

# “Variations for Orchestra”--Louisville Orchestra (1956)

Added to the National Registry: 2005

Essay by David Schiff (guest post)\*



*Elliott Carter*

In 1948, the year he turned 40, Elliott Carter initiated a sharp turn in his musical idiom. In his Cello Sonata, completed that year, he explored approaches to rhythm, harmony, texture and form that moved beyond the neo-classical style of much of the music he had written up to that time. Also in 1948, Robert Whitney, musical director of the Louisville Orchestra, and Charles Farnsley, Mayor of Louisville, conceived an ambitious plan for commissioning, performing and recording new works for orchestra. This idea gave the Louisville Orchestra a distinctive mission among American ensembles. To achieve this mission, the orchestra downsized from 70 players to 50, and stopped engaging prominent guest soloists. Flouting conventional wisdom, the Louisville Orchestra became a lean machine for producing new music. In 1953, a grant from the Rockefeller Foundation enabled the orchestra to commission, perform and record as many as 52 new works annually. By the mid-1950s, Louisville was commissioning nearly three times as many new works as all the other major American orchestras combined. The Louisville commissions, moreover, included a wide range of styles, and an international line-up of composers, some well-known, others, like Carter, just emerging.

After the Cello Sonata, Carter began to imagine major projects that would expand his new idiom, and demonstrate his heightened ambitions. His String Quartet no. 1, completed in 1951, is an epic, visionary work, clearly intended to take its place alongside the quartets of Bartok, Berg and Schoenberg, and Ruth Crawford Seeger (each of whom get little intertextual fist-bumps in Carter's score). Its European premiere, in Rome in 1954, earned Carter an international following for the first time. Even before that premiere, he began to sketch a major orchestra work that would be the symphonic equivalent of the quartet, and he also began to look for a commission to guarantee performance. After his hopes for one from the Boston Symphony were dashed, he turned, a little reluctantly, to Louisville; he had had no previous contact with the orchestra or its conductor, and he was concerned about the ensemble's pared-down size and technical abilities. These concerns were important because Carter was modeling his new work on the *Orchestral Variations* op. 31 of Arnold Schoenberg, which was scored for a large

ensemble (including mandolin and guitar) and was so daunting in its demands that its premiere in 1928 with the Berlin Philharmonic (under Furtwängler) was a “debacle”—even the formidable Chicago Symphony did not program Schoenberg’s Variations until 1964. The score of Carter’s “Variations,” completed in 1956, shows how he simultaneously reined in some of his innovations, out of concern for the Louisville Orchestra’s real or imagined limitations and, at the same time, composed a work that remains technically challenging even today. The recording made on May 20, 1956, a month after the premiere, demonstrates how, despite Carter’s fears, the Louisville Orchestra was fully up to all the challenges he placed in its path.

In his program notes for the Louisville premiere, Carter explained, in a characteristically broad-ranging (and hyper-erudite) manner, that he had adopted a “more dynamic and changeable approach” to the standard theme and variation form. He likened the older variations to the sharp delineations found in “Ethical Characters” by Theophrastus (the Greek philosopher from the third century BCE). Carter’s work, by contrast, explored the “unexpected types of changes and relationships of character, uncovered in the human sphere by psychologists and novelists, in the life cycle of insects and certain marine animals by biologists, indeed in every domain of science and art.” We can trace these arcane references back to Carter’s undergraduate years at Harvard in the late 1920s where he studied literature and classics. (One of his earliest compositions, written for the Harvard Classical Society, set a text in ancient Greek.) A new edition and translation of “The Characters of Theophrastus” appeared in 1929. Around the same time, the young Carter also attended a lecture in philosophy by Alfred North Whitehead, which would be published, also in 1929, as “Process and Reality,” an encounter that would influence his thinking for the rest of his life. Whitehead’s lectures redefined philosophy in terms of organic growth, creativity, becoming. In the “Variations,” Carter gave Whitehead’s ideas about process a musical form.

As the program note hints, Carter, at midlife, was moving forward and looking back. The “Variations” can be heard as enacting a three-way conversation/argument between musical and philosophical father figures: Arnold Schoenberg, Charles Ives (whom Carter had first met when he was in high school) and Whitehead. From Schoenberg, Carter borrowed the formal design of Introduction, Theme, nine variations and Finale. The theme itself contains several 12-tone ideas. From Ives’ “The Unanswered Question,” where strings, flutes and a trumpet pursue independent, unrelated musical thoughts, Carter borrowed the textural idea of superimposing or juxtaposing three distinct layers of music. (The homage to Ives is most explicit in the seventh variation, where woodwinds, strings and brass trade off competing ideas.) Unlike Ives, though, Carter did not assign each layer to a particular group of instruments; they constantly evolve, in a Whitehead-style process. Process also appears in two recurring thematic ideas that Carter termed “ritornelli.” Unlike the Schoenbergian theme, which unfolds in distinct melodic phrases, the two ritornelli are objects of rhythmic transformation, musical organisms, one slowing down across the entire length of the piece, the other speeding up. This process appears most clearly in the fourth and sixth variation, the first, a continuous ritardando, the second, an accelerando. To achieve these effects, Carter had to expand the technique of “metrical modulation” that he had explored in the First Quartet, taking rhythm from the realm of geometry to that of differential calculus. Conductors and players today can still find the notation a little baffling. Once, at a New York Philharmonic rehearsal that I attended, even the great clarinetist Stanley Drucker lost

his way. Without stopping, or looking down at the score, Maestro Lorin Maazel, began to sing the clarinet part in solfege syllables to help Drucker get back on track.

Perhaps the most innovative aspect of Carter's "Variations" is its contrapuntal texture. Nearly everywhere three distinct musical ideas unfold simultaneously. This keeps the players, especially in a relatively small ensemble, very busy and in constantly changing roles, sometimes as soloists, sometimes part of a *grand tutti*. The conductor has the challenge of keeping the rich layers of musical ideas balanced and moving. Listening to the Louisville recording, few listeners would guess that it was compact in size or second tier in status. Robert Whitney and his pioneering musicians captured the volatile drama of Carter's score with its full cyclonic force.

*Composer and author David Schiff studied with Elliott Carter at the Juilliard School. He has written books about Carter, George Gershwin and Duke Ellington, and essays on a wide range of music and musicians for "The New York Times," "The Atlantic Monthly," "The Nation," and the "Times Literary Supplement."*

\*The views expressed in the essay are those of the authors and may not reflect those of the Library of Congress.