

Link, John. Review of *Elliott Carter* by James Wierzbicki (Urbana, Chicago, and Springfield: University of Illinois Press, 2011). *Music & Letters* 93, no. 4 (November 2012): 629-632. doi:10.1093/ml/gcs080

Imagine, as a biographical subject, a creative artist whose career spans more than three quarters of a century—from the 1930s to the 2010s, who was mentored by Charles Ives, drank with Edgard Varèse at a Greenwich Village speakeasy, sang in the choir at the premiere of Stravinsky's *Perséphone*, studied with Gustav Holst, Walter Piston, and Nadia Boulanger, and who has counted among his friends and colleagues not only Stravinsky and Varèse but Sessions, Cowell, Copland, Barber, Nancarrow, Babbitt, Boulez, Gielen, Barenboim, Levine, and Knussen. Then add a body of work that is unsurpassed in the annals of late Modernism, and that now extends with equal energy, insight, and wry comedy well into our own post-Modern age. Surely one would think the Henry-Louis De La Granges of the world (if not the Robert Caros) would be clambering to take up such a remarkable figure. But for the American composer Elliott Carter (b. 1908), that kind of biographical attention has not been forthcoming. The books on Carter that have so far appeared—including David Schiff's *The Music of Elliott Carter* (1983; 2nd rev. edn. 1998), Max Noubel's *Elliott Carter ou le temps fertile* (2000), and Felix Meyer and Anne C. Shreffler's *Elliott Carter: A Centennial Portrait in Letters and Documents* (2008)—have greatly enriched our understanding of Carter's long and eventful career, but a full-fledged biography has yet to be written.

Though the aims of the University of Illinois Press's American Composers series keep it well shy of Caroesque proportions, James Wierzbicki's *Elliott Carter*

is, at least in part, a biography, and in that respect it makes a much-needed contribution to a neglected area of Carter scholarship. Limited “by contractual necessity” (p. 99) to a low word count, Wierzbicki mixes a summary of notable events in Carter’s life with brief discussions of his music—the latter, for the most part, deftly assembled from quotations of other authors in order to showcase the views Wierzbicki finds most illuminating or most in need of qualification. The book is written in a lively and readable style and should appeal to non-specialists, while giving die-hard Carterians plenty to think about as well.

The book is arranged chronologically: chapters one, three, and four—“Foundations (1908-45),” “Maturity (1950-80),” and “New Directions (1980-2010)”—cover large chunks of roughly thirty years each. The second, somewhat shorter chapter—“Three Seminal Works (1945-51)”—deals with the six-year period during which Carter composed his Piano Sonata, Cello Sonata, and First String Quartet. There is a four-page introduction, fifteen pages of endnotes, and a six-page index of names and titles, except for entries on “pitch-class set,” “metric modulation,” and “cybernetics”(!).

The most valuable part of the book covers Carter’s early life and education. Wierzbicki’s boldest claim is that Carter changed his major from Music to English after his first semester at Harvard not because of his frustration with the Music Department’s conservatism (as Carter usually has claimed) but because “...the department’s rigorous demands were simply over Carter’s head.” (p. 13) Although clearly meant to provoke, this conclusion has at least the ring of truth. Carter’s family was not terribly encouraging of his musical talents and his early training was not extensive. Like many late bloomers, Carter threw himself into his chosen field with a special determination to master its craft. While

majoring in English he took classes and lessons at the nearby Longy School (a private conservatory), then went back to the Harvard Music Department and earned a Master's degree before setting out for Paris (in the footsteps of his teacher Walter Piston) to study with Nadia Boulanger. But Wierzbicki does not dwell on Carter's early need for remediation. In fact, he cites with approval Jonathan Bernard's observation that Carter's liberal arts training was both unusual for a composer at the time, and an essential source of inspiration for his later music.

Wierzbicki is also at pains to debunk what he calls the "unfortunately enduring myth" that Carter "was born with the proverbial silver spoon in his mouth." (p. 5) Here he is on shakier ground. Although Carter made considerable sacrifices to succeed as a professional musician, rather than an enthusiastic amateur, the allowances and gifts his family provided—including tuition at Harvard and a modest stipend in Paris—gave Carter a significant financial leg up as he was learning his craft and establishing himself professionally.

Wierzbicki's assertion that "after Harvard the young composer, in terms of finances, was pretty much on his own" (p. 6) goes too far in the other direction.

Otherwise Wierzbicki tells the story of Carter's early years well. He gives a clear and well-researched account of Carter's pivotal relationships with Ives and Boulanger and of his return to the U.S. in 1935 and the rather unsettled period that followed. By bringing familiar events together in an insightful narrative, he shows us Carter's formative years in a welcome new light.

In addressing the music, Wierzbicki makes Carter's philosophy of time his overarching theme. He emphasizes Carter's desire to move away from "novel momentary effects" (p. 39, quoting the composer) towards a more fluid

conception of musical development, and explores the young composer's diverse sources of inspiration. These include the philosophy of Alfred North Whitehead, whose lectures Carter attended at Harvard, and the Modernist literature and not-necessarily-Modernist films that Carter absorbed from the time he was a teenager. (In this respect Buster Keaton was probably as strong an influence as Alain Robbe-Grillet.) But when it comes to connecting Carter's philosophical principles and extra-musical inspirations with the specifics of his compositions, Wierzbicki tends to leave the heavy lifting to his sources, which are sometimes pitted against each other with Wierzbicki as moderator. This technique reaches its zenith in chapter 4, when summaries of several responses to Schiff's 1989 article "Carter's New Classicism" are strung together in the manner of a literature review. Technical analysis would be out of place here. But rather than a summary of scholarly *querelles*, Wierzbicki might have given the general reader better guidance in how to recognize Carter's philosophical, literary, and cinematic influences in the experience of listening to his music.

The story Wierzbicki tells of Carter's post-war development closely follows the contours David Schiff laid out in 1983, building on the work of Carter's earlier champions, among them Richard Franko Goldman, Abraham Skulsky, and William Glock. It is a story of continuous technical innovation that leads ultimately to the divided ensemble music of the 1960s—the goal of Carter's apprenticeship, and the normative standard against which the rest of his output is judged. As enduring as this story has been, both its implications and its Cold War origins have become increasingly problematic. In the march of progress toward a "mature" style, the early music is necessarily left behind as immature, while compositions like *Emblems*, and *The Minotaur* that do not fall in step are

said to be “relapses into traditional modes of rhythmic organization” and “examples of conservative backpeddling.” (p. 38) The music after 1980—in which the epic opposition of forces is subjected to ironic scrutiny when it occurs at all—is accommodated rather awkwardly via the expedient of “lightness” (an idea Carter borrowed from Italo Calvino to fulfill the terms of a 1990 commission, which has become something of a catch-all in discussions of his late music). Wierzbicki points to a “a radical turn” in Carter’s style after 1998 (p. 88), but dismisses the instrumental compositions he has written since because they “deliberately avoid the confrontations of his earlier work; the music is lyrical and shapely, but seldom does it demand concentrated listening.” (p. 95)

Given this view, it is not surprising that Wierzbicki is most interested in what he follows Schiff in calling Carter’s “American period,” from 1951-80, and the years leading up to it. Here, one wishes he had brought the same thoughtful skepticism to his account of Carter’s arrival on the international stage that he did to his early years at Harvard and Longy. That Carter’s middle-period music and his career-making success in Europe are enmeshed in Cold War politics has become increasingly clear, thanks to a good deal of recent scholarship. At the same time, those politics have been used to paint ugly caricatures of Carter as pawn of the Congress for Cultural Freedom’s CIA-funded propaganda efforts. Wierzbicki dips a toe in these increasingly turbulent waters—suggesting that Carter’s reengagement with Modernist composition was at least partly a response to the music of the European post-war avant-garde, and mentioning the CIA connection in a footnote—but he quickly retreats.

When Carter took Walter Piston’s advice to go to Paris, his plan for career success was based on a familiar model. But his big break came not in the U.S. as

an exponent of “old world” craftsmanship, but in Cold War Europe, as an American Hero—a loner iconoclast who had followed his own muse as he set off into the Arizona desert to compose his First String Quartet. As a symbol of American freedom, Carter’s music was ideal: it was uncompromising in its insistence on the inviolability of the individual voice, and if the individual voices that peopled it sometimes produced a chaotic welter instead of an ideal society, the result was interpreted not as irony, but as evidence of the strength of their individuality. The “desert myth,” with its echoes of Hollywood Westerns no less than Moses and Tamino, lionized its hero in the image of his music, and was astutely tailored to the politics of the day. As Aaron Copland discovered to his chagrin, the emergence of the Soviet Union as a world power gave the populist leanings of American neo-Classicism a distinctly suspect air. Carter’s return to Modernism circumvented that pitfall, while its portrayal as a struggle to reclaim his roots inoculated his change of style against any hint of political expedience. Similarly, his professed distance from European serialism was interpreted as a stand for freedom against the tyranny of the systematic. Thus the story of Carter’s path—a quintessentially American “road less traveled”—steered a carefully chosen course between political shoals on both the left and the right.

But were Carter’s champions in the 1950s acting in their capacity as Cold Warriors, or was their portrait merely crafted to appeal to funders with especially deep pockets? Or was theirs an honest and sympathetic account of Carter’s principled response to the dominant crises of his time? And what mix of aesthetics, patriotism, pride, and politics motivated Carter’s characterization of his own work in these years, not to mention his compositional choices? These are not easy questions to answer even if one accepts that they are relevant questions

to ask. But to conclude only that Carter “had the good fortune to be in the right place at the right time with what seemed to be exactly the right kind of music,” (p. 51) is to evade them altogether.

The study of Carter’s life and music has entered a new phase—one in which the traditional narratives are being reconsidered in a broader historical context. James Wierzbicki’s book effectively straddles the divide. He reexamines the story of Carter’s early years with care and insight, while leaving the familiar Cold War era account of his later success, and his music, largely undisturbed. If there are general readers out there who are still interested in contemporary concert music, they will learn a good deal from Wierzbicki’s *Elliott Carter*. It may even tempt some of them to listen to Carter’s music for themselves. If so, they have a treat in store, and Wierzbicki’s book will have done a valuable service. The Carter mythology that took shape in the 1950s and ‘60s was hard on his early pieces, and its continued application a half-century later has been hard on his recent ones too. And now the pieces in the middle are under fire from Freedom-loving iconoclasts of a different stripe eager to save the world from the so-called monstrosities of post-war Modernism. That is an irony worthy of Elliott Carter’s music... if we are willing to pay it attention.

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