

Concert 5

## **“TEMPO E TEMPI”**

Program Notes for pieces by Elliott Carter

by John Link

### **Esprit Rude/Esprit Doux II (1994)**

Carter composed *Esprit Rude/Esprit Doux* as a 60<sup>th</sup> birthday present for Pierre Boulez, using a short motto based on Boulez's name. Ten years later, Carter added this brief companion piece as a 70<sup>th</sup> birthday present. The first measure of the later piece repeats the final gesture of the earlier one, and the two pieces may be played individually, as a suite, or as a single continuous movement. *Esprit Rude/Esprit Doux II* adds marimba to the original's flute and clarinet, and reflects the considerable changes in Carter's style that took place between 1985 and 1994. The main body of the piece consists of a long-line melody, passed between the flute and clarinet. Unable to participate in the sustained lyricism of the woodwinds, the marimba provides an occasionally vehement accompaniment. Elsewhere, the instruments find common ground in a texture of trills and tremolos that minimizes their differences, but a mood of playful contentiousness nonetheless prevails.

### **Trilogy (1992)**

*Trilogy* was composed for Heinz and Ursula Holliger, and consists of short pieces for solo harp (*Bariolage*), and solo oboe (*Inner Song*), with a concluding duet for the two instruments together (*Immer Neu*). Each of the three movements may be played alone as an independent composition, but when played as a suite the instruments make small accompanying gestures during each other's solo, to particularly striking effect. The word *Bariolage* originally referred to the mixing of colors but was later adapted to bowed instrument playing to refer to the technique of moving rapidly between different strings to produce changes of tone color. Carter's piece was inspired by the harpist Carlos Salzedo, one of the more interesting figures in the New York avant garde, who Carter knew in the 1920s. *Inner Song*, composed in memory of Stefan Wolpe, is extended span of lyrical melody, interrupted only occasionally by contrasting material. The piece conveys a mood of deep feeling and intense focus. *Immer Neu* is a late exploration of the technique of metrical modulation, which Carter developed in the 1950s. As it unfolds, melodic lines with different speeds and contrasting characters overlap and intermingle, creating a constantly-evolving texture of dance-like rhythmic patterns. Carter gave *Trilogy* a motto from Rilke's *Sonette an Orpheus*, part of which reads "Und die Musik, immer neu, aus den bebendsten Steinen, / baut im unbrauchbaren Raum ihr vergöttliches Haus."

### **Mosaic (2004)**

was commissioned by the London-based Nash Ensemble, which gave the world premiere in 2005. The virtuosic harp part is another tribute to Carlos Salzedo to whom *Mosaic* is

dedicated. The piece explores a wide range of special techniques for harp—from “snare drum effect” to “thunder”—all suggested by Salzedo’s influential book *Modern Study of the Harp* (1921), which Carter had long admired. The harp predominates in the opening section with extended solos and a grab bag of special effects punctuated by ensemble flourishes. A lively scherzando and a pair of slow sections follow—the first with dramatic pauses between outbursts from the strings and harp; the second with sustained chords in the strings against the fast fragments for the harp and woodwinds. An impassioned melody passed at great speed among the woodwinds leads to the climax, which unexpectedly disappears into a gently oscillating coda.

### **Quintet for Piano and Winds (1991)**

This Quintet was commissioned by the oboist Heinz Holliger and KölnMusik, who asked a number of composers to write for the unusual ensemble of one of Mozart’s most remarkable compositions, the Quintet for oboe, clarinet, bassoon, horn, and piano (K. 452). Carter accepted the challenge to follow in Mozart’s footsteps and his work has several distant echoes of its illustrious predecessor. Both are in three movements—fast, slow, fast—with the balance leaning heavily toward the first movement, and both introduce the wind instruments with idiomatic and characteristic solo passages that emerge gracefully from the surrounding texture. Perhaps an even stronger echo is the supple shifting of roles among the instruments, from accompanist to soloist and back again. But while he may tip his hat to Mozart, Carter is not the type to indulge in musical nostalgia. The movements of his quintet are played continuously, and the harmonic and rhythmic character of the music is decidedly his own. The ensemble is divided into three groups—piano, horn, and trio of winds—but this partition is fluid, and the alliances are subsumed by the overall character and form. The outer movements feature the piano, by turns declamatory and scampering, which eventually recedes to form a background of slow pulsed single notes during the central tranquillo, which largely features the winds. There are wonderful contrasts and confrontations throughout the piece: the bassoon plays a duet with itself; the horn angrily interrupts the irrepressible, and increasingly shrill E-flat clarinet; the clarinet and bassoon join in a surprisingly rhythmic dance. The personalities of the instruments are sharply defined, particularly the horn which often outdoes itself, ending a phrase on a high note only to follow that with the note a half step higher. The coda, expanding on the piano figuration at the end of Mozart’s quintet, is a grand accelerando: an evolving line of regular pulses gets faster and faster as it is passed from instrument to instrument.

### **Tempo e Tempi (1998-99)**

The poems in Carter’s Italian song cycle range widely in tone—from philosophical to intensely emotional to transcendent—and their unpredictable mood swings are matched by a similarly varied compositional technique in the music. The number and type of instruments in the accompaniment change with every song. There are three duets, dedicated to three virtuosos with whom Carter has maintained long and warm friendships: oboist Heinz Holliger, clarinetist

Charles Neidich, and cellist Fred Sherry. The duets are interspersed among five ensemble pieces, most dedicated to close Italian friends and significant patrons.

*"Tempo e tempi"*

The title poem examines a temporal paradox: our perception of time varies with the circumstances of our lives (lying on the beach or sitting in the dentist's chair), but there are many of us and our conflicting time perceptions, though they rarely intersect, nonetheless proceed simultaneously. Montale likens the situation to multiple tape recorders playing at once. Characteristically, Carter picks up the irony of his text, here depicting the poem's "multi nastri" in an elaborate double canon. The song begins with awkward, out-of-sync pulses in the bass clarinet and English horn. Soon the violin makes a bravura entrance, followed a measure later by the voice. Both the elaborate canonic structure and the quasi-fugal entrances suggest Renaissance or Baroque forms. But here the accumulation of layers produces, not the seamless integration of a Bach fugue, but the confusion of parallel, often contradictory, lives in simultaneous juxtaposition. Typical of Carter's late style, the exemplary technique and the expressive intent are related ambiguously, even antagonistically: does the music conscientiously apply an ancient tradition of contrapuntal craftsmanship to the masterful depiction of confusion? Or, does the music parody that tradition, illustrating its irrelevance in the context of the modern world?

*"Ed è subito sera"*

In Quasimodo's aphoristic but deeply personal poem, the sense of time speeding up as one gets older is suggested by the poem's decreasing line lengths, and by the rhyme of "terra" and "sera," which is set up with four stresses in the first line and answered with only two in the last. As emotion overtakes the speaker in the second line, Carter's expanding wedge-like vocal melody points both to the concluding "sera" (on the voice's lowest note) and to the heights of "sole." The registral separation culminates in the final measure in a four and one-half octave span between the lowest note in the clarinet and the highest in the violin. In the song's (and the poem's) vertical geography, the "living earth" (literally "the heart of the earth") mediates between the height of the sun and the depth of the grave. From "solo" to "sole," and "terra" to "sera," the song engages our experience of being "alone on the living earth."

*"Oboe Sommerso"*

The evening that arrived all too suddenly in "Ed è Subito Sera" returns in "Oboe Sommerso," "like water falling on my grassy hands." The impression of time slipping through one's fingers is augmented by the "Greedy pain" of the opening stanza, which interrupts "my hour / of signed-for abandon," and reminds the speaker that the renewal implicit in the "joy of everlasting leaves" is "not mine." Behind the rapidly-shifting metaphors of rapacious pain and a heap of rubble on the one hand, and water, grass, and wings on the other, is the distant sound of the "Oboe Sommerso," which seems to the speaker to be a kind of memoryless automaton, its notes absent-mindedly parsing joy into syllables. The appearance of the flying birds marks the

poem's turning point; not even this quintessential symbol of freedom and weightlessness can assuage the speaker's pain. The back and forth of their flapping wings is like a heartbeat, but their flying away only serves as a reminder of the heart's weakness and impermanence. The transformation of the birds from a symbol of hope to one of hopelessness is echoed in the final measures, when the oboe's bird-like high trill repeats in the instrument's coarse lowest register. The collapse of the linear order of time into an undifferentiated pile of useless debris marks the nadir of the cycle.

#### "Una Colomba"

In the wake of hopelessness comes hope. The rough oboe trill at the end of "Oboe Sommerso" is transformed at the beginning of "Una Colomba" into the sweet mormorando of a clarinet, playing the dove of the title. Noah's symbol of deliverance from the flood here redeems the weak flapping of the previous poem and suggests the rejuvenation of the poet's mood.

#### "Godimento"

"Greedy pain" may leave one's days "rubble" but pleasure has its problems too. Pleasure is "an abundance of light"; pleasure is "a fruit that slowly ripens." But pleasure is also time bound, and at the end of the day the remorse its absence brings is "like a dog's howl lost in the desert." The stark antithesis of pleasure and remorse at the heart of the poem is familiar ground for Carter and (true to form) he treats it with irony, depicting a type of pleasure that greedily blocks out the rest of the world. The elaborate contrapuntal textures of the first two songs seem to have sped up in "Godimento" and become a tingling swarm of pizzicato strings and staccatissimo woodwinds. Instead of waiting their turn to fall in step, the instruments in the quasi-fugal opening leap ahead of each other, every instrument for itself. The first line of the poem is set as a kind of frantic prologue that persists in the accompaniment, even as the vocal line expands languidly to greet the new day and savor the lusciousness of "addolcisce." But this sensuous indulgence cannot last. As in "Ed è Subito Sera," evening arrives all too soon. As the speaker's thoughts turn from ripening fruit to the coming night, the hum of pleasure in the instruments breaks down into stuttering fragments, and the final howl—beautifully rendered as a cello harmonic—hangs in the air after the last oboe note, as though heard from a great distance away.

#### 6. "L'Arno a Rovezzano"

Like "Tempo e Tempi," "L'Arno a Rovezzano" begins with the elevated tone of a philosophical postulate. In the latter poem, however, the pretense of objective discourse disguises nostalgia and the pain of an old wound. The poem juxtaposes two different time periods, two rhetorical modes, and different perspectives on two key objects of the poet's attention: a house on the river Arno, and the river itself. The numerous binary oppositions stand in for the current distance between the speaker and "a former intimate" (as Carter puts it). In spite of the first line's aura of universality, the true subject of the poem is lost love.

Carter's setting imagines the multiple perspectives, memories, and time frames in the poem as a stream of consciousness, depicted in the multi-layered and continuous accompaniment. Impassioned, or lazily unfurling melodies, aggressive jagged fragments, tolling intervals, and emphatic march-like pulses, all emerge from and disappear again into the trills that provide a fluid background throughout much of the song. Towards the end, a cantando violin melody culminates in a remarkable solo that veers between the poem's and the song's opposite poles of reflection and unstoppable forward motion.

#### "Uno"

"Uno" is the first of six numbered stanzas that constitute Ungaretti's poem "Proverbi." The two-line text is structured as a chiasmus—*S'incomincia:cantare::canta:finire*—that neatly confines singing within the bounds of a life (or perhaps suggests that singing defines those bounds). Carter separates the "singing to start" and the "singing to end" with a rhapsodic cello solo set mostly in the same register as the soprano, as though continuing the passionate song wordlessly. The rhapsody is punctuated by emphatic repeated notes, suggesting the twin poles of the text, and by occasional stentorian tones from the cello's resonant lowest register.

#### "Segreto del Poeta"

Night returns in "Segreto del Poeta," as it has again and again throughout the cycle, and here it is accompanied by hope. The poem's strategy is one of increasing complexity via the accumulation of qualifying detail. It begins with a simple declaration, but by the third sentence (which constitutes the entire second stanza of the poem) the syntax has become dizzyingly complex. Instead of giving a generalized overview, as in the first half of the poem, the speaker plunges into a direct recounting of nocturnal experience. If we unscramble the syntax, flame dislodges the immutable hope that resides in the speaker, separating it from shadows, and restoring light to the mundane gestures of the beloved. But the logic must be pieced together after the fact. The tangle of branching references and proliferating subsidiary clauses depicts the stream of consciousness, seizing on strong images as it struggles to grasp how they are related to one another. In the poem's nocturnal world it is no accident that the speaker's hard-won epiphany—that "Luce" is the quality that hope and memory bring to the beloved—coincides with the end of the night (and the end of the poem). If the night—as backdrop for the work of the imagination—seems at first to be the poet's only friend, perhaps the real secret is that the perception of immortality is felt most ecstatically in the joy of greeting a new day.

Pulse is the essential point of connection between Ungaretti's complex poem and Carter's musical setting. The opening contrasts an insistent heartbeat in the cello against a background of vastly slower pulses in the other instruments—the sound of night's indifferent tranquility. The vocal line initially floats free of the regularity of the instruments, but in the second stanza (in the phrases "*Mentre riprende a distaccarsi da ombre,*" "*nel silenzio retituendo va,*" and "*che immortali pàrvero*") pulse delineates an agitated struggle that repeatedly interrupts the background of inanimate nocturnal calm.

The struggle to escape the distractions of pulse is never entirely resolved in “Segreto del Poeta.” It infects even the most emotional outpouring of love in the song (Talmente amati), cresting on the vocal line’s highest note. Only in the sudden break following the climax is the tenacious continuity of pulse momentarily disrupted. The ecstasy the speaker feels at the rediscovery of “Luce” resists the relentlessness of time enacted in the earlier songs, transforming it in memory into a seemingly endless cycle of renewal.

### **Retracing (2002), Retracing II (2009), Retracing III (2009)**

Carter’s three Retracing’s are short excerpts of the solo parts from longer pieces. The first came in response to a request from the great virtuoso bassoonist Peter Kolkay for a piece for his instrument. Having recently completed *Asko Concerto* Carter thought immediately of that piece’s concluding movement—a sparsely accompanied virtuosic solo for bassoon. With its bravura leaps and colorful trills, this solo succeeds brilliantly as an independent composition.

At an early performance of Carter’s *Quintet for Piano and Winds* in New York, a particularly eager horn player stood out above the other instruments of the ensemble. After the performance, Carter responded to a question about the unequal balance with the simultaneously wry and cheerful observation that he felt he had written quite a good horn part for the piece. More than ten years later Carter may have had that performance in mind when he returned to the *Quintet* and extracted an excerpt of its horn part as *Retracing II*. The result is a composition that spans a wide range of moods, letting both the power and the tenderness of the horn emerge through lyrical expression.

*Retracing III*, for solo trumpet, returns to the transcendent solo from the opening of Carter’s *A Symphony of Three Orchestras* (1976)—a solo that carries the prophetic lyricism of Hart Crane’s vision of a seagull circling New York harbor and the Brooklyn Bridge in the opening stanza of *The Bridge*. In spite of its brilliance, the solo has long bothered Carter. It was written for Gerard Schwartz (then the principal trumpet of the New York Philharmonic), but in spite of Schwartz’s brilliant virtuosity (which may be heard on the Philharmonic’s recording, conducted by Pierre Boulez) it has proven to be too demanding for many orchestral trumpet players due to its lack of pauses to allow the player to rest between soaring flights. Ostensibly, *Retracing III* was composed to solve that problem, but the interpolations added to the original solo (which is otherwise unchanged) also subject the memory of its transcendence to fragmentation and ultimately to a kind of truncation far removed from the original context. The ending gradually draws the music back to the present (with which it is on a collision course), via the imperative of the ticking clock: a periodic staccato note in the trumpet’s low register.