

Concert 1 -

“ENCHANTED”

Program Notes for pieces by Elliott Carter
by John Link

Enchanted Preludes (1988)

Carter composed this sparkling duet for flute and ‘cello on commission from Harry Santen as a birthday present for his wife Ann Santen—the program director of Cincinnati’s public radio station and a great champion of contemporary music. According to David Schiff, Carter thought of the piece as a “Mendelssohnian scherzo,” and that description neatly captures the lively evanescence of the music. The phrasing is especially fluid and supple, and although the two instruments—so different from each other in register, timbre, and (in this piece) harmonic vocabulary—are sometimes starkly contrasted, more often they dance around each other in playful counterpoint, meeting only on the downbeat that follows the initial flourish, and again at the very end. The fragmentary scurrying and long sustained notes that predominate early on eventually give way to an intense exchange of soaring melody, until the dream dissolves and night descends (and are those crickets or frogs?) in the final measures.

Trije glasbeniki (Three Musicians) (2011)

Carter composed this short piece for flute, bass clarinet, and harp as a thank you to the 2011 Festival Slowind. In the first of its three continuous sections, the woodwinds boldly declare themselves in the gaps between the harp’s slow staccato pulses. After a sonorous flourish to begin the second section, the harp creates a dialog between its highest and lowest registers, while the winds re-imagine the opening pulses as a quiet legato accompaniment. The third section is marked by a flurry of harp arpeggios and glissandi that resolves itself into another accented pulse—this one much faster. The dramatic reentry of the winds leads to a lively conclusion.

Night Fantasies (1980)

After 1945 Carter became increasingly interested in writing for instruments and groups of instruments that interact with each other somewhat like the characters in a play. With this social conception at the heart of his music, Carter wrote very little for solo instruments. Then, in 1978, a commission from four pianists long associated with his work—Paul Jacobs, Gilbert Kalish, Ursula Oppens, and Charles Rosen—prompted him to rethink his approach to the instrumental solo. In *Night Fantasies*, Carter’s portrayal of lyric experience in his recent vocal music is mapped to the piano via a poetic conceit. In Carter’s words, the music models “the fleeting thoughts and feelings that pass through the mind during a period of wakefulness at night...,” in order “...to capture the fanciful, changeable quality of our inner life at a time when it is not dominated by strong, directive intentions or desires.” As precedent, Carter cites the piano music of Robert Schumann, in particular *Kreisleriana*, *Carnaval*, and *Dauidsbündlertänze*. The reference to Schumann—like the piece’s nocturnal setting and its depiction of an altered state of consciousness—reflects an interest in Romanticism that

affected many composers, artists, and writers in the early 1980s. But Carter is uninterested in returning to the harmony and stylistic hallmarks of the nineteenth century. Instead, he builds on Schumann's highly varied textures and widely spaced chords, and especially his practice of constructing large-scale forms from fragmentary material.

In order to realize his conception, Carter constructed a polyrhythm consisting of two streams of very slow periodic pulses. The two streams coincide only in the third measure of the piece (just after the initial sleepy grumble) and again on the final notes, twenty minutes later. The polyrhythm serves as a kind of formal and rhythmic skeleton, marking important moments of transition or arrival, and generating a wide variety of faster rhythmic patterns that give the piece its feeling of mercurial virtuosity. Although they are often set within quite elaborate and brilliant textures, the pulses sometimes emerge to be heard in isolation. The sustained opening, for example, is punctuated by short blinks that mark the pulses of the faster stream, and the slow stream comes to the fore in the final minutes, when an emphatic chord returns again and again on successive pulses, interrupting the recollection of short fragments from earlier in the piece.

The opening measures also highlight another aspect of Carter's compositional design: the association of musical intervals with specific moods. The *tranquillo* introduction, which returns at various times throughout the piece, is always associated with the "open" sound of perfect fourths and fifths. By contrast, the obsessive repetition, in the coda, of chords made of sevenths and ninths suggests a more restless state familiar to any insomniac who can't seem to get a thought out of his or her head. The tritones of the *recitativo collerico* (which occurs about halfway through the piece) occupy a middle ground between the calm of the opening and the agitation of the final section, which dissipates only at the very end of the piece.

For all its formidable technical hurdles, the central interpretive challenge of *Night Fantasies* is an expressive one. Each of the piece's short episodes has its own special mood and requires its own special approach to articulation, phrasing, pedaling, and dynamics. The listener may be guided by Carter's description of *Night Fantasies* as "a fast movement interrupted by slow 'trios' that gradually turns into a slow movement interrupted by fast 'trios'." Perhaps the greater pleasure in listening to this music is to take the sudden changes and constant variations of texture and mood as a matter of course—to recognize in the music's unpredictability, and in its obliquely interconnected moments, a mirror of the "fleeting thoughts and feelings" that characterize the life of the mind.

A Mirror on Which to Dwell (1975)

This cycle of six songs on poems by Elizabeth Bishop has become a particular favorite of conductors and audiences alike, partly due to the clarity with which Carter finds musical analogues for the conceits of the poetry. The songs fall into two alternating groups. Numbers one, three, and five are public: the speaker finds in great spaces a specific object, like a bird on the beach or a brass band, to serve as a metaphor for the experience of wonder, apprehension, or muted anger. The even-numbered songs are about love. In all of the poems the speaker describes an external object in a vivid setting, which Carter depicts in the music as a secondary layer of activity apart from the voice. Nevertheless, the music of A

Mirror on Which to Dwell puts us in the mind of the poetic speaker, experiencing the world at first hand.

"Anaphora" is a rhetorical term for the repetition of a sequence of words at the beginning of successive clauses. (Think of Martin Luther King's "I have a dream" speech.) In her poem, which is filled with repetitions of all kinds, Bishop sees the cyclical return of the sun each day as anaphora. The poem traces the sun's arc from dawn to dusk to dawn again and Carter follows with a form that begins with the bustle of a city morning, gradually calms to evening, and ends where it began, with the ascent of the sun at the beginning of a new day. The music, with its lively flourishes and moments of expectant calm, has its own type of repetition: like the blinking lights in a scrolling light board, every pitch occurs in only one fixed register somewhere in the two octaves above middle 'C'.

In the poem "Argument" the disagreement between two lovers is encapsulated in the words "days" and "distance," which Carter sets in the vocal line as the notes G-sharp and B every time they occur. A trio composed of aggressive bongos, lightning-fast piano, and ungainly but emphatic contrabass enacts the argument with great vigor in the accompaniment.

The "dim beaches deep in sand" that the speaker in "Argument" remembers seeing from the window of a plane are the setting for the third song, "Sandpiper." But now we zoom in to observe the world—as William Blake did—in a grain of sand, from the point of view of a bird zig-zagging along the beach. "Sandpiper" is one of Carter's most vivid compositions, with the oboe playing the role of the title character and the strings and piano sounding the dull roar of the waves. In the middle of the song, the oboe's shrill peeps get gradually faster and faster, leading to an almost frantic duet with the voice, as the narrator's view unexpectedly fuses with the sandpiper's.

"Insomnia" finds an unrequited lover reflecting on the moon reflected in a bureau mirror. Her agitated state is echoed in the nervous jittering of viola and marimba, while the moon sounds in the placid sustained tones of piccolo and violin. The speaker imagines the moon—like herself "deserted" by the universe—lashing out in anger, then finding a reflection of her own image. In the mirror's "world inverted" it is possible to imagine that left is right, that night is day, and that the speaker is not rejected, but loved. Carter's beautifully spare setting evokes the mirror's inverted world with a variety of echoes, reversals and inversions before settling to the depths of the sea near the end.

"View of the Capitol from the Library of Congress" is a poem of political protest, written near the beginning of the Korean War. It pits the earnest but ineffectual strivings of the U.S. Air Force Band against the impassive filter of the trees behind the U.S. Capitol building. As forcefully as the band plays, the trees "[catch] the music in their leaves / like gold-dust" and the band's efforts vanish. Carter's setting contrasts ersatz band music, which "comes in snatches," with sustained ninths in the strings representing the trees. With its imitations of a brass band interrupted by contrasting music, "A View..." is something of a parody of Charles Ives's transcendental patriotism, set in the nuclear age of "Mutually Assured Destruction"—a time when "boom-boom" was a terrifying sound to contemplate.

From the grand stage of government we turn in the final song to the intimacy of the bedroom shared by two lovers. One is asleep; the other contemplates the intimately familiar, yet maddeningly separate breath that stirs within the breast of her lover. The musical

accompaniment of winds and strings recreates the slow respiration of sleep—unresponsive to the earnest searching of a wide-awake and breathless partner.