

Carter, Elliott (1908-2012): Overview of his Writings

[Elliott Carter's writings](#) form a total of more than a hundred texts including a range of program notes, concert reviews and commentaries on American or European musical life and institutions, as well as articles on the composers for whom Carter felt a particular musical or intellectual understanding. They also contain texts on some of his scores and, particularly, fundamental theoretical and aesthetic writings. In addition to two important anthologies in English supervised by the composer (each containing more than fifty texts) (Else Stone and Kurt Stone, eds., [The Writings of Elliott Carter](#) and Jonathan W. Bernard, ed., [Collected Essays and Lectures, 1937-1995](#)) there exists a collection of sixteen texts translated to French (Philippe Albéra and Vincent Barras, eds., [La dimension du temps](#)).

Elliott Carter's first articles date to 1937. He was based in New York and trying to earn a living in an America still deeply marked by the Great Depression and its devastating effects on avant-garde artistic movements. Carter was obliged to work as a music critic, a job of little prestige at the time. Still, his writing for the journal *Modern Music* edited by Minna Lederman proved enriching and often stimulating. Although he had to write on operas, ballets, films, theater and on other subjects often distant from his own interests as a composer, he was often assigned to review concerts of modern music in New York, but also Boston, Philadelphia, and Washington, DC. He had not yet composed any major works or found his own personal voice as a composer, but he possessed an exceptional musical and intellectual background and fine knowledge of major modern works that allowed him to analyze and diagnose the state of contemporary musical creation with great acuity.

At the beginning of the 1940s, Carter abandoned regular work as a critic to take a teaching post at St. John's College in Annapolis, and later, to work as a music consultant in the Office of War Information. He returned to New York in 1945. Carter's musical thought was then in a phase of intense maturation, ripening the concepts on which his music would be based for decades to come. From that point onward, his writings concentrated on the areas and subjects at the heart of his personal reflections. He was particularly critical of American cultural politics. In a difficult context which tended to marginalize original and innovative works Carter lent his support to the rare organizations and leaders that showed daring like the Contemporary Concerts of Mark Brunswick, Roger Sessions, and Eduard Steuermann. In the article "Stravinsky and Other Moderns in 1940," Carter remarks that the three men were making "a determined and what seems for the moment to be a last stand for modern music." In other articles, Carter later paid tribute to the American composers who played an important role in the development of modern American music: "Walter Piston" (1946), "Eduard

Steurmann" (1966), "Roger Sessions; Violin Concerto" (1959), and "In Memoriam: Roger Sessions, 1896-1985" (1985/1995), as well as "In Memoriam; Stefan Wolpe, 1903-1972" (1972).

Following the resounding European success of his *String Quartet No. 1* (1951), which propelled him onto the European scene, Carter no longer felt the need to confront his peers or his models, as he did in the famous article, "The Case of Mr. Ives," which appeared in *Modern Music* in 1939, with its severe critique of the *Piano Sonata No. 2, Concord, Mass., 1840-1860* that took the form of the ritual killing of his spiritual father, Charles Ives. He who had been considered as the pioneer of modern American music and to whom Carter owed so much was later rehabilitated and praised in 1944 with the article, "Ives Today: His Vision and Challenge," and with three other major texts on Ives of 1946, 1974, and 1975.

The patient and persistent builder of an immense musical edifice, Carter became an accomplished composer whose growing notoriety and respect on the international stage lent his thought a form of authority and even wisdom. His writings gradually turned away from commissioned texts to projects that allowed him to develop and discuss not only his personal concepts but also his point of view on the trends and evolutions of American musical creation. This is the case in the 1950s with the article "To Be a Composer in America" (1953) in which he expresses, among other things, the duty that he and his American colleagues have to explain their musical ideas and make them known, or the essential article, "The Rhythmic Basis of American Music" (1955) in which he outlines his rhythmic (and, particularly, polyrhythmic) thought in a broader American and European context from which emerges his conceptual proximity with Conlon Nancarrow and the determining influence of Ives's contributions.

Carter's mature writings on American music are those of an artist profoundly convinced that his country must create an art music based on solid concepts (and not on what might be called a superficial "American-ness") in order to free itself from European music, much as the ultramodern composers of the 1920s had once attempted to do. Carter's texts still show an immense capacity for absorbing the ideas of illustrious emigrant composers like Schoenberg, Stravinsky, Bartók, and Hindemith to whom regularly refers without devoting specific articles to them (apart from Stravinsky).

If there is an artistic confrontation to be found between Carter and these composers, or with other European figures (notably Berg and Webern, whose free atonal works he praises), it is in Carter's approach to concepts, style, and aesthetics, not in an ideological combat. For Carter, it was pointless to enter the trench warfare between the partisans of Stravinsky and Schoenberg. Instead, he nourished his musical thought by creating his own synthesis of the contributions of these two major figures of twentieth-century musical modernism. In fact, whether regarding the European giants in American exile or other composers, American or otherwise, Carter might have adopted the words of Michel Butor, "it is not I who speaks of Baudelaire, it is Baudelaire who speaks of me." Therefore, in articles such as, among others, "The Three Late Sonatas of Debussy" (1959), "On Edgard Varèse"

(1979), "Charles Ives Remembered" (1974), or two texts on the music of Petrassi, "Goffredo Petrassi: Two Essays" (1960 and 1986), we learn as much about Carter's thinking on music as that of the composers he studies.

Carter was no less a staunch defender of an ambitious modernity issue from the visionary ideas of American ultramodernists, of Charles Ives, and Schoenberg who he analyzes with sympathy and rare perspicacity in articles like "Expressionism and American Music" (1972). If he is far from having been tempted by post-Webernian serialism and even further from the electroacoustic music of his young colleagues at Donaueschingen or Darmstadt, Carter's reviews of European contemporary music festivals in the 1960s show his sharp and sincere interest for these new trends and his capacity to recognize both their contributions and limits. In "Letter from Europe" (1963) he affirms that the excessive formalization of integral serialism creates the same result as the excesses of formalization in aleatoric methods. In both cases the processes are used to the detriment of the work's artistic value.

It is a pity that Carter did not produce more theoretical writings on his musical thought which is as rich as it is complex. This makes all the more precious texts like "The Time Dimension" (1965), "The Orchestral Composer's Point of View" (1970), and "Music of the Time Screen" (1976) which, as the titles of two of them suggest, concern Carter's approach to musical time based on independent rhythmic layers. These important texts also discuss harmonic language. The major works of the 1950s and 1960s are briefly discussed, including the *Variations for Orchestra*, the *String Quartet No. 1* (1951) and *String Quartet No. 2* (1959), *Canaries* for timpani (1950), the *Piano Concerto* (1965) and the *Concerto for Orchestra* (1969).

From the 1970s onward, Carter received an increasing number of commissions for new works and his writings became rarer without stopping altogether. In the following decade and up until his last breath some thirty years later, Carter's musical production accelerated and intensified. He no longer wrote long texts, but favored short program notes accompanying the publication of a score or recording. It was therefore in the numerous interviews that he generously accepted, many of which have been published, or in the documentaries devoted to him, that one must seek what his later writings offer in only very partial form.

Max Noubel

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Further reading:

Carter, Elliott, « La base rythmique de la musique américaine, trans. Jacques Demierre, *Musiques Nord-Américaines*, Contrechamps, n° 6, avril 1986, p. 105-111.

Carter, Elliott, « La musique et l'écran du temps », trans. Stéphane Goldet, « Dossier Elliott Carter », *Entretiens* n° 4, juin 1987, p. 97-111.

Edwards, Allen, Rosen, Charles et Holliger, Heinz, *Entretiens avec Elliott Carter*, trans. Suzanne Rollier, Carlo Russi, Daniel Haefliger, Genève, Contrechamps, 1992.

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