

## THE CARTER-MESSIAEN PROJECT: IS THE MUSIC AMERICAN? OR EUROPEAN?

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A musicologist friend recently told me that the fact that Olivier Messiaen and Elliott Carter were born one day apart, on the 10th and 11th of December, 1908, destroyed any remaining faith she may have had in astrology. Besides their adjacent birth dates and their importance in the music of the last half century, the two composers seem to differ in every important way. Messiaen: French, Catholic, mystical, composer-organist, inspiring teacher. His music is complicated, yet fundamentally simple. Carter: non-religious New Yorker, never a performer, a reluctant, sporadic teacher. His music is fundamentally complex, even when relatively simple. And yet apparent opposites can share similar traits. Music critic Alex Ross once called Carter “America’s great European composer,” and I am tempted to call Messiaen the most American of French composers. After all, two of his greatest works, *Oiseaux exotiques* and “From the Canyons to the Stars,” celebrate the birds of America and the landscape of our national parks.

Carter’s European links are not hard to explain. His family’s business imported finery from Europe and each year they traveled from New York to the lace-making centers of France, Belgium and Switzerland. The family claimed that young Elliott could read French before he learned to read English and that he could even converse in Romansch, the obscure Swiss language. Carter studied with Nadia Boulanger in Paris for three years in the early 1930s, and composed some of his most important works of the 1960s while living in Germany and Italy. Messiaen’s Americanism is more mysterious. His father was a professor of English, but Messiaen never learned the language, and when he spent one summer teaching at Tanglewood he worked through a translator. The trip to southern Utah that inspired “From the Canyon to the Stars” was a rare American excursion.

But the issue of America and Europe has less to do with language and travel than with ideas about music. Europe represents a musical tradition over 1,000 years old. America, we might say, represents the possibility of forgetting about that tradition. For Carter, these

two paths of music were represented by two influential figures: Nadia Boulanger and Charles Ives. When Carter was in high school he was introduced to Ives, who lived on Manhattan’s upper east side. Due to poor health, Ives had retired from the insurance business, where he had made a great fortune, and also from composing, but he was still passionately involved in music, and, in particular, he underwrote the music of the “ultra-modern” composers Henry Cowell, Carl Ruggles, Dane Rudhyar and Edgard Varèse. Ives took Carter to hear concerts of new music, and, Carter recalls, would later decry what he saw as the simplistic nature of European modernism compared to the greater complexity of his own music and that of his ultramodern friends. These composers wanted to make a total break with the European past. Cowell wrote a book called *New Musical Resources* (1930) in which he imagined entirely new ways of constructing harmony and rhythm; he was the first composer to ask a pianist to play inside the piano, and the first to use tone clusters.

When Carter studied with Boulanger, however, he encountered a very different attitude. For her the most important new music, particularly that of Stravinsky, was a continuation of the European past. Her students not only pursued the traditional study of counterpoint, but performed Bach cantatas and Monteverdi madrigals. They analyzed medieval music, renaissance music and classical music along with the latest modern scores. Music was not a matter of radical re-invention, but of a carefully honed craft learned from the masters of the past. Boulanger’s wrenching influence on Carter became apparent in 1939 when Carter wrote a scathing review of Ives’ Concord Sonata in an article entitled “The Case of Mr. Ives.” He called the music “basically conventional,” “full of the paraphernalia of the overdressy sonata school.” Its harmonies were “helter-skelter;” its aesthetic, “naïve.” This parricidal review might have been dictated by Mlle. Boulanger. Just a few years later, though, Carter began to reassess his rejection of Ives, and in three of his most important works, the Cello Sonata of 1947, the first String Quartet of 1951 and the Variations

for Orchestra, written in 1954-1955, Carter would quote themes from Ives' music, while at the same time alluding to the music of European modernists like Debussy, Bartok and Berg. Like a character from a Henry James novel, Carter would remain torn between European and American ideals, and as with Henry James, this conflict would fuel his creative work. The internal argument between Boulanger and Ives never really ended.

With Messiaen the conflict of European and American ideals played out in a less dialectical form. Messiaen's early works, like his Preludes for Piano, show how grounded he was in the music of Debussy and Ravel; Debussy's opera *Pelléas et Mélisande*, was a lifelong influence. But as a composer Messiaen showed little interest in the European tradition of the three B's. His sense of the past jumped directly from Gregorian chant to Wagner, particularly *Tristan und Isolde*, paying no attention to Bach or Mozart, even though (or perhaps because) neo-classical and neo-baroque music were all the rage in Paris in the years when Messiaen was a student. In his early 20s Messiaen allied himself with other young French composers, including André Jolivet in a group called "*La Jeune France*" who opposed the bubbly neo-classical style of *Les Six*. Interestingly, Jolivet studied with Varèse for a number of years and so was a link between French anti-classicism and American ultramodernism. Rather than learn from the canonical European masters, Messiaen, like Cowell, sought to re-invent music from the ground up. Some of his ideas were mathematical, like Cowell's: Messiaen experimented with non-traditional scales that he termed "modes of limited transposition" beginning with Debussy's whole-tone scale and Mussorgsky's octatonic scale, and he created new kinds of rhythmic development which challenged older ideas of meter and symmetry. Messiaen also explored rhythmic ideas from Indian and ancient Greek music. In 1942 Messiaen summarized his non-traditional approach to composition in "The techniques of my musical language" which might be thought of as a French equivalent to Cowell's *New Musical Resources*.

In their compositional careers Carter and Messiaen again display an obvious contrast. Messiaen found his distinctive voice quite early, with his *Apparition de L'Église éternelle* for organ in 1932 and his song cycle

*Poèmes pour Mi* of 1936, and his mature style appeared in a series of masterpieces in the 1940s, including the Quartet for the End of Time, *Visions de l'Amen*, *Trois petites Liturgies*, *Vingt Regards sur l'enfant Jésus* and Turangalila-Symphony. After a brief period of experiment with serial ideas and even with electronic music, spurred by his students Pierre Boulez and Karlheinz Stockhausen, Messiaen would return to the idiom outlined in his book, augmenting it with ideas from Japanese music and, especially, with his continuing systematic study of birdsong. His idiom and interests found their perfect subject in the vast opera *St. Francis of Assisi* which many critics view as Messiaen's crowning achievement.

Carter's development was slower and more unpredictable. Many of his early works were secular choral compositions written from university chorales. Carter pursued the simple American-sounding style of Walter Piston and Aaron Copland, both of whom had also studied with Boulanger. The first sign that Carter would have something original to say came with the Piano Sonata, written in 1945-1946; its harmonies suggest Copland, but its epic scale recalls Ives. After the war Carter re-connected to the "ultramodernist" music of his teen years, working with Cowell and Lou Harrison on editing Ives' music for performance, and cultivating a friendship with Varèse. This shift in allegiances influenced the form of the Cello Sonata which was begun in a Coplandesque style but evolved in a more experimental direction particularly in terms of rhythm; the sonata introduced the use of "metric modulation" with frequent, proportional changes of tempo. Carter disguised this unforeseen development by placing the last-composed movement first thereby giving the sonata as a whole a kind of spiral design in which the end flowed into the beginning.

These innovations, however, did not give Carter a life-long idiom comparable to Messiaen's techniques. His style remained open to influences, particularly from the European avant-garde, and continued to evolve until he was past 60. Yet, from the Cello Sonata onward Carter's music sprang from a single idea: disconnection. Where Messiaen's music celebrates a divinely created, mystically unified cosmos, Carter's music pictures a disjointed world where a cello and a piano seem to be playing different, unrelated pieces at

the same time with only hints of interaction. At the premiere of the Duo for Violin and Piano, for instance, the two players were positioned as far away from each other as possible to emphasize their dysfunctional relationship. Not surprisingly Carter has compared some of his pieces to the plays of Samuel Beckett.

And yet, for all their differences in background and outlook, both composers share interests in rhythm and timbre that can bring their music close together. If you listen to Messiaen's Quartet for the End of Time paired with Carter's First Quartet it soon becomes apparent how both composers have expanded the possibilities of rhythm not just beyond the practice of 19th century music, but beyond the rhythmic innovations of Stravinsky as well. Similarly, if you listen to Messiaen's orchestral masterpiece *Chronochromie* (1960) back-to-back with Carter's Concerto for Orchestra (1968), you can hear how both composers redefine the sound of an orchestra, especially in their foundational use of the percussion.

For the Carter-Messiaen Project, we are indeed fortunate to hear this important body of music interpreted by players who have played a decisive role in putting the music on the map through their virtuosity and passionate advocacy.