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## INTERVIEWS

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During the Fall of 1968, a series of ten conversations with contemporary American composers was held under the auspices of the School for Continuing Education at New York University. Tapes were made at the sessions, the tapes were transcribed, and the transcriptions were edited to maximize continuity and coherence while preserving as much of the original spontaneous, informal character of the exchanges as possible. Brief extracts from these are being published in this and subsequent issues of the Newsletter; the complete versions will appear in PERSPECTIVES OF NEW MUSIC, beginning in the Spring-Summer 1969 issue.

Benjamin Boretz

### CONVERSATION WITH ELLIOTT CARTER

By Benjamin Boretz  
New York University

Now, I don't intend to engage in an elaborate introduction of Elliott Carter, because I assume that you all know who he is. But it might explain some of what happens in the discussion that follows if I do mention something about his relation to the younger generation of American composers. Most of us look back to the appearance of Elliott's first string quartet (which was 1951) as a moment that gave us an extraordinarily tangible prospect of what we could hope to do as composers--particularly as American composers, and even more particularly as "advanced" composers. Perhaps by now it is difficult to recall how difficult it was to feel secure about being, and being recognized as, a "serious" composer, but it was--and I mean "serious" in a sense having to do with more than the mere production of one's works in the concert rather than the dance hall, but also with such questions as the professional viability of what we generally called "advanced" musical characteristics and attitudes toward composition, with questions of what are considered to be complexities in musical structure and surface, which were not only misunderstood by virtue of the predominant tendencies of prominent American music up until that time, but were also involved with the general notion that the proper locus of such complexity and advancement was strictly European. There was even a general idea that the manner in which it was appropriate to realize complex musical ideas had not to be defined by our own composers, even though there was and had been for a long time

an American tradition of music involving various kinds of extreme complexity--some of them realized in a rather simplistic way to be sure. Elliott, of course, has often spoken of this music, particularly that of Ives, and it is perhaps an aspect of that special quality his work has for us that it seems clearly to have something to do with this tradition.

Perhaps this connection might most clearly be made by beginning our discussion with Elliott's Double Concerto which seems rather prominently to engage the two issues of "complexity" of idea and surface. Here medium, in at least the purely instrumental sense, can hardly but be apparent as a significant issue in the immediate surface of the piece. So perhaps a good first question would be "What particular relation does the composition of the instrumental ensemble (the piano, the harpsichord, and the ensembles associated with them) have to what you consider your 'compositional idea', in the largest music-conceptual sense?"

EC: Well, the most important consideration was the use of each one of the different groups of instruments--the percussion (there are four percussion players and a very large array of percussion instruments), the two keyboard soloists (harpsichord and piano), and then an array of 12 pitched instruments (4 solo strings, 4 woodwinds, and 4 brass). The original idea of this piece came from a request by Ralph Kirkpatrick for a piece for piano and harpsichord. It occurred to me as I thought about this that piano and harpsichord would be like oil and water, as far as sound goes. After a great deal of thought I decided to use all these other instruments to help join them together. The percussion instruments isolate the attack characteristics of the keyboard instruments and the other instruments, in a very crude way, isolate the sustained sounds, so that the two basic aspects of the keyboard instruments are amplified by the choice of all of the other orchestral instruments. And each has its own characteristic instrumental analog: that is, since the harpsichord has a rather metallic, sharp, biting sound, while the piano has a rather more soft and subdued sound, the harpsichord is accompanied by things like cymbals, which can produce a sharply struck metallic sound as well as a sort of swooshing, and also by woodblocks, triangles, and other metallic and wood instruments; while the piano is accompanied by drums because of its rather heavier attack quality. Another thing that was most important to me was that the harpsichord is an instrument where the kinds of



attack have no effect on the dynamics produced-- it is mechanical in this respect. What produces its various degrees of loudness are pedals in which you add more or less numbers of strings and also different kinds of mutes and other things, while the piano on the other hand responds directly to the human touch. And thus the idea finally began to take shape in my mind of two antiphonal groups, one characterizing the harpsichord, and the other the piano. Now, how to use this remained still, of course, an open problem. I want you to understand that to me, and I guess for most composers, the instrumental presentation of the work has to be justified by the idea. In almost every case, the instrumental presentation, the instrumental arrangement comes first because it is given. The next step after the choice of instruments is to invent a world of ideas which requires these instruments to present them. In this piece, the contrast of these two worlds of things, harpsichord-derived and piano-derived, seem to me one of the most fascinating things in the proposition.

BB: This idea seems evident in the piece, and does indeed engage a compositional level considerably deeper than that of a simple specification of the instrumental arrangement. But there are still further questions that occur to me in this connection, having to do with, for example, kinds or structures of what relation the particular things that one identifies as "events" in one way or another have to the characteristics of the medium. Thus, for instance, I have often wondered about the degree to which, in your music, timbre with all its extensions (not just the timbre of an instrument, but all the timbral characteristics of an ensemble or group of ensembles) becomes a structural element, perhaps even to the extent that pitches (or, rather, pitch groupings) associated with instrumental attacks are secondary in some sense to the other characteristics of the "sound", at least function in a double way, that is partly just as timbre. How much, in fact, do you consider that the interior of events in your music is conditioned by timbral considerations more than by pitch structural considerations that are more compositionally traditional?

EC: Well, let me say that there are several aspects: one of the things is, that in the course of deciding that the Double Concerto would be an antiphonal dialogue between the harpsichord and its orchestra and the piano and its orchestra, I also realized that a literal antiphony that would be constant and constantly differentiated throughout the work would be uninteresting, and so in each ensemble I introduced counterparts to the opposite one. There are, I think, five cymbals, and they are ranged among the four percussion players on both sides of the stage. Similarly, there are four or five drums that are so disposed, so that it's possible to have not only the "answering" of "opposed" timbres but of similar timbres as well. This was an important idea in itself, because it then gave me the notion that one could have a kind of music that rotated back and forth between qualities, which themselves are not always just black and white but of different shadings. And then the work actually began to take shape as a form, as you say, by the notion that all the pitches were worked out in such a way that they combined to produce certain kinds of intervals, and these intervals were treated at the beginning as if they were percussion instruments and like percussion instruments--for example, a major third always appears in the piano and is repeated at certain

speeds, as if it were like a gong, (similarly the perfect fifth) and each of the instruments has its own speed at the beginning. It is out of this idea that the whole piece was germinated. Ultimately, this opening movement is really just the coming to life of the piece, and the presentation of the basic material in terms of the basic idea of contrast, the constant interruption of the material by something that's quite contrary. And in the middle of this slow emergence, the harpsichord introduces its cadenza, after which the movement concludes its presentation of the primitive elements. Then the succeeding movement presents all the piano's material, and so forth. Each part has a place which presents parts of the material in a very elementary, and, so to speak, elemental aspect. So the notion is that things gradually come into focus as through a moving picture lens gradually turning on them, and appear and disappear while other things appear in turn; and the piece as a whole is formed out of this emergence and disappearance of material, while all of the material is always being sounded, to a certain extent, all the time. The idea that there was a kind of total world that was always going on from which items were picked out and brought into focus is one of the important conceptions of this piece.

BB: Well, to go along with this presentational conceit, let me take the part for the moment of the listener, the not-so-naive listener perhaps, but nevertheless the listener whose orientation is most securely rooted in the traditional literature. How is he best to understand how to listen to pitch, for example, in a context like this, where pitch is functioning in at least two ways. In other words, is there some way you could describe how one might listen to pitch relations in one sense in some passages, and in a different sense elsewhere, or perhaps even in two different senses simultaneously? I ask this not primarily about individual pitch sonorities but about pitch relationships, and not only about intervals presented as single sonorities or successions, but about intervals presented next to intervals in the context of a total phraseology of intervals.

EC: I don't expect the listener to be able to hear this in all its detail. Actually, the work is based on certain fundamental sonorities, harmonies, so to speak, and all the parts of the work relate to these; specifically, there's one set of harmonies for the harpsichord, and one for the piano, which are always merging, while also maintaining a certain distinctness. The notion of resolution in my music, as in this piece, is actually the sounding of everything together--a total undifferentiation, the total sound of all the notes, so to speak, is the moment when everything is resolved, where all the notes find their conclusion in one chord. This chord generally dominates the entire work (and just little details of it are shown throughout).

BB: When you speak of "resolution" this raises what for me at least is a very significant point, namely the interrelation between articulations on the surface and the underlying syntax and phraseology of the successions that create this surface. So that it seems to me that your use of "resolution" is somewhat metaphorical, because it seems to describe a feeling you have about something that happens in your music, rather than specifying the function of this kind of event--for your "resolutions" are surely not analogous to those of tonal music in any evident way. But would



you consider the possibility that the phenomena you described might more precisely be called completions of units of syntax?

EC: Yes. Let's say that I have been very concerned, more in works that I've written since that time than this one, with trying to regain the sensitivity to individual notes. That is, I felt it became more and more important in a dissonant style to make it seem as though every note counted in some way, or that if something wasn't the right note it would make a great deal of difference. Now, it's very difficult to do that in a very dissonant music, especially in music that moves rather quickly and rather thickly. But I've been very concerned with trying to, so to speak, reenergize the tensions of the notes, the qualities of individual pitches. In order to do this, I used the techniques that I described, and this is in a certain sense what you called completion. That is, there are certain formulas of sound which the notes tend to form as groups--as chords, or as series of notes in succession. These chords actually work very strongly, to control all the motions of a piece, and to make the notes I choose sound to me as "right" notes. It disturbs me very much to use a random system of dissonances, because I find the notes tend to lose all their sensitiveness and quality, and since it seems to me that music has to do with the quality of sound in this sense as much as anything else, I would not like to destroy it.

BB: Everything you've said raises so many questions I hardly know where to start! But perhaps we could connect something you mentioned just now with some earlier remarks, namely, the question of qualities that are to be regarded as characteristics of individual pitch events. Now, manifestly, the sounding of an individual pitch is the minimal specifiable datum of any piece of music, the atomic element, so to speak, of music as we know it. But surely, in order to describe an event you must have something which consists of not only a single identifiable element but of at least one relationship among such elements. Nevertheless, in order to perceive this "event" it is necessary to perceive the identities of its components. So it's in this sense that I take your concern with the "qualities" of a single pitch--that is, in its function as part of such an event. But now, what you said earlier, in addressing the listener, that he needn't necessarily concern himself with everything in your piece in order to understand a great deal or at least the most important things about it, seems to conflict with the notion that one of the important things about it is precisely this sense of the function of the individual pitch.

EC: Well, I don't expect the listener to be able to be articulate about this any more than he could describe the harmony of a Beethoven symphony or a Wagner opera. But he is perfectly able to be aware that something is happening here which is recognizable, and I believe that--hope that--at once, or maybe it requires a couple of listenings, one grasps that in the Double Concerto.

BB I didn't mean to suggest that people ought necessarily to be able to verbalize about what they hear, but rather that for something to be "noticeable" by anyone in any communicative sense, it has to have some cognitive characteristics, some things that can be specified (even if they aren't, explicitly) and retained as precise images in memory.

EC: I do feel it's very important to have a strong unity in a work because otherwise the whole illusion, as far as I'm concerned, is destroyed, and the whole sense of continuity and meaning, because it seems to me that however one can describe musical meaning, it can't exist without a basis in unity of some kind, not necessarily a logical unity, but a fairly restricted range, let's say, of materials with which it operates, just like speech at this basic level. You can't talk about anything more specific that you could relate to the "meaning" of a piece.

BB: But how else could you come to describe that concept of the total composition that you have? It seems to me, for example, that when you talk about ways in which the piece goes, you are making statements about continuity, the way a piece goes as part of its medium that is, as one of the aspects of the medium through which ideas are transmitted. It's not yet--doesn't stand for--the ideas themselves, but has to do with them in a particular way, and I wonder if this particular way is not just what we probably mean by "meaning" in music. Yet, at the same time I'm perfectly prepared to accept the notion that ultimately there is no way to articulate what a composition is "about" except by examining the total intersection of its components continuities, textures, and all its other "media".

EC: This particular piece has, as I suggested, a general sort of plan or choreography, I guess, and that is that it emerges out of a kind of elementary chaos in the percussion. The solo instruments bring in the other instruments, and then a great deal happens presenting all its material, and then, in the end, occurs the dissolution of this entire material into chaos, so to speak, with the percussion (as in the beginning). This is the way the piece was thought of as a form. As I worked on the piece, I began to think of literary works that had this form, like Concerning the Nature of Things of Lucretius, and also the Dunciad of Alexander Pope, which ends, if you remember, in praise of chaos and madness.

BB: But in view of some of the things that are likely to take place here on subsequent occasions, I think you might be careful in your use of the word "chaos".

EC: Well, I'm only using "chaos" in quotes; what I mean in the frame of this particular work is that at first the element of percussion supplies only the rhythmic aspect and a certain undifferentiated pitch aspect, after which more concrete pitch sounds are, so to speak, more sharply focused, and then the dissolution returns to the primeval sound. I don't mean that to be chaos in any sense other than that of the chaos at the beginning of Hayden's Creation.

BB: I think it's important to emphasize that the notion is metaphorical because, in fact, when you say that one could regard this unpitched opening and its consequent as a progression from "chaos" to "order", one could equally well invoke any number of other--perhaps seemingly contradictory--images to use as names for exactly this aspect of the relation of the unpitched to the pitched without changing anything in one's understanding or hearing of it in any cognitive sense. In other words, if one were not to use your metaphor, if one were to choose some other metaphor for what happened, could one not still be describing precisely the same set of musical events,



and in fact still arriving at the same unique musical structure? In other words, I don't believe the musical structure is really going to be affected by the particular descriptive label one chooses at this level of discourse. And in the same sense, it seems to me that your description of the relation of the instrumental medium to the total composition in the Double Concerto would only be a rather general remark about what seems so obviously striking an example of a complex and fundamental relation of medium and structure--that is, a rather deep relation between obviously unique aspects of the medium and obviously unique aspects of continuity, texture, pitch relation, and sound relation of all kinds. So, could you perhaps reconsider both questions in terms of what you regard, here or in other pieces, as the most interesting, or significant, relation of the medium to the total composition?

EC: I'm not quite sure; after all, I did say that most of the works that I have written have had a pre-chosen instrumentation because they were commissioned by string quartets, orchestras or what-not, so that it was then up to me to validate the medium which was already given...

#### GREENWICH HOUSE CONCERT SERIES

An interview with Raoul Pleskow and Joan Tower, co-directors of a concert series of contemporary music at the Greenwich House in New York City.

by Elaine Barkin  
Queens College, CUNY

EB: What were the circumstances leading to the initiation of the Greenwich House series?

JT: It had been my idea for some time prior to our first season in 1966 to put on a series of contemporary music concerts at the Greenwich House (with which I am affiliated). I felt that conditions were suitable for undertaking such a venture in view of the availability of a hall, the location, publicity outlets, secretarial services and an institution to which tax-exempt donations could be made. After securing adequate financial assistance to present five concerts of works for small ensembles, I asked Raoul to assist me as co-director in handling the various

administrative matters involved.

EB: What did you intend some of the functions of your series to be?

RP: There is, of course, a great deal of new music that should be played and heard, but too often the best of this music is performed only once; therefore, although we have premiered a number of works, we also feel that one of our special functions is to provide for second and third performances of important works that have been performed elsewhere. Another function is to offer dedicated performers of 20th century music a place to perform difficult pieces that they have in their repertoire.

EB: Are you generally able to get good performances?

JT: For the most part, yes. We have been very fortunate to obtain the services of some of the best performers of contemporary music in New York, a fact that has helped keep our concerts on a generally high level. However, we have not been able to remain entirely free of encounters with the so-called 'job musician' (of the less-rehearsal-time, more-money genre), whose attitudes clearly hinder the efforts of those involved in serious music making. For us, fortunately, these encounters have been kept to a minimum due to the fact that our programs usually do not require the services of large numbers of musicians.

EB: How do you select and schedule the pieces for the series? Are you concerned at all with performing works manifesting very diverse stylistic procedures?

RP: Our programs include composers of several generations, as well as the established masters. Although the styles represented are quite diversified, it is not our purpose to provide the public with an encyclopedia of 20th-century musical procedures or an electroencephalograph of rising and falling stylistic trends. Our selection of pieces is generally based on quality, practicality and appropriateness. For each particular program every effort is made, of course, to select and arrange the pieces with due regard for stylistic and instrumental variety.

EB: What are some of the problems you have encountered?

JT: One of the major problems involved with any project of contemporary music is obtaining adequate financial assistance. It is indeed paradoxical that in one of the largest and richest cities in the world, where many composers of stature reside, the few contemporary concert series in existence are experiencing financial difficulties. We ourselves are not yet assured of support even for the last concert of this season. A second problem concerns the selection of pieces to be performed. Because of the lack of program space, it is not always possible to include all the composers we would like to on each series.

EB: Have things gone well in general? How have the concerts been received?

RP: All of the concerts have been exceptionally well-attended. One might say that the "informality" of the hall has been amply compensated for by the elegance of the performances. We have good reports from many composers, professional musicians and the audience at large.

EB: If this season will be as exciting as last season, I'm sure that the series has already fulfilled its raison d'etre.

JT: Thank you. We can at least count on the raison.