



Review of David Schiff, *The Music of Elliott Carter*, 2nd Ed.

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ABSTRACT: David Schiff's 1998 second edition of the *The Music of Elliott Carter*, a much needed revision of the first edition, may leave unsatisfied the reader wanting to know more about the composer's recent music. After a brief biography and glossary, Schiff surveys Carter's output by genre. Schiff's commentary and analyses are decorated by anecdotes. An extensive bibliography and discography, compiled by John Link, are also included.

[1] David Schiff's second edition of *The Music of Elliott Carter* is a much needed revision of the first edition, if for no other reason, than the last piece discussed in the previous edition was *Night Fantasies* (1980). Carter has produced new pieces at an astonishing rate since then, and although Schiff has published supplementary articles in *Tempo*, *College Music Symposium*, and *Ovation*, a new survey of the composer's *oeuvre* was in order.⁽¹⁾

[2] The second edition is nearly a complete rewriting of the first. Schiff's language is tighter, not as flowery, and more objective. In the first edition, Schiff's adoration for the composer was embarrassingly evident, and led him to some erroneous statements. For example, some reviewers of the first edition vehemently disagreed with Schiff's suggestion that the percussion writing in the Double Concerto was the most progressive since *Ionization* and that it raised the standard of an entire generation of percussionists. Schiff is content in the second edition to concede that "the greater role given percussion instruments [in the Double Concerto] has already been accomplished by Varese" (235).

[3] Unlike the first edition, which was structured chronologically, the commentaries in the second are grouped by genre: chamber music, vocal music, piano music, and orchestral music. This organization is helpful to the person seeking information about a specific work; however, I found the chronological organization of the first edition more helpful in understanding Carter's evolution as a composer. The choral works, ballets, and orchestral works such as *Holiday Overture* are markedly different from later works such as *A Symphony of Three Orchestras*. This historical perspective of Carter's career is missing from the second edition.

[4] Instead, Schiff compresses nearly all biographical and chronological information into a thirty-three page introduction. While I think the introduction to the second edition is informative, since it is devoid of musical examples, it is somewhat divorced from the music that it discusses. Schiff also eliminates two chapters on musical time and musical space found in the first book, and reduces them to a technical glossary. The technical glossary attempts to encapsulate bits of information about Carter's compositional practice, so that the author may refer to them throughout the book. Again, I think an evolutionary view of the composer's music, which is gained from the two chapters in the first edition, is simplified beyond recognition in the second.

[5] Schiff's first book met with criticism from many reviewers, largely on the grounds that it was not theoretical enough. It is

likely that these criticisms will be echoed in other reviews of the second edition, for there is little, beyond basic theoretical explanations, to interest the hardcore post-tonal theorist. Schiff attempts to quell this criticism in the “Preface to the Second Edition,” writing that, “[i]n the United States, however, it is assumed that a book like this is aimed primarily at a graduate students of music theory. This premise creates a problem, for the kind of detailed analysis performed by theorists is usually incomprehensible for non-theorists.” (vii).

[6] Schiff indicates that the book is rather intended for “performers, listeners, composers, and critics.” However, this characterization of his audience is also somewhat problematic, for some will not have the technical background to understand his allusions to set-theory or the explanations of Carter’s rhythmic practice.

[7] No matter the audience, the second edition is somewhat lacking in its overview of the works written since the first edition was published. While many new works are included, Schiff discusses none in the depth that he does the Double Concerto or Concerto for Orchestra. Structural polyrhythms, which have possessed such an important role in Carter’s compositional thought since 1980, are defined in the glossary and specific relationships are mentioned as they occur in particular pieces. The description of Carter’s use of all-interval twelve-note chords, which pervade his late music, is somewhat cursory, and has been described in much greater detail by Andrew Mead and John Link.⁽²⁾

[8] This is not to say that there is no new information to be found. The appendix, which includes Carter’s listing of three-, four-, five- and six-note chords from the first edition, is joined by a listing of “Link” chords, which can be found in the recent *Symphonia*. There are also a current bibliography and discography, compiled by John Link, both of which are very helpful.

[9] By and large, Schiff’s commentaries read more like program notes than detailed analyses. While these commentaries often leave the theorist yearning for more, they are merely a reflection of the author’s strengths and target audience. Although Schiff was Carter’s composition student, it was because Schiff studied literature at Columbia that Carter felt he was the person to write this book. Schiff draws extensively on his knowledge of the subject of literature, and provides many comparisons to Carter’s music.

[10] I do not find Schiff’s allusions to literature to be forced, such as his comparison of the simultaneous duos of the Third String Quartet with Faulkner’s *As I Lay Dying*, “in which fractures episodes describe a continuous action from different points of view” (86). Carter himself has confirmed the connections between some of his works and literature. In this light, Schiff’s references are more an extension of Carter’s thought than an imposition.

[11] His commentaries are not completely literary, however. Schiff includes over seventy musical examples and over fifty charts in the main body of the book. As the first edition included over 120 musical examples, one can see that Schiff was much more selective in his choices for the second edition. In my opinion, more examples from the newer works would have been welcome.

[12] In conclusion, since Schiff has defined a target audience which is less specialized than the relatively small pool of music theory scholars who are interested in Carter’s music, he cannot be faulted for pursuing a somewhat less technical rhetoric. Nevertheless, since the second edition contains many new works not discussed in the first edition, it would have been gratifying if these new pieces had been probed at a somewhat deeper level, commensurate with the space provided the earlier works. As Schiff is someone who knows Carter intimately, his anecdotes prove amusing; however, it would seem his insight on more technical matters could also prove valuable. Carter shows no signs of slowing down, and there will no doubt be a third edition of *The Music of Elliott Carter*. While I hope that this third edition will be written as tightly as the second, I would also relish a third edition which could unlock a few more of the secrets of the composer’s music.

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Footnotes

1. See David Schiff, "Carter's New Classicism," *College Music Symposium* 29 (1989): 115–122; "Elliott Carter: America's Much Honored Composer is Still Creating Challenging Music at Age 75," *Ovation* 4, 11 (December 1983): 12–15, 50–52; "Elliott Carter's Harvest Home," *Tempo* 167 (December 1988): 2–13; and "'In Sleep, In Thunder': Elliott Carter's Portrait of Robert Lowell," *Tempo* 142 (September 1982): 2–9.

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2. See John Link, "The Composition of Carter's 'Night Fantasies,'" *Sonus* 14, 2 (Spring 1994): 67–89; and Andrew Mead, "Twelve-Tone Composition and the Music of Elliott Carter," in *Concert Music, Rock and Jazz Since 1945*, ed. Elizabeth West-Marvin and Richard Hermann, (Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press, 1995), 67–102.

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