Feldman, and friends are frequently played outside of the United States, but as intriguing and beautiful as their art can be, Carter's music is more deeply connected to the European/American concert music tradition in its rhetorical nature and in the forces for which it was composed. As Carter said, "We [Aaron Copland and I] were in a different stream of modernism than John Cage."[1]

Carter's relationship to nationality models the "middle way"; he neither reacted against being American nor used identifiable American material in his music. On this issue, Carter said: "I'm just a composer. I'm Elliott Carter, the composer...I'm making a new sound, it's an American sound...Nationality, as I see it, is something that's being produced by all of us all of the time".[2] Being an American composer is challenging in that America's cultural products are heavily weighted towards pop, perhaps more than any

[1] Alan Baker, "An Interview with Elliott Carter," *American Mavericks,* (American Public Media, 2002). http://musicmavericks.publicradio.org/features/interview_carter.html, accessed November 9, 2012.

[2] John Tusa, "Transcript of the John Tusa Interview with Elliott Carter," *The John Tusa Interviews* (BBC Radio 3, 2000) http://www.bbc.co.uk/radio3/johntusainterview/carter_transcript.shtml, accessed November 9, 2012.

other country, and part of being an American composer is confronting this reality. David Foster Wallace said in a 1993 interview with Larry McCaffery that "Fiction's about what it is to be a f***ing *human being*."[3] One might say the same about composition. Whatever one feels about his work, Elliott Carter wrote music that engaged serious questions about what it meant to be alive in his time. The legacy of Carter's life is certainly musical, but it is more than that; Carter's life serves as an inspiration and a challenge to search for a way to write music in this place, in this time.

[3] Larry McCaffery, "A Conversation with David Foster Wallace, " *The Review of Contemporary Fiction*, Summer 1993, Vol. 13.2., p. 131.