

**PART I**

**Context**

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John Link  
Excerpt  
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## 1 Carter's Career and Reception History

Well, you see, I'm living beyond my time.

– Elliott Carter<sup>1</sup>

### A Career in the Making

Elliott Carter was born four months after Orville Wright demonstrated the Wright Brothers' Flyer to the US Army, and he died two months after the Voyager 1 spacecraft left the heliosphere at the threshold of interstellar space.<sup>2</sup> Carter's remarkable longevity, and the unusual trajectory of his life and work through more than a century of disruptive change, has affected the reception history of his music in ways that we are only beginning to acknowledge. Over the course of a nearly eighty-year-long career, Carter leveraged his advantages and turned obstacles into opportunities with admirable persistence. He chose projects that not only interested him but also fit into the plans for artistic and professional development that he cultivated assiduously over decades. And he paid close attention to how his artistic objectives could be presented most effectively to the performers, listeners, and patrons on whom his career depended. Together with his wife Helen Frost-Jones Carter,<sup>3</sup> he skillfully steered a course through the turbulent waters of the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries with steadily increasing success. The story of Carter's artistic life, as he told it and as it was promoted by several generations of advocates, is one of independence, uncompromising vision, and technical progress. It was astutely tailored to the beliefs and values of its intended audience and, as autobiography, it reports selectively and glosses over or omits events and attitudes deemed unhelpful in building Carter's reputation and authority and promoting his music.

Born in New York City in 1908 into a wealthy but not musical family, Carter was expected to enter the lace-importing business started by his grandfather Eli Carter after the Civil War, and taken over by his father

<sup>1</sup> Johnson, *Discovering Music*, 12:20.

<sup>2</sup> Anonymous, "Just the Facts"; Barnes, "In a Breathtaking First, NASA's Voyager 1 Exits the Solar System."

<sup>3</sup> On Helen Carter's birth certificate and marriage license her mother is listed as "Ada Forst." It isn't clear when or why Helen Carter adopted "Frost" as her preferred spelling.

Elliott Cook Carter, Sr. He briefly took piano lessons – not unusual for a young person of his social class – but his early interest in becoming a professional musician was viewed as unwise and opposed by his family.<sup>4</sup> At the Horace Mann School he got to know like-minded peers including Eugene O'Neill, Jr., and the children of diplomats from the Soviet Union,<sup>5</sup> and his interest in contemporary music was encouraged by his teacher Clifton Furness, who took him to concerts given by the pianist and Scriabin disciple Katherine Ruth Heyman and introduced him to Charles Ives.<sup>6</sup> Nevertheless, Carter arrived at Harvard in 1926 with notable deficiencies in his musical training. After what must have been a disillusioning first semester he decided to study English literature instead, and to pursue his musical ambitions by supplementing his Harvard classes with studies at the nearby Longy School, a private conservatory.<sup>7</sup> Even after he had returned to the Harvard Music Department and earned a master's degree (probably with some satisfaction at having proved his doubters wrong), Carter was still unhappy with his technique and in 1932 he took the advice of his teacher Walter Piston to go to Paris for further training with Nadia Boulanger. More than fifty years later, Carter recalled his state of mind at the time: "My own ineptitude worried me deeply, and I was willing to do anything to learn how to overcome it."<sup>8</sup>

When Carter took Piston's advice, his career plans were based on a familiar model: acquire his *bona fides* through conservatory training in Europe, then join the effort back home to raise American musical culture to European standards. But when Carter returned to New England in 1935, in the middle of the Great Depression, success was elusive. He first tried to establish himself as a "Boston Neoclassicist," writing "well-made pieces for

<sup>4</sup> "My family, they disliked modern music even more than other music. Maybe that's why I got interested in it." Carter, in Cook, *Meridian*, 6:01.

<sup>5</sup> "Actually, some of the students [at the Horace Mann School] were children of members of the Soviet Union embassy that was at that time in New York, so that we saw a great deal of the pre-Stalinist things that went on in the Soviet Union, when many things of this sort were sent over." Mullis, "Elliott Carter Interviewed by Chris Mullis (Dec. 11, 1998)," ¶5. In 1989 Carter told Enzo Restagno "When I was a young man, in my college days, I looked all over for political ideals. For a while I think I was even a Trotskyite, and I was always very much interested in the Soviet Union. I remember the disappointment caused by Stalin's purges, but even that didn't turn me into an anti-communist." *ECIC*, pp. 34–35, quoted in Boland, "Form and Dialectical Opposition," p. 96.

<sup>6</sup> See Oja, *Making Music Modern*, pp. 51–52. Ives became an informal mentor to the teenaged Carter, though their later relationship was fraught. See Carter, *CEL*, part III, and Schiff, *MEC-1*, pp. 18–19, and *MEC-2*, pp. 8–14.

<sup>7</sup> See Wierzbicki, *Elliott Carter*, pp. 11–13.

<sup>8</sup> Carter, "Elle est la musique en personne": A Reminiscence of Nadia Boulanger" (c. 1985/95), in *CEL*, 290, quoted in Wierzbicki, *Elliott Carter*, 22.

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the Harvard Glee Club.”<sup>9</sup> Then, after moving to New York in 1936, he leveraged his connections and was hired by fellow Harvard alum Lincoln Kirstein to become the Music Director of Ballet Caravan, the precursor of the New York City Ballet. Through his friendship with Aaron Copland, he got a job writing music criticism for Minna Lederman's journal *Modern Music*,<sup>10</sup> and he worked for a time as a music critic for the *New York Herald Tribune*. But the music Carter himself was writing gained little traction. He must have had high hopes for his ballet *Pocahontas* (1938–39), an orchestral score that was among the first of his compositions to be performed publicly. But it was premiered on the same program with Copland's *Billy the Kid*, and suffered by comparison. “Copland has furnished an admirable score,” wrote the *New York Times* critic John Martin, “warm and human, and with not a wasted note about it anywhere.” By contrast “Mr. Carter's music is so thick it is hard to see the stage through it.”<sup>11</sup> The score won a publication award from the Juilliard School, but it was clear that the tastes of composers and audiences in the late 1930s and early '40s were changing. Years later Carter was circumspect about his setbacks, but at the time the critical reaction must have been demoralizing. It associated him with “a dated, outworn style whose only purpose was to be unintelligible.”<sup>12</sup>

It was only after Carter once again left New York City that his luck began to turn. In the late 1930s he had become friends with the composer Nicolas Nabokov (first cousin of the famous novelist), whom he had met through Kirstein.<sup>13</sup> It was Nabokov who later introduced Carter to Helen Frost-Jones and served as best man at their wedding.<sup>14</sup> When Nabokov was offered a position at St. John's College in Annapolis, Maryland, for the academic year 1940–41, he responded that he would only be able to accept the position the following year due to previous commitments at Wells College, and he recommended Carter as an interim replacement.<sup>15</sup> Once established in Annapolis, Carter, in turn, helped ease the way for Nabokov, at one point hosting a gathering with a St. John's Dean. After Nabokov arrived, Carter arranged to stay on an additional year.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Schiff, *MEC-2*, p. 14. <sup>10</sup> See Zwilich, “Elliott Carter Interviewed,” transcript, p. 66.

<sup>11</sup> Martin, “Ballet Caravan in Seasonal Debut,” p. 31.

<sup>12</sup> Carter, “To Be a Composer in America” (1953/94), in *CEL*, p. 205, quoted in Schiff, *MEC-2*, p. 17.

<sup>13</sup> Giroud, *Nicolas Nabokov*, p. 134.

<sup>14</sup> Schiff, *MEC-1*, p. 16 gives the year as 1939, but the official certificate of marriage is dated July 6, 1940.

<sup>15</sup> See Thoms, “Rolling His Jolly Tub,” p. 104 and Giroud, *Nicolas Nabokov*, p. 151.

<sup>16</sup> Brody, “Cold War Genius,” p. 384, n. 26.

Carter had found in Nabokov an ally whose star was on the rise. By 1945, four years after his arrival at St. John's, he had moved on to Berlin, where he was working for the US military government's Information Control Division. As Martin Brody notes, the job put Nabokov "at the epicenter of the Western coalition's effort to reconstruct the city's musical institutions while competing cheek by jowl with their Soviet counterparts to demonstrate cultural supremacy."<sup>17</sup> By 1951, with the support of Michael Josselson, Nabokov had been elected Secretary General of the Congress for Cultural Freedom.<sup>18</sup> With boundless energy, abundant charm, and ample clandestine funding from the US government, Nabokov initiated some of the most ambitious projects of the "cultural Cold War," among them a festival of contemporary music in Rome in April 1954.

Carter's involvement in the Rome festival was, at least in part, the result of a professional crisis. He had entered his First Quartet in a competition sponsored by the city of Liège, Belgium, and funded by the Koussevitzky Foundation. Late in 1953 he learned that his quartet had been awarded first prize. But this triumph quickly became a dilemma, as the rules of the competition specified that the winning quartet "should be a manuscript, unpublished and unknown to the public."<sup>19</sup> Not only had Carter's quartet been performed several times by then, but it had also been accepted for publication by Associated Music Publishers. Carter's efforts to avoid losing this prestigious European award included reaching out to Nabokov, who immediately wrote to Belgium with an invitation to the Quatuor Municipal de Liège to perform at the Rome festival. Nabokov specifically requested Carter's quartet, which (he pointedly emphasized) "won the first prize at the Concours de Liège."<sup>20</sup>

In the end, neither Carter nor Nabokov could prevent the First Quartet's being declared ineligible.<sup>21</sup> But this apparent setback turned out to be less of a blow than it seemed. Not only did the Koussevitzky Foundation give Carter \$800 to replace the prize money he had to return, but they also offered him a commission.<sup>22</sup> More consequentially, Nabokov, along with fellow jurists Aaron Copland and Carter's former professor Walter Piston, had selected Carter as the recipient of the Prix de Rome for 1953–54.

<sup>17</sup> Brody, "Cold War Genius," p. 378.    <sup>18</sup> Saunders, *The Cultural Cold War*, p. 93.

<sup>19</sup> Announcement in *The Musical Times* (Apr. 1953), p. 174, quoted in Guberman, "Composing Freedom," p. 154.

<sup>20</sup> Quoted in Guberman, "Composing Freedom," p. 156 (Guberman's translation of the original French).

<sup>21</sup> Carter sometimes said that the quartet had been awarded first prize but didn't mention its ensuing disqualification. See Schiff, *MEC-1*, p. 152, and cf. Schiff, *MEC-2*, p. 55.

<sup>22</sup> Wierzbicki, *Carter*, p. 51.

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Nabokov also seems to have been instrumental in overcoming the resistance of the Parrenin String Quartet – who had been engaged to take over the festival performance of Carter's quartet and thought the piece was too difficult.<sup>23</sup> This performance proved to be a major turning point. It brought Carter's music to the attention of an influential international audience, including Luigi Dallapiccola, Goffredo Petrassi, Roman Vlad, and William Glock (later Sir William), and brought him his first taste of international success. Glock was especially influential. He became the Comptroller of Music for the BBC in 1959 and of the Proms in 1960. As his influence grew, he promoted Carter's music vigorously, making it well known in the UK and its composer an influential figure to a younger generation of British composers including Peter Maxwell Davies and Oliver Knussen. Glock was also the founder and director of the Dartington School and founder and editor of *The Score and IMA Magazine*, in which he published an early appreciation of Carter's rhythmic technique in 1955.<sup>24</sup>

### A Fresh Start

In the wake of the First Quartet's success in Europe, Carter's fame grew. But his slow rate of production, the difficulty of his music for performers, and the limited number of pieces in his back catalog that represented the style of the quartet all constrained the circulation of his music, especially in the United States. In the absence of widespread performances, essays and reviews – in publications from *Musical Quarterly* to *Stereo Review* – became important vehicles for Carter's growing renown. He took advantage of the opportunity they provided to project a carefully crafted public persona, one that proved to be remarkably durable in the years ahead.

Early critics had grappled with Carter's reputation as “an intellectual composer with a gift for calculated complexity,” as Richard Franko Goldman summarized it in 1951, “a composer of music never lacking in skill but sometimes ingeniously uninteresting.” As an alternative, Goldman offered a portrait of Carter as a modernist problem-solver: “It is true that Carter is an intellectual in the sense that he regards each new work as being in some respects a problem peculiar to itself, and considers that intellect is often useful in arriving at solutions . . . Each problem, in Carter's work, must find its own musical solution.”<sup>25</sup> Abraham Skulsky took up the theme of problem-solving in a 1953 profile, and connected it to novelty of expression: “Every new work [of Carter's] emphasizes some problem, some aspect

<sup>23</sup> See Brody, “Cold War Genius,” p. 385.    <sup>24</sup> Glock, “A Note on Elliott Carter.”

<sup>25</sup> Goldman, “Current Chronicle,” pp. 83–84.

of musical expression not previously dealt with by him and which once embodied in a composition is never approached again in the same way.”<sup>26</sup> Reflecting the modernist credo “make it new,”<sup>27</sup> this perspective soon came to dominate the reception history of Carter’s music, with technical and expressive novelty elevated to a kind of Horatio Alger-like self-reinvention, undertaken (heroically) again and again for each new piece. In 1982, looking back on the thirty-five years between the *Piano Sonata* (1946) and *Night Fantasies* (1980), Carter described his work as a “continuous exploration of musical means largely invented as various imaginative needs were felt.” Or, as David Schiff put it in 1983, “each new work would be a fresh start, a new crisis.”<sup>28</sup>

### A Western Hero

The language of self-reinvention for each new piece helped to explain and justify Carter’s relatively slow rate of production in the 1950s and ’60s, but it also reflected his own experience of success with the First Quartet. Understandably pleased with the positive turn his career had finally taken, Carter encouraged the perception that the quartet entailed not just a creative breakthrough but a kind of metamorphosis – one that transformed him from a second-tier neoclassicist into a postwar modernist master with a highly original style.<sup>29</sup> In 1950, on a Guggenheim fellowship, he had moved with his wife and seven-year-old son to a rented guest house on the estate of the wealthy philanthropist Helen d’Autremont, near Tucson, Arizona. The fellowship, he reported in his program notes for the first recording of the quartet, “allowed me a quiet, undisturbed year there in which to compose,” and he described that process in the familiar terms of problem-solving and technical innovation:

I had been waiting for just such an opportunity to give form to a number of novel ideas I had had over the previous years and to work out in an extended composition the character, expression and logic these ideas seemed to demand. It is a musical pattern which had to be invented at every step of the way and at the time, I felt that I was constantly pushing into an unexplored musical realm.<sup>30</sup>

<sup>26</sup> Skulsky, “Elliott Carter,” p. 2.

<sup>27</sup> See North, “The Making of ‘Make It New.’” <sup>28</sup> Schiff, *MEC-1*, p. 21.

<sup>29</sup> See Eisenlohr, *Komponieren als Entscheidungsprozess*, pp. 166–70.

<sup>30</sup> Carter, quoted in Guberman, “Composing Freedom,” p. 166. Guberman also discusses Carter’s evolving descriptions of the composition of the First Quartet.



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By the time Carter rewrote this note in 1970, the composition of the First Quartet was no longer “an opportunity to give form to a number of novel ideas,” but “an effort to understand myself,” and the “emotional and expressive experiences that I kept having.” The prestigious Guggenheim – that “allowed” the composition of the piece – had disappeared in favor of a Thoreau-like decision to “seek the undisturbed quiet.” Conversely, the problem-solving labor of “constantly pushing into an unexplored musical realm” had been sublimated into a nostalgic memory of desert walks in a place remembered as “a kind of ‘magic mountain.’”<sup>31</sup>

Carter went even further in describing his experience of writing the quartet to Allen Edwards in 1971:

Well, I worked up to one crucial experience, my First String Quartet, written around 1950, in which I decided for once to write a work very interesting to myself, and to say to hell with the public and with the performers too.

I wanted to write a work that carried out completely the various ideas I had at that time about the form of music, about texture and harmony – about everything.<sup>32</sup>

As this story was retold in the years that followed, the appeal of Carter's journey of self-discovery and reinvention in the desert, and its resonance with the romanticization of the “Old West” that suffused American popular culture in the postwar years, proved irresistible.<sup>33</sup> The “desert myth,” with its echoes of Hollywood westerns no less than of Moses and Tamino, became a staple of the Carter literature – its hero cast as a rugged individualist who speaks “the language of inward isolation.”<sup>34</sup> He is a self-made man, who “withdrew into the desert to remake himself,”<sup>35</sup> and who strives “to ‘be an individual,’ unequivocally self-reliant.”<sup>36</sup> He remains “a loner . . . , affiliated with no group or school and indifferent to the changing demands of fashion and the market place.”<sup>37</sup> As a composer, he is “a man without compromise,”<sup>38</sup> “living proof of uncompromising, complex music.” “He made no compromises, no concessions,” “always concentrat[ing] uncompromisingly on the

<sup>31</sup> Carter, “String Quartets Nos. I, 1951, and 2, 1959” (1970), in *CEL*, p. 232. Carter often cited Thomas Mann's novel *The Magic Mountain* as an important influence on his thinking about musical time. See Carter, “Music and the Time Screen” (1976), in *CEL*, p. 270.

<sup>32</sup> Edwards, *FW*, p. 35.

<sup>33</sup> See Eisenlohr, *Komponieren als Entscheidungsprozess*, pp. 166–70.

<sup>34</sup> Schwartz, “Elliott Carter and American Poetry,” p. 13.

<sup>35</sup> Rothstein, “Twilight Fantasies,” p. 24. <sup>36</sup> Mellers, *Music in a New Found Land*, p. 115.

<sup>37</sup> Schiff, “Elliott Carter,” *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, p. 204.

<sup>38</sup> Pierre Boulez, quoted in Scheffer, *Elliott Carter: A Labyrinth of Time*, 47: 33.

musical substance,”<sup>39</sup> and his compositions are “uncompromising in their exhaustive development of material.” “One thing I really like about him,” said Christoph Eschenbach, “is that he never makes compromises.”<sup>40</sup> And, of course, he is a man, who (with an echo of Ivesian machismo) “asks the listener to ‘stand up and use his ears like a man.’”<sup>41</sup> Derailed by changing tastes in prewar America, Carter had gotten back on track in postwar Europe, not as an exponent of “old-world” craftsmanship as he had hoped, but as an American Hero, riding alone out of the Arizona desert.

One key benefit of Carter’s emerging reputation was that it let him appear to be beyond the sway of musical influences, both past and present. The obvious similarities between the First Quartet and influential precursors by Bartók, Berg, Crawford Seeger, Ives, and Schoenberg, were noted by Carter’s earliest critics – including Martin Boykan, George Rochberg, and Joseph Kerman<sup>42</sup> – but downplayed in later portraits. And as Carter left behind the Boulanger/Stravinsky-inspired neoclassicism he had adopted in Paris and moved toward the neo-modernism that was then taking hold among the younger generation in Europe, he and his champions preempted the charge of opportunism by pointing to Carter’s early interest in the American “ultra-Moderns” of the 1920s and his mentoring by Ives. Thus the ongoing development of his postwar style became a journey to reclaim his roots. As Carter’s career took off, he similarly took pains to distance himself from the burgeoning interest in serial techniques on both sides of the Atlantic. His reticence was interpreted by Boykan in 1961 in explicitly political terms as a stand for freedom against “the specter of a new common practice,” which Boykan linked to “that ‘permanent revolution’ which has its discoveries behind it,” thus explicitly connecting Pierre Boulez’s rhetoric to Trotsky’s. In Boykan’s view, Carter’s music “provides a moral lesson because it reminds the composer that it is his task – painful, perhaps, but inescapable – to choose his language freshly for each work, and to choose from the whole range of musical possibilities.”<sup>43</sup> In Europe, Carter’s return to modernism got the attention of the younger generation, who grouped him not with his American friends and colleagues, like Sessions and Babbitt, nor with Copland and Barber (themselves

<sup>39</sup> Barenboim, “Elliott Carter,” n.p.

<sup>40</sup> Quoted in Stearns, “Elliott Carter, 94, Keeps on Building Music,” n.p.

<sup>41</sup> Charles Ives on Carl Ruggles, quoted in Glock in “A Note on Elliott Carter,” p. 47. For more on Carter, Ives, and the gendering of artistic production, see Herzfeld, “Carter, le quatuor à cordes et la notion de caractère musical,” pp. 4–5.

<sup>42</sup> See Boykan, “Elliott Carter and the Postwar Composers”; Rochberg, “Elliott Carter: Quartet”; and Kerman, “American Music: The Columbia Series.”

<sup>43</sup> Boykan, “Elliott Carter and the Postwar Composers,” p. 128.