



# Elliott Carter and the Poets: Listening to, Listening Through

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## Elliott Carter and Poetry: Listening to, Listening Through

Poets have always been listening. The meanings they seek to convey in their poems often seem to lie half outside the words, in the rush of wind or water, in the thunder, in the cries of birds, as if poets were trying to translate into human language a poetry that pre-exists in the whole body of the world's sounds. Composers also listen; and when they read poems, they listen both to the music of the words themselves, and to the music on the far side of the poems, the music that the poets themselves were attending to. So—when Haydn sets a passage in *The Seasons* in which frogs appear, he sets the orchestra a-croaking. The philosopher Schopenhauer greatly deplored this tendency in Haydn, on the grounds that music should strive to align itself with the deep urgencies hidden in the heart of things, and not to imitate external phenomena. But it's futile to try to argue Haydn out of his ribbits, or Beethoven out of his cheep-cheeps in the song *Die Wachtel*. The Quail. In a poem about sound, the external sound is an irresistibly potent metaphor for the poem's meaning. Imagine a composer trying to set this passage from a poem by Crashaw, concerning a nightingale:

There might you hear her kindle her soft voice,  
In the close murmur of a sparkling noise,  
And lay the groundwork of her hopeful song,  
Still keeping in the forward stream, so long  
Till a sweet whirlwind (striving to get out)  
Heaves her soft bosom, wanders round about,  
And makes a pretty earthquake in her breast ...

(“Music's Duel,” 1646, a translation of a 1617 Latin poem by Famianus Strada)

Only an extraordinary chaste composer could resist the temptation to embody in the music something of the dynamic of the whirlwind and the earthquake, the immense pressure trying to escape through the small orifice of the bird's throat. The meaning of the poem may not be exactly identical with tornado, tremor, or throb of song; but it would be difficult to convey the poem's meaning without some audible allusion to these things.

Elliott Carter is a composer particularly gifted at listening to and listening through poetry. As a sample of his skill at listening to, I'll play for you the beginning of a setting he wrote in 1938 of Shakespeare's song “Tell me where is fancy bred”:

### 1. Carter, Tell me where is fancy bred

This lithe and elegant tune is perhaps the only twentieth-century setting of a Shakespeare song that would have given sure pleasure to Shakespeare himself, if he had been able to hear it. The contour of the melody, expertly adjusted to the poem's rhythm and breathing-pattern, does all the work of expressing the shadowed simplicity of the text.

But of course Carter is famous for text-settings of a very different kind. For a long time during the middle of his career, Carter abstained from writing vocal music, and when he resumed he began to write in a style that adapted some features of the strikingly original instrumental style developed in the 1950s. Two relevant features of Carter's mature style are, first, what Carter calls in a 1959 essay “emancipated musical discourse” (*The Writings of Elliott Carter*, ed. Else Stone and Kurt Stone, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1977, p. 188), extending Schoenberg's idea of the emancipation of the dissonance to a thorough liberation of every aspect of music; and, second, the preoccupation with a sort of utopian polyphony involving the careful coordination of wildly independent strands of music—“distinct, simultaneously evolving,

contributory thought-processes or musical characters” (Allen Edwards, *Flawed Words and Stubborn Sounds: A Conversation with Elliott Carter*, New York: Norton, 1971, p. 37), in Carter’s words.

In Carter’s first three compositions for voice and instrumental ensemble—*A Mirror on Which to Dwell* (1976), to poems by Elizabeth Bishop, *Syringa* (1978), to a poem by John Ashbery, and *In Sleep, in Thunder* (1982), to poems by Robert Lowell—we can hear a radical rethinking of the notion of setting words to music. When Carter was young, he composed a “Madrigal Book,” from which he published a few selections, such as the cheerfully Morleyesque “Harvest Home” (1937); and I suspect that the madrigal is for Carter the fundamental musical form for dealing with words. I’m not sure whether to describe the style of the Bishop, Ashbery, and Lowell setting as a sort of anti-madrigalism, or to describe it as a sort of madrigalism pushed to its limit. In the seventeenth-century Italian madrigal, the staggering of voices is typically a device for intensifying the central emotion, as if feeling were heightened to such a pitch that one voice reels off dizzily into a small band of reinforcements:

## **2. Monteverdi, Vago augeletto: opening**

But in Carter’s work the accompaniment may reinforce the main line—when there *is* a main line—but may also qualify, resist, question, or contradict the main line. Such features occasionally occur in old madrigals, and quite often in opera: as Carter himself said in a 1960 critique of Shostakovich’s *Lady Macbeth of Mtsenk*, “The relation of the music to the action is unaccountable, ranging from opposition, as in the scene in which the heroine and her lover strangle her husband . . . to a lively dance tune, to the more familiar underlining of action and mood” (p. 213). Carter rather disapproved of this opera, which he called “makeshift and callous,” a “‘comic’ book”; but he himself was to spend a good deal of time investigating the ways in which music could resist a text, not in a haphazard or arbitrary manner, but by teasing out the text’s internal voices of self-resistance. Carter’s approach is essentially deconstructive—in a sense, he’s Mikhail Bakhtin’s or Jacques Derrida’s dream composer, in that he searches for the implied polyphonies of meaning within the poetry he sets. Carter listens to the text, and he listens *through* the text for ironies and false notes, for veiled meanings that can realize themselves in half-hidden or ambiguous lines in the instrumental accompaniment.

For this reason Carter often chooses texts in which self-excoriation, bad faith, doubt, or sheer puzzledness is prominent. For a simple example of listening through the text, we might hear a passage from the Bishop setting *Sandpiper*:

The roaring alongside he takes for granted,  
and that every so often the world is bound to shake.  
He runs, he runs to the south, finical, awkward,  
in a state of controlled panic, a student of Blake.

## **3. Carter, Sandpiper, opening**

The beach hisses like fat. On his left, a sheet  
of interrupting water comes and goes  
and glazes over his dark and brittle feet.  
He runs, he runs straight through it, watching his toes.

—Watching, rather, the spaces of sand between them  
where (no detail too small) the Atlantic drains

rapidly backwards and downwards. As he runs,  
he stares at the dragging grains.

This is as literal as Carter gets: the oboe is obviously imitating the piping of a bird, and the whooshes of the piano are probably imitating the waves. But I think that the oboe is imitating, more than the sound of the bird, the motion of the bird, its hectic jerky gait; Carter is creating a cock-eyed, off-kilter, titubated sort of rhythm. The sandpiper is a student of Blake because Bishop is thinking of Blake's famous lines, "To see a World in a Grain of Sand / And a Heaven in a Wild Flower" ("Auguries of Innocence"); but Blake elsewhere wrote,

Mock on Mock on Voltaire Rousseau  
Mock on Mock on tis all in vain  
You throw the sand against the wind  
And the wind blows it back again

And every sand becomes a Gem  
Reflected in the beams divine  
Blown back they blind the mocking Eye  
But still in Israels paths they shine

The Atoms of Democritus  
And Newtons Particles of light  
Are sands upon the Red sea shore  
Where Israels tents do shine so bright

According to Blake, some folks see grains of sand as gems, whereas others see only inert bits of dead matter. Bishop compared herself to the sandpiper, as she once said: "All my life I have lived and behaved very much like the sandpiper—just running down the edges of different countries and continents, 'looking for something'" (James Vinson quoting Elizabeth Bishop, *Contemporary Poets*, third ed., 1980). She was clearly looking for gems—"quartz grains, rose and amethyst," according to the end of "Sandpiper"; but maybe she was to find only sand. I wonder if Carter caught a glint of self-mockery in this poem. The staccato pecking of the oboe and the voice, atomizing the music, breaking it down into irregular blips and peeps, has a somewhat scattered or scatterbrained quality—as an expression of that paradoxical condition, intent aimlessness, the music could hardly be surpassed.

A more complicated example of listening-through can be found in another song from the Bishop sequence, *View of the Capitol from the Library of Congress*, in which Bishop—the poetry consultant for the Library of Congress—watches the Air Force Band in the distance, but can't hear it:

On the east steps the Air Force Band  
in uniforms of Air Force blue  
is playing hard and loud, but—queer—  
the music doesn't quite come through.

#### **4. Carter, View of the Capitol: alla marcia**

It comes in snatches, dim then keen,  
then mute, and yet there is no breeze.  
The giant trees stand in between.  
I think the trees must intervene,

catching the music in their leaves  
like gold-dust, till each big leaf sags.

Unceasingly the little flags  
feed their limp stripes into the air,  
and the band's efforts vanish there.

Great shades, edge over,  
give the music room.  
The gathered brasses want to go  
*boom--boom.*

Carter is especially attracted to poems about screening. This poem concerns an almost unheard band—and Carter must have relished the challenge of writing music to describe an inaudibility. We strain our ears to listen through the blocking foliage for the oompahs on the other side, but all we hear are acoustic ghosts: a muffled snare drum, a few faint defective fanfares from piccolo, oboe, and clarinet (marked *quasi da lontano*: as if afar), often with leaps not likely to be encountered in Sousa, such as an upward major ninth. But as the song continues the direction *quasi da lontano* starts to be found in the parts of the violin and cello, not instruments usually heard in a marching band: it's as if the spectre of the band, the imaginary band constructed out of memories of other bands in other places, is itself becoming the screen that blocks the real band's sound—the band is at once everywhere and nowhere. Ultimately the singer has to supply the band's noise herself by saying out loud the syllables *boom-boom*—"intensely whispered," according to the score. From the age of sixteen Carter knew the composer Charles Ives, who was quite fond of musical evocations of distant brass bands: as Carter wrote in a 1946 essay on Ives: "The effects of acoustical perspective made by placing instruments and even whole bands in antiphonal, opposing position on the village green were also tried" (p. 147). Anne Shreffler has consulted Carter's notes and manuscript drafts for *View of the Capitol*, and has argued, with great precision and subtlety, that there are passages in which Carter is organizing his music into two distinct simultaneous bands, one fast, one slow (*Quellenstudien II: Zwölf Kompositionen des 20. Jahrhunderts*, ed. Felix Meyer, Basel: Amadeus, 1993, p. 275); but maybe one can hear innumerable spectres of bands—wisps of pseudo-brass seem to come from every direction at once, a metaphor for a sort of ubiquitous non-existence of sound. I think that Carter, unlike Ives, isn't dealing with too many bands, but with too few. There aren't many precedents in music for portraying a missing sound, but Debussy tries the experiment at the end of his piano prelude *Fireworks*:

### **5. Debussy, Fireworks, end**

The refrain of the *Marseillaise* ("Aux armes citoyens") lingers in the air like the memory of a lost tune—as Keats said, unheard melodies are sweeter. Carter, incidentally, was five years old when Debussy composed that piece.

*Sandpiper* deals with audibly complicated meanings; but *View of the Capitol* deals with an absent meaning. This concern with a meaning that isn't quite there is a strongly Modernist aspect of Carter's art. At the climax of T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* the thunder speaks the saving syllable, the magic syllable—DA—that ought to bring rain to the desert and heal the broken heart. The poem explains, more or less, that *da* is the Sanskrit root of *give*, *sympathize*, and *control*, and giving, sympathizing, and controlling are surely all fine things, but it's not clear that they're enough to ease the predicament of modern man—and as you know the poem ends polyphonically, in a celebrated piece of gibberish blending Italian and Latin and French and Sanskrit—*uti chelidon nel fuoco à la tour abolie shantih shantih shantih*, to squash the ending even more than Eliot did. The thunderword of *The Waste Land*, and the still more interesting

thunderword that appears on the first page of Joyce's *Finnegans Wake*, babadalgharaghtakamminarronkonnbronntonnerronntuonnthunntrovarrhounawnskawntoohoo-hoordenenthurnuk!

are desperate, vaguely comical attempts to find a word that can convey ultimate meaning. (Joyce concocted this word out of roots meaning *thunder* in a great variety of different languages.) The supremely meaningful and the absolutely meaningless are strangely intimate with one another in twentieth-century art. This is a sort of aesthetic that tries to listen through the text to hear, in effect, the voice of the universe itself, a voice that may turn out to have nothing to say. As the century progressed, and the Modern drifted into the Postmodern, the conviction grew that there was a general absence of meaning in texts of all sorts, from the English language to the genetic code. And so art becomes a set of inscriptions and doodles and little noises posed on top of a vacuum. I know of no artist more gifted than Carter at making elegant trceries that hint at something missing underneath.

In *View of the Capitol*, most of the music represents not what we want to hear, but the screen that prevents us from hearing it, the thick frazzle of leaves disabling the sound of the band. In the next and last song of the Bishop sequence, *O Breath*, the instrumental music is unusually static, representing the sleeping woman's slow breathing; but it is full of odd soft tremoli and scurrings and half-audible iridescences of a suspended cymbal and the occasional low muffled blat, as if hinting that the woman's sleep is uneasy, perhaps troubled by nightmare:

#### **6. Carter, O Breath: opening**

Beneath that loved and celebrated breast,  
silent, bored really blindly veined,  
grieves, maybe lives and lets  
live, passes bets,  
something moving but invisibly ...  
(See the thin flying of nine black hairs  
four around one five the other nipple,  
flying almost intolerably on your own breath.)

Equivocal, but what we have in common's bound to be there ...

#### **7. Carter, O Breath: flying**

Or maybe the disturbances aren't in the sleeper but in the listener's nerves—at this level of intimacy it's hard to say whether the listener stops and the sleeper begins.

Breath can be taken as one of the ultimates of art, an origin and terminus, since all speech, much music, is but a breath of air; an aura of the sacred surrounds the word *breath*, since words for the human soul—*spiritus*, *pneuma*, *ruach*—are often words for breathing. But this is a poem about equivocation, about evasions in love, about shortness of breath, so to speak. Bishop was an asthmatic—asthma curtailed her schooling and sometimes hospitalized her; and the breaks in the lines represent a kind of panting. The sleeper breathes, but the singer seems deranged from breathlessness. The melismas of Carter's vocal line are so fretful, so interrupted, that they suggest a singer who continually snatches for air: the song is a tissue of holes. We still listen through the song, but the only thing to be heard on the other side is silence. The florid soprano scribbles on air; but the missing object here is oxygen.

The Lowell sequence repeats many of the themes and devices of the Bishop sequence. Parallel to *Sandpiper* there is *Across the Yard: La Ignota*: in the Bishop setting we hear through the poem to the sandpiper; in *La Ignota* we hear through the poem to the voice of a soprano who practices Wagner in a dilapidated house.

The soprano's bosom breathes the joy of God,

### **8. Carter, La Ignota**

Brunhilde who could not rule her voice for God ...

She has to sing to keep her curtains flying ...

She flings her high aria to the trash like roses ...

When I was lost and green, I would have give  
the janitor three months' rent for this address.

The unruly voice is represented by a trumpet *quasi da lontano*, in an odd reversal of instrument and voice: the actual tenor we hear singing seems only to be providing a critical commentary on some more potent vocal music that half-eludes his hearing. As in the Bishop setting *View of the Capitol*, there is a certain muffling, screening out of sound, though the curtains here are far less effective than the leaves in the earlier song. I hear no specific allusions to Wagner in the trumpet line, but it can be understood as a bending-out-of-shape of any number of things in *Die Walküre*. The most likely thing, perhaps, for a ruined, retired, or wannabe Brünnhilde to be practicing would be *Hojotoho*:

### **9. Wagner, Walküre, Hojotoho**

The first big whoop consists of an augmented G-major triad, progressing into E major, then F major, then F $\square$  major. The delirious excitement is produced by semitonal upward creep of the harmony. Wagner's Valkyrie music is marked by a strong tendency to outline triads, but then to violate them, bend them by brute force into a new shape:

### **10. Wagner, Walküre, valkyrie**

Wagner builds up a C major triad, but instead of the expected culmination on the octave, the tune lands a little below, on B, the major seventh, making the melody lurch violently into E major. In other words, Wagner, like Carter, gives us botched fanfares, but Wagner finds a way to repair the fracture. This swerve to the mediant is the same electric shock that Ravel gives you at the climax of *Bolero*, though Wagner doesn't make you wait fifteen minutes to get it.

A study of the trumpet part in *La Ignota* reveals all sorts of distorted bugle-calls, including, at mm. 15-16, a fractured Valkyrie-like fanfare, and even a quick flash of the G-major augmented triad of *Hojotoho*:

### **11. Carter, La Ignota, mm. 15-16**

Later (mm. 34-35) we hear the phrase-shape, but not the notes, of *Hojotoho*:

### **12. Carter, La Ignota, mm. 34-35**

But of course these Wagnerisms don't sound particularly Wagnerian, since Carter not only deprives them of harmonic support, but also provides the "wrong" support, so that they spike out into all sorts of peculiar shapes. Carter is playing a game similar to the game that Schoenberg played in his 1929 opera *Von heute auf morgen*: the plot concerns the marital difficulties of a modern composer, not wholly unlike Arnold Schoenberg—at one point the composer's wife flirts with a Wagnerian tenor, who quotes his favorite line from *Die Walküre*, "Schmecktest du mir ihn zu?" (Will you taste it first for me?—the exhausted Siegmund's request to Sieglinde, after she's brought him some water):

### **13. Wagner, Walküre, Schmecktest**

In Schoenberg's opera, the composer's wife offers the tenor a cup of coffee, and the tenor replies, "Coffee! O sweet Hebe, poured out by *you!*—or, as I sing it as Siegmund, 'Will you taste it first for me?'—café au lait would certainly taste like gin!":

### **14. Schoenberg, Von heute, Schmecktest**

What is strange is how easily Wagner's music fits into the atonal texture of Schoenberg's opera;

similarly in *La Ignota* the allusions to Wagner are modest and inconspicuous, in the distance in several senses.

Now much of the story of Modernist music consists of various extensions and subversions of Wagner; as a founding father of Modernism, Wagner might represent some primary meaning dimly audible behind the occlusions of the twentieth century; some rock, like the great E $\square$  chord at the beginning of *Das Rheingold*, on which the dizzying experiments of later periods might ground themselves. But as we listen through *La Ignota* to Wagner, we don't find any such place of refuge. Drifts of fake or forgotten Wagner float effortlessly through the song—it's difficult to know whether the Brünnhilde can't sing right or the poet can't hear right, across the yard and through the veils of the curtains. Carter doffs his hat to Wagner, but he doesn't adore him—Wagner provides pleasure, but for Carter, unlike Lowell, Wagner doesn't seem to have anything to do with the voice of God, the trumpet of judgment.

So far we've looked at a number of teases in Carter's music—sound-glimpses of some domain of meaning that is touched upon but never fully entered. But in *Syringa*, Carter does seem to enter a second world—to expose some deep stratum of meaning beneath the words of a poem, As he explains in his note to the score,

The idea of accompanying the singer of Ashbery's text with another singer whose part would express the subliminal background that might be evoked in the mind of a reader, very soon suggested itself. Indeed, lines near the poem's end: "In whose tale are hidden syllables / Of what happened so long before that" led to the idea that the second singer could have a text that reflect some of the sounds, ideas, and feeling of the Ashbery poem in "hidden syllables"—the "hidden syllables" of classical Greek, since the poem was about a classical myth.

Ashbery's poem is difficult, but I construe it as follows: behind the poem there lies some experience of loss which the poet can't describe directly, since the pointed facts of a specific man's pain are finally unspeakable, beyond the range of art; so the poet chooses to write not about his own loss but about Orpheus's loss of Eurydice, a well-understood, easily available story; but as he writes his Orpheus poem Ashbery discovers that Orpheus too was a sort of prevaricator, inventing stories because he couldn't deal with the pain of *his* loss, either. The poem reels backward from the truth, in an endless deferral of meaning; it's less a poem than a description of what a poem would look like if it were so fortunate as to exist. Everywhere Ashbery keeps probing the possibility of a secret language adequate to our feeling, like "the language of the birds" that a horse boasts that he can understand; but the poem isn't optimistic about the possibility of holding on to either the people we love or to the love itself or even to the expression of that love in words—at one point a poem streaks by, "its tail afire, a bad / Comet ... The singer / Must then pass out of sight." Neither the poet nor the poem can hope to endure, can hope to say much.

But Carter counterpoises all this palaver about how life runs off into places we can't find, how life petrifies into snapshot and microfilm, with texts from classical Greek, including a creation song ascribed to Orpheus himself, and lines by Sappho of the utmost erotic intensity, and Plato's peculiar story of the phantom Eurydice that followed Orpheus from the underworld—a phantom, not the real woman, because the gods figured that a musician was too craven actually to die for love. Classical Greek is a language little known to the public at large; and any language you don't understand is a plausible version of the language of the gods. Robert Morgan, in his wonderfully wide-ranging article "Secret Languages: The Roots of Musical Modernism" (*Critical Inquiry*, March 1984, p. 447) points out that in the nineteenth century



writers spoke of music as “a second Sanskrit” (E. T. A. Hoffmann) or “a mysterious language [revealing] that which is most mysterious” (Ludwig Tieck); but the notion of juxtaposing two musical languages, one discursive and prosaic, the other esoteric, perhaps began after Hoffmann’s time.

In some sense *Syringa*’s whole premise of realizing a secret language somewhere behind a vocal line is a monstrous expansion of a device Carter used in his Frost song “The Line Gang” (published 1975, evidently written 1942), concerning the destruction of forests to provide telephone and telegraph lines. Here Carter taps out a bit of Morse code, as if to provide an occult second language in counterpoint to the text:

### 15. Carter, *The Line Gang*, telegram

Here we listen through the poem into a language of pure rhythm—or at least an allusion to such a language. If this rhythmically active, aroused beep-speech were given to a singer, it would sound rather like *Syringa*.

The sonority of the mezzo-soprano singing Ashbery’s poem is usually quite distinct from that of the bass singing the Greek:

### 16. Carter, *Syringa*, mm. 159-182

But it isn’t enough  
To just go on singing. Orpheus realized this  
And didn’t mind so much about this reward being in heaven  
After the Bacchantes had torn him apart, driven  
Half out their minds by his music, what it was doing to them.

*Eros, once again,  
unloosens  
my body  
torments me  
bitter-sweet  
irresistible monster...  
The seed of fire  
preserving ...*

Some say it was for his treatment of Eurydice.

As Lawrence Kramer once pointed out in a fine article (“*Syringa*,” in *Beyond Amazement: New Essays on John Ashbery*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1980, pp. 255-271), the distance between the mezzo-soprano and the bass keeps shifting; but in general the mezzo-soprano is conversational, easy-going, as if she were reading the text out loud, whereas the bass yelps, yodels, agonizes. Carter himself was inspired by Cavalieri’s *Rappresentazione di anima e di corpo* (Schiff, p. 302), but in some ways the effect is closer to that of Monteverdi’s narrated epic *Il Combattimento di Tancredi e Clorinda* (1624), except that the narrator and the impassioned characters often sing at the same time. We listen through the mezzo-soprano to the hyperexpressive sound-world of the bass, revealing the true affect hidden beneath the often prosaic surface of Ashbery’s text. In most settings of the Orpheus story, there is a musical dialectic between beauty and terror: as in Gluck’s *Orpheo* (1762), in which Orpheus sings a lovely song to the furies, while the furies threaten him and Cerberus howls; or in Stravinsky’s *Orpheus* (1948), which begins with the plinks of Orpheus’s lyre:

### 17. Stravinsky, *Orpheus*, beginning

and climaxes with the Bacchantes’ ripping Orpheus into pieces:

### 18. Stravinsky, *Orpheus*, dismemberment

But in *Syringa* beauty and terror, lamentation and dismemberment, all belong to the emotionally intense world of the bass, the undersong; the mezzo-soprano doesn’t seem to know much about them.

In some ways Carter’s strategy, ingenious as it is, betrays the effect that Ashbery sought. Instead of an unspoken x at the core of the poem, Carter provides an articulate musical speech; where Ashbery frames an absence, Carter fills the hole with an opera. As soon as music’s secret

language becomes audible, it isn't a secret any more; the bass's voice becomes simply one more polyphonic line in the whole collection, distinct only insofar as it offers unusually legible codes of affect. On the other hand, if Carter is trying to demonstrate that there isn't really anything there on the far side of music—if he is exposing the folly of trying to listen-through music to something real, something miraculous, beyond the surface—then maybe *Syringa* accomplishes his goal. When I hear it, I feel disillusioned: beyond the web of sound there seems to be nothing but an excited bass showing off.

Perhaps there's a clue in *Syringa* itself that the limitation of music, its inability to reach distant goals, is Carter's true theme. When the bass sings of the phantom Eurydice and the cowardly Orpheus, he suggests that under the aspect of eternity neither the singer nor his grief counts for very much; and all the bass's ululating and whooping may be read not as woe or horniness or exaltation, but as fear—the fear that all these expressive gestures may reel off into nothing. By revealing in song the secret meaning of Ashbery's poem, Carter makes it ordinary.

If I'm right about this, the true sequel to *Syringa* is his *Symphonia* (1998), subtitled *Sum fluxae pretium spei* (I am the prize of flowing hope)—the line is from a Latin poem, *Bulla* (Bubble) by Richard Crashaw, the seventeenth-century Royalist and Roman Catholic convert with whom we began today. The motto of the amazing final movement, *Allegro scorrevole*, is also taken from Crashaw's poem:

Sum venti ingenium breve  
Flos sum, scilicet, aeris ...

I am the genius of the gust,  
And the sure flower of air ...

### **19. Carter, Allegro scorrevole**

This movement is the most prolonged act of vanishing in music: it is a playful representation of sheer nihil. Carter isn't the first composer to deal with nothingness as theme for music. At the end of Schoenberg's *Erwartung* (1909), the music glides away into a faint fast prickling of zero:

### **20. Schoenberg, Erwartung, end**

And we can find similar things in much earlier music. In Crashaw's age, in fact in the very city where Crashaw held a minor clerical post, Rome, there arose a peculiar subspecies of oratorio called the *vanitas*—Silke Leopold has described them in some detail. In one such oratorio, *Vanitas vanitatum II*, attributed to Carissimi, pompous music depicting the pomp of royal life suddenly collapses at the mention of the word *vanity*, like a balloon pricked with a needle:

Sceptres, crowns, purple pomp,  
triumphs, laurels, honors, decorations,  
glories, even games, and delights,  
and feasts, and riches, all  
is vanity and a shadow.

### **21. Carissimi, Vanitas**

The simplest meaning of the word *vanity* is *emptiness*. This oratorio is exactly equivalent to those seventeenth-century still lifes, in which a skull and a housefly were somber signs of the transience of all things mortal; Carissimi even builds long rests into the music, as if the listener were to contemplate the fact that, of the things pass away, nothing passes away so quickly as music, which makes its little noise and then is as if it never was. In the twentieth century silence stands as one of the austere ultimates of experience, along with meaninglessness and death, those Easter-Island statues that loom over the art of the age. But Carter seems to smile as he contemplates the silence that is the only certain thing that lies on the far side of sound. Again and again in his later work there appear musical realizations of the dissolving and dissipating of all things, *solvet saeculum in favilla*. In Carter's setting of William Carlos Williams's poem

“Lear,” from *Of Rewaking* (2003), there is a passage that describes how Williams dreamed of a throng of solid-seeming men and women—  
but as we approached down the paved  
corridor melted—Was it I?—like  
smoke from bonfires blowing away

## 22. Carter, Of Rewaking

The poem may be called “Lear,” but the music would be right for that speech in *The Tempest* where Prospero describes how the

The cloud-capp'd tow'rs, the gorgeous palaces,  
The solemn temples, the great globe itself,  
Yea, all which it inherit, shall dissolve,  
And like this insubstantial pageant faded  
Leave not a rack behind. We are such stuff  
As dreams are made on, and our little life  
Is rounded with a sleep.

\*

Carter is sometimes thought of as a rather abstract composer, and this talk may have made him seem all the more abstract, if not abstruse. But I want to end with a notion that Carter is in one sense a remarkably concrete composer. I've argued that we listen through the music and find absence, breathlessness, silence; but from another perspective we listen through the music and hear an extraordinarily complete representation of the way it feels to have a body. If I attend closely to the rhythms of my body, and count up how often my heart beats in a minute, how often I breathe, I find that these frequencies have no relation to one another—pulse and breath seem to operate on independent arithmetical systems. If I factor in other data, such as the oscillations of eyeballs, the twitches of head and arms, not to mention blinking, I find that on the most concrete level my life as a mammal is a polyphony. In a note in the score of *Partita* (1993), which became the first movement of *Symphonia*, Carter wrote,

During and after composing *Partita* ... my musical intention was to present the many changes and oppositions of mood that make up our experience of life. In general, my music seeks the awareness of motion we have in flying or driving of a car and not the plodding of horses or the marching of soldiers that pervades the motion patterns of older music. At the time I was reading poems of the English Jacobean poet Richard Crashaw, and was fascinated by ... *Bulla* (Bubble), which at one point personifies a floating bubble

...

Carter sees his music as something like a jet plane performing aerial maneuvers; I see his music as a description of the sheer multifariousness of the motor and perceptual nervous system, the buzz and shimmer of living in a world where independent phenomena bombard us from all sides. But in either case Carter is a realist of the deepest human senses—muscular clench and balance, coenesthesia. You should hear not only elegant inflections, but bone and blood.