

**Zeitschrift:** Dissonanz = Dissonance  
**Herausgeber:** Schweizerischer Tonkünstlerverein  
**Band:** - (2013)  
**Heft:** 121

**Nachruf:** Elliott Carter (1908-2012)  
**Autor:** Shreffler, Anne C.

### **Nutzungsbedingungen**

Die ETH-Bibliothek ist die Anbieterin der digitalisierten Zeitschriften. Sie besitzt keine Urheberrechte an den Zeitschriften und ist nicht verantwortlich für deren Inhalte. Die Rechte liegen in der Regel bei den Herausgebern beziehungsweise den externen Rechteinhabern. [Siehe Rechtliche Hinweise.](#)

### **Conditions d'utilisation**

L'ETH Library est le fournisseur des revues numérisées. Elle ne détient aucun droit d'auteur sur les revues et n'est pas responsable de leur contenu. En règle générale, les droits sont détenus par les éditeurs ou les détenteurs de droits externes. [Voir Informations légales.](#)

### **Terms of use**

The ETH Library is the provider of the digitised journals. It does not own any copyrights to the journals and is not responsible for their content. The rights usually lie with the publishers or the external rights holders. [See Legal notice.](#)

**Download PDF:** 11.05.2025

**ETH-Bibliothek Zürich, E-Periodica, <https://www.e-periodica.ch>**

## Elliott Carter (1908–2012)

integrier Helmut Lachenmann geriet in den 1980ern aus der Fassung. Auf Henzes unsachliche Angriffe gegen ihn als Vertreter einer «Musica Negativa» konterte Lachenmann mit einer Philippika, die nicht zu seinen rühmlichsten Äußerungen gehört. Es wäre an der Zeit, nüchterner zurückzublicken auf ein Leben, das am 1. Juli 1926 in Gütersloh begann und in Dresden am 27. Oktober 2012 endete. Es spiegelt vor allem dieses: die Dramatik und Tragik deutscher Nachkriegszeit sowie ein gespaltenes Musikleben.

Torsten Möller



Elliott Carter composing "Soundings" for Daniel Barenboim and the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, New York, April 2005. © Malcolm Crowthers

American music has lost one of its most original and influential voices. After Elliott Carter died on 5 November 2012 in New York at the age of 103, after more than eight decades of continuous compositional productivity, all obituaries drew attention to his longevity and his quite remarkable – indeed unprecedented – creative surge right up until the end. After the age of eighty, Carter composed over 100 new works, including many shorter pieces for solo instruments, but also ambitious large-scale works such as the three-movement *Symphonia: Sum Fluxae Pretium Spei* (1993–96) and his first and only opera, *What Next?* (1997–98). Carter's last work – *Epigrams* for piano trio – was completed less than three months before his death. The only figure in music history comparable to Carter in terms of longevity is Leo Ornstein, who lived until the age of 109, but had stopped composing by the age of ninety-seven.

Yet it is important not to let the biological quirk of his lifespan overshadow Carter's continuous and significant contributions to twentieth and twenty-first century music. Carter has created a

body of music that is instantly recognizable for its rhythmic energy, contrapuntal complexity and vivid instrumental colour. In works such as the *Double Concerto* for harpsichord and piano (1959–1961), *Concerto for Orchestra* (1967–69) and *A Symphony of Three Orchestras* (1976) he created rich and multi-layered soundscapes that redefined and expanded the expressive capabilities of the orchestra while articulating vast formal structures. Starting with *A Mirror on Which to Dwell* (1976) on poems of Elizabeth Bishop and ending with *Three Explorations* on poems of T.S. Eliot (2011), Carter has created a library of song cycles in which he came to terms with practically all the notable American poets as well as several European ones.

While his works presented almost insurmountable rhythmical and technical difficulties to many performers at the time they were written, Carter's music, while still not easy to play, no longer presents the same challenges it once did. The abilities of musicians have developed to the point where many works (including the string quartets,



the piano music, the *Double Concerto*, and the song cycles) have become part of the concert repertory. Musicians like to play Carter's music, and this will help ensure its survival.

Carter's music has been received with special enthusiasm in Europe, where he has long been esteemed as the leading American composer. Indeed Carter's ties to the Old World are numerous and deep. Brought up speaking French since childhood, Carter accompanied his father, a lace merchant, on business trips to Belgium, France and Germany at an early age. In 1932, he followed the counsel of his Harvard teacher Walter Piston and went to Paris to study with the already legendary pedagogue Nadia Boulanger. In doing so, he went against the advice of another mentor, Charles Ives, to uphold his duties towards America. But Carter's studies with Boulanger, rather than being a wrong turn, were just what the inexperienced young composer needed; Boulanger's disciplined method gave him the technical basis for all his future works as well as the encouragement to be an American composer. As the American premiere of Stravinsky's *Le Sacre du printemps* in 1924 had been Carter's formative musical experience, Boulanger's ties to Stravinsky were hardly a stumbling block.

Later in life Carter would develop strong institutional and personal ties to Europe, through his London publisher Boosey and Hawkes, the American Academy in Rome, and the Paul Sacher Foundation in Basel, which acquired his papers in 1987. He was awarded Europe's most prestigious musical distinction, the Ernst von Siemens prize, in 1981. He and his wife Helen also enjoyed friendships with European musicians including Pierre Boulez, Oliver Knussen, Goffredo Petrassi, William Glock, and Witold Lutosławski. They were especially close to Heinz and Ursula Holliger; Carter admired Heinz Holliger's compositions as well as his

virtuosity as an oboist, and he benefitted from Ursula Holliger's advice about harp techniques. Holliger's advocacy of Carter's music yielded a steady stream of new works: the *Oboe Concerto* (1987), commissioned by Paul Sacher, an arrangement of an early work, *Pastoral*, for English horn, marimba, and string orchestra (1988), *Quintet for Piano and Winds* (1991), *Trilogy* for oboe and harp (composed for Heinz and Ursula Holliger in 1991–92), *A Six Letter Letter* for English horn (1996), *Oboe Quartet* (2001), and finally the birthday present *HBHH* for oboe solo (2007).

It is paradoxical (or perhaps logical) that for Europeans, Carter represents American music, whereas for many Americans, Carter's music is considered to be oriented more towards Europe. Carter's American identity resided however not in the overt nationalistic type of Americanism of Copland's *Appalachian Spring*, but rather in the model of cosmopolitan Americanism that was prevalent in intellectual and artistic circles in the U.S. in the first half of the twentieth century. Carter's whole output, whether the neoclassicism of the early works, complex modernism of the middle period, or the translucent luminosity of the late works, can be seen as growing out of the productive confrontation between an Ivesian Americanism (represented also by the "ultra-moderns" such as Henry Cowell and Ruth Crawford Seeger) and a virtuosic Stravinskian technique of clarity and control.

Carter's musical intelligence was flexible and omnivorous, whether in looking back to Mozart's example when writing his *Violin Concerto* (as he wrote in a letter to Heinz Holliger) or turning to the paintings of Helen Frankenthaler to inspire a completely new, Feldmanesque static texture in *Sound Fields* for strings (2007). Never susceptible to momentary trends, Carter developed a unique, highly personal compositional voice that does

not fit into conventional categories. Neither conservative nor avant-garde, the music of the world's oldest composer will always sound new.

Anne C. Shreffler