

ELLIOTT CARTER
Piano Concerto
Variations for Orchestra

New World Records 80347

Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra
MICHAEL GIELEN, Conductor
URSULA OPPENS, Piano

Elliott Carter was born in New York in 1908. While a student at the Horace Mann School, he came to know Charles Ives. Carter continued his education at Harvard and then studied with Nadia Boulanger in Paris. Ives and Boulanger were formative influences: Carter's music draws on American experimentalism (Ives, Cowell, Crawford, Nancarrow, Varese) and European modernism (Debussy, Stravinsky, the Viennese). Ever since he reached his stylistic maturity with the String Quartet No. 1 of 1951, Carter has continued to pursue an original and individual approach to music in works for soloists, chamber ensembles, and orchestra, which have been widely performed and honored.

Carter's orchestral works are only slowly achieving the place in the repertory already claimed by his chamber music. His music makes virtuosic demands on performers; and while a string quartet can give a Carter work forty or fifty hours of rehearsal and then take it on a tour of many performances, orchestral conditions limit rehearsal time to ten hours at the most, and there are rarely more than four performances. So Carter's chamber music has had the opportunity to develop a performance tradition—the players resolving technical problems, clarifying the style, discovering how best to articulate the form—while the orchestral music is still at the beginning of this process.

The Variations for Orchestra and the Piano Concerto belong to two different decades and stylistic periods. The Variations, commissioned by the Louisville Orchestra and written in Rome in 1954-55, are a summation of the works Carter wrote after the stylistic breakthrough of the Cello Sonata of 1948. The listener will hear passages recalling the Eight Etudes and a Fantasy (1950) and the Sonata for Flute, Oboe, Cello, and Harpsichord (1952) as well as the sweeping, heroic lyricism of the Quartet No. 1. But the eclecticism of the work reaches far beyond Carter's own music. Aaron Copland once remarked on Carter's wide knowledge of the music of his time; the Variations are a monumental synthesis of many different kinds of modern music (and in an overt way that Carter never again attempted). There are not only surface resemblances to Schoenberg and Berg, but there is also Carter's closest approach to serial technique. Charles Ives, who died while Carter was composing the work, is invoked explicitly in Variation 7, and Ives's technique of superimposition is the basis of the whole work's texture and form. Also present in the music are the spirit of Debussy, particularly of *La Mer* and *Jeux*; the rhythmic experiments of Conlon Nancarrow and Henry Cowell; jazz (variation 8); and even the rhetoric of the Great American Symphony of Harris, Copland, and Schuman. In addition to these many stylistic strands, Carter also attempted to use all possible variation techniques, including an array of canonic and contrapuntal devices—Variation 2, for instance, is a free mensuration canon in which the size of intervals varies along with the rhythmic values. The music holds these opposing tendencies together with an ever present tidal force. The daring eclecticism is only slightly less surprising if we remember that variations are often encyclopedic in nature. The *Goldberg* and *Diabelli* variations, Brahms's Handel and Haydn variations, and Schoenberg's Variations for Orchestra, Op. 31, all attempt a grand overview of the musical language of their time. Carter's Variations belong in this company.

Carter's approach to both the variation form and the orchestra is novel. There are three themes, or rather a traditional "theme" and two less traditional elements, which Carter call ritornelli. One ritornello, which moves in small intervals, begins very slowly and accelerates throughout the work. The other, a twelve-tone row, is first played rapidly and then slows down with every reappearance. The variations are similarly grouped in threes. Variation 1 is light and fast; 2 is heavy and slow; 3 combines the previous two. Variation 4 is a continuous ritardando; 5, the eye of the storm, is a motionless study in shadowy sonorities; 6 is a continuous accelerando. Variation 7 juxtaposes three distinct kinds of music in the woodwinds, brass, and strings, respectively; 8 continues the woodwind idea over a jazzy scherzando; 9 superimposes the three elements of 7 over a frightening clocklike pulse (a transformation of the jazz beat of Variation 8). The Introduction, Theme, and Coda (emergence, presence, and dissolution) form yet another three-part grouping, framing the whole. The orchestra mirrors the work's formal dialectic. The instruments are everywhere divided into three opposed elements playing contrasting kinds of music. Sometimes these elements are fixed, as in Variation 7; more often they move around the orchestra in the way of klangfarbenmelodien, as in the Theme, where the first ritornello, the theme proper, and prefigurations of Variation 1 unfold simultaneously, each moving through the orchestra. Just as Carter destabilizes the variation form, turning the traditional sequence of independent pieces into a multiply interactive complex, so the orchestra itself becomes a protean, ever changing medium.

The Piano Concerto, written in Berlin in 1964-65, explores the tragic possibilities of an alienated texture on a visionary scale. Carter has pointed out on several occasions the influence of the Berlin setting, and the newly built Wall, on the work. His studio was near an American target range, and the sound of machine guns underlies the time-bomb mechanism of the orchestra in the second movement. Carter sets the piano against the orchestra (asking, if it is possible, that they be clearly separated spatially), and their conflict intensifies throughout the work. It's not a question of soloist and orchestra simply elaborating different materials--we can find that in Vivaldi; rather, here the piano and orchestra represent irreconcilable and violently opposed principles. To connect these antagonists--and at the same time to emphasize the distance that separates them--Carter surrounds the piano with its own ensemble or concertino of seven instruments. The work thus contrasts an isolated soloist whose character is free, fanciful, and sensitive with an orchestra that functions as a massive and mechanical ensemble and with a chamber orchestra as a well-meaning but impotent intermediary; Carter himself has compared the three eloquent woodwind solos of the second movement to the advice of Job's friends.

The expressive world of the Piano Concerto puts it far indeed from the exhibitionistic entertainment of most concertos; one has to go back to the Mozart C minor to find the concerto form used for such an austere and tragic end.

The grim yet finally cathartic struggle of the piece takes the word "concerto" back to its Latin root meaning--to strive or contend--yet gives that meaning a connotation it could have, alas, only in this century. But perhaps even more remarkable is the sense of hope with which the work ends.

—David Schiff

David Schiff is the author of The Music of Elliott Carter and the composer of the opera Gimpel the Fool. He teaches at Reed College in Portland, Oregon.

Ursula Oppens has performed with major orchestras both in the United States and abroad, including the Los Angeles Philharmonic, the St. Louis Symphony, the New York Philharmonic, and the Boston Symphony. Noted for her interpretations of contemporary music, she has premiered works of many composers, including Frederic Rzewski, Charles Wuorinen, Pierre Boulez, Elliott Carter, Gyorgi Ligeti, and John Adams. She is a cofounder of Speculum Musicae, a contemporary-music group in New York. Her recordings are on the Nonesuch, Angel, CBS, CRI, Vanguard, and Watt Works labels.

Michael Gielen grew up in Germany, Austria, and Argentina. In 1951 he became a conductor at the Vienna State Opera, and he has been music director of the Royal Opera in Stockholm and the Belgium National Orchestra, and principal conductor of the Netherlands Opera. Gielen made his American debut in 1971 with the New York Philharmonic. He has since conducted the Chicago, Pittsburgh, Detroit, and National Symphony orchestras, and at the Blossom Festival. Gielen has been named chief conductor of the Southwest German Radio Orchestra in Baden-Baden.

The Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra, founded in 1895, is one of the oldest orchestras in the United States. Several prominent musicians have served as music director of the symphony, including Leopold Stokowski, Eugene Ysaye, Fritz Reiner, Thor Johnson, and Max Rudolf. The orchestra has presented the American premieres of Mahler's Fifth Symphony and works by Ravel, Debussy, Respighi, and Bartok, among others. The Cincinnati Symphony made its first recording for Columbia in 1917; its recordings can now be found on the Telarc, Vox, CRI, and Candide labels.

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SELECTED DISCOGRAPHY

- Concerto for Orchestra. New York Philharmonic, Leonard Bernstein conducting. CRI SD-469.
- Piano Concerto. Jacob Lateiner, piano; Boston Symphony, Erich Leinsdorf conducting. RCA Victor LSM-3001 and LSC-3001.
- Riconoscenza*. Maryvonne Le Dizes-Richard, violin. New World NW 333.
- String Quartets Nos. 1 and 2. Composers Quartet. Nonesuch H-71249.
- String Quartets Nos. 2 and 3. Juilliard Quartet. Columbia M-32738.
- To Music*. University of Michigan Chamber Choir, Thomas Hilbish conducting. New World NW 219.
- Variations for Orchestra. Louisville Orchestra, Robert Whitney conducting. Louisville LOU 59-3.
- . New Philharmonia, Frederick Prausnitz conducting. Columbia Ms-7191.

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Elliott Carter

Piano Concerto (22:35)

(publ. AMP Inc.)

1- I (10:05)

2- II (12:25)

Ursula Oppens Piano

Concertino: George Hambrecht, flute; William Harrod, English horn; Thomas LeGrand, bass
clarinet; Phillip Ruder, violin; Marna Street-Ramsey, viola; John Sharp, cello; Barry Green, bass.

Variations for Orchestra (22:17)

(publ. AMP Inc.)

3- Introduction-Theme-Variations 1-9-Finale

Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra

Michael Gielen Conductor

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