

Concert 3 -

"SCRIVO IN VENTO"

Program Notes for pieces by Elliott Carter

by John Link

Woodwind Quintet (1948)

The Woodwind Quintet is usually said to be Carter's farewell to the French neoclassicism he cultivated in Paris, and he himself has said that he wrote it to be the kind of music of which his teacher Nadia Boulanger would approve. Nevertheless, its stratified texture, rhythmic fluidity, and sense of continuous development all connect it strongly to Carter's later music. The first movement, Allegretto, combines lyrical melody, staccato pulses, and flowing but syncopated fast figuration. Elemental motivic ideas—a leap down and back up, followed by a step up; a leap up and a step down—emerge and disappear and are shared among the instruments. The form seems to be through-composed, until the clear recapitulation of the opening about two-thirds of the way through leads to a resonant melody in the horn, a final recall of earlier themes, and a quiet conclusion. The second movement, Allegro giocoso, is an exhilarating romp. The opening hint of a low flute melody is immediately cut off by irregular figures in the bassoon and swept up into a continuous texture of flowing staccato notes and unpredictable tutti syncopations. With its harmonic surprises, textural variety, and invigorating rhythmic energy, this movement is among the liveliest music Carter has written.

Scrivo in Vento (1991)

This short piece for solo flute was composed for Robert Aitken to premiere at the 1991 Centres Acanthes festival when he and Carter were in residence there together. The tone is set at the beginning when a soft, low, legato melody is suddenly interrupted by a piercing shriek from the flute's highest register. A third idea of flowing fast notes soon joins the other two and their interaction develops in imaginative and sometimes surprising ways throughout the piece. Especially striking is a passage near the close, when the fast music speeds up to a blur of fluttertonguing, from which a long held note of the lyrical melody emerges as though extreme speed had "wrapped around" to slowness.

Gra (1993)

Gra for solo clarinet is Carter's birthday present to his admired Polish colleague Witold Lutoslawski. The piece shares with Scrivo in Vento (composed two years earlier) the idea of a concluding section in which a recurring multiphonic (two notes sounded at once) triggers fragmentary recollections of the piece's earlier music. But Gra (the title means "Play" in Polish) is a much more whimsical piece, in which irrepressible arabesques repeatedly cut in on the attempts of an expressive melody to take shape. Taking advantage of the clarinet's flexibility, Carter juxtaposes extreme contrasts of register, range, dynamics, and articulation, often at lightning speed, which makes the piece an ideal vehicle for the virtuoso clarinetist and a thrilling experience for the audience. The piece ends, unexpectedly, with the ghost of a major triad.

Flute Concerto (2008)

Carter's Flute Concerto is in seven continuous movements, each with its own tempo, character, and approach to texture:

1. Allegretto
2. Meno mosso
3. Andante
4. Presto
5. Mesto; Più mosso; Presto
6. Allegro non troppo
7. Leggierissimo (presto possible)

As in all of Carter's late concertos there is a creative tension between the articulated movements and a more continuous large-scale form. Three contrasting ideas in the orchestra cut across the movement boundaries. The first is an accompaniment of staccato chords and fragmentary gestures, heard most notably in the percussion, harp, and piano, which act as a de-facto concertino, providing a glittering background throughout the piece that finally comes to the fore in the last movement. The second idea—intense held chords, usually with crescendos—builds gradually through a terraced series of appearances in the first movement, then returns near the end. The third idea is a texture of forceful, irregular, marcato fragments for the full orchestra that usually marks the transition from one movement to the next.

Movements one and two form a fast group, with an extroverted and highly varied solo part that tends toward emphatic articulation. The accompaniment builds gradually in the first movement then peaks in the vigorous exchanges of the second. In the third movement, isolated attacks in the orchestra play against an unbroken stream of notes divided between the soloist and the flutist in the orchestra. Movement four is the most dramatic. When the flute duet's final high trill is interrupted by the brass, both flutes suddenly drop out and the orchestra seems to be taken by surprise. It first proceeds in fits and starts, as though waiting for the soloist to fill in the gaps, as it did in the similarly textured second movement. But this time the provocations go unanswered and the orchestra becomes increasingly agitated. Finally, the flute enters (soon joined by the harp and two double basses), but instead of a vigorous rejoinder, it introduces the high, plaintive music of the Mesto. There ensues a remarkable passage of extreme antiphony, in which the calm sadness of the flute and its consort alternates with the continuation of the orchestra's frantic marcato.

Eventually the orchestra gives way, and movements five and six form an extended quiet interlude that takes up nearly half of the concerto's total length. (The marking *Allegro non troppo* in movement six is for the conductor; the music sounds as a continuation of the prior movement's slow music.) Here, a continuous legato melody in the solo part is set against a background of soft sustained chords in the orchestra.

The possibility that the soloist's lyricism has succeeded in taming the orchestra is eventually dispelled by the gradual gathering of staccato fragments, which leads to the orchestra's most forceful marcato exclamation. Heavy crescendoing chords and low register accents build up a wave of energy that finally propels the flute into the last movement like a shot. In the finale the soloist executes a virtuoso cabaletta of short fragments alternating with longer patterns. A culminating upward sweep ignites an explosive duet for solo flute and orchestral piccolo. When the soloist emerges from this duet in a rush, it seems at first to have taken on new momentum that will propel it into a whole new section of the piece. It comes therefore as a complete surprise when the flute suddenly makes a last skittering ascent and simply disappears in a wash of sustained strings. The orchestra is left behind to wonder once more where the soloist has gone, but its final percussive chords and fortissimo crescendo are answered only by silence.