

Elliott Carter's Late Music

The first comprehensive study of the late music of one of the most influential composers of the last half century, this book places Elliott Carter's music from 1995 to 2012 in the broader context of postwar contemporary concert music, including his own earlier work. It addresses Carter's reception history, his aesthetics, and his harmonic and rhythmic practice, and includes detailed essays on all of Carter's major works after 1995. Special emphasis is placed on Carter's settings of contemporary modernist poetry from John Ashbery to Louis Zukofsky. In readable and engaging prose, *Elliott Carter's Late Music* illuminates a body of late work that stands at the forefront of the composer's achievements.

Composer and author John Link is Professor of Music at William Paterson University. He is editor of Carter's *Harmony Book* (with Nicholas Hopkins, 2002) and *Elliott Carter Studies* (with Marguerite Boland, Cambridge University Press, 2012), and the author of *Elliott Carter: A Guide to Research* (2000).

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For

Maria, Anna, and Eva

Hilda, Dale, and Aaron

Peggy, Eric, and Paul

in memory of

Frederick M. Link (1930–2011)

Donald L. Gregory (1938–2009)

and for

Elliott Carter (1908–2012)

So he who strongly feels,
behaves.

– Marianne Moore

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Contents

<i>List of Tables</i>	<i>page</i> x
<i>List of Examples</i>	xi
<i>Preface</i>	xv
<i>Acknowledgments</i>	xviii
<i>List of Abbreviations</i>	xxiv
 Part I Context	 1
1 Carter's Career and Reception History	3
2 The Elements of an Aesthetic	20
3 Harmony	33
4 Rhythm and Form	77
 Part II A Literary Imagination: Text Settings	 93
5 Sense and Sensibility: Opera	95
6 A Kind of Light: Song Cycles and Other Text Settings	117
 Part III Instrumental Music	 227
7 Illusions: Music for Orchestra	229
8 Social Aspirations: Music for Instrumental Soloist and Ensemble	256
9 A Free Society: Music for Large Chamber Ensemble	297
10 Social Relations: Music for Small Chamber Ensemble	317
11 Reflections: Short Instrumental Pieces	370
Afterword	440
 <i>Appendix 1 Set-Class Catalog</i>	 444
<i>Appendix 2 Derived Core Harmonies</i>	448
<i>Bibliography</i>	454
<i>Index</i>	474

Tables

3.1	Categories of derived core harmonies	<i>page</i> 51
3.2	Pentachords that are subsets of the ATH and/or supersets of the AITs	61
3.3	Interval repertoires in Carter's compositions, 1959–69	62
3.4	Two-part interval partitions in Carter's compositions, 1971–2012	63
3.5	Selected interval repertoires in pieces with more than two contrapuntal layers	64
3.6	Overlapping interval repertoires	65
3.7	<i>Penthode</i> , symmetrical trichords	65
3.8	<i>Nine by Five</i> , interval partition	66
6.1	<i>On Conversing with Paradise</i> , form plan	172
6.2	"Alba (1952)," cadential intervals	183
6.3	<i>A Sunbeam's Architecture</i> , form and themes	201
7.1	<i>Boston Concerto</i> , form plan	238
7.2	<i>Soundings</i> , form plan	248
8.1	Clarinet Concerto, form plan	259
8.2	Cello Concerto, form plan	265
8.3	Horn Concerto, form plan	276
8.4	<i>Interventions</i> , form plan	280
8.5	Flute Concerto, form plan	285
8.6	<i>Dialogues</i> and <i>Dialogues II</i> , interval repertoires	294
9.1	<i>Asko Concerto</i> , form plan	302
9.2	<i>Tintinnabulation</i> , form plan	311
10.1	String Quartet No. 5, form plan	321
10.2	String Quartet No. 5, interval repertoires	322
10.3	Quintet for Piano and String Quartet, interval repertoires (strings only)	333
10.4	Quintet for Piano and String Quartet, form plan	333
10.5	Oboe Quartet, form plan	341
10.6	<i>Nine by Five</i> , interval repertoires	358
10.7	<i>Nine by Five</i> , form plan	361
10.8	String Trio, form plan	364
11.1	<i>Concordance: Retracing II</i> and Quintet for Piano and Winds	386

Examples

3.1	Set-class notation (<i>Instances</i> , mm. 82–84, vibraphone pedalings omitted)	page 34
3.2	String Quartet No. 5, violin 1, mm. 101–02	35
3.3	The two all-interval tetrachords (AITs) and their 2-pc subsets	35
3.4	Generating AITs from intervals	36
3.5	Trichord subsets shared by both AITs	37
3.6	ATH trichord subsets	37
3.7	Generating ATHs from trichords	38
3.8	<i>Au Quai</i> for viola and bassoon, m. 44	39
3.9	AIT subsets of the ATH	39
3.10	<i>Steep Steps</i> , mm. 24–31, with analysis (sounds major ninth lower)	40
3.11	String Quartet No. 2, mm. 6–9, with harmonic analysis	43
3.12	Octachords formed by nonintersecting AITs (“combination sets”), from Carter, “The Orchestral Composer’s Point of View,” with annotations	44
3.13	String Quartet No. 2, mm. 10–15	45
3.14	String Quartet No. 2, mm. 10–15, analysis	46
3.15	String Quartet No. 2, mm. 279–85, with analysis	49
3.16	Hexachord 9 and pentachord 36	51
3.17	Oboe Quartet, mm. 38–39	52
3.18	<i>Mosaic</i> , mm. 68–70	53
3.19	“Like a Bulwark,” mm. 26–33, vocal line (after Ravenscroft, “An Adventure in Form,” ¶39)	54
3.20	Septachord supersets of the ATH	54
3.21	Carter’s “seven-note chord system” (harmonic analysis added)	54
3.22	<i>Epigrams</i> , I, mm. 2–10	55
3.23	<i>Epigrams</i> , I, mm. 3–5 (strings), harmonic analysis	56
3.24	<i>Sound Fields</i> , for string orchestra, mm. 32–38, with analysis	56
3.25	AIT subsets of derived core pentachords	58
3.26	Generating derived core pentachords from AITs	58
3.27	AIT and derived core pentachord 31 subsets of the ATH	59
3.28	Derived core pentachords as the union of trichord 2 (036) and ic6	59
3.29	Clarinet Quintet, mm. 187–89 (sounding pitch)	59
3.30	<i>Intermittences</i> , mm. 90–99, harmonic analysis	60

3.31	Concertino for Bass Clarinet and Chamber Orchestra, mm. 75–81, solo part, with analysis (sounding pitch)	70
3.32	<i>Rhapsodic Musings</i> , mm. 21–22	71
3.33	Quintet for Piano and String Quartet, mm. 241–46 (strings only)	73
3.34	Quintet for Piano and String Quartet, mm. 241–46, harmonic analysis	74
3.35	<i>Interventions</i> , mm. 49–51, piano	75
3.36	<i>Interventions</i> , mm. 49–51, harmonic analysis	75
4.1	Pulse streams in J. S. Bach's Suite for solo cello in E \flat major, BWV1010, I. Prelude	78
4.2	"Ed è subito sera," mm. 5–9, vocal line	78
4.3	"Ed è subito sera," mm. 5–9, vocal line, renotated to show the sounding meter	79
4.4	<i>Duettone</i> for violin and cello, mm. 67–68, metric modulation	81
4.5	<i>Intermittences</i> , mm. 182–84, contrasting pulse streams	86
5.1	<i>What Next?</i> , no. 14, mm. 409–17, Stella's vocal line	107
6.1	"Ed è subito sera," mm. 1–4, renotated to show the sounding meter (sounding pitch)	128
6.2	"Una Columba," vocal line harmony	130
6.3	"Una Columba," mm. 4–7, clarinet part, renotated to show the underlying pulse stream	130
6.4	"Segreto del poeta," mm. 1–8	134
6.5	"Segreto del poeta," mm. 1–8, harmony	135
6.6	"Segreto del poeta," mm. 19–22, vocal line	135
6.7	"The Rewaking," mm. 39–44, and harmonic analysis	138
6.8	"Shadows," mm. 96–100, and harmonic analysis	142
6.9	"Shadows," mm. 2–9	143
6.10	"Shadows," mm. 122–24, and harmonic analysis	144
6.11	"The Rewaking," mm. 18–22	145
6.12	"Metamorphosis," mm. 4–5, vocal line only	151
6.13	"Metamorphosis," mm. 30–33 (sounding pitch)	152
6.14	"Alba (1952)," mm. 1–12 (sounding pitch)	181
6.15	"Alba (1952)," mm. 6–12, clarinet harmony (sounding pitch)	182
6.16	"Alba (1952)," mm. 10–12, harmonic analysis	182
6.17	"Alba (1952)," mm. 13–18, AIT harmony	184
6.18	"Finally a Valentine," mm. 14–16, clarinet (sounding pitch)	186
6.19	"That Harp You Play So Well," mm. 25–28 and mm. 49–52, comparison of vocal line harmony	195
6.20	"The Being So-Called Human," mm. 55–59	197
6.21	"To an Intra-Mural Rat," mm. 8–9	198
6.22	"The River," m. 36, twelve-note chord, and mm. 40–53, pulse stream of trichord subsets	211
6.23	"The Fire and the Rose," mm. 5–13	214

List of Examples

xiii

6.24	Heinrich Schütz, "Attendite popule meus," SWV 270 (pub. 1629), mm. 89–95	215
6.25	"This Is the Thesis," mm. 35–41 (sounding pitch)	226
7.1	<i>A Celebration of Some 100 x 150 Notes</i> , mm. 69–77 (reduction)	234
7.2	<i>Partita</i> , mm. 1–15 (reduction)	235
7.3	<i>Réflexions</i> , mm. 63–89, TNEI chords (brackets indicate contiguous ATHs)	245
7.4	<i>Instances</i> , mm. 1–4	251
7.5	<i>Instances</i> , mm. 150–58	254
8.1	Clarinet Concerto, "clarinet chord" (sounds two semitones lower)	261
8.2	Clarinet Concerto, mm. 43–48	262
8.3	Clarinet Concerto, mm. 43–48, harmony and voice leading	262
8.4	<i>Dialogues</i> , mm. 109–12, orchestra only, and metrical analysis	271
8.5	<i>Dialogues</i> , mm. 279–89, and harmonic analysis	272
8.6	<i>Dialogues</i> , mm. 279–81, rhythmic analysis of orchestra	272
8.7	<i>Dialogues</i> , mm. 175–77	273
8.8	<i>Dialogues</i> , mm. 81–84	273
8.9	<i>Interventions</i> , mm. 20–25, string melody with interval analysis added	282
8.10	Flute Concerto, mm. 189–200, solo flute melody	286
8.11	Gluck, "Dance of the Blessed Spirits," three excerpts, showing intervals in the solo flute part	287
8.12	Gluck, <i>Orphée et Eurydice</i> (1774), Act II, scene ii, flute duet (flute parts only)	287
9.1	<i>Luimen</i> , mm. 1–2 (sounding pitch)	299
9.2	<i>Mosaic</i> , mm. 65–67 harp solo	308
9.3	<i>Double Trio</i> , mm. 145–47	316
10.1	String Quartet No. 5, Lento espressivo, mm. 99–106	323
10.2	String Quartet No. 5, mm. 99–106, octachord harmony	324
10.3	String Quartet No. 5, mm. 161–62, fixed-register octachord harmony	325
10.4	String Quartet No. 5, Interlude I, mm. 67–71	327
10.5	Comparison of TNEI chords	328
10.6	String Quartet No. 5, Interlude V, mm. 299–304	331
10.7	Quintet for Piano and String Quartet, "tonic" chord	334
10.8	Quintet for Piano and String Quartet, mm. 237–42	338
10.9(a–b)	Quintet for Piano and String Quartet, mm. 190–92 (a); mm. 455–59 (b)	340
10.10	Oboe Quartet, mm. 304–12	342
10.11	Oboe Quartet, mm. 304–12 (harmonic analysis)	343
10.12	Oboe Quartet, mm. 1–5	344
10.13	Oboe Quartet, mm. 283–86, with harmonic analysis	345
10.14	Oboe Quartet, mm. 185–89	348

10.15	Mozart, Oboe Quartet, K370, first movement, mm. 81–87	349
10.16	Mozart, Oboe Quartet, K370, first movement, mm. 1–4, oboe part	349
10.17	Mozart, Clarinet Quintet in A major, K581, first movement, mm. 1–9	350
10.18	Clarinet Quintet, mm. 1–2 (clarinet sounds two semitones lower)	350
10.19	Clarinet Quintet, mm. 7–9 (clarinet sounds two semitones lower)	351
10.20	Clarinet Quintet, mm. 286–90 (clarinet sounds two semitones lower)	356
10.21	Interval-class partitions of AIT 18, their possible realizations as interval pairings, and the interval repertoires in <i>Nine by Five</i>	358
10.22	<i>Nine by Five</i> , mm. 1–7 (transposed score)	359
10.23	<i>Nine by Five</i> , mm. 59–67, with analysis (sounding pitch)	360
10.24	<i>Epigrams</i> , VIII, mm. 6–12	367
11.1	<i>Figment II</i> , mm. 1–21, pitch-class harmony (after Roeder, “A Transformational Space”)	378
11.2	<i>Retracing</i> , mm. 22–25	385
11.3	<i>Retracing III</i> , mm. 1–3 (sounds major second lower)	389
11.4	<i>Retracing III</i> , mm. 35–48	390
11.5	<i>Retracing V</i> , mm. 29–34	390
11.6	<i>Caténaires</i> , mm. 38–40, with analysis	402
11.7	<i>Caténaires</i> , mm. 119–23, with analysis	404
11.8	<i>Shard</i> , mm. 1–5, with rhythmic analysis	408
11.9	<i>Statement – Remembering Aaron</i> , fixed-register designs	412
11.10	<i>Statement – Remembering Aaron</i> , mm. 58–63	413
11.11	<i>Statement – Remembering Aaron</i> , mm. 33–37	413
11.12	<i>Riconoscenza per Goffredo Petrassi</i> , two-partitions of AIT 18	415
11.13(a–c)	<i>Riconoscenza per Goffredo Petrassi</i> , excerpts (after Roeder, “The Matter of Human Cooperation,” pp. 123–24); mm. 26–35, harmonic analysis (a); AIT 18 recurring in mm. 77–83 (b); pairs of fixed-register AIT 18s forming derived core hexachord 29 (c)	416
11.14	<i>Rhapsodic Musings</i> , mm. 1–2	417
11.15	<i>Rhapsodic Musings</i> , mm. 9–13	418
11.16	<i>Rhapsodic Musings</i> , m. 24	419
11.17	<i>Fantasy – Remembering Roger</i> , mm. 68–70	420
11.18	<i>Fantasy – Remembering Roger</i> , mm. 1–8	421
11.19	<i>HBHH</i> , mm. 1–16, with harmonic analysis	424
11.20	<i>Au Quai</i> , mm. 8–11	428
11.21	<i>Sound Fields</i> , TNEI chords	437
11.22	<i>Wind Rose</i> , TNEI chords	439

Preface

Any analysis of music has to be the analysis of the means by which a piece makes its expressive point and produces the impression one has of it. Thus any analysis presupposes that the piece to be analyzed is *worth* analyzing, in that it does in fact communicate something esthetically *before* one studies the printed score.

– Elliott Carter¹

I wrote this book to share some of the pleasure that Elliott Carter's music has brought me over more than thirty-five years of listening. Ever since I discovered it in college, I have loved its paradoxical complexity and clarity; its vivid depiction of human experience and its abstract musical language; its humor, poignancy, irony, and thrilling juxtapositions. That Carter's music is complex is undeniable, but that near-universal epithet has always struck me as woefully insufficient to capture the sense of exhilaration I feel when I listen attentively to a skilled and enthusiastic performance of one of his pieces. Tracing that exhilaration to its source is the essence of my project in this book. I have not shied away from technical analysis, but over many years I have come to realize that the significance of Carter's technique is its way of representing the multifaceted and continuously changing experience we have of our lives, our relationships, and the world we inhabit. Elucidating that representation is the aim of my analyses.

As Carter's productivity accelerated in the last three decades of his life, both his aesthetic preoccupations and his compositional techniques continued to change in response to a changing world, as they had throughout his long career. Yet a growing body of popular and scholarly writing has perpetuated an image of Carter's music fixed on the period of his initial Cold War-era success, from the late 1940s through the early 1980s. A growing consensus divides Carter's career into five periods: early (to 1948 or 1951), transitional (to 1959), middle (1959–1979), late (1980–1995), and late-late (1995–2012), but the very title “late-late” for the period beginning when Carter was eighty-six, and lasting – astonishingly – nearly two decades, is an admission of uncertainty disguised by wit. Our necessarily foreshortened view in this first decade after Carter's death is only partly responsible; we are simply not prepared to deal with such a bounteous phase of a composer's creative life coming at such an advanced age and so long after his initial success. In his late eighties and beyond Carter produced a remarkably diverse body of work – from piano pieces lasting barely two minutes to a forty-minute comic opera. He wrote

¹ Edwards, *FW*, 118 (emphasis in the original).

studies, instrumental music for traditional and oddly assorted ensembles large and small, solo concertos, and song cycles that illuminate some of the most striking and original poetry of the twentieth century. And he distilled a lifetime's worth of harmonic and rhythmic exploration into a concentrated and powerful musical language that made possible a significant expansion of the expressive range and dramatic impact of his compositions. Our models for such work – the “late idyll” of a composer like Richard Strauss, “living well past his real period” as Edward Said puts it,² or the “reclusive genius” defined by the Romantics in the generation after Beethoven – are of limited help in understanding the case of Elliott Carter. Even Verdi when he wrote *Falstaff* and Heinrich Schütz when he wrote his last Magnificat setting were an entire generation younger than Carter when he composed his last pieces.³ It is not my aim, nor would it be possible, to provide definitive readings of an *oeuvre* as rich and varied as the one Elliott Carter produced in the last seventeen years of his life. But I hope at least to make the case that it is worth considerably more sustained attention than it has received thus far.

The title of this book is both an accurate description of its contents and a red herring. Contained herein are several dozen essays of various lengths that cover nearly all of the music that Carter composed between 1995 and his death in 2012, arranged by genre. I pick up roughly where David Schiff's *The Music of Elliott Carter* (1983; rev. second ed. 1998) leaves off, with a nod to the tradition of identifying Carter's string quartets as turning points in his career. If pressed I would probably argue that the period that ends with the completion of *Symphonia: sum fluxae pretium spei* in 1997 is followed by a period that begins two years earlier with the composition of the Fifth Quartet. But the sharp line implied by my title's generic “late music” is illusory. Understanding the music Carter wrote beginning in the mid-1990s requires an awareness of the substantive changes, as well as the continuities, in both his technique and his aesthetic over the course of a very long career. I have not tried to generalize these changes into a critical category to encompass Carter's “late” (or “late-late”) style. My engagement with Carter's aesthetics emerges from my engagement with his individual compositions; I have tried to adjust my general observations to fit the specific world of each piece, rather than the other way around.

It is my hope that this book will appeal to music lovers with a variety of backgrounds. Basic music terminology is used freely throughout, and I assume familiarity with the fundamentals of musical set theory, limited mainly to pitch and interval classes, pitch-class sets, and set classes. For nonspecialists, my analytical markup will be at least somewhat useful in following the arguments

² Said, *On Late Style*, p. 45.

³ To my knowledge, the only composer who lived longer than Carter was Leo Ornstein (1893–2002), who completed his last major composition in September 1990, shortly before his ninety-seventh birthday. See http://leoornstein.net/leo_ornstein.html.

in the text. Access to good recordings of Carter’s music, on the other hand, is essential. Fortunately, such recordings of all the pieces discussed in this book are readily available, or soon will be. The reader’s firsthand experience of listening attentively to the music under consideration is assumed, and this book will be of little interest without it.

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Acknowledgments

xix

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§

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xxi

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xxiii

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Abbreviations

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CEL	Carter, Elliott. <i>Collected Essays and Lectures, 1937–1995</i> . Ed. Jonathan W. Bernard. Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press, 1997.
ECCP	Meyer, Felix and Anne C. Shreffler. <i>Elliott Carter: A Centennial Portrait in Letters and Documents</i> . Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2008.
ECIC	Restagno, Enzo. <i>Elliott Carter: In Conversation with Enzo Restagno for Settembre Musica 1989</i> . Trans. Katherine Silberblatt Wolfthal. Brooklyn, NY: Institute for Studies in American Music, 1991.
ECS	<i>Elliott Carter Studies</i> . Ed. Marguerite Boland and John Link. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012.
ECWN	Capuzzo, Guy. <i>Elliott Carter's What Next?: Communication, Cooperation, and Separation</i> . Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 2012.
FW	Edwards, Allen. <i>Flawed Words and Stubborn Sounds: A Conversation with Elliott Carter</i> . New York: Norton, 1971.
HB	Carter, Elliott. <i>Harmony Book</i> . Ed. Nicholas Hopkins and John F. Link. New York: Carl Fischer, 2002.
LOC	Elliott Carter Collection, Library of Congress, Washington, DC
LTF	Noubel, Max. <i>Elliott Carter ou le Temps fertile</i> . Geneva: Éditions Contrechamps, 2000.
MEC-1	Schiff, David. <i>The Music of Elliott Carter</i> , 1st ed. London: Eulenburg Books; New York: Da Capo Press, 1983.
MEC-2	Schiff, David. <i>The Music of Elliott Carter</i> , revised 2nd ed. London: Faber; Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1998.
PSS	Elliott Carter Collection, Paul Sacher Stiftung, Basel, Switzerland.