

Concert 2

“NINE BY FIVE OR NINE”

Program Notes for pieces by Elliott Carter

by John Link

Sonata for Flute, Oboe, Violoncello, and Harpsichord (1952)

This lively piece—commissioned by Sylvia Marlowe for her Harpsichord Quartet of New York—combines elements of Carter’s earlier neoclassicism with the fluid rhythmic language he developed in his First String Quartet (1951). In the brief first movement, marked *Risolto*, the initial contrapuntal dialog of short motivic gestures is quickly joined by a clock-like ticking in the harpsichord, and the interplay of these two textural ideas carries through to the quiet conclusion. The second movement, *Lento*, is the longest and most diverse in character and mood—from the spacious calm of the opening *klangfarbenmelodie* to the bold *maestoso* declarations of the harpsichord, to the sudden breathless outburst that ushers in the final section. The last movement is the most rhythmically vibrant. It begins with a jaunty dotted figure and the jig-like rhythm typical of the final movement of a sonata. But that neoclassical paradigm is soon challenged by more elaborate and ambiguous textures made up of overlapping lines moving at different speeds. At various times the music tries to settle in to the metrical regularity of the opening, but it is always carried away by the onrushing flow of moving lines. Motivic ideas—like the fast repeated-note figure that comes to predominance in the second half of the movement—similarly emerge and disappear like leaves caught in whitewater rapids. Traditional ideas of motive and thematic development are here subsumed in the continuous motion of which they are a part.

Nine by Five (2009)

Carter’s second composition for woodwind quintet is the polar opposite of his first (the neoclassical

Woodwind Quintet of 1946). *Nine by Five* (subtitled *Woodwind Quintet No. 2*) was inspired by Carter’s recollection of *Tre per sette* (1967) by Carter’s longtime friend and colleague Goffredo Petrassi (1904-2003). In both pieces the numerical titles refer to the fact that the instruments outnumber the players due to instrumental doublings. In *Nine by Five* Carter expands Petrassi’s ensemble of seven woodwinds played by three players to nine instruments played by a full quintet: the flutist also plays piccolo and alto flute, the oboist doubles on English horn, the clarinetist plays both B-flat and E-flat clarinets, and the bassoonist also plays contrabassoon. The arsenal of unusual woodwinds creates a dramatic visual impression on the stage, but the real drama is in the music. Instruments that are often used only for special effects are here given full chamber music responsibilities, and their combination gives *Nine by Five* a unique and unusual sonority. The piece is composed as a continuous sequence of accompanied solos, duets, and tutti passages, with a sustained chorale at the center, and each instrument brings its own unique combination of harmonic and rhythmic materials to the party. Among the highlights are a long-line melody in the flute

accompanied by quicksilver interjections from the clarinet, and a dramatic extended horn solo that is suddenly joined by a boisterous E-flat clarinet. The tutti are generally raucous with each instrument asserting its own proprietary intervals in declamatory fashion.

Triple Duo (1983)

Triple Duo was commissioned by The Fires of London, the conductor-less ensemble led by Sir Peter Maxwell Davies that was a major presence on the international new music scene for two decades beginning in the mid-1960s. The group's enthusiastic advocacy and ambitious commissioning program did much to popularize the ensemble of "Pierrot plus percussion," which has become as familiar in our time as the string quartet was in the late eighteenth century. As its whimsical title suggests, Triple Duo groups the instruments into three pairs: flute and clarinet, piano and percussion, and violin and cello. Each group has its own unique vocabulary of intervals and range of speeds, derived from subdivisions of a structural polyrhythm. But unlike his more adversarial compositions of the 1960s and '70s, Triple Duo explores collaboration as much as conflict. Like *Night Fantasies*, it is made up of numerous short contrasting episodes. After a short introduction, an explosion of sound gradually subsides before being abruptly interrupted by the first of several *tranquillo* passages. For most of the rest of the movement, the three duos take turns in the spotlight. The winds are playful, the piano and percussion mercurial, and the strings comically emphatic. But the early *tranquillo* section has planted a seed of collaboration that soon germinates. An early trio of bass clarinet, piano, and 'cello—all whispering intensely in their lowest registers—comes and goes, but later on all six players join in their highest registers for a crystalline slow movement. The most notable example of shared effort comes in the last third of the piece when, after a dramatic recitative for the marimba and an intense climax, the instruments together unfurl a continuous melody made up of short melodic phrases that they pass from one to the next by way of shared pitches. The effect is to transform the self-contained statements from earlier in the piece—statements that emphasized the contrasts among the duos—into a shared experience of lyrical melody that persists and develops in spite of those contrasts

Fatamorgana (Božidar Kos)

The word "fatamorgana" comes from the Italian word *fata* (fairy) and the name Morgana - (or Morgan le Fay), legendary King Arthur's half-sister, usually represented as a scheming, evil fairy who seeks King Arthur's death.

Traditionally "fatamorgana" is used for denoting a mirage that occurs in deserts due to very hot or very cold air. People see things that do not exist.

In my composition the title *Fatamorgana* is used as a metaphor for a deceptive/illusive hope. This was the first composition I wrote after my wife's death. During a relatively short period of her illness she was undergoing a series of tests, each associated with some hope that the disease could perhaps be beaten, only to be followed by a series of disappointments and eventually by a cruel realisation of the inevitable.

Composition is structured in different layers. Dialogues between the flute and the clarinet are accompanied by the violin and the violoncello, for the most part quietly with glissandos, as well as the vibraphone or the marimba. The vibraphone's part has to be performed so silently as if coming from afar, while remaining all the time painfully present and annoying. The marimba's role is that of interfering and commenting. Three sections, heard at the beginning of the work, are repeated at the end, though hardly recognizable due to the fact that they are invertedly reversed.

Fatamorgana was commissioned by ENSEMBLE OFFSPRING with financial assistance from the Music Board of the Australia Council

Božidar Kos