

# 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.

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.

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.

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.

now associated with a “dated, outworn style”), but with Cage, Cowell, Nancarrow, and Varèse – mavericks whose musical innovations could be understood as truly American and thus also safely apart from their own (European) traditions.

These developments all served to protect Carter's attentively cultivated reputation for stylistic autonomy. Long before his earlier music was swept aside by Copland's success, Carter had experienced the flowering of modernism in the 1920s, and he knew how quickly the novelties of provocation wear out their welcome. He was acutely aware of the dangers of being associated too closely with any of the well-publicized (and easily politicized) trends in contemporary composition in Europe after the war (dangers underlined by the political charge of Boykan's article). And he knew that the struggle to define the key words “atonal,” “dodecaphonic,” “serial,” “twelve-tone,” and so on had as much to do with power and control of resources as it did with clarifying compositional techniques. Carter professed his admiration for Schoenberg's pre-serial music, but was less enthusiastic about the twelve-tone works, although he studied them in detail.<sup>44</sup> He was even more guarded about the integral serial works of the younger generation, preferring to ally himself with older European composers to whom he was closer in age and temperament.<sup>45</sup> Even when he heard something he liked, like Luigi Nono's *Il Canto Sospeso*, which Carter analyzed for a class at the University of Minnesota in 1967, his evaluation of its techniques of composition was deeply ambivalent, and his praise was mixed with skepticism.<sup>46</sup>

Carter expressed a similar ambivalence about his own earlier music. Although he refrained from destroying his less “advanced” compositions of the 1940s (as he had most of his pre-Boullanger pieces), he effectively set them adrift. He retrospectively portrayed his Woodwind Quintet as a nostalgic farewell to neoclassicism<sup>47</sup> and made no mention of the piece in *Flawed Words and Stubborn Sounds*, his most extensive public summary of his compositional development. (In fact, he mentions the piece only

<sup>44</sup> In his copies of Schoenberg's Variations, Fourth Quartet, String Trio, and *Phantasy for Violin* (now in PSS), Carter made detailed analyses of their row structure, including illustrations of hexachord combinatoriality. On separate sheets of staff paper, he also wrote out pairs of rows from Schoenberg's *Moses and Aaron* and Webern's String Trio, illustrating the preservation of contiguous dyads at different transpositions of the row in the latter piece.

<sup>45</sup> See Guberman, “Elliott Carter as (Anti-) Serial Composer,” on Carter's changing relationship to “serial” music (variously defined), and Brody, “Cold War Genius,” pp. 385–86, on Carter's alliances among European composers.

<sup>46</sup> See Emmery, “Workshop Minnesota.”

<sup>47</sup> See Schiff, *MEC-2*, p. 96, and Bernard, “An Interview with Elliott Carter,” p. 193.

once, in passing, in all of his collected writings.) Carter's champions echoed his own view of the "problematic" early compositions, and even some later ones, like the Sonata for Flute, Oboe, Cello, and Harpsichord, *Emblems*, and *The Minotaur*.<sup>48</sup> Even when they are not dismissed, the compositions that do not conform to Carter's later style are remade as disguised precursors, "exercises in sabotage," whose value was in forcing Carter's hand: "eventually Carter's energies had to burst the bounds of an alien practice."<sup>49</sup>

### A Democratic Struggle

If Carter's reputation for "calculated complexity" put off some critics in the early 1940s, it was a distinct advantage in the postwar years, when questioning the basic principles of musical organization became a badge of honor for many composers. In this climate, the technical innovations of Carter's music, starting with the First Quartet, were understood to be the locus of his achievement. Chief among them were "metric modulation" (see Chapter 4) and an approach to texture and form that became known as "the divided ensemble."<sup>50</sup> Drawing on many influences, Carter stratified the instruments (or groups of instruments) in his compositions – individualizing them by assigning each one a unique repertoire of harmonic materials and rhythmic behaviors to establish its unique musical identity, or "character-continuity" as he put it.<sup>51</sup> As in Mozart's operas, distinct combinations of musical elements manifest the contrasting personality traits of the characters.<sup>52</sup>

Although Carter was proud of the innovative techniques he had developed, and wrote about them in a series of essays, he took pains always to connect them to his broader expressive goals. He described his music of social interaction in explicitly political terms, as a celebration of individual freedom that contrasted with the coordinated ensembles of earlier European concert music. And "freedom" was very much the point. Beginning with the Rome festival, Carter and his music were conscripted into the cultural Cold War as an exemplar of artistic freedom in the United

<sup>48</sup> See Goldman, "The Music of Elliott Carter," p. 163; Schiff, *MEC-1*, p. 112; and Wierzbicki, *Elliott Carter*, p. 38.

<sup>49</sup> Schiff, *MEC-1*, p. 76. And cf. Bernard, "The True Significance of Elliott Carter's Early Music."

<sup>50</sup> The term was coined by Schiff in *MEC-2*, p. 26. <sup>51</sup> Edwards, *FW*, p. 101.

<sup>52</sup> "The thought itself came from reading Edward Dent's book on Mozart's operas, which describes this in detail" (Carter, in Ford, *Composer to Composer*, pp. 6–7). See Dent, *Mozart's Operas: A Critical Study*.

States – something that many Americans, including Nabokov and the Congress for Cultural Freedom, saw as a critical advantage of American democracy in its struggle with Soviet communism. Unlike their counterparts behind the Iron Curtain, artists in the United States were said to be free to pursue whatever styles and techniques they chose, and that freedom was taken as indicative of the broader freedom of American citizens, guaranteed their rights by the Constitution and the rule of law. To support its citizen-artists, the US government repurposed the lavish funding for the arts under Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal to showcase the superiority of "free" American art over state-mandated Soviet realism.<sup>53</sup> And whereas the priority during the Depression was supporting a patriotism of common purpose (one that transferred readily to the war effort), the postwar imperative was showcasing individual expression. In this context, very much unlike that of the 1930s, unpopularity could be construed positively as evidence of independence of mind. "[P]eople in a free society don't keep step together," Carter told Enzo Restagno in 1989. "Each one must find and hold his own rhythm, and in this sense instruments to me are like individuals, each with its own character and its own rhythmic personality."<sup>54</sup> And he went further in describing the complexities of his rhythm to Charles Rosen: "I do not want to give the impression of a simultaneous motion in which everybody's part is coordinated like a goose step."<sup>55</sup>

From the standpoint of the early twenty-first century, the erstwhile and well-financed efforts on the part of the US and Soviet governments to use contemporary concert music as a weapon in the Cold War seem less Machiavellian than quixotic. Nevertheless, considerable resources were in play, and Carter was more than happy to benefit from the attention his music attracted during the Cold War years. In many ways he was an ideal candidate for the role of the free artist that Nabokov and his allies were eager to promote. He was American, but his studies with Boulanger gave him credibility with European tastemakers, as did his fluent French, broad familiarity with European culture, and enthusiasm for the arts. Although he was in his forties and moved among the senior figures in American music, Carter was not well known prior to the Rome festival, especially in Europe. The same comparative obscurity that made his First Quartet seem like a breakthrough made Carter himself something of a *tabula rasa*. Since humble origins were such an important part of the "self-made man" mythology, Carter's background as the Harvard-educated scion of an upper-class mercantile family – and his socialist leanings – were

<sup>53</sup> See Saunders, *The Cultural Cold War*, and Gottlieb, "Elliott Carter's Piano Concerto."

<sup>54</sup> Restagno, *ECIC*, p. 42. <sup>55</sup> Rosen, "An Interview with Elliott Carter," p. 36.

downplayed and the stubborn persistence of his nature emphasized. Carter's development as a late bloomer was recast as resistance to the traditional music education at Harvard,<sup>56</sup> and as we have seen, his Guggenheim-funded sojourn became a heroic retreat into the desert to find himself, free of the pressure to conform to anyone's expectations but his own.<sup>57</sup>

Carter's middle-period music led to even greater success. In 1960 his Second Quartet won the Pulitzer Prize and the New York Critics' Circle Award, and in May of the following year it was voted the outstanding work of the 1960–61 season by the International Rostrum of Composers in Paris.<sup>58</sup> By the time his Third Quartet (1971) won the Pulitzer Prize in 1973, Carter was firmly established as a leading light of contemporary music in the United States. Although his music of democratic ideals never approached Copland's in popularity, it was widely recognized and rewarded, at least by those who followed contemporary classical music. Yet Carter was hardly a stooge of the US government's propaganda efforts, as some critics would have it.<sup>59</sup> His vision of democratic society, particularly in the compositions that received clandestine US government funding during the Cold War, was far from utopian. Carter's music may insist on the inviolability of the individual voice, but the individual voices that people it produce a chaotic welter as often as a model society. In his large-scale compositions of the 1960s and early '70s, Carter used the divided ensemble to weave captivating dramas of separation and cross-purposes. Elaborate harmonic and rhythmic partitions define the instrumental character-continuities in terms of their differences – each layer of the texture consists of individuals who speak only the language of their tribe. When multiple layers converge, as they do in the climactic sections of many pieces in this period, from the Double Concerto (1961) to the Brass Quintet (1974), the result is not dialog but confusion, even chaos. As David Schiff put it: “from the Cello Sonata onward, Carter's music sprang from a single idea: disconnection.”<sup>60</sup> Even as he cultivated and benefitted from a reputation as a loner, Carter reflected in his music a concern about the isolation of the artist in the United States that was widely shared in the 1960s and '70s. In Carter's most explicitly programmatic compositions, like the Piano Concerto and *A Symphony of Three Orchestras*, the

<sup>56</sup> See Edwards, *FW*, p. 46; Swed, “Nearly 100 (mph),” n.p.; and Wierzbicki, *Elliott Carter*, pp. 11–13.

<sup>57</sup> See Carter, “String Quartets Nos. I, 1951, and 2, 1959” (1970), in *CEL*, pp. 231–34.

<sup>58</sup> Anonymous, “Composer for Professionals,” p. 82. <sup>59</sup> Taruskin, “Standoff (II).”

<sup>60</sup> Schiff, “The Carter-Messiaen Project,” 2.

alienation of the individual in a modern democratic society sounds very much like the suppression of the individual in a totalitarian regime, with equally dire consequences.

### **A Changing World**

Carter found an entirely new way of thinking about the divided ensemble when he began setting lyric poetry again in the mid-1970s. His return to writing for the voice was widely acknowledged as a significant turning point, but most critics recognized little change in the guiding aesthetic of his music. Just as the First Quartet had become the goal of Carter's journey of self-discovery in accounts of his early post-Paris years, the divided ensemble – understood as a struggle of contending characters – had taken its place as the goal of Carter's maturity in later chronicles, both his own and those of other writers. His success validated the point. With a host of international awards under his belt and more commissions than he could possibly accept, Carter, as he entered his seventies, seemed to be a solved problem: an uncompromising maverick, whose complex, technically innovative compositions dramatize the alienation and conflict of the postwar world.

Then, in the early 1980s, Carter's relevance was challenged more intensely than at any time during the previous forty years. The dramatic changes that were taking place in contemporary concert music were popularly understood as a proliferation of fresh new styles meant to sweep away the hermetic narcissism of the postwar modernists. In fact, the changes had as much to do with economics as with aesthetics. The 1973 Arab oil embargo, high inflation, the end of a period of generous government spending in support of the United States Bicentennial in 1976, and the election of Ronald Reagan in 1980 had all contributed to a period of belt-tightening for the arts. As resources became more limited, composers of all kinds had to find ways to write music that could be performed persuasively at a reasonable cost. For the New Romantics, the fact that their harmonic, gestural, and formal vocabularies were already familiar to performers steeped in the standard repertoire was economically beneficial as well as aesthetically attractive. For composers like Carter, who, throughout the 1960s, had enjoyed the patronage of large foundations eager to use modernism to advance American geopolitical goals, the rehearsal time necessary for ensembles to come to grips with unconventional styles, playing techniques, and stage setups became increasingly difficult to come by. Techniques that were intended to expand the range of expressive possibility instead became obstacles to effective performance. In spite of Carter's

soaring reputation in the early 1970s and a number of brilliant and expressive performances and recordings of his most complex pieces, his music was still not widely played. His middle-period chamber music was beyond the reach of all but the most capable and dedicated performers, and the larger works after the Variations were hard to program given the economic limitations of most orchestras. Nor were the difficulties of Carter's music limited to its performance. It was also extremely difficult and time-consuming to write, not least because Carter felt he had to "grope along like a blind man" as he painstakingly worked out the materials and techniques of his middle-period style.<sup>61</sup> As is widely noted, Carter completed only ten pieces in the twenty years between 1949 and 1969, a rate of production that must have seemed increasingly worrisome to him as he got older. Not long after signing a new contract with Boosey & Hawkes, Carter wondered aloud about whether the deal was a good one for the publisher: "Oh, I don't know if it's worth your while. I'm 73 and you might not get many pieces."<sup>62</sup>

According to the popular mythology, Carter ignored all of these pressures and continued to compose "without compromise."<sup>63</sup> In fact, they prompted him to carefully rethink his work, and to simplify nearly every aspect of his style. He dramatically reduced the technical demands of his music, especially his music for large ensembles, and he thinned out the complex textures that were a recurring feature in nearly all of his pieces. As Carter made his music easier to play, he also made it easier to write. Not the least of the ironies in his remark (made almost thirty years before his final compositions) that he might not have many pieces left in him is that when he made it (in 1982) he had already doubled his rate of production over the preceding decade, an increase that did not go unnoticed at the time.<sup>64</sup> After 1980 Carter's productivity increased even more, due in no small part to his willingness to dispense with the technical self-reinvention that had been a longstanding point of honor. His avoidance of repetition gave way to an approach that might be called reduce, reuse, recycle. Pieces that are entirely dissimilar in genre and mood share technical details, like structural polyrhythms, interval repertoires, and (after around 1995) a small collection of core harmonies, which replaced the elaborate harmonic partitions of his middle-period music (see Chapter 3). There are also recurring titles to indicate new pieces in

<sup>61</sup> Johnson, "Discovering Music."

<sup>62</sup> Carter quoted in Wallace, *Boosey & Hawkes: The Publishing Story*, p. 168.

<sup>63</sup> Pierre Boulez, quoted in Scheffer, *Elliott Carter: A Labyrinth of Time*, 47:33.

<sup>64</sup> See Schiff, "Carter in the Seventies," p. 2.

existing series, like the *Figments* and *Fragments*, and even repurposed music. In the five *Retracings*, an excerpt of a longer piece becomes an independent composition (see Chapter 11), while in both *Réflexions* and *Luimen*, Carter constructed a longer piece around the kernel of a preexisting shorter one (see Chapter 9). Many of Carter's late pieces, such as the *Three Occasions for Orchestra*, *Three Illusions for Orchestra*, *Tri-Tribute*, *Trilogy*, *Tre duetti*, *Symphonia*, and the *4 Lauds*, are suites whose movements may be performed as independent compositions. Perhaps most surprising – given his longstanding commitment to writing music that emerges from the nature of the instruments that play it – Carter happily accepted and then published Benny Slucin's trombone transcription of the solo clarinet piece *Gra* (1993).

### Disability and Aging

Carter's simplification of his working methods was also a way of staying productive as he got older. In addition to narrowing the focus of his harmonic language, Carter eventually left behind the structural polyrhythms he had used throughout the 1980s, which were complicated to implement, and began to explore simpler sectional forms with much less elaborate connecting material than he had used in his middle-period compositions (see Chapter 4). In a 2001 interview, Carter reflected on the ways his compositional process had changed: "When I was younger, I sometimes spent weeks putting these sorts of things in working order, but I'm tired of doing that now. I just write what's in my mind. In the old days I used to write them and then correct them to fit into the pattern. Now I don't correct."<sup>65</sup>

Although the decision not to "correct" may have been motivated by the constraints of aging, as well as institutional change, its significance is easy to misjudge. All composers face constraints, whether external or self-imposed, and in Carter's case they were a powerful imaginative stimulus, both inspiring new aesthetic directions and placing his earlier achievements in a new context. Increasingly, Carter began to write about the experience of getting older in his compositions. He addressed disability and the awareness of encroaching mortality, as well as the ever-increasing part of life that exists only in memory.<sup>66</sup> *Anniversary* (1989), dedicated to his wife on their fiftieth, opens with a duet for oboe and bassoon, a jaunty polyrhythmic portrait of a couple in the spring of youth. By the end they

<sup>65</sup> Meyer, "Elliott Carter in Conversation with Felix Meyer," p. 28.

<sup>66</sup> On "late style" and "disability style" see Straus, *Extraordinary Measures*, chapter 5.

have slowed, muddling along more like Eeyore than Tigger, but finally their love gives rise to an unexpectedly lyrical tuba solo – a basso profundo offspring or a defiant reaffirmation of romance (or both). The pulsed layer in the first of the *Two Diversions* (see Chapter 11) similarly can be heard as music of limited mobility. Each new dyad shares a common tone with the previous one, as though the music were bringing its back foot forward only as far as its front one before committing to the next step. And Carter called a solo bass clarinet piece dedicated to his friend, colleague, and manager Virgil Blackwell *Steep Steps*, with a dual reference to the instrument overblowing at the 12th rather than the octave and the difficulty of climbing steps in old age. (Carter and Blackwell navigated many staircases together over the years.) Although he seems not to have mentioned it, Carter also made his experience of auditory disability a part of several compositions. Both *Fragment No. 1* and the Adagio sereno of the Fifth Quartet are written entirely in string harmonics, and the high whistling sounds are eerily similar to the experience of tinnitus.

In his last years, Carter wrote somberly about the death of Helen Frost-Jones Carter, his wife and partner of more than sixty years. His grief, expressed in different ways, sounds in several of his compositions around the time of her death in 2003, including *Of Rewaking* (2002) and *Dialogues* (2003), and (later) in *Mnemosyné* (2011), to which he added the dedication “Remembering my wife Helen” after the score was engraved. Carter also dedicated *Boston Concerto* (2002) to her, and its last note, an isolated “B” (“H” in German) is her initial – a coded tribute that also is heard at the ends of *Instances* and *Epigrams* (both 2012).<sup>67</sup> Carter also addressed the subject of memory in his late song cycles, choosing poems that both celebrate the vividness of the past in memory and lament the passage of time it inevitably evokes. He faced his own mortality most poignantly in “This Is the Thesis . . .” from *The American Sublime*, and in the coda of *Instances* (see Chapters 6 and 7).

### Looking Forward/Looking Back

The changes in Carter's music that began in the mid-1990s were the result of a thoroughgoing reevaluation of his aesthetic choices as well as his technique, and are as consequential as those in any other period of his career. Yet when Carter's late music is addressed in the secondary literature

<sup>67</sup> I thank Nicolas Hodges for pointing out the programmatic significance of the last note of *Boston Concerto*, and Guy Capuzzo for pointing out the “H” endings of *Instances* and *Epigrams* (private communications).

it is generally treated as “Carter light”: shorter pieces, thinner textures, less complicated rhythms and forms. But the “lightness” so many have noted paints a misleading and incomplete picture of Carter’s music, early as well as late. The gravity attendant on contemporary music in the 1960s tended to mask the comedy that Carter wrote into his compositions, influenced (as he himself said) by Charlie Chaplin, Buster Keaton, Chico and Harpo Marx, and the tradition of the musical clown in vaudeville.<sup>68</sup> Conversely, the recognition of comic elements in Carter’s late pieces and their general association with “lightness” have tended to obscure the fact that they are frequently as dark or darker in mood than their predecessors.<sup>69</sup> Carter was too ambitious to let the final chapter of his career become merely a diverting afterthought. Alongside his fond recollections of friends and colleagues is a parallel track of self-reflection and reassessment of his earlier work that is very different in mood from his earlier reassessments of his neoclassical and neo-modernist periods. A true picture of Carter’s accomplishments comes into focus only when this late music is recognized not only for its buoyancy, but for its insights into the most challenging questions of human experience.

<sup>68</sup> See Carter, “Letter from Europe” (1963), in *CEL*, p. 34.

<sup>69</sup> See Boland, “Form and Dialectical Opposition,” 103–09, on the ideas of “lightness” and “darkness” in Carter’s music, and Schiff, *Carter*, p. 195.