Elliott Carter Studies

Over the course of an astonishingly long career, Elliott Carter has engaged with many musical developments of the twentieth and now twenty-first centuries – from his early neoclassical music of the interwar period, to his modernist works of conflict and opposition in the 1960s and 1970s, to the reshaping of a modernist aesthetic in his latest compositions. Elliott Carter Studies throws new light on these many facets of Carter’s extensive musical oeuvre. This collection of essays presents historical, philosophical, philological, and theoretical points of departure for in-depth investigations of individual compositions, stylistic periods in Carter’s output, and his contributions to a variety of genres, including vocal music, the string quartet, and the concerto. The first multi-authored book to appear on Carter’s music, it brings together new research from a distinguished team of leading international Carter scholars, providing the reader with a wide range of perspectives on an extraordinary musical life.

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Elliott Carter Studies

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Preface

The study of Elliott Carter’s music has entered a new phase. In the fourteen years since the publication of David Schiff’s revised edition of *The Music of Elliott Carter*, new research and new resources have broadened the discourse and led to the reconsideration of many of the traditional narratives of Carter’s music and his career. Major studies in German, French, and English have been published – Henning Eisenlohr’s *Komponieren als Entscheidungsprozess*, Max Noubel’s *Elliott Carter ou le temps fertile*, Felix Meyer’s and Anne Shreffler’s *Elliott Carter: A Centennial Portrait in Letters and Documents*, and James Wierzbicki’s biography *Elliott Carter* – while articles and book chapters in many languages have appeared with increasing frequency and diversity of approaches. At the same time, the enormous body of work Carter has completed since his eightieth birthday has dramatically shifted the center of gravity of his career toward his later music, and prompted significant new scholarly activity. As an illustration of the reach of Carter studies today we may contrast Ève Poudrier’s theoretical investigation of the perception of polymeter in Carter’s music¹ and Anne Shreffler’s study of “dramatic action” in Carter’s opera *What Next?*.² As Carter’s stature continues to grow and – most importantly – as an ever-widening audience discovers the pleasures of listening to his music, an inevitable and welcome diversification of viewpoints is taking place.

The celebrations surrounding Carter’s centenary in 2008 provided a wonderful opportunity for just such musical discoveries, as festivals around the world, from Toronto to Ljubljana, were dedicated entirely to performances of his music. To mention but a few, the *Aspects des Musiques d’Aujourd’hui* festival in Caen (France) mounted an All-Carter program in 2005; the BBC Symphony Orchestra produced the *Get Carter!* showcase in 2006; the Saint Paul Chamber Orchestra in partnership with the University of Minnesota organized a week-long Carter festival in 2006; and the major Centennial event at Tanglewood’s 2008 Festival of Contemporary Music featured no fewer than forty-seven of Carter’s works. Many of the festivals included workshops, talks, and presentations offering audiences exposure not only to Carter’s music but also to the perspectives and preoccupations of those performing and writing about it. The papers delivered at IRCAM’s Carter Conference in 2008 were

¹ Poudrier, “Local Polymetric Structures in Elliott Carter’s 90+ for Piano (1994).”
² Shreffler, “Instrumental dramaturgy as Humane Comedy: *What Next?* by Elliott Carter and Paul Griffiths.”
even broadcast on Radio France. Importantly for Carter studies, these events also brought groups of geographically dispersed scholars together to exchange fresh ideas. The impetus for *Elliott Carter Studies* sprang out of the exchanges and connections that were made at a number of these events.

Not surprisingly, the increased attention to Carter’s music has opened up a range of new perspectives. For many years a relatively small number of accepted narratives of Carter’s music and career prevailed – mostly ones that were formed and propagated by Carter himself and by a close circle of friends and admirers to explain and promote the music and the musical aesthetic that brought Carter his first international recognition. *Elliott Carter Studies* offers a wider and more diverse set of viewpoints that both explore and question these well-known narratives: historical events and musical structures are reinterpreted, often revealing new points of connection between Carter’s work and the milieu of twentieth-century Western art music in which he has played such a vibrant role. Whether American Neoclassicism of the 1930s and 1940s (see contributions by Jonathan Bernard, and Annette van Dyck-Hemming), the Second Viennese School (see chapters by Dörte Schmidt, Felix Meyer, and Stephen Soderberg), or the dramatic changes in musical styles and institutions at the end of the twentieth century (discussed in chapters by John Link, Arnold Whittall, Marguerite Boland, and Max Noubel), Carter has always explored and experimented with musical ideas of the time, adapting them to suit his own unique stylistic and aesthetic voice.

The narrative of disconnection and the divided ensemble has accompanied Carter’s music and its early reception history from his First String Quartet onwards. With the benefit of much excellent work on Carter’s techniques of individualizing harmonic and rhythmic materials, analytical studies are now seeking a better understanding of the integration and the sophisticated interaction of musical strands in Carter’s music, both locally and at the formal level (see chapters by John Roeder, Andrew Mead, Stephen Heinemann, and Guy Capuzzo). At the same time, other work is recognizing that in much of Carter’s music, the ensemble divisions are challenged by cooperative interaction (see Heinemann and Boland), by a reconceived thematicism (see Whittall), and by the lyric perspective (see Link), all of which act as unifying elements and cut against the grain of the divided ensemble.

The lyricism of Carter’s late music is very much tied up with the literary influences on his musical creativity, be it latent in instrumental pieces or directly in text settings (see chapters by Brenda Ravenscroft, Noubel, and Link). Although the triptych of American compositions that marked Carter’s return to vocal writing dates from 1975–81, it was not until another twenty years later that Carter again turned his hand to vocal writing and since that time he has never stopped. With songs, song cycles, an opera, and a choral work all written in the last two decades, vocal composition – much of it based on
the poetry of several generations of early twentieth-century modernists – is an
essential aspect of Carter’s late period.

Many of the new directions in Carter studies have been sparked by the
archival resources now available to scholars. Since the mid-1990s, studies
based on the collection of Carter’s manuscript materials at the Paul Sacher
Foundation, Basel, have appeared with increasing frequency. More recently
the digitization of the vast holdings of Carter manuscripts at the Library of
Congress has made a wealth of resources instantly available to scholars
around the world. Today sketches at both the Sacher Foundation and the
Library of Congress are consulted almost as a matter of course in much
analytical research (including here in Heinemann, Boland, and Schmidt).
However, the chapters by Felix Meyer and by Stephen Soderberg represent
major contributions to the small but growing field of Carter sketch studies,
and what they uncover should entice scholars to delve deeper into the
archives on both continents.

No deliberate attempt was made in this collection to cover the full span of
Carter’s musical career; however, the diversity of interests of the contributors
has meant that representative pieces from all periods of Carter’s creative
output are discussed, whether historically, analytically, or philosophically.
The chapters in this volume, written by an international cast of composers,
theorists, and musicologists from seven countries and three continents, are
evidence of the ongoing proliferation of voices in Carter scholarship, and a
testament to the deep engagement that his music continues to inspire.

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Abbreviations


