

Concert 4

## **“CANTO”**

Program Notes for pieces by Elliott Carter

by John Link

### **Saëta and March (1950/66)**

Carter’s pieces for solo timpani began life as rhythmic studies for his First String Quartet. *Recitative and Improvisation* were published first, and later the collection grew to six pieces; all were the fruit of Carter’s friendship with percussionists in the New York area—Raymond Des Roches, Saul Goodman, Al Howard, Morris Lang, Paul Price, and Jan Williams. When the first edition of *Recitative and Improvisation* went out of print, Carter worked closely with Williams to revise all six pieces for publication as *Six Pieces for Kettledrums*. Then, in 1966 Carter added two new pieces—*Adagio* and *Canto*, both of which involve elaborate changes of pitch made possible by pedal timpani—to complete the set now known as *Eight Pieces for Four Timpani*.

According to Carter’s program note, *Saëta* is “An Andalusian song of improvisatory character sung during an outdoor religious procession... during which an arrow (*saëta*) was shot into the clouds to release the rain.” The piece begins with a dramatic *accelerando* on a single note—an idea that recurs near the end. Momentous pauses articulate the form, while between them loud slow pulses emerge almost imperceptibly from quiet faster ones.

There are two marches in *March*. Each one alternates tonic and dominant pitches as in countless marches for band, but here they are played simultaneously—at two different speeds and in two different keys! The result is a humorous parody—both of military music and of the simultaneous overlapping bands in the music of Carter’s early mentor Charles Ives. The two layers are quite distinct at the beginning, then pool their resources in the middle before separating again near the end, in which the two marches speed up and race each other into oblivion.

### **Tarantella (1936)**

When he returned from Paris in 1935, after studying with Nadia Boulanger, Carter faced the unenviable prospect of building a career as a composer in the middle of the Great Depression. One opportunity that came his way was to write incidental music for his alma mater’s production of Plautus’s *Mostellaria*. The *Tarantella* was the production’s finale, and apparently its greatest success. Unlike much of Carter’s music of the time, it was well reviewed, and went on to receive frequent performances over the years, also becoming Carter’s first published work. The text describes the celebrations that greet the coming of spring and the music is suitably vigorous and buoyant, in a well-crafted, Stravinsky-inspired neoclassical style.

### **Recitative and Improvisation (1950/66)**

*Recitative* introduces three contrasting ideas—a fast tremolo, a Bolero-like dance rhythm, and a heartbeat pulse—that are freely juxtaposed and interwoven to create a fantasia-like form.

Improvisation contrasts speeding up and slowing down lines and is the most varied of the set, with sudden contrasts between slow and fast rhythms, loud and soft dynamics, and varying patterns of accentuation.

### **Adagio and Canto (1950/66)**

Adagio and Canto both explore the myriad changes of pitch and timbre that are possible using modern pedal timpani. In Adagio, the changes in pitch are ghostly echoes of the loud struck notes. Canto is a more continuous and mostly quiet melody, played with snare drum sticks, and punctuated by occasional louder, more dramatic passages.

### **Moto Perpetuo and Canaries (1950/66)**

A constant fast pulse in Moto Perpetuo is continuously regrouped by shifting accentuation patterns and subtle changes in tone color produced by changing the location where the drumhead is struck.

The punning title “Canaries” refers not to tiny birds with their high-pitched chirps, but to the dances native to the Canary Islands. The piece begins with a simple dotted dance rhythm that soon goes off the rails—speeding up dramatically like an out-of-control machine—and this pattern becomes thematic. In the middle of the piece, the music divides into two contrapuntal lines, one of which stays steady while the other gradually speeds up. The piece winds down towards the end; the dance rhythm makes a last attempt to start up again before being definitively silenced by the final gesture.

### **The Defense of Corinth (1941)**

The Defense of Corinth, for speaker, men’s voices and piano, four hands, was written in 1941. At the time—several months before the Japanese invasion of Pearl Harbor propelled the U.S. into the Second World War—there was considerable debate about whether the U.S. should become involved or remain a neutral outsider. The Defense of Corinth is ostensibly Carter’s response to that debate. It tells the story of Diogenes of Sinope who, according to legend, lived in a tub on the outskirts of the Ancient Greek city of Corinth. As the Corinthians busily prepared for war against Macedonia, Diogenes began to beat the sides of his tub violently, making considerable noise with no useful result. When asked why he was acting so strangely, he replied that amid the war preparations, he didn’t want the Corinthians to think he was lazy. In the socio-political context of the day, Carter’s Diogenes can be understood as a stand-in for the American isolationists of the time. But Carter had another more deeply ironic purpose in mind. For his text, he used a verbose and comically anachronistic seventeenth-century English translation by Thomas Urquhart of Rebelais’ sixteenth-century French original. It is filled with word play, alliteration, and onomatopoeia, all of which Carter exaggerates in his setting to comic effect. In the first movement, he uses a neoclassical harmonic language and a rhythmic style borrowed partly from Stravinsky and partly from military marches, to heighten the irony of the Corinthians’ carefully organized preparations for the chaos of war.

In Urquhart's text, the elaborate description of the war preparations of the Corinthians is paralleled in the second half by an equally elaborate description of Diogenes's noise-making. Carter, however, develops the Diogenes section far beyond its original proportions. The crisp march rhythms and simple speech-like recitatives of the first movement give way in the second to complex melodies interwoven in extended fugal developments. Here Carter's deeper comic purpose comes to light: on the eve of war to portray Diogenes's noisy bluster—part ironic protest, part recognition of his own powerlessness—with a flamboyant display of the Boulanger-trained composer's most elaborate contrapuntal technique.

### **Heart Not So Heavy As Mine (1938)**

In Emily Dickenson's poem, the speaker overhears the good cheer of a whistled melody and his heavy heart is lightened. Carter's setting, for a capella chorus, contrasts slow ruminative music (initially setting the poem's title) with a faster staccato layer narrating the speaker's late night walk. Fluid counterpoint alternates with short chorale-like passages in a way that recalls a sixteenth-century madrigal. But the division of the texture into layers—to simultaneously represent the external scene and internal feelings of the speaker—shows the same concern to capture the richness and complexity of human experience that informs all of Carter's mature music.

### **Let's Be Gay (1937)**

As the Tarantella celebrates the coming of spring, Let's Be Gay celebrates youth. Scored for women's chorus and two pianos, the piece is a setting of John Gay's poem, commissioned by Nicholas Nabokov for a Wells College production of *The Beggar's Opera*. It combines an American pop-song melodic sensibility with the march-like rhythmic language and dissonance-inflected harmony of neoclassical Stravinsky. The score remained in manuscript, unheard for decades, until John Oliver persuaded Carter to allow its first recording in 1997.