

## **The Classical Beat**

**By STEPHEN DANKNER**

### **A MUSICAL JOURNEY TO ‘THE UNEXPLORED COUNTRY’**

Writing two days before the first notes sound at Ozawa Hall, opening the Tanglewood Festival of Contemporary Music’s week-long celebration of Elliott Carter’s music and his upcoming 100<sup>th</sup> birthday, I find myself trying to clarify, in my own mind, why his music is deemed “important” or “essential” by those in the know, given its fearsome difficulties. One approaches it with a combined sense of trepidation tinged with risky adventure – sort of like going on a riverboat expedition up the Amazon without getting your tropical disease shots. Don’t worry – I’ll try to inoculate you against air-borne auditory illness.

The commonest things people say about any new music include the following: “I don’t understand it; it’s too mathematical. Is there a theme? If there is, I can’t follow it. And the form and rhythm sound random.” You know what? I have the same problems.

First – this notion of understanding. Music without text or a literal or figurative program can’t ever be pinned down to mean anything specific. The general emotions older music invokes in us is usually sufficient, and we’re grateful for them. Dvorak is happy and light-hearted; Beethoven is... well, you know. Actually, I find Beethoven’s so-called heroic music more angry than powerful or heroic. You could say that anger is an attribute of power and even heroism, I suppose. Things tend to get awfully confused when you talk about music and emotions.

Here’s a different way of looking at the problem. I’m now taking a course in Photoshop – the sophisticated digital arts software. The perspective from another art form has illuminated some of my musical concerns. In Photoshop, the two most powerful tools to manipulate images are Layers and Filters. Imagine subtle morphing of a picture in deep focus, where several incomplete, but discrete thin strata provide meaning, as in a book of transparent sheets. Remember those cartoon flipbooks, where flipping the pages quickly with your thumb simulates a moving picture? Here, though, all the individual “stills” or images are transparent. When viewed together,

the composite layering reveals a multiplicity of effects, and resultant meanings. That's Layers. Filters are easier to visualize. Take a photo of a sunset with clouds filtering the light. Apply a watercolor or brushstroke filter to the image and the result could look very close to 19<sup>th</sup> century artists Turner or Constable. In other words, in both Layers and Filters, manipulation is what it's all about, creatively speaking. It's not the raw materials; it's what you do with (to) it.

Ives' music is a good example of musical layering, with four or five different kinds of music – brass bands, patriotic tunes, church hymns – all being played at once, in different keys and tempos. The raw musical “information” - all those familiar tunes - penetrates each layer, and the composite forms a new, concatenated whole, with the simple musical meaning of each layer made more complex by the piling up of intended discords.

Filtering, in my use of the term, can be heard in almost every old master. What is Mahler without his marches – funeral or military? What is Chopin without the waltz or mazurka? Are all those classical-era minuets in Haydn and Mozart symphonies nothing more than dance music? All are filters – ways of projecting music through preexisting pattern recognition screens. Listeners love filters because they are familiar, comfortable and consoling. Often they contain elements of the exotic and mysterious. What is Debussy's impressionism but a series of filters or gauzes with which to hear? The mind's eye is almost matched in imaginative capabilities by the mind's ear. You want water; he'll give you “La Mer.” You like bucolic nature, place yourself in this picture: “Afternoon of a Faun.” All filters.

Back to Carter. To my ear, he practices an art of avoidance - the “Thou Shalt Not” approach to composition: no recognizable forms, no repetition to underscore the important themes and so on. It's all about process, the manipulation of notes and rhythms in the abstract. Above all, he demonstrates an almost complete avoidance of past composers' techniques, to the point that Aaron Copland once said of Carter's music “If this is music, I don't know what music is anymore.”

Most important, there are no referential filters that conjure up descriptive imagery, like Ives. I have often wondered what Carter's music – the same notes and rhythms - would be like if it were tonal – grounded in keys. We'll never know, as the composer is a confirmed post-Schoenbergian atonalist. It

would be an interesting experiment to pass Carter's music through a tonal "filter" to see what comes out.

But, there ARE layers, albeit abstract ones: different streams of music seemingly existing in their own quantum universe, on the sub-atomic level, Some streams, like electrons and neutrons, repel each other. The ultimate example is the opening 30 seconds of his Third String Quartet. There's a feeling that we're hearing musical matter colliding with anti-matter, creating an unprecedented sonic cataclysm. Listen and see if you don't agree.

Carter has said that he doesn't much like older music (meaning the classical tradition,) and finds the old forms and methods worn out and incompatible with the way we live today, in our unresolved lives and times. Thus, he avoids conflict resolution - perhaps the single, key element in all (not just musical) Western art. This is radical thinking.

Bernard Holland, New York Times music critic, in a 1991 commentary on Carter wrote: "There are listening spirits that revel in the conflict, who find in it powerful metaphors for the complications of 20th-century culture. But there are others repelled by this warring spirit, who value order in even its most complicated forms and who seek in music the solace of reconciliation even when the things being reconciled are not necessarily optimistic or particularly consoling. These are listeners who have observed Mr. Carter's music with some precision and simply do not like what they see."

It's a safe bet that Carter's music 50 years from now will still sound complex and abstract. It will be left to posterity to see if the weightier works survive and will find an audience; the earlier sonatas of the 1940s up to the 1955 Variations for Orchestra, I believe, will. I doubt that Carter's music will ever find a large and enthusiastic audience; his music is iconoclastic and will likely be cherished mainly by a small circle of adventurous listeners and specialist virtuoso performers – James Levine notwithstanding; the same people who revere Schoenberg and late Stravinsky.

Are you willing to join them – just visiting - in the here and now? Your last chance at Tanglewood will be Thursday, July 24, 8 pm in Ozawa Hall when Carter acolyte Oliver Knussen leads the BSO in the composer's orchestral magnum opus, "Symphonia: Sum fluxae pretium spei."

It's not about liking the music or trying to understand it in the traditional

sense, which is not really possible; it's about opening yourself up to it as a unique experience. With Carter, sound and imagination coexist in a multi-dimensional universe. There must be listeners – un-jaded ones – out there who are imaginative enough to create their own filters or dispense with them, as the case may be. I'll be joining you in Ozawa Hall Thursday night.

I've administered your shots. Are you ready for that journey upriver?

*Stephen Dankner lives in Williamstown. Send your comments to him at [sdankner@earthlink.net](mailto:sdankner@earthlink.net).*