

Elliott Carter
Horn Concerto (2006)

ELLIOTT COOK CARTER, JR., was born in New York City on December 11, 1908, and lives there. He wrote the Horn Concerto in 2006 on commission from the Boston Symphony Orchestra, James Levine, Music Director, with generous support from the New Works Fund established by the Massachusetts Cultural Council, a state agency. Carter wrote the solo part specifically for the BSO's principal horn, James Sommerville; the score is inscribed "to James Levine" and "for James Sommerville." Sommerville was the soloist with the BSO and James Levine in the first performances of the concerto, which took place on November 15, 17, and 20, 2007, in Symphony Hall. He repeated the work with the BSO and conductor Shi-Yeon Sung on July 24, 2008, at Tanglewood's Seiji Ozawa Hall during the five-day Festival of Contemporary Music marking Elliott Carter's 100th birthday year.

IN ADDITION TO THE SOLO HORN, the score calls for flute, two piccolos, two oboes, English horn, two clarinets, bass clarinet, contrabass clarinet, two bassoons and contrabassoon, three trumpets, three trombones, tuba, percussion (three minimum—I: vibraphone, large gong, large almglocke, cowbell, temple blocks, bongos, triangle, small maracas, high snare drum; II: marimba, two tom-toms, medium snare drum, large and small suspended cymbals, woodblocks, very high pipes, tambourine, large maracas; III: glockenspiel, bass drum, low snare drum, medium snare drum, log drum, medium suspended symbol, wood gong, guiro, large pipe), piano, and strings. The piece is in one movement and is about twelve minutes long.

Elliott Carter celebrates his 100th birthday on December 11, 2008, with the Boston Symphony Orchestra, James Levine, and pianist Daniel Barenboim performing his piano and orchestra work *Interventions* in a concert at Carnegie Hall. Carter wrote *Interventions* at the joint request of Levine and Barenboim for a work specifically for them to perform together on the occasion; it received its first performances this December 4 and 5 at Symphony Hall. This week's performances of the Horn Concerto are also part of these birthday celebrations for the composer. Soloist James Sommerville, in addition to giving the first performances of the concerto in November 2007 and repeating it this past summer at Tanglewood, also played it with the Netherlands Radio Chamber Orchestra and Peter Eötvös in January 2008, and with the Orchestra Sinfonica Nazionale della RAI, Peter Rundel conducting, at the Torino Milano International Music Festival in September.

Including the Horn Concerto, Elliott Carter has written eight concertos (so designated) for solo instruments. The first was the Double Concerto for Harpsichord, Piano, and Two Chamber Orchestras (1961); this was followed a few years later by the big Piano Concerto, written for Jacob Lateiner and premiered by the Boston Symphony Orchestra in April 1967. Most of Carter's concertos are relatively recent, beginning with the Oboe Concerto, followed by the Violin Concerto, Clarinet Concerto, Cello Concerto, the Horn Concerto, and a Flute Concerto, the premiere of which Daniel Barenboim conducted in Jerusalem in September with soloist Emmanuel Pahud and the Jerusalem International Chamber Music Ensemble. The Flute Concerto is another Boston Symphony Orchestra co-commission. (There are also the Concerto for Orchestra, premiered by the New York Philharmonic in 1969, and the BSO-commissioned *Boston Concerto* of 2003, but these are concertos of a different sort.) There are other "concerted" works as well, including three for piano solo and orchestra, all written within the past few years: *Dialogues*, *Soundings*, and *Interventions*.

Changes in Carter's rate of production, and in the music itself, since about 1980 have been much remarked upon. The number of works he has written in the past thirty years or so easily exceeds twice or even three times the number he wrote in the previous thirty or even forty years. Much of this change is due to an upsurge in requests from his many musical friends and colleagues. Daniel Barenboim with the Chicago Symphony and the Berlin Staatsoper, and James Levine with the Met Orchestra in New York and with the Boston Symphony Orchestra, have been significant among these colleagues in the past decade or so, as has BSO artistic administrator Anthony Fogg, who arranged for the commission of Carter's *Boston Concerto* prior to Levine's appointment as music director.

It was James Levine who suggested that Carter write a horn concerto for the BSO. The composer wasn't immediately sold on the idea, although he had had experience writing hefty parts for the horn in his Brass Quintet and the Concerto for Orchestra, both of which feature highly idiomatic horn parts. (Carter had begun looking closely at the range of the instrument's potential in the 1950s, when he got to know a horn player in the Symphony Orchestra of Italian Radio while in residence at the American Academy in Rome.) Levine suggested that Carter listen for inspiration to the playing of the BSO's principal horn, James Sommerville, when attending the BSO's

concerts, not only in performances of his own music but of other works both in Boston and at Carnegie Hall. With that sound as a trigger, Carter eventually began to sketch a solo part. Sommerville provided technical feedback as the work became more detailed, which he described in a short article he wrote for the newsletter of the New England Horn Society, *Cornucopia*:

During the spring of 2006, crumpled envelopes would appear periodically in my mailbox, stuffed with pages from handwritten sketches and questions. By mid-August, Carter had substantially completed the concerto. During the process, I drove down to Manhattan and played through the sketches for him. Carter was gracious, and unusually collaborative for such an august figure. He took my timorous suggestions seriously, though his understanding of the horn was encyclopedic....He was curious about alternate fingerings, and uses these to great effect in the work.

The sense of sheer enjoyment of the horn in the concerto, the focus on things that only the horn can play, is hard to miss. Carter wrote the solo part for the specific sonic personality of the triple horn. Its three lengths of tubing (F, B-flat, F alto) allow for a much greater range of timbres than the more standard double horn offers.

The concerto begins with a brief series of sharp chords—successively brass, marimba, woodwinds, piano, strings, then a massive, fortissimo twelve-note chord for the whole orchestra. Out of this emerges the soloist's first sustained pitch. Carter describes the soloist's relationship to the orchestra as being a part of the ensemble that gradually separates from the larger group. The piece is laid out in a series of episodes played continuously. The big divisions are:

Allegro (q = 120)—

Meno mosso (q = 96)—

Meno mosso (q = 72). Scherzando—

Più mosso (q = 90)—

Largo (h = 48)—

Presto (q = 144)—

Meno mosso (q = 120/h = 60)

The horn's material is unique for each episode, and each is characterized by a particular ensemble timbre. Full orchestra accompanies the horn's initial bold line, which features a very wide melodic range and both sustained and fast music. Two breaks for percussion alone interrupt, leading to the next section, a quiet and lyrical one for the soloist accompanied with a shifting backdrop of brass. In the succeeding Scherzando section, the horn shifts rapidly among several different kinds of sound, from fully stopped (a congested tone) through echo tone and fully open, accompanied mostly by unpitched percussion. This section broadens out into an episode marked "emphatically" in the solo part, with sharp orchestral chords—the strings surge in little accelerations and decelerations written into their parts.

The Largo section returns to sustained, lyrical music for the horn with delicate percussion and strings. The Presto passage contrasts strongly, with rapid figuration in the solo part, including quickly repeated pitches. (The composer was surprised to find that his sketches for this very fast section were so readily handled by Sommerville when he played through them.) The orchestral music here is sparse, even pointillistic. The closing section is lyrical once again, building to the horn's highest point and largest, most dramatic leap downward. The final measures echo the horn's emergence from the first big orchestral chord at the start of the piece.