

Elliott Carter (1908-2012) and the crisis of contemporary music

Fred Mazelis

6 December 2012

The death of American composer Elliott Carter in early November, at the advanced age of 103, was followed by an outpouring of praise and recognition in the media and in musical circles.

Carter has been especially venerated by his musical colleagues for his exceptionally long and active life. Fifty-four of his works, about one third of his published compositions, were produced after he turned 90. Fourteen of these late works were composed after he reached the age of 100.

In the midst of the admiring tributes, however, it must also be noted that Carter's work is neither widely known nor often performed. A search of the database of the New York Philharmonic, Carter's hometown orchestra, turns up about 25 of his works performed in the past 50 years. Most of them were played only once. His major orchestral works, composed in the decades between 1950 and 1980, have not been performed by the Philharmonic in more than 30 years.

A reasonably well-informed member of the musical audience has probably never heard—or even heard of—Carter's *Double Concerto for piano and harpsichord*, from 1959-1961, for instance, or his *Piano Concerto* from 1964 or the *Concerto for Orchestra* from 1969. His numerous chamber works, including the five string quartets composed between 1951 and 1995, are occasionally played, and have been recorded by the Juilliard String Quartet and some younger ensembles. However, none of Carter's music has won a wide audience in the six decades since he became one of the most well-known exponents of what is loosely referred to as musical "modernism."

Of course, to challenge the audience and not find immediate success is by no means unheard of. Recognition of some of the works of Beethoven, Schubert and other masters came after their lifetimes. This general problem, of a "lag" between a wide audience and composer, does not seem to apply in Carter's case or help explain why his major works have found little or no audience after 60 years and show no signs of doing so in the future.

As the obituary in the *New York Times* acknowledged in somewhat understated language, "Some listeners found [Carter's] music cerebral, elitist and devoid of emotion. Even some who respected Mr. Carter's erudition and the detail inherent in his compositional method were unmoved by his music."

Carter's long life makes his career in many ways emblematic of the trajectory of music, or significant portions of it, in the decades since the end of the Second World War. He was a leading figure in both the US and Europe. To more fully understand his music and musical legacy, it is necessary to look at them not primarily as the products of his own overly "cerebral" ideas, but as part of a definite historical trend. And the trend of which he was a prominent representative must be seen as the outcome of broader social and historical forces.

A key to understanding Carter's development can perhaps be found in his comment cited in a number of the obituaries. It makes clear that the composer decided not so much to challenge his audience as ignore it. "As a young man, I harbored the populist idea of writing for the public," he

declared. "I learned the public didn't care. So I decided to write for myself. Since then, people have gotten interested."

In fact, while Carter did attract wide interest in academic musical circles, he did not, as noted above, connect with a broader audience. This raises important issues of both a historical and an aesthetic nature. What is the relationship between a creative artist and his audience? How is this relationship connected to the broader questions of the nature of the period in which he lives? What did Carter's decision "to write for myself" have to do with the circumstances in which he matured and set out on a musical career?

Elliott Carter was born in New York in 1908, into a prosperous family, and exposed to music at an early age. Noted American modernist Charles Ives became an early mentor. Carter recalled the New York premiere of Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring*, which he attended in 1924, before his 16th birthday. By the early 1930s, after graduation from Harvard, Carter was in Europe, where he spent three years studying composition with the legendary Nadia Boulanger.

Returning to the US in 1935, Carter embarked on a career of teaching and composition that would last more than seven decades. His work can be divided into roughly three periods: a first stage, more conservative and traditional in its language, that lasted about a decade and corresponded to his description of "writing for the public"; a second period, spanning the years from the late 1940s until about 1980, in which he first achieved prominence, fully embracing atonal composition and producing many of the works of extreme complexity for which he is best known in musical circles; and a third and final period, spanning the last 30 years of his life, in which his musical language remained atonal, but his compositions were somewhat less thorny and more accessible, with some critics finding humor and a kind of "impish" quality in them.

By these last few decades, Carter had become an institution, and many younger musicians asked him to write pieces specifically for them. He twice won the Pulitzer Prize for music, taught at Harvard, Yale, Princeton, the Juilliard School and elsewhere, and was given the National Medal of Arts and numerous other awards.

Carter came of age in the mid- to late 1920s. This was a period of artistic and musical experimentation and vitality. Despite the awful carnage of the First World War, there was still significant confidence in intellectual circles in the possibility of social progress, and of course the Russian Revolution of 1917 loomed large in that respect.

As early as 1907, Arnold Schoenberg had turned to atonality, the theory and practice of musical composition without a tonal center and harmonies associated with it. Tonality had characterized the Western classical canon for about 300 years. By the early 1920s, Schoenberg had attempted to systematize the atonal compositional technique by developing the twelve-tone system, which used all twelve notes of the chromatic scale in equal importance.

Although Alban Berg and Anton Webern declared their allegiance to Schoenberg in what became known as the Second Viennese School, most

of their contemporaries did not join them. Dissonance and chromaticism went far beyond that used occasionally in the nineteenth century, but tonality still dominated.

Looking back over the past century, it becomes clear that the Second Viennese School and the twelve-tone system, in a fashion somewhat similar to that of Futurism in art and literature, represented an important part of musical history, but at the same time led to something of a blind alley. It contained a legitimate element of experimentation, but in its crude and almost childish break from the past it remained confined within a section of the intelligentsia and was unable, as Leon Trotsky explained about futurism in his classic *Literature and Revolution*, to find a lasting connection to history and to social life.

The first four decades of the twentieth century saw prolific work by composers from the more traditional, such as Sibelius and the later Richard Strauss, to the more experimental, including Janacek, Bartok and others. Younger figures like Prokofiev and Shostakovich were among those who continued to work in the tonal tradition. The work of all of these composers was recognizably of the twentieth century.

The atmosphere changed significantly in the 1930s. This was the decade that witnessed the depths of the world economic depression, the rise of Nazism, the most monstrous crimes of Stalinism and the beginning of a second imperialist world war in less than a generation. All this could not help but have a shattering impact on artists and intellectuals, and art generally, “the most complex part of culture, the most sensitive and at the same time the least protected” (Trotsky).

Carter was in Europe when Hitler took power. He had recently returned to America when the Moscow Trials took place, virtually wiping out the generation of revolutionary leaders who had played the decisive role in 1917. He was still a young man, writing in the neoclassical style then associated with Stravinsky and others.

The catastrophic defeats of the working class and the terrible setbacks for social progress and culture may not have had a direct impact on Carter’s consciousness and activity, but he could not have been unaffected by them. As Trotsky wrote in *Literature and Revolution*: “It is silly, absurd, stupid to the highest degree, to pretend that art will remain indifferent to the convulsions of our epoch. The events are prepared by people, they are made by people, they fall upon people and change these people.”

The convulsions of the 1930s and Second World War produced a period of artistic crisis and disorientation, and the musical arena was deeply affected. On the one hand, the crimes of the Nazis, culminating in the Holocaust, led to the “disappearance” of many composers who were either killed or suffered at least partial obscurity in exile. This list includes such figures as Alexander Zemlinsky, Bohuslav Martinu, Erwin Schulhoff, and Viktor Ullman.

At the same time, the ideals of the previous generation seemed discredited. Socialism and communism appeared to many to have failed, except for those who accepted the monstrous perversion of socialism under Stalin. This had an enormous impact on the cultural climate as well.

Stalinism both before and after the war had promulgated the fraud of “proletarian culture” and the monstrosity of “socialist realism,” dictating “optimistic” music and art. In the 1930s, this had affected composers like Hanns Eisler, a one-time adherent of Schoenberg’s atonality, and Aaron Copland, who began working in an American “populist” style at the time the Stalinists were singing the praises of Roosevelt and American patriotism.

In 1948, Stalin’s henchmen made their infamous denunciation of Shostakovich, Prokofiev and others for “musical formalism.” Serious artists and intellectuals rightly found this brutal treatment repugnant. The “official art” of Stalinism was antithetical to the most elementary principles of human creativity and solidarity. Artists felt themselves increasingly trapped, however, between the Stalinist lies and an

accommodation to “popular” art in the West.

A clue to Carter’s thinking at this time can be found in a statement quoted in Alex Ross’s informative book on music in the twentieth century, *The Rest Is Noise*. Explaining why he adopted atonality in place of the style associated with Copland and others or the neoclassicism of Stravinsky, Carter declared: “Before the end of the Second World War, it became clear to me, partly as a result of rereading Freud and others and thinking about psychoanalysis, that we were living in a world where this physical and intellectual violence would always be a problem.”

Freudianism and psychoanalysis became the means by which certain layers disengaged themselves from an external reality they found difficult to contemplate and impossible to change. The resulting “rush inward” (in the words of a commentator) found expression in Carter’s decision “to write for myself.” Of course he was not the only one to make this decision. It was a kind of musical version of “art for art’s sake,” the outlook that had found such wide appeal in the nineteenth century and corresponded to a mood within the intelligentsia rooted in political repression and stagnation.

In the field of classical music, these circumstances led to a resurgence of interest in and support for atonality and the twelve-tone school of composition first developed decades earlier. Melody became a swear word in some musical circles. Theodor Adorno, an early student of Alban Berg who had also become one of the leading philosophers of the so-called Frankfurt School of anti-Marxists, came forward as the most uncompromising opponent of tonality. As Ross notes: “[T]he very act of preserving tonality in the modern era, Adorno proposed, betrayed symptoms of the Fascist personality.”

Pierre Boulez, then only in his 20s, associated himself with Adorno’s views. Boulez and his coterie were vitriolic in their hostility to the music of the past 200 years. Boulez became somewhat notorious for his violent polemics against any music that did not meet his own extreme academicism. He even scorned Schoenberg, whom he had previously praised, as having gone only half way toward dismantling all past musical traditions. When the older composer died in 1951, Boulez’s obituary article absurdly accused Schoenberg, the “father” of atonality, of having displayed “the most ostentatious and obsolete romanticism.”

Atonal music in the several decades after the Second World War became more and more inaccessible. Elliott Carter was one of the main representatives of this school in America. Though he wrote little about his aesthetic views, they were presumably articulated, at least at the time, by his equally prominent colleague, Milton Babbitt. In 1958, Babbitt wrote an article, “Who Cares If You Listen?” It argued that “the composer would do himself and his music an immediate and eventual service by total, resolute and voluntary withdrawal from this public world to one of private performance and electronic media, with its very real possibility of complete elimination of the public and social aspects of musical composition.”

The Cold War in the decades following 1945 also played a role in this development. Composers like Babbitt won official recognition and growing support. Atonality and its musical offspring came to be equated in the minds of a layer of the intelligentsia with Western “democracy” and individual freedom, in opposition to the Stalinist bans on anything but accessible music in the Soviet Union and the East European states now under Moscow-backed regimes.

As Ross reports, the CIA “occasionally funded festivals that included hypercomplex avant-garde works.” Twelve-tone composers were “indirect beneficiaries” of bigger political decisions, in which the US ruling elite used support for an alleged avant-garde as a weapon in the Cold War. At the same time as the CIA was overthrowing democratically elected governments from Guatemala to Iran, it was throwing money at various cultural efforts as part of its anti-communist crusade.

While Carter had never identified himself dogmatically with such

schools as the “total serialism” espoused by Babbitt, his work from about 1950 through the mid- to late 1970s fell very much within the framework of the extreme complexity, abstruseness and mathematical approach to music then ascendant.

This music was limited not necessarily because it was ugly or offensive or different. Rather, its narrow emotional palette, while perhaps sometimes effective in expressing frustration, confusion or despair, was capable of little else. No one has successfully composed a twelve-tone love song or lyric. There was a strong element of elitism in this music, written almost exclusively for critics, fellow musicians and a handful of aficionados.

The various schools of atonality had pretty much exhausted themselves by the 1970s. New musical trends emerged, including minimalism, post-minimalism, electronic music in various forms, spectralism and others. Carter began to modify his own work after these shifts.

The newer tendencies included neo-romanticism, more directly aimed at replicating earlier styles. There were also renewed attempts to integrate folkloristic elements into classical music. Steve Reich, Philip Glass, John Adams, Gyorgy Ligeti and Osvaldo Golijov are some of those associated with the above trends. Some pieces were more successful than others—Adams’s operas *Nixon in China* and *Doctor Atomic* come to mind.

A thorough discussion of these styles is far beyond the scope of this article, but a few general conclusions can be drawn. While many younger composers declared their determination to reach a wider audience than Carter and most of his contemporaries had, wishing did not make it so. For all of the 60 years during which Carter composed in his atonal style, there were composers who rejected his methods, but were also for the most part unsuccessful in leaving a body of satisfying work. Leonard Bernstein fell largely silent as a composer for the last few decades of his life, concentrating on his conducting and performing career.

There was a wider reason for the challenges facing contemporary composers. The connection with an engaged audience—let us say, for purposes of illustration, the type of audience for which Mahler, Bartok or Shostakovich wrote—is something that involves both the composer and his listeners, but it is not something that can be decreed. The composer must have something profound to communicate and there must be an audience—not necessarily a mass audience, but certainly one that goes far beyond the composer’s peers and immediate circle—looking for music of a challenging, expressive and moving character. It is fair to say that the social and cultural atmosphere in recent decades has not been conducive to this kind of relationship between composer and audience.

Despite their rejection of twelve-tone music, for instance, the more recent trends for the most part share some conceptions with their musical “opponents.” They also often reject past traditions in an arbitrary manner, and they have so far had little of substance to offer to replace them.

There are some, for instance, who claim that opera can be revitalized by new productions that combine the glorious music with updated stagings that are usually either dull or ludicrous. Many of the minimalist composers substitute music that is repetitive and boring, even if “accessible,” for the complex music of composers like Carter. Those dubbed neo-Romantics have generally composed in a bland style that usually leaves no more of a memorable impression than the esoteric compositions associated with Carter and his school.

The composer must have something to say, and it cannot be conjured out of his head, but must arise, in a way that is difficult to define, from a cultural mood, a sensibility that is in turn related to great historical events.

The difficulties of contemporary classical music are also related to the persistent gulf between “high” and “low” culture. This has profound historical roots and cannot be wished out of existence, but that does not mean that nothing can or should be done about it.

The advocates of “complexity” avoided contamination with the

uninitiated. As Ross puts it in reference to Babbitt, Carter, Charles Wuorinen and others, “they seemed concerned above all with self-preservation, with building a safe nest in a hostile world.” Their work will continue to exist as part of musical history, of course, but large numbers most likely won’t want to listen to it.

That which has been called postmodernism in music, on the other hand, generally eschews complexity, but instead settles for a superficial eclecticism, a kind of musical equivalent of Pop Art and similar trends in the art world. This tendency, under which minimalism can generally be grouped, also accepts the high/low dichotomy as natural and permanent, and sometimes argues that its approach, more oriented toward popular culture, is more democratic. Much of the opera restaging referred to above falls into this category.

Amidst the general musical cacophony, there are, in some small ways, genuine efforts to develop beyond the confines of the stagnation that I have described. Among young chamber musicians, for instance, while there is dedication to the enormous body of work from the two centuries roughly spanning 1770-1970, efforts are also made to seek out newer music, as well as to revive some of the “forgotten” music of the interwar years and the early decades of the twentieth century, music for the most part composed in a melodic tradition.

The neglect of music education in the U.S. is scandalous and part of a general cultural malaise and decay that has seen orchestras and classical radio stations disappear in recent years. A small but significant positive development in this area is the recent effort to expand the work of El Sistema, the music education program founded nearly 40 years ago in Venezuela, into the United States. El Sistema has trained literally hundreds of thousands of poor and working class youth. Many have become world-class musicians, most notably Gustavo Dudamel, the young conductor of the Los Angeles Philharmonic.

This is only a bare beginning of the struggle for music education on various levels, which in turn is part of the nurturing of a new audience for classical music. New directions in music can be expected to develop largely from the tonal traditions of the past. However, especially under conditions in which global cultures and traditions intermingle as never before, music will change and develop accordingly.

A musical rebirth, above all, can only come from important events and struggles, and the same must be said for every other field of art. The impulse for a change will come from struggles for social progress that generate a new audience and inspire the creators of a new era of great music.



To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact