

Elliott Carter

Flute Concerto (2008)

ELLIOTT COOK CARTER, JR., was born December 11, 1908, in New York City, and lives there in the Greenwich Village apartment he acquired in the early 1950s. He wrote the Flute Concerto in late 2007 and early 2008, completing it on February 25, 2008. It was requested by Elena Bashkirova, director of the Jerusalem International Chamber Music Festival, which commissioned the concerto along with the Berlin Philharmonic and the Boston Symphony Orchestra. Emmanuel Pahud, principal flute of the Berlin Philharmonic, was soloist in the first performance, which was given by the Jerusalem International Chamber Music Festival Ensemble under Daniel Barenboim's direction on September 9, 2008. Pahud gave the first European performances of the concerto with the Berlin Philharmonic and Barenboim in June 2008, attended by the composer. These are the first American performances. The score is dedicated to Elena Bashkirova.

IN ADDITION TO THE SOLO FLUTE, the score calls for an orchestra of flute (doubling piccolo), oboe (doubling English horn), two clarinets (second doubling bass clarinet), bassoon (doubling contrabassoon), two horns, trumpet, trombone, percussion (marimba, xylophone, vibraphone, log drum, five temple blocks, two woodblocks, snare drum, four bongos, four tom-toms, two cymbals, tam-tam, shaker, Almglocke, bass drum, and a length of pipe), harp, piano, and strings (minimum two on a part, expandable proportionately). Duration is about fourteen minutes.

For many years flutists have been asking for a flute concerto, yet I kept putting it off because I felt that the flute could not produce the sharp attacks that I use so frequently. But the idea of the beautiful qualities of the different registers of the instrument and the extraordinary agility attracted me more and more, so when Elena Bashkirova asked me to write something for her and the Jerusalem International Chamber Music Festival, I decided it would be a flute concerto. From mid-September 2007 to March 2008 ideas and notes for it fascinated me without relief.

Elliott Carter, May 2008

So Elliott Carter has written a Flute Concerto, to go along with the increasing bouquet of other concerto and concertante pieces that have become such a major part of his body of work in the past quarter-century.

There have been particular triggers for all of Carter's concertos, as is the case with most composers; in the past twenty years, he has written a concerto for a different instrument on average about every two years, repeating an instrument only with piano (for *Dialogues*, 2003, and *Interventions*, 2008), and with a bit of a hiatus for the composition of his big orchestral triptych *Symphonia* in the early-to-mid 1990s. The first in the series was the Oboe Concerto, commissioned by the great new-music advocate and conductor Paul Sacher in 1988 for Heinz Holliger, to coincide with Carter's eightieth birthday. That and the Violin Concerto (1990) are both more than twenty-five minutes in length; the concertos have since tended smaller, with the Flute Concerto and the Horn Concerto clocking in at twelve to fourteen minutes. A brand-new piece in the genre, a Concertino for Bass Clarinet and Chamber Orchestra written for Carter's longtime friend and proponent Virgil Blackwell, is hot off the presses; the premiere hasn't yet been scheduled.

Although these pieces have all been the results of requests from specific musicians, it's in Carter's nature to approach any project as an opportunity to discover something new; and even with his eighty years of experience writing for all kinds of instruments, he typically delves even further into their potential when placing them in a solo role. Initially reticent about writing the Horn Concerto, for example, he eventually became fascinated with the idea and worked closely with BSO principal horn James Sommerville, for whom the piece was intended, to explore the horn's full range of techniques. Carter also recently wrote two pieces for ensemble types he'd never tackled before: string orchestra for *Sound Fields* (commissioned by the Tanglewood Music Center and premiered during the Carter Centenary Festival at Tanglewood in July 2008) and wind ensemble for *Wind Rose*. Both pieces are astonishing in their ephemeral, timbre-based, homogenous textures, completely different from the brilliant density we tend to associate with Carter's music. (Carter wrote *Wind Rose* at conductor Oliver Knussen's request as a complement to *Sound Fields*, completing it within three weeks of the premiere of the string orchestra piece.)

Carter's other freshly premiered and soon-to-be-premiered works include his setting for baritone and orchestra of the *Pisan Cantos* of Ezra Pound, titled *On Conversing with Paradise*, first performed at the Aldeburgh Festival in June 2009; *Poems of Louis Zukofsky* for mezzo-soprano and clarinet, premiered at Tanglewood last August; a wind quintet, *Nine by Five*, due for premiere on February 11 in New York; and a new work for soprano and orchestra on

poems of Marianne Moore, *What Are Years*, which will first be heard at the Aldeburgh Festival this coming June. The Tanglewood Music Orchestra, led by James Levine, gives the American premiere this summer; the piece was jointly commissioned by the Tanglewood Music Center, the Aldeburgh Festival, and the Lucerne Festival.

All this can be summed up in something Carter said during a conversation about his *Boston Concerto* in 2003:

In our situation, in our time, in this place, to write music as far as I'm concerned is to get in a situation of great adventure, an adventure that's going to make you think of something that you haven't done, that's something you haven't thought about, that makes you think in a new way. And I think every one of the pieces that I've written, except some of the little tiny pieces—and even some of them—represent this point of view.

It certainly doesn't appear that he has changed his approach at all since he turned 100 in December 2008.

The direct impetus for Carter's Flute Concerto was a request from Elena Bashkirova, a Russian-born pianist and administrator, founder of the Jerusalem International Chamber Music Festival, which co-commissioned the concerto together with the Berlin Philharmonic and the Boston Symphony Orchestra. It was Bashkirova's husband, Daniel Barenboim, who led the first performances of the piece: the world premiere in Jerusalem in September 2008 and the European premiere in Berlin in June 2009. The soloist in both cases was the Swiss-born Emmanuel Pahud, an acclaimed flutist with an international solo and recording career and also the Berlin Philharmonic's principal flute. The soloist in this week's BSO performances is our own principal flute, Elizabeth Rowe. (Next month, Heinz Holliger, for whom Carter wrote his Oboe Concerto, conducts the Hyogo Chamber Orchestra in the Japanese premiere of the Flute Concerto, with Swiss flutist Felix Renggli.)

The outward dimensions of the Flute Concerto are similar to those of other recent Carter concertos, for example *Dialogues* for piano and orchestra (heard here last week) and the Horn Concerto. Compared to those pieces, the Flute Concerto is perhaps less mosaic-like, its moods and episodes changing less rapidly, although high contrast and rapid shifts of character are still the norm. Great musical agility is required of the soloist: fast arpeggios like the one on which the soloist enters, tremolos (rapid alternation between two pitches), leaps of two or more octaves (including several instances of two octaves plus a minor second, and a couple of two octaves plus a tritone), and rapid and precise changes of articulation and dynamics. The athletic flute dominates the first and last parts of the concerto; the lyrical flute prevails throughout the central part.

The orchestra is used sparingly: a sharp wind chord at the start outlines the harmonic basis of the piece, seconded by the flute's quick arpeggio (rich with major thirds) and the sustained chord in the strings. A transparent, pointillist, and quite variegated orchestral foundation is laid for the flute's accompaniment, the orchestra rarely striking out on its own. Gradually, though, orchestral bursts become more insistent, becoming prominent for a brief *Meno mosso* section in which the soloist's role is all single notes separated by rests. An orchestral burst marks a clear beginning of the lyrical *Andante*, where the soloist's legato line is supported and filled in by the orchestral flute, a surprising interplay of nearly identical timbres. Tremolos by the soloist introduce a brief, primarily orchestral *Presto*, interrupted by short sustained passages for the soloist. These anticipate the long ensuing section (*Mesto*, "mournful"), with the soloist playing a far-ranging melody, very sparsely accompanied. A brief chordal flourish in the orchestra leads to an *Allegro non troppo* section, virtually static but for the flute's almost cadenza-like line. Finally the soloist embarks on a quick, mercurial, staccato episode, marked "*Leggierissimo (presto possibile)*" (essentially, "as nimbly and as quickly as possible") that propels the piece to its close.

Robert Kirzinger