

The Classical Beat

By STEPHEN DANKNER

MUSIC FOR A WHILE – TO LISTEN AND READ WELL

I recently wrote about the eminence grise of new music, composer Elliott Carter, who attained his hundredth birthday December 11, 2008. No, this isn't CNN – the Carter News Network, with 24/7 coverage of a composer whose main claim to fame – other than his great longevity genes – is the complexity of his esoteric music.

In this year's-end wrap up, I'm going to throw some contrary ideas out there. Not only blather, but two fascinating books on music for your delectation.

More thoughts on Elliott Carter

Here's my rant: The contrary idea that performers, not audiences, decide which music gets performed, lives or dies. Players will tell you that Carter's music scares them to death, it's so hard. But, if they can conquer its fiendish difficulties, they feel vindicated for their struggles. What about listeners? Well, we have to work hard, too, to keep up with the non-stop barrage of notes thrown in our direction.

Two questions deriving from the composer's conceit: Are we willing to work that hard - to listen, if necessary, many times to a work to "get it"? And, how do we evaluate music composed without regard for traditional means of organization: no themes or standard forms, atonal harmony in lieu of keys, stuttering rhythms, and above all, no repetition?

For all the intellect on display, I'm troubled by Carter's rather old-fashioned devotion to atonal harmony and pre-planned interval building-block schemes. Is this really invention? If he had created, for example, a new way to re-construct traditional harmony, I'd be grateful beyond words, because tonal harmony is the linchpin of music. All the advances in music since Bach's day have been extensions of harmony – chords, in other words – both individually and collectively.

I wouldn't presume to second-guess James Levine, knowing that he loves Elliott Carter's music; Levine is a truly great musician; if he likes it, people say, it's got to be good. Yet, there's so much more to hear that's – dare I intone the word – accessible – that also possesses power and an individual voice.

I'm thinking of the amazing "Second Concerto for Orchestra" by Steven Stucky I heard performed by the TMC Orchestra at Tanglewood in 2004. One could tell that this was a masterwork. It's composed in a very modern style, yet it was immediately accessible; I'd love to hear it again. This work won the 2005 Pulitzer Prize, by the way. Have you heard it, or heard of it?

When was the last time you heard a William Schuman symphony or a Vincent Persichetti piano sonata in concert? Music lives when it finds a champion, especially after the composer is gone. We should be hearing unjustly neglected, yet wonderful American mid-20th century or new mainstream music at the major venues. Every piece does not have to be philosophical. It would be enough for it to sound beautiful, with memorable melodies.

To paraphrase Melville, Carter's music "tasks me, it heaps me." Yes, I keep trying, thinking that some day I'll have an "aha" moment. Until then, there's Samuel Barber, Paul Creston, Joan Tower, David Diamond, Peter Lieberson, Ellen Taaffe Zwilich, Richard Danielpour, Martin Adamo, Thomas Ades, John Adams, John Luther Adams, Judith Shatin, Tobias Picker ... and Steven Stucky, among many, many others. My advice: go the extra mile and discover a "friendly" but unfamiliar composer and establish a listening relationship with his/her music.

For your bookshelf

Two recent books speak volumes (pun intended) about the composer's life, de-mystifying the creative process and elucidating where we've come from, musically speaking, and where we might be going.

Alex Ross, music critic for The New Yorker magazine, for my money is the best writer on music today. He won a New York Times Book Review "Ten Best Books of 2007" listing for "The Rest Is Noise: Listening to the Twentieth Century." It's a breathtaking, virtuosic journey through the social history of music, with insightful coverage of Stravinsky, the Viennese fin de

siecle, Shostakovich, Sibelius and the American music scene – classical, jazz, pop and rock - in all its diversity. The book has just come out in paperback and is published by Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

Speaking of John Adams, his autobiography “Hallelujah Junction – Composing an American Life” is a must-read. The book is as effervescent as his music, with wonderful stories about his upbringing in New Hampshire, making the hegira to California in the drugged-out ‘60s and eventually finding his composer’s voice with the operas “Nixon In China” and “Doctor Atomic,” now in repertory at the Metropolitan Opera. Again, the publisher is Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

Stephen Dankner lives in Williamstown. Send your comments to him at sdankner@earthlink.net.