

## Elliott Carter's Cold War Abandonment of the Chorus

by Daniel Guberman

Upon returning from Paris to the United States to begin his compositional career in 1936, Elliott Carter wrote more works for chorus than for any other instrument or ensemble. His choral works were championed by G. Wallace Woodworth, director of the Harvard Glee Club, who commissioned three works from him over ten years and regularly scheduled performances during the group's tours. In addition to his *Tarantella* (1937), *Defense of Corinth* (1941), and *Emblems* (1947) for the Harvard Glee Club, Carter composed *Let's Be Gay* (1937) for the Wells College Glee Club, directed by his friend Nicolas Nabokov. In 1937 he attempted to organize a madrigal choir in New York, for which he composed *To Music* and *Harvest Home*. Other choral works from this period include *Heart Not So Heavy As Mine* (1938), *The Harmony of Morning* (1944), and *Musicians Wrestle Everywhere* (1945). After *Emblems*, however, he abandoned choral music for six decades, not writing another piece in the genre until 2007.

The accepted reason for Carter's abandonment of the voice is that vocal music did not fit the new style he developed in the postwar era, exemplified by the First String Quartet. This new style emphasized complex music tailored to the sound of specific instruments. America had no professional choral tradition, and early in the 1950s Carter believed that university and amateur groups would be unable accurately to perform the intricate rhythmic and pitch structures in his new compositions.<sup>1</sup> He described this situation in a 1953 presentation at Harvard University titled "The Need for New Choral Music." In this talk Carter emphasized that it was not composers who had to be convinced of the value of choral music, but choruses and audiences who had to convince the composer that there was a market. At the beginning of his talk, Carter presented himself as a composer who would be happy to continue writing for the chorus, but in the end he excluded himself from this group, and declared that he would no longer write simplified compositions in the genre: "for me at least the time for writing deliberately simplified music has come to an end."<sup>2</sup> Thus Carter claimed that strengthening America's choral tradition would be valuable, but he cautioned that he would not undertake the task.

The idea that choral music must be simplified may have seemed true in the late 1940s and early 1950s, but Carter's conception of choral music changed drastically when he heard Luigi Nono's *Il Canto Sospeso* during his travels in Europe in the late 1950s. The second movement, for a *cappella* chorus, fascinated Carter, and became a staple in his lectures on contemporary music in the 1960s. In his 1963 lectures at Dartmouth College, Carter focused on the unprecedented effects Nono produced from the chorus through his use of contrasting dynamics:

The notion of unvoicing chords, so to speak, having unbalanced chords, in which some notes are louder than others, this is something that people had never thought of before or seldom ... composers had never written chords that had varieties of different loudnesses within their notes ... Somebody is singing a pianissimo low note and somebody is shouting on a loud, this gives an extraordinary impression, just that it is very moving and sort of very unexpected in character.<sup>3</sup>

The Dartmouth lecture reveals that Carter's encounter with *Il Canto Sospeso* renewed his interest in choral compositions and made him reconsider his own choral works. When discussing his compositional development in the same lecture series, he placed an emphasis on *Emblems*, describing his attempts to compose contrasting characters for the piano and chorus as a precursor to the contrasting ensembles in the *Double Concerto*:

I was asked to write for the Harvard Glee Club for piano and men's chorus and I thought it would be interesting to write a piano concerto for piano and men's chorus accompanying, and as you can see in this piece which would then make the piano have a free part that was separate and different and idiomatic from the chorus and to make this a kind of meaningful thing that had a relationship to the text ... It starts with a choral introduction and then there is a middle movement which is sort of a piano concerto and then there's a last movement in which the piano gradually is overwhelmed again by the chorus. When I play my double concerto you will see very similar patterns in my most recent work which follow very much the same kind of thing in motion of the accompanying medium allowing the soloist to appear and then get overwhelmed again.<sup>4</sup>

By 1967, when he delivered another lecture series, Carter continued to praise Nono's accomplishments and even declared that American groups were capable of performing such complex pieces: "I never would have thought anybody could do it, there are quite a number of choruses now in Europe and even in the United States that do things as difficult as this."<sup>5</sup>

Despite his renewed faith in the abilities of choral ensembles, his fascination with the products of Nono's complex writing for voices, and his continued interest in connecting music to poetry, Carter still avoided composing for choruses.<sup>6</sup> He finally explained his hesitance to compose choral works in a 1986 letter to Ann Santen (*Plate 1*), refusing her request to commission such a piece. Santen directed WGUC, a classical music radio station in Cincinnati, and had helped to arrange the recording of Carter's Piano Concerto and *Variations for Orchestra* by the Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra and Michael Gielen. In refusing the commission, Carter claimed

Dear Ann, *Santen*

Forgive me for sending this letter so late. I hope, meanwhile, you have received the letters I wrote about Michael Gielen and the recordings, among them my complete choral works— all written before the lessons of the '40's had sunk in, when I saw life very differently than I do now.

I have thought a lot about the choral work we discussed and which you so kindly offered ~~to~~ <sup>to</sup> arrange to have commissioned. A great deal of time has been spent searching for a text and now I am beginning to feel I never will, *finding one.* Perhaps the reason is that to me, now, choral music represents a social cohesiveness and agreement about worthy goals— which I no longer see in the world we live in, except on very superficial matters — public relations and consumer goods and as I have no desire to write an advertising cantata (as Milhaud did for a paper company), I see that except for something humorous there is little for me in the project. Being one of a crowd and expressing this in choral music is, now, I think, alien to me, writing a work that 'deconstructs' the choral as I have instrumental ensembles and still be within the range of American choral potentials would be to solve an arduous time-consuming puzzle, even before a note was written, and would continue to be during the entire period of composition. There are more useful and effective ways of using one's time and energy.

I deeply appreciate your wish to have me do this and have made every effort to find a way to carry it out satisfactorily, but I really don't think I could, now. I don't want to keep you waiting any longer for an answer, which, alas, is no.

Helen joins in sending our warmest greetings to you and Harry,

March, 1986

Plate 1: Elliott Carter, Letter to Anne Santen, March 1986 (Elliott Carter Collection).

that he had thought about writing a choral work for a long time, and would have liked to, but found the chorus was not an appropriate ensemble for the modern world. It was rare for Carter to use a political statement to explain his compositions or practices. While he had numerous interactions with the government and participated in cultural diplomacy efforts, both officially and unofficially, throughout the 1950s and 1960s, he rarely spoke publicly, or in his letters, about political matters. This letter in particular is valuable because of its wide-ranging time span, beginning with the “lessons of the ‘40s” and continuing to the 1980s, covering almost the entire Cold War.

Carter describes the lesson of the 1940s as a failed attempt at “social cohesiveness.” I attribute this idea to the short-lived yet popular “one-world” worldview that emerged near the end of the Second World War, when Americans saw the Atlantic Charter as an opportunity to revise the mistakes made in the aftermath of the First World War. Instead of returning to isolationism, which had ended with the bombing of Pearl Harbor, many Americans saw the bounding of America and Britain as the first step towards the creation of a new international community, resulting in enormous popular and political support for the Bretton Woods Agreement and the formation and joining of the United Nations. However, by the end of the decade the hopes for universalism expressed at the end of the Second World War had faded amidst the emergence of the Cold War, with Stalin replacing Hitler as America’s primary enemy.<sup>7</sup> These developments and the initial intensification of the Cold War accompanied Carter’s last work for chorus, *Emblems*, in 1947. For Carter, perhaps the antagonistic mindset created by the Cold War precluded composition in the choral genre, which had its premise in social cohesion and universal cooperation.

Later in the letter, Carter addresses his instrumental compositions, depicting his music as “deconstructing” ensembles, which suggests political overtones for his methods. Carter’s desire to deconstruct ensembles, by giving the instruments individual and often contrasting musical identities, first appears in the first movement of his Cello Sonata, composed in 1948, just as he abandoned the chorus. Carter emphasized an explicit “deconstruction” of ensembles with his three compositions between 1959 and 1965 (the Second Quartet, *Double Concerto*, and Piano Concerto), aligning with the most tense period of the Cold War (including the initial escalation of the Vietnam War, the Cuban Missile Crisis, and the Chinese nuclear missile tests).<sup>8</sup> By revealing Carter’s connections between the relationship of performers in an ensemble and collective versus individual identities, Carter’s letter to Anne Santen suggests new modes of inquiry and analysis for some of his most important and complex compositions.

<sup>1</sup> In his correspondence with Woodworth, Carter discusses the difficulty of *The Defense of Corinth*. See Felix Meyer and Anne C. Shreffler, *Elliott Carter: A Centennial Portrait in Letters and Documents* (Woodbridge, Suffolk: Boydell Press, 2008), pp. 45–47.

<sup>2</sup> Elliott Carter, “The Need for New Choral Music” (1953), *ibid.*, pp. 106–09, quotation p. 108.

<sup>3</sup> This is my transcription of the audio recording of his lecture. A copy of the recording is held in the Elliott Carter Collection, Paul Sacher Foundation (original recordings on tape; Dartmouth lectures from August 5, 8, 12, and 15, 1963; archival copies on CD).

<sup>4</sup> The description of a solo pianist gradually becoming overwhelmed by the chorus parallels the relationship between the piano and the orchestra in the Piano Concerto, which he was beginning to think about at this time.

<sup>5</sup> My transcription of audio recordings in the Elliott Carter Collection, Paul Sacher Foundation (original recordings on tape; Workshop Minnesota, July 3 to 6, 1967; archival copies on CD).

<sup>6</sup> Carter considered composing a cantata based on Hart Crane’s poem *The Bridge*, but ultimately removed the chorus, turning it into his *Symphony of Three Orchestras*.

<sup>7</sup> See Andrew J. Falk, *Upstaging the Cold War: American Dissent and Cultural Diplomacy 1940–1960* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2010), especially chapters 2, “One World or Two? The American Postwar Mission,” and 3, “Casting the Iron Curtain.” For a discussion of the political events and decisions in the first years of the Cold War see John Lewis Gaddis, *The United States and the Origins of the Cold War, 1941–1947* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1972).

<sup>8</sup> Carter recalls watching the erection of the Berlin Wall during his stay in the city as he composed the Piano Concerto.