

Cambridge University Press  
978-0-521-11362-5 - Elliott Carter Studies  
Edited by Marguerite Boland and John Link  
Excerpt  
[More information](#)

PART I

Overview: music early and late

Cambridge University Press  
978-0-521-11362-5 - Elliott Carter Studies  
Edited by Marguerite Boland and John Link  
Excerpt  
[More information](#)

---

## 1 The true significance of Elliott Carter's early music

*Jonathan W. Bernard*

... they come up to me at concerts when they hear my old pieces and say, "Why didn't you keep that up? You were doing it so well! It had such liveliness, such freshness of sound!" As if to imply that when I got into less tonal stuff my music went to pot.

*Well, I certainly don't think so. But I like your earlier music very much.*  
 Well, so do I! I've come to like it a second time, for I didn't used to like it.<sup>1</sup>

Critical writing about Elliott Carter's early compositions has tended to treat them collectively as a kind of preparatory exercise to his music from the First String Quartet (1951) onward. This is understandable, since they were written in a basically neoclassical style that Carter firmly repudiated, with scarcely a glance back, over half a century ago. At most, it would seem, this earlier work – extending from the first acknowledged work in his catalogue, the *Tarantella* of 1936, to the Woodwind Quintet of 1948 – has been considered worth picking over for the occasional foreshadowing of one technique or another that would emerge in its definitive employment after 1950, far more extensively worked out and more fully integrated into a working method "advanced" enough to make use of its implications in a significant way. Moreover, the tendency of this earlier work, over the years since it was composed, to recede ever farther into insignificance has been encouraged by the sheer length of Carter's career. The first twelve years, after all, were one-fourth of its total span in 1984; today, a quarter century later, those same twelve years represent less than one-sixth.

After decades of listening to and writing about Carter's music, I have come around to thinking that the general lack of attention paid by Carter scholars (myself included) to the work of his first dozen years as a composer is unfortunate, for two reasons. One is that many of his pieces from the period 1936–48 are as well regarded by performers as any in the repertoire of the American neoclassical style, and are often programmed. Charting the Carter 100th birthday celebrations in 2008 and 2009, it would have been hard not to notice that, although the early works were almost completely neglected at some of the larger festivals (such as the annual Tanglewood Festival of Contemporary Music, wholly devoted to Carter in July 2008, which presented

<sup>1</sup> Bernard, "An Interview with Elliott Carter," 191.

#### 4 Jonathan W. Bernard

only two works of this period among the forty-seven given in ten concerts), many of the commemorations of smaller scale held throughout the United States during that time tended to feature the early works. It's true that, by and large, they are easier to play than the later music; and no doubt they appeal more readily to the typical audience that has never heard any Carter at all. But such circumstances hardly need stand as a disincentive to those who study Carter's music to bring to the early pieces something approaching equal attention; rather the opposite, in fact, since in doing so one might be able to identify just what there is about Carter's notoriously formidable later music that the more "accessible" early music could clarify for a wider audience.<sup>2</sup>

Should such pragmatic considerations alone, however, not offer sufficient encouragement to undertake such an effort, one might be persuaded by Carter's altered attitude toward his own early work during the past thirty years or so, as indicated in the interview quotation above: coming "to like it a second time" has meant that he has been willing to take the time and trouble to orchestrate works such as the *Three Poems of Robert Frost*, *Pastoral*, and *Voyage*, and to make new arrangements of the *Elegy*. These changed circumstances suggest a second reason to regret the general critical disregard of the earlier music: that it impedes a proper appreciation of his formation as a composer. For Carter's later work is actually founded in the earlier, not simply foreshadowed; much of what makes him the composer he is today, and has been for the past sixty years, is already present in the first music he saw fit to bring to a public hearing.

The idea of the earlier music as *foundation* rests less on technique or style than on aesthetic. Although in the pages that follow it will be necessary to speak extensively of technical matters, the reader must keep in mind that such matters are, after all, only the outward manifestation of something else, less easy to specify or quantify yet in the end more significant. This stance is partly signaled by the topical organization of the present essay: my aim is not to present a chronology of Carter's stylistic development. More useful, it seems

<sup>2</sup> I should not like to give the impression that Carter's early music has been entirely disregarded in the critical literature. Schiff, *MEC*, 1st edn, which covered all the works up to 1979, devoted fifty-six pages – nearly a fourth of the main text – to the years 1936–48, and even found room for a few pages on the "student efforts" before 1936 (in Schiff's revision of 1998, which discards the chronological treatment of the first edition in favor of arrangement of Carter's works by genre, the early pieces, distributed as they are among those of all of Carter's other periods, register as a group much less prominently). Beck, "Elliott Carter's Tonal Practice in 'The

Rose Family,'" advocates fervently for closer attention to Carter's pre-1950 music (ironically, considering the title of the anthology in which the article was published), and engages in close analysis of one brief song, the second of Carter's *Three Poems by Robert Frost* (1942). And Meyer, "Left by the Wayside: Elliott Carter's Unfinished Sonatina for Oboe and Harpsichord," in this volume, examines an unfinished work from the 1940s, unknown until quite recently, pinpointing features that it holds in common both with other (complete) works of the same decade and the *Sonata for Flute, Oboe, Cello, and Harpsichord* of a few years later.

## 5 The true significance of Carter's early music

to me, is to show that certain fundamental preoccupations of Carter as composer were there from the start, even if expressed in quite different ways in the earlier music than in the later.

Within the necessarily limited confines of an essay like this, it would have been impossible to cover every work of the years 1936–48, even if I had wanted to do so. I do hope, though, that the five pieces from which I have drawn examples seem reasonably representative of the period as a whole. The choral music I have completely excluded, though in a way this may be justifiable: Carter has written no choral music since *Emblems* (1947). In compensation, one could say, the vocal work *Voyage* (1943), for voice and piano, is given extensive attention. The others are: *Canonic Suite* (1939); *Symphony No. 1* (1942); *Holiday Overture* (1944); and the *Piano Sonata* (1946).

### A love of complication

When Carter's early music is described as more accessible by comparison to his later, "difficult" work – as it sometimes is by newspaper critics, among others – the implication is often drawn that what has given the later work this forbidding quality are its intricate or complicated aspects: as if the tonal or tuneful qualities of the music of the 1930s and '40s made everything simpler, or at least more straightforward. This assessment, however, overlooks the fact that much of Carter's first professional work as a composer reflects the same complicating tendencies – something that may be more readily appreciated by comparing his music in a neoclassical style with that of other American composers from around the same time.

Carter, in fact, *was* trying to write in what he called "a deliberately restricted idiom" during this period, making "an effort to produce works that meant something to me as music" that would also "be understandable to the general musical public."<sup>3</sup> David Schiff has mentioned the close friendship between Carter and Aaron Copland during the 1940s, as well as Carter's admiration for the "directness" that Copland achieved especially in his works from *El Salón México* (1936) on.<sup>4</sup> And at first hearing, a piece like Carter's *Symphony No. 1* (1942) seems to adopt much the same style. Yet closer scrutiny reveals how different it really is.

Example 1.1a reproduces mm. 1–41 of the first movement in short score. The first three measures are occupied by a sustained chord of ambiguous structure (B $\flat$  thirteenth? G $\flat$  ninth in inversion?), the contents of which are next arpeggiated, except for the G $\flat$ , in the clarinet and horn (mm. 4–12). At m. 13 the strings re-enter with a new chord, even more ambiguous than the

<sup>3</sup> Edwards, *FW*, pp. 57–58.

<sup>4</sup> Schiff, *MEC*, 1st edn, p. 114.

6 Jonathan W. Bernard

Ex. 1.1a Elliott Carter, Symphony No. 1, first movement, mm. 1–41, short score

MODERATELY, WISTFULLY ( $\text{♩} = 56 \pm$ )  
(MODERATO, NOSTALGICO)

Cl. *espr.*  
*mf*

Hn *espr.*  
*mf*

Strings *p* *tranquillo*  
*mf*

10 *mp* *p* *più p* *mp*  
*mf* *pp* *unis. pizz.* *p*  
*one vc solo* *pizz.* *one bass solo* *p*

20 *accelerando* MODERATELY, FAST ( $\text{♩} = 76$ )  
(ALLEGRO MODERATO)

31 *f* *mf* *mf* *pp* *pp* *bsn* *pp*  
*fl 2* *cl 2* *cl 1* *mf*  
*kettle drums* *horns* *p* *più p*

## 7 The true significance of Carter's early music

Ex. 1.1b Carter, Symphony No. 1, first movement, mm. 62–69, short score

first, quite possibly best heard as a combination of C $\flat$ -major and F-minor triads (reading from low to high). The horn's subsequent arpeggiation of an F-minor seventh (mm. 14–16) suggests one way in which these two triads might be connected. This is followed directly by material offering a complete tonal and rhythmic contrast to what has been heard so far: a pizzicato figure in the strings, shifting irregularly between (eventually) just two different chords that collectively are almost but not quite in E minor. Its total extent (mm. 17–47) far outweighs that of the opening; it would entirely eclipse that opening were it not for the continuing presence of melodic lines in the woodwinds that bear a distinct similarity to the arpeggiative figures of mm. 4–16, adjusted to the tonal orientation newly sounded in the strings. After one sizeable stretch (mm. 27–35) in which the pizzicato material is heard alone, the clarinet and horn, now joined by flute and bassoon, re-enter in much the same vein in which they left off in m. 26. Just when the way seems prepared for the kind of stable thematic statement that one might normally expect in this style, another sudden tonal shift takes place (m. 65 ff., see Example 1.1b). And so on. The overall effect is restless, deliberately (it would seem) *unsimple*, thanks not only to the lack of a central tonal impression but also to its rhythmic qualities. As to the latter, both the irregular nature of the pizzicato material and the persistently syncopated melodic lines – especially as the counterpoint between them becomes more involved with the additional parts entering from m. 39 on – often counteract any strong sense of governance by the notated meter of  $\frac{3}{4}$ .

Comparison of this passage to other, roughly contemporaneous symphonic openings by Copland and Roy Harris is instructive. The first page of Harris's Third Symphony (1938) is reproduced as Example 1.2. This work,

8 Jonathan W. Bernard

Ex. 1.2 Roy Harris, Symphony No. 3, mm. 1–36

Con moto ♩ = 84 M.M.

Divisi

Viola

Cello

*f*

7

*mf*

*con moto*

*f*

13

*poco accelerando*

*mf*

19

*poco accelerando*

Divisi

Con moto ♩ = 120 M.M.

Viola

Solo cello

Cello

*f*

*pizz. vibrato*

*f*

(arco)

31

*f*

*f*

*f*



## 9 The true significance of Carter's early music

widely admired from the time of its premiere in early 1939 on,<sup>5</sup> could hardly be more different from Carter's symphony in the way it begins, in regular quarter-note motion occasionally interrupted, as it were cadentially, by longer notes; in its monophonic, then homophonic texture (polyphony in a limited sense develops eventually, but it takes a fairly long time to show up); and in its earnest concentration on a single mode of expression. The passage is not harmonically unadventurous, but its pacing in this regard is quite slow and regular.<sup>6</sup> Another useful foil to the Carter is Copland's Second Symphony (1933). This work belongs to the relatively brief period in which Copland favored a style rather angular and spare, not readily ingratiating, before he discovered his more "direct" mode of expression. Yet even in the opening of this symphony Copland keeps things simpler than Carter. The opening music (Example 1.3a), for all its spiky contours and (somewhat Stravinskian) rhythmic intricacy, is actually just one line, constantly splitting and recombining among the orchestral parts; its character persists throughout the first movement, thrown into relief only occasionally by alternation with or (eventually) fusion with the distinctly different gesture first heard at m. 14 (Example 1.3b). And of course Copland in the 1940s, having abandoned this style in the interests of trying, as he put it, to "say what I had to say in the simplest possible terms," composed works that, as it were, speak far more plainly, as becomes clear from a comparison of the Second Symphony's opening with that of *Appalachian Spring*, for example, or the Third Symphony.<sup>7</sup> One wonders whether the often-quoted remark attributed to him by Carter upon Copland's looking through the score of his *Holiday Overture* – that it was "just another one of those 'typical, complicated Carter scores'" – signals a view of Carter's work of the same period as an attempt, conscious or not, to bring back a mode of expression that Copland felt was not only passé but also socially irresponsible, since part of his stated intention in adopting his new style was to try to reconnect, on behalf of living composers in general, with the listening public.<sup>8</sup> Fortunately for us, Carter eventually realized that he would never be able to make things as simple as Copland had.

In the brief account given above of the opening passage in Carter's symphony, the contribution of contrapuntal intricacy to the overall impression of

<sup>5</sup> Among the admirers, eventually, was Carter himself, who essentially panned the work in his review of an early performance but later changed his mind. See Carter, "Season of Hindemith and the Americans" (1939) and "American Music in the New York Scene" (1940).

<sup>6</sup> See Hanson, *Harmonic Materials of Modern Music*, pp. 270–72, for an interesting analysis

of this passage, in which the periodic harmonic changes are described in terms of systematic mutation of the "perfect-fifth hexad" into transpositionally equivalent forms, through the dropping of certain pitches and the addition of others.

<sup>7</sup> Copland, "Composer from Brooklyn: An Autobiographical Sketch," p. 229.

<sup>8</sup> Edwards, *FW*, p. 58.

Tempo ♩ = 144 (incisivo)

Picc.

Flute I

Oboe I

Horn I

Bass Clarinet

Bassoon

Horn II

Piano

Violin I

Violin II

Viola

Cello