

## **Dramatizing the Harpsichord: The Harpsichord Music of Elliott Carter**

by Chau-Yee Lo

“I regard my scores as scenarios, auditory scenarios, for performers to act out their instruments, dramatizing the players as individuals and participants in the ensemble.”<sup>1</sup> Elliott Carter has often stated that this is his creative standpoint, his works from solo to orchestral pieces growing from the dramatic possibilities inherent in the sounds of the instruments. In this article I will investigate how and to what extent this applies to Carter’s harpsichord music.

Carter has written two works for the harpsichord: Sonata for Flute, Oboe, Cello, and Harpsichord was completed in 1952, and Double Concerto for Harpsichord and Piano with Two Chamber Orchestras in 1961. Both commissions were initiated by harpsichordists: the first by Sylvia Marlowe (1908–81) and the Harpsichord Quartet of New York, for whom the Sonata was written, the latter by Ralph Kirkpatrick (1911–84), who had been Carter’s fellow student at Harvard. Both works encapsulate a significant development in Carter’s technique of composition, and bear evidence of his changing approach to music in the 1950s. Shortly after completing the Double Concerto Carter started writing down the interval combinations he had frequently been using. This exercise continued and became more systematic over the next two decades, and the result is now published as the *Harmony Book*.<sup>2</sup>

Carter came to write for the harpsichord for the first time in the Sonata. Here the harpsichord is the only soloist, the other instruments being used as a frame. In particular Carter emphasizes the wide range of tone colours available on the modern harpsichord, echoing these in the different musical characters of the other instruments. In focussing on the harpsichord, he explores its expressive character beyond that which is displayed in the Baroque repertoire.<sup>3</sup> In the Double Concerto, however, the harpsichord is antiphonal to the piano, and both keyboards have their own orchestras. In the Sonata the harpsichord is accompanied by non-keyboard instruments – flute, oboe and cello; in the Double Concerto it is an equal partner with the piano.

The nature and capabilities of the harpsichord shape both the Sonata and the Double Concerto in different ways. Carter concentrates on the issue

of dynamic balance between the harpsichord and the other instruments, as well as similarities and differences in sonority. Its drier percussive quality contrasts with the other instruments: this contrast is central to the Sonata, while in the Double Concerto Carter surrounds and complements the harpsichord with pitched and unpitched instruments which both echo and contradict its sonority. The dynamic range of the modern harpsichord conditions all details of the Sonata: its shape, phrasing, rhythm, texture, as well as the large form. This is also true in the Double Concerto. Even earlier, in the Sonata for Cello and Piano (1948), Carter commented that it could be meaningful to make the great differences in sound and expression of the different instruments one of the points of the piece, and to use these different qualities to articulate the large-scale form and argument.<sup>4</sup>

The Challis harpsichord for which the Double Concerto was written has two manuals and pedal stops. All stops except the mute have half-hitches (intermediate positions). This includes the Coupler, since on the Challis the Coupler does not connect the keyboards but adds to the lower manual one additional set of jacks. This plays on the 8' strings of the upper manual. Whilst the Sonata was first written for a Pleyel without half-hitches, it was subsequently recorded on a Challis described above and the printed edition bears instructions for such an instrument.

On the title page of the holograph score of the Sonata, Carter wrote:

The dynamic markings for the flute, oboe, and 'cello should be carefully adjusted to the various degrees of loudness produced by the different registrations of the harpsichord. The latter should always be clearly audible when playing even in a soft registration and when its part is marked "solo." The other instruments should play softly enough to allow the harpsichord part clear predominance. (Elliott Carter Collection.)

In the Double Concerto, too, Carter is careful to stipulate that the harpsichord music should always come through, not by amplification, but by gradation of dynamics of other instruments playing with it. Indeed throughout the Double Concerto, Carter allows the harpsichord music to come through in different degrees by his instrumentation.

In the Sonata the beginning of each movement is characterized by a different combination of registrations on the harpsichord. Carter tells us that he wants to emphasize as much as possible the different tone colours available on the modern harpsichord.<sup>5</sup> (For example, a large Pleyel with seven pedals can produce thirty-six different colours.) Each combination determines the character of the movement. The first movement, *Risoluto*, starts with *tutti*, the next movement, *Lento*, with Manual I<sup>1/2</sup> 16' (half-hitched sixteen foot) and Manual II<sup>1/2</sup> 8', and the final *Allegro I*: 4' + 16' and II: 8'. The full force of the harpsichord starts the first movement dramatically; the half-hitched position reduces the volume of the two registers for the more introspective slow movement. 4' and 16' registers open up the harpsichord by two octaves at the start of the *Allegro*: Carter is careful not

to overload the texture so as to keep the music afloat in the manner of a “gondolier’s dance.”<sup>6</sup>

Carter’s desire to “get down to the physical origins of musical sound”<sup>7</sup> is reflected in the shape of the Double Concerto, which begins and ends with unpitched percussion, with pitches gradually emerging in both ensembles, introducing the soloists. These in turn become more articulated and differentiated: the harpsichord speaks on its own in its Cadenza, and then again in the Presto, but eventually pitches disintegrate into chaos from the beginning of the Coda.

The general structure of the Double Concerto has several points in common with the Sonata. The first movement of the Sonata begins with a big sound that gradually ripples away; similarly the crash of sound in the Coda of the Double Concerto dies away to a single click at the end of the piece. In the Lento of the Sonata, energy bubbles beneath the calm surface anticipating the fast dance-like Allegro; in the Double Concerto, fast music also bursts out towards the end of the Adagio, into the Presto.

The 4’ adds brilliance to cadenza-like passages in both the Sonata and the Double Concerto: the continuous stream of semi-quavers at measure 296ff (Allegro) and measure 540ff (Presto) demonstrate Carter’s skill in orchestration, by giving the harpsichord an individual voice in the texture. In both instances, the choice of instruments and their disposition in register allow the harpsichord to come through clearly. The 4’ + 8’ combination is just enough in both cases to bring about the effect Carter has in mind. The 16’ is not used here: the weight of the extra set of strings would affect the speed of execution of the semi-quavers; extending the written notes an octave down would take away the brilliance Carter has achieved.

The frequent changes in registration in the Sonata become yet more frequent in the Double Concerto, reaching a high-point of complexity in the Cadenza for Harpsichord, where often there is at least one registration change per bar (*Example 1*). However, the use of the mute to produce a continuous converging line in the Sonata at measure 121ff (Lento) is different contextually to its fragmented appearance towards the end of the Introduction in the Double Concerto, here made even more fragmentary by the use of *staccato*. Whereas the mute is used mainly for textural contrast in the Sonata, it plays a more important part in dynamic shading in the Double Concerto.

When the harpsichord is used with a small ensemble in the Sonata, it is readily perceived as the main instrument. Against the large number of instruments in the Double Concerto, Carter is careful to either augment its sound, by using other instruments that share its sound qualities, or by using sparse instrumentation, or none at all. For example, its Cadenza is entirely unaccompanied, and the Presto has minimal instrumentation. In sections where Carter uses the full force of the *tutti*, the harpsichord contributes to the overall sonority by playing heavy clusters in both hands, for example

**Cadenza for Harpsichord**  
*Cadenza per il Clavicembalo*

103 Perc. 2 *bTom* *pp*  $\leftarrow \text{quarter note} = 98 \rightarrow$

Hpschd. (i) *marc.* *pp* *quasi pizz.* *muted* *(+II mute)* *(+16)* *(-16)* *(-4)* *(-C)* *(+16)* *(-16)* *(+16)* *(-16)*

Perc. 3 *(sSD)* *pp*

Perc. 4 *(aTom)* *pp*

106 Hpschd. *pp* *quasi pizz.* *muted* *(+II mute)* *(+16)* *(-16)* *(-4)* *(-C)* *(+16)* *(-16)* *(+16)* *(-16)*

109  $\leftarrow \text{quarter note} = 56 \rightarrow$

Example 1: Elliott Carter, *Double Concerto for Harpsichord and Piano with Two Chamber Orchestras* (1961), “Cadenza for Harpsichord,” mm. 103–11 (New York/London: Associated Music Publishers, 1964, p. 33, AMP 96139-168).

at the beginning of the Coda at measures 619–20, and measure 642. In other passages where the harpsichord plays in duo with the piano, for instance in the fast music of measures 439–65, Carter exploits the combination of the plucked sound of the harpsichord and the more resonant hammerstruck piano. In so doing he takes particular care in balancing the texture and dynamics of the two instruments.

Indeed, the question of dynamic balance has occupied Carter a great deal in live performances as well as recordings. Carter responded to the first commercial recording by effectively saying the listener should be able to experience a recording in the same way as if he were in a live performance.

He went on to note that a great deal of dynamic contrast had been levelled off in the recording, commenting

The harpsichord is really too loud in relation to the others. It is always associated with soft sounds, and if amplified, must never sound more than *mf* of the other instruments. To make the harpsichord loud cuts out one important source of variety in the work – that of large dynamic changes.<sup>8</sup>

Stravinsky famously hailed the Double Concerto as a masterpiece.<sup>9</sup> It is regrettable that Carter's contemporaries and successors failed to take up the challenge posed by the Sonata and the Double Concerto: with the exception of John Cage and Lejaren Hiller's *HPSCHD* (for 1–7 harpsichords and tape, written for Antoinette Vischer [1909–73] and completed in 1968), there were no significant contributions to the repertoire by major American composers in the decades following. Both Marlowe and Kirkpatrick were notably less active in commissioning new works from the early 1960s, leaving a new generation of European performers and composers to extend the repertoire of the contemporary harpsichord.

<sup>1</sup> Elliott Carter, quoted from Bayan Northcott, "Crosstalk," *New Statesman*, vol. 86, no. 2230 (14<sup>th</sup> December 1973), pp. 920–21, quotation p. 920.

<sup>2</sup> Elliott Carter, *Harmony Book*, ed. by Nicholas Hopkins and John F. Link (New York: Carl Fischer, 2002).

<sup>3</sup> Notes by Carter published as sleeve notes in the Nonesuch release of the Sonata for Flute, Oboe, and Cello, together with the Sonata for Cello and Piano, and the Double Concerto (CD Elektra Nonesuch, 79183-2, 1992). The booklet for this compilation reprints Carter's notes from earlier LP releases of the Sonata (LP Nonesuch, H-71234, undated), and the Double Concerto (LP Nonesuch, H-71314, 1975).

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> Taken from Carter's typescript, one page, of his response to the first commercial recording of the Double Concerto (LP Epic, BC 1157, 1962), held in the Elliott Carter Collection.

<sup>9</sup> Igor Stravinsky and Robert Craft, *Dialogues* (London: Faber Music, 1982), pp. 99–101.