

Arts

A matter of time

Andrew Clark salutes composer Elliott Carter, who is still going strong as he celebrates his 100th birthday this week

Classical music is full of dead composers, most of whom are fetéd more than their living counterparts. But the American modernist Elliott Carter, who will celebrate his 100th birthday on Thursday, is still very alive. What's more, he is still composing. That must be unique.

Composers aren't supposed to go on as long as this. Sibelius, who lived until he was 91, stopped composing in his 60s. Verdi started slowing in his 60s, although he produced some of his greatest works in his last decades, and put down his pen at 85. With Carter, it is different. The older he gets, the more prolific he becomes. Since his early 80s he has produced a succession of works that, if not his most adventurous, have certainly been his most approachable. That is an achievement worth saluting.

Born in New York on December 11 1908, Carter didn't attract international attention until the 1950s, when he developed a technique known as "metric modulation", whereby motifs are superimposed at different pulses to create intriguing layered effects. Few outside the contemporary music circuit understood it. Concert promoters stayed well clear. Carter was considered an audience-killer.

Today, despite signs that modernism is blending into musical tradition, the situation is little different. According to the pro-

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motional blurp for the centenary, Carter is "widely recognised as one of the foremost composers of our time". Yes – if "widely" means a small but influential circle of European musicians, impresarios, critics and publishers, whose taste was forged by the postwar avant-garde. Among the wider public Carter remains as little known as ever.

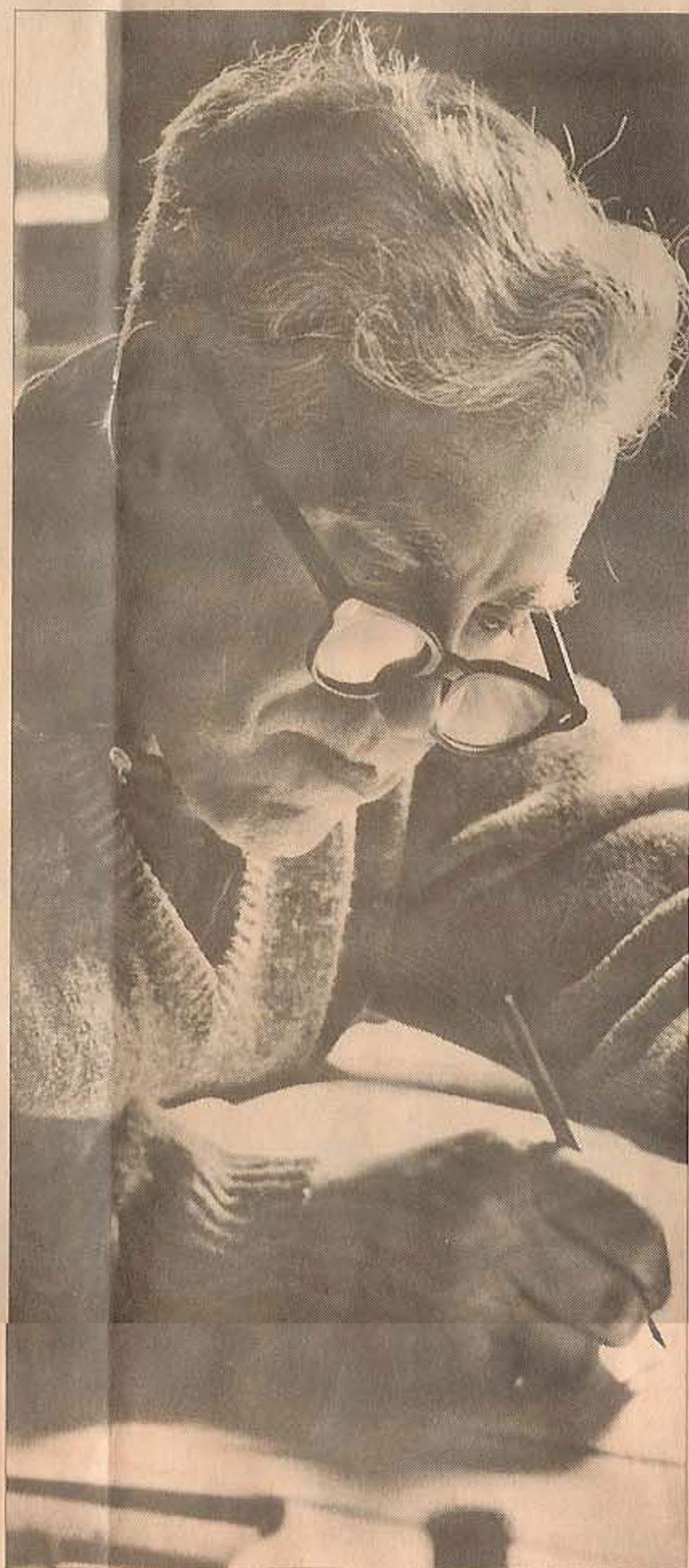
So there's a degree of hypocrisy at work in Carter's birthday bash. Many in the musical world and beyond are happy to acclaim him because he is lovably old, a piece of living history – precocious enough to have been taught by Gustav Holst, well enough connected to have been befriended by Charles Ives, intelligent enough to have won the respect of Igor Stravinsky, sufficiently heavyweight to attract champions of the calibre of Daniel Barenboim, Pierre Boulez and James Levine, who are leading the birthday dance on either side of the Atlantic.

But look through the programmes of most musical organisations and his name is conspicuous by its absence – above all in his native US, where the tide of culture has flowed away from art that requires patience, concentration and sustained intellectual



Maestro Elliott Carter, 100 years old on Thursday, is still composing; from left, Carter in 1918, 1966, and 2006

William Gedney, ArenaPAL



engagement, as Carter's does. Carter himself says the world is living through "a period of confusion. We're constantly overwhelmed with confused problems, and sometimes the expression of confusion is an important thing. When this period wears itself out, people will become more sensitive [to complexity] than they are now, and then they will like my music."

We'll see. Posterity may dismiss much of Carter's output as dry and academic but it is less forbidding now than it appeared in the 1960s and 1970s, and Carter's style has become increasingly lucid and lyrical. Even if the music leaves you cold, you can still admire him for his creative longevity.

For those who persevere with the thickets of complexity, he is significant for two

reasons. First, his *oeuvre* synthesises some of the most potent musical forces of the past 100 years – on one hand the classical rigour taught to him in Paris by Nadia Boulanger in the early 1930s, on the other the musical modernism pioneered by American mavericks such as Varèse and Ives, both of whom Carter knew, and by Europe's postwar avant-garde, whose rebellious freedoms he took to heart but whose dogma he did not follow. There was a third influence – the rhythmic language of Stravinsky and American jazz, each of which plays regular patterns against irregular.

It was Carter's absorption of these influences that, after a series of unremarkable neoclassical works in the 1940s, led to his groundbreaking String Quartet No 1,

completed when he was 42. This calls on the four instruments to work at constantly varying speeds to each other for much of the piece, before returning to the tempo with which they all started. Written during a scholarship-funded retreat in the Arizona desert in 1950, it marked the birth of "metric modulation" – and of Carter as we know him. Like the Double Concerto and Piano Concerto that followed, the music was fiendish to play and difficult for audiences to understand. Carter knew it was so, but this was the music he wanted to write; he has never compromised or courted popularity. With time and familiarity, Carter's interpreters have found ways of making it sing.

His significance lies, secondly, in the way his music embodies a philosophy of life – a Beethovenian ideal that few of today's composers aspire to. "My music," says Carter, "is a picture of society as I hope it will be – a lot of individuals dealing with each other, sensitive to each other and co-operating, and yet not losing their individuality."

You can hear it, with almost visual clarity, echoing through his Clarinet Concerto and Asko Concerto. It's a philosophy born of his first-hand experience of Europe in turmoil from the early 1920s (when Carter visited first world war battlefields with his father) to the mid-1940s, and reinforced by the attack on the Twin Towers of September 2001 in New York, where Carter lives.

Exactly when that philosophy began consciously to influence his music is hard to tell but there's one other aspect of his thinking that has increasingly enriched his output – the idea of musical time. One piece may appear to occupy a long time but say little, whereas another may seem to last a very short time but say a lot. Carter demonstrated the effect in his 10-minute orchestral triptych *Three Illusions* (2005), which ranks in his *oeuvre* on the same plane as *Falstaff* in Verdi's. An old man looks back on life a little cynically but none too seriously – and, with masterly compression, shows his juniors how it's done.

I cannot claim "friendship" with Carter, as critics often do with composers they admire, but I did conduct two extended face-to-face interviews with him – the first at his Greenwich Village apartment in 2000, not long before the death of his wife, the sculptor Helen Frost-Jones. Despite an easy flow of musical conversation, he kept saying, "Come on, Mr Clark, what do you want to ask me?", as if challenging me to stimulate him. Before my arrival he had taken advantage of the early morning quiet to write out "a little cello piece", an offshoot of his recently completed cello concerto. The harmonic inspiration had come only the day before but the score for this jewel (*Figment 2*) was now sitting on his modest worktable, the ink barely dry, as legibly precise as it was scribble-free.

When I chatted to him last week on the phone, the same process was under way. He had just put the finishing touches to *On Conversing with Paradise*, an Ezra Pound vocal work for next summer's Aldeburgh festival, and was midway through a series of eight pieces for soprano and clarinet on poems by Louis Zukofsky. Next up is a duo for violin and cello. And what was he reading? Shakespeare – *Henry VI Part I*. "Now that I'm getting old, I'm getting impatient," he said with the same spry courtesy as ever. "I'm full of all kinds of things, so I'm writing music I can write down more quickly. The big pieces took such an enormous amount of time."

Age may have made Carter tire more quickly but it has not altered the daily craft of creativity, of reacting to his human environment, of translating thoughts into musical ideas, and transferring those ideas on to bar lines. That craft is a life force, a well of inspiration that has endowed him, and us, with the richest of Indian summers.

Andrew Clark is the FT's chief classical music critic

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CENTENARY CELEBRATIONS

Get Carter

The best way to engage with Elliott Carter is by attending live performances of his music. Opportunities in the coming week include two high-profile concerts on December 11, the composer's 100th birthday, led by Pierre Boulez at London's Festival Hall and James Levine at Carnegie Hall in New York.

On the same evening at Birmingham's Symphony Hall, Elspeth Dutch and the City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra give the UK premiere of the Horn Concerto, while the BBC Symphony gives the world premiere of *Wind Rose* on December 16 at the Barbican, London.

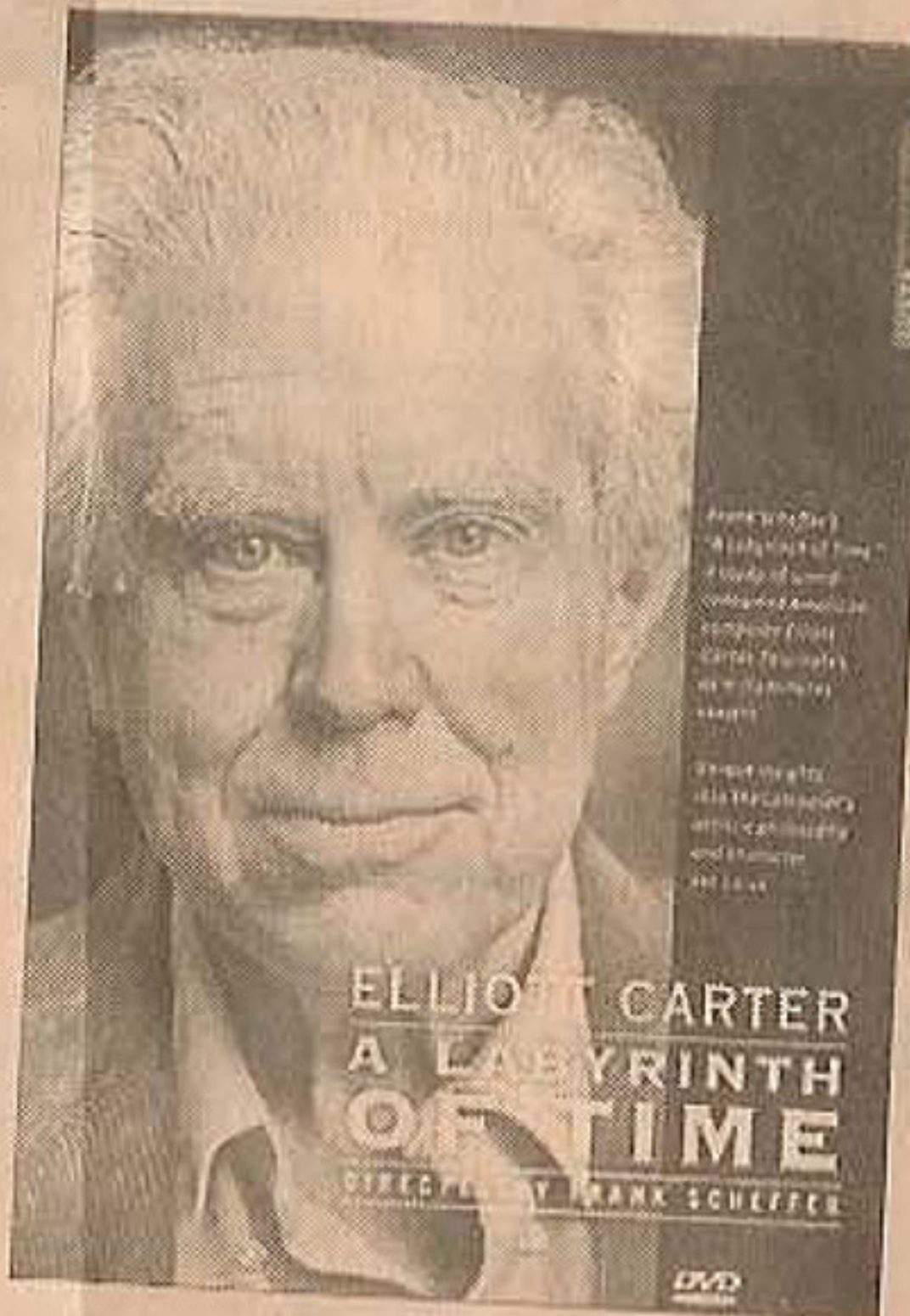
The Pacifica Quartet will play Carter's five string quartets (1950-1995) on February 3 at London's Wigmore Hall, and a new 20-minute work for voice and ensemble will be premiered at the

Aldeburgh Festival in Suffolk on June 20.

The DVD of Frank Scheffer's 90-minute Carter film portrait, *A Labyrinth of Time*, provides a fascinating introduction to the man and his world. The most useful CD to have come out of the Carter centenary is a

collection of short chamber pieces on the 2L label, which finds unexpected links between his early tonal idiom and some recent bonbons.

For committed Carterites, the only acceptable Christmas present will be the lavishly illustrated, handsomely documented and superbly annotated *Elliott Carter: A Centennial Portrait in Letters and Documents* by Felix Meyer and Anne C Shreffler, published this month by the Boydell Press in association with the Paul Sacher Foundation.



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