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Narrative and Metaphor in Elliott Carter's String Quartet No. 1

ABSTRACT

Background

The circumstances surrounding Elliott Carter's conception of his seminal First String Quartet (1951) are well-known: Carter exclaimed, 'to hell with the audience and with the performers, too', before retreating to the Lower Sonora Desert in Arizona to explore novel ideas about 'musical themes, ways of development, textures and forms'. However, Carter's writings, interviews, and text documents reveal that Carter was quite mindful of the audience and performers while composing this quartet, evidenced by numerous narratives he devised in order to make the piece more approachable and understandable. Building on the scholarship on musical narrative and metaphor, I aim to discuss Carter's First String Quartet through a lens of narrative. My study is informed by the analysis of the sketches (housed at the Library of Congress and the Paul Sacher Stiftung) and the score, as well as original text documents, correspondence, and Carter's own writings on the piece.

Carter's First String Quartet marks a turning point in his development of musical language and expression. Carter wrote it at a time when he became increasingly interested in exploring new and unusual ideas — the individualization of the instruments, superimposing thematic material, complex poly-rhythms, tempo modulation, chordal sonorities as a means of unifying a work, and creating novel textures and forms. The piece is characterized by a textural conflict with many layers of contrasting speeds and characters, yielding what Carter has referred to as his 'most extreme adventure into 'metric modulation''. These ideas stemmed from Carter's interest in the subject of time perception, leading him to conclude that the most compelling aspect of music is time. Seeking new ways to address the perception of time, its understanding and experience, as well as the role memory plays in music, Carter turned to the modernist literature and film, primarily Marcel Proust's *À la recherche du temps perdu*, James Joyce's *Ulysses*, Jean Cocteau's 1930 film, *Le Sang d'un poète*, and Sergei Eisenstein's montage technique in his movies. Thus, Carter often discussed his First Quartet using one of those narratives.

To rephrase Jean-Jacques Nattiez's questions, 'Can one speak of narrativity in music?', to which he responds, 'No', we may ask — with all these narratives, what does one hear in Carter's First Quartet? Do we hear the desert horizons, Proust, Joyce, Cocteau, and Eisenstein? Byron Almén notes that one of the most important insights about musical narrative is that it is fundamentally dependent on the listener's, analyst's, and/or performer's interpretation. But, as Nattiez suggests, it is the presence of a text or program that engages our narrative listening strategies, thus we do not hear a narrative unless we are given a linguistic cue. Therefore, without this Verbal Cue Argument — the program notes and narratives given specifi-

cally by Carter to influence our hearing and understanding of the piece — it would be highly unlikely that anyone would develop any of those narratives on their own. Almén argues that while it is certainly true that *what* we hear (narrative) depends on *how* we hear (a particular listening strategy), we might ask whether Nattiez is considering *all* the ways that a narrative listening strategy could be cued, citing Hatten's observation that our listening strategies tend to arise from both conventional and idiosyncratic musical behaviors. Can these conventions and idiosyncrasies be applied to Carter's work, hailed as the piece that broke away from Carter's early-music conventions and idiosyncrasies?

Aims and Repertoire Studied

The existing scholarship on Elliott Carter's First Quartet predominantly focuses on analysis of the rhythmic and harmonic language of the piece, ignoring the notion that the ecology of the Arizona desert played a role in the development of Carter's new language, or how the many narratives surrounding this Quartet shape our understanding and reception of the piece. In this paper, I aim to discuss Carter's First String Quartet through a lens of narrativity and semiotics.

Methods

My analysis builds on the scholarship on musical narrative and metaphor (Zbikowski 1998; Maus 2003; Spitzer 2004; Mailman 2012; Almén 2008), and on musical ecology (Cook 2013; Clarke 2005). Further, my study is informed by the analysis of the sketches (housed at the Library of Congress and the Paul Sacher Stiftung) and the score, as well as original text documents, correspondence, and Carter's own writings on the piece.

Implications

My study bridges music analysis to performance and (eco-)musicology, and offers an interdisciplinary approach to interpreting Carter's seminal First String Quartet through narrative and metaphor.

Keywords

Elliott Carter, First String Quartet, Narrative and Metaphor, Eco-Musicology, Twentieth-Century Music.

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