

***Figments and Fragments: Chamber Music by Elliott Carter.*** *Sonata for 'Cello and Piano, Figments 1 and 2, Enchanted Preludes, Scrivo in Vento, Gra, Con Legrgerezza Pensosa, Fragments 1 and 2, Elegy for String Quartet.* Johannes Martens Ensemble: Johannes Martens, Joachim Kjelsaas Kwetzinsky, Tom Ottar Andreassen, Andjei Maeovski, Anders Nilsson, Yi Yang, Anders Rensvik. 2L 2L54SACD.

***Elliott Carter: 100<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Release.*** *Mosaic, Scrivo in Vento, Gra, Enchanted Preludes, Steep Steps, Figments 1 and 2, Riconoscenza per Goffredo Petrassi, Rhapsodic Musings, Dialogues.* New Music Concerts Ensemble, Robert Aitken, Director; Robert Aitken, Max Christie, Virgil Blackwell, David Hetherington, Fujiko Imajishi. Naxos, CD 8.559614 with DVD 2.110256.

Both of these discs were intended as part of the wide-spread celebration of the Carter Centennial, the second more explicitly so, and both offer a brace of relatively recent smaller pieces for solo instruments or small ensembles (with a certain amount of overlap between the two discs) anchored by larger and more substantial works. Carter's smaller scaled works started in the 1980s as a trickle amidst much larger pieces, and have become increasingly more prevalent over the years, mostly as birthday and memorial tributes to friends, often composers, but also as works for the world class performers who have championed Carter's music.

The music of composers who survive into old age and continue to write usually undergoes some sort of qualitative change. Although the dimensions of his works remained more or less the same, in his old age Verdi turned to comedy for the first time in his mature career. Vaughan Williams's later works were suddenly brimming with new and vivid instrumental color, allied with an expanded tonal and harmonic sense. The music of Stravinsky's last period, aside from being twelve-tone, displayed a greatly increased concentration and compression of substance, texture, and time scale. (Although there is probably not much else that they have in common, both Vaughan Williams and Stravinsky, in their last major works—the *Ninth Symphony* and *Requiem Canticles*, respectively—produced summation works that seem to be continually referencing their earlier music.) Virgil Thomson, reflecting an older person's reluctance to spend too much time by himself or to expend too much stamina at a time, returned to an earlier practice of writing musical portraits of people who would sit in a room with him for an hour at a time. Arthur Berger, having conceded that the world at large wasn't particularly interested in music, stopped writing new music, although being unwilling to completely give up on composition, he began to re-write his pieces, but recasting and altering them so they became virtually new works. Strauss, Faure, and Brahms also offer striking examples of stylistic changes in the last stages of their careers.

Carter's later career has been marked not only by an increase in shorter, smaller scaled works, but also, generally, by a change in both the density of the music and the scope and complexity of the initial generating idea and its development. (The *Sinfonia: sum fluxae pretium spei*, Carter's longest single work, from 1996, is in some ways an exception to this trend, and in others not.) Whereas in an earlier phase Carter would say, "I've lots of ideas about writing for the orchestra and do like to have time and the incentive to put them down, but it's a terrible lot of thought, imaginative effort and just plain note writing. I limit myself to a small number of orchestral pieces...", by the mid 1980s, his attitude was, "I am continually thinking of musical possibilities, of short motivic figures, chord progressions, trying over in my head all sort of musical textures and colors. Sometimes one of these seem particularly interesting, and then I begin to think how it could be led into and away from, and soon a whole section of a piece begins to form itself....with each piece I try to do something different because I like to be involved in the piece and take chances with it, not knowing at first where it will lead or how it will turn out. To me, it's like going on an expedition to a place where I have not been."<sup>1</sup> These shorter works, displaying a staggering profusion of materials, expressive characters, instrumental textures, narrative strategies, and musical

<sup>1</sup>Both of these quotations, the first from a 1973 interview with Stuart Liebman in the Boston Phoenix, and the second from an interview at the Banff Center with Robert Johnston, Michael Century, Robert J. Rosen, and Don Stein in 1984, are contained in *Elliott Carter: A Centennial Portrait in Letters and Documents*, edited by Felix Meyer and Anne C. Schreffler.

realizations are evidence of a vivid musical imagination, worthy of comparison with that of Haydn. The solo works, *Scrivo in Vento*, *Gra*, *Fragments I and II*, *Steep Steps*, *Riconoscenza per Goffredo Petrassi*, and *Rhapsodic Musings* do all have in common their presentation of clearly delineated contrasting materials whose interactions, either cooperative or confrontational, or both in turn, are the substance of the formal trajectory of the work.

The '*Cello Sonata* (1947-48), which is the major piece on the Johannes Martens Ensemble disc and the oldest work on either disc, was, along with the *Piano Sonata* of two years earlier, the harbinger of what one might call Carter's mature style, which conclusively arrived with the *First String Quartet* in 1951. The beginning idea of the Sonata is that the manner of sound production of the two instruments is irreconcilable and that those differences should be featured rather than hidden. This idea, which is at the same time abstract and completely grounded in a simple aural reality, leads to the development of distinct thematic material and the projection of different senses of the movement of time for the two instruments and thus generates a continuously unfolding intensely dramatic form that eventually comes full circle, but with those instrumental characteristics and materials reversed. *Enchanted Preludes* of 1988 starts with an idea both similar and contrary to that of the sonata: the two instruments, a wind and a string, mimic each other's characteristic sonic and articulative qualities, creating a continuously fused airy textural web while maintaining separate and distinctive intervallic and rhythmic vocabularies. *Con Leggerezza Pensosa*, for clarinet, violin, and 'cello, whose title, drawn from the writings of its dedicatee, Italo Calvino, which means 'lightness of thoughtfulness,' might serve as a description of the manner of all these later pieces, also builds its form from the differentiated sonic, rhythmic, and intervallic characteristics of the three instruments, but in this case treating them as parts of a larger meta-instrument which subsumes them all, the form being the dramatic curve of their fusions and oppositions. *Fragments I and II* (1994 and 1999, respectively) and the *Elegy* of 1946 are brief textural essays which stand as pendants to the five string quartets which as a unit stand as a major component of Carter's output.

The major works on the New Music Concerts Ensemble disc are *Mosaic* (2005) for harp and seven instruments and *Dialogues* (2004) for piano and eighteen instruments. *Mosaic*, which is a tribute to Carlos Salzedo, harpist and composer, who was one of the ultramodernists composers who were influential on Carter during his early years, explores many of the innovative harp playing techniques developed by Salzedo through a series of short episodes described by Carter as being like *tessera* (the individual stones making up a mosaic.) *Dialogues* is the first of three late works (the others being *Soundings* of 2005 and *Interventions* of 2007) exploring the conversational and sometimes confrontational relationship between solo piano and a large instrumental ensemble.

Although all of the performances on both discs are, to say the least, completely above reproach, the most memorable is that of the '*Cello Sonata* by Johannes Martens and Joachim Kjelsaas Kwetzinsky. Searingly passionate, powerfully intense, completely in control of the technical and rhythmic difficulties, and understanding of the musical and expressive complexities of the work, while always beautiful of sound, it seems to me to be the best performance of it, either live or on recording, that I have experienced. In general the lingering impression of the performances of the Johannes Martens ensemble is of the strongly vivid instrumental color of their performances (in the case of the early gentle *Elegy*, perhaps to its detriment), but the performances of the members of the New Music Concerts Ensemble are also uniformly strongly expressive and musically satisfying. The contrasts between the more playful performance of *Gra* by Andjei Maevski and the more aggressive one of Max Christie, Robert Aitken's intense and sensuous performance of *Scrivo In Vento* and Tom Ottar Andreassen's rather cooler one, are interesting to think about, and between them offer one a fuller picture of the respective pieces.

The Naxos disc comes with a DVD documentary entitled *Elliott Carter in Toronto in 2006*, which contains a conversation between Carter and Robert Aitken and performances of *Mosaic* and *Dialogues*.

John Rodney Lister, June 2009