

## **The Classical Beat**

**By STEPHEN DANKNER**

### **ELLIOTT CARTER, A MUSICAL MASTER, TURNS 100**

For those readers of this column who have an interest in contemporary music, December 11, 2008 was a red-letter day: Elliott Carter turned 100.

I'd venture a guess that it's mainly music professionals – composers and performers - who keep up with the current trends in new music. For us, Carter's career, with its steady-as-you-go progressive development, has been unique, as the composer has, for over sixty years, created his own path, undeflected by the vagaries of trends and hip fads. Minimalism, neo-romanticism, the various world/ethno music meldings and electronic/computer interactions have left no mark on Carter's style or on his esthetic.

So why should this be of interest to music lovers who cherish the Masters – Mozart, Beethoven, Brahms and Mahler – up to, let's say, Shostakovich? Because to many, Carter is the living embodiment of the great composer working within the venerated classical tradition, which, for practical purposes, begins with Bach. Why Bach? His music is the oldest we're likely to encounter, on a regular basis, in the concert hall.

But back to Carter. Apart from the obvious longevity issue, I find it more interesting to think about the trajectory of his music since 1948. Before that date, Carter was a superbly trained neo-classicist, following the Stravinsky model. The other influence that tugged at (and bedeviled) the composer was the influence of Copland, who was a colleague and friend. Copland's mature work was based to a large degree upon Americana.

Carter, unlike Copland, didn't possess a natural feel for American subject matter, and his training in Paris with Nadia Boulanger, (the pedagogue who taught Copland and championed his music,) reinforced Carter's natural proclivity towards the more intellectual side of music, with an emphasis on strict counterpoint, complexity and dense textures over emotionalism.

Carter, eight years younger than Copland, really came into his own as a composer after World War II. His academic, intellectual bent fit in perfectly with the soon-to-be-reborn European “contemporary music” esthetic, which focused on order and structure over program music (pieces like Copland’s that told a story, like “Appalachian Spring,” “Billy the Kid” and many others.)

Some have suggested that European composers (Boulez, Stockhausen, et al) were looking for artistic order to replace the political, social and economic upheaval in Europe caused by the war - a musical version of the International Style in architecture and abstraction in painting and sculpture. The music composed in those postwar years formed the beginnings of what was to become cosmopolitanism, which dominated new music well into the 1960s.

In America, over a crucial twelve-year period, from 1948-1960, Carter emerged as the foremost representative in America of that esthetic, with works like his “Cello Sonata” (1948,) “First String Quartet” (1951,) “Variations for Orchestra” (1955) and “Second String Quartet” (1959-‘60).

These are great pieces, all very serious. To an astute listener, they still convey a sense of the grandeur of America. But, it’s the opposite of the nostalgia of Samuel Barber (“Knoxville: Summer of 1915”) and the optimism (“Fanfare for the Common Man” and “Lincoln Portrait”) of Copland; there’s a sense of tragedy, despair and even anger in Carter’s music of this period. Yet, the vision, scope and grandiosity are at once American at its core. Call it the dark side of the American dream.

In the nearly 50 years since the “Second String Quartet,” Carter has composed many big works: concerti for piano, violin, clarinet, cello, oboe; a huge symphony; three more string quartets; an opera; vocal works in all manner of configurations; solo works for piano and other instruments – you name it. The true miracle is his fecundity after 1990. In fact, most of Carter’s output of over 100 works springs from the last twenty years. Many of these pieces are aphoristic little gems, some lasting only a few minutes.

Listeners with the time, interest and sense of adventure can trace the un-deflected path I referred to, since practically all Carter’s music has been recorded. As a lifelong devotee, I’ve taken the journey, but admit that I’ve

had to stop to catch my breath often, and with long layovers before going on. Carter's music is worth it, but it can be tough going.

I have no doubt that Carter is in the tradition of the Masters. Does his music warrant being accorded a place in the canon, along with other 20<sup>th</sup> century greats Bartok, Stravinsky and Shostakovich? Watch for the increasing love of Carter's music by performers and audiences – then you'll know; the jury is still out on that score. Recently, James Levine and Daniel Barenboim have come on board, leading the way very visibly at Tanglewood, Carnegie Hall and other high profile venues. Only time will tell.

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