

THE MUSIC OF ELLIOTT CARTER

The forked crash of split thunder parts
Our hearing momentwise . . .

The music evokes life and death, lyrical motion and paralysis in a continuous span built from fragments of shattered images, 'one arc synoptic of all tides below'.

Materials

A standard symphony orchestra (triple winds, five horns, five percussionists) is divided into three contrasting groups:

Orchestra I: brass, timpani, strings

Orchestra II: three clarinets, vibraphone, chimes, xylophone, marimba, long drum, low tom-tom, piano, four violins, six cellos, two basses

Orchestra III: woodwinds (without clarinets), horns, metal percussion, strings (no cellos)

Orchestra II seated at the centre is a concertante group, each of whose movements is dominated by solo instruments. The outer orchestras play more textural music.

Chart 36 Twelve movements

(A Symphony of Three Orchestras)

Orchestra I: Brass, timpani, strings.


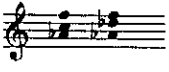
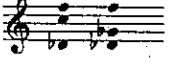

Movement	Bars	Interval	Chord	Speed	Character-colour
1	38-46 237-259	m6		MM 12	sostenuto
2	55-89 207-226	A4		60	molto espr.
3	105-121 157-192	M2		420	flowing
4	127-142 273-309	m2 m9		120 140	angry

Orchestra II: 3 Clarinets, Vibraphone, chimes, xylophone, marimba,
Piano, 4 violins, 6 celli, 2 basses.

1	50-67 131-164	P5		45	bell-like
2	82-112 250-264	m7		240	grazioso (clarinets)
3	178-199 298-318	A4		80	cantabile, espr. (celli)
4	215-242 268-285	m3		accel. to 540	accelerating (piano)

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Orchestra III: Flutes, oboes, bassoons, horns, violins, violas,
basses, non-pitched percussion.

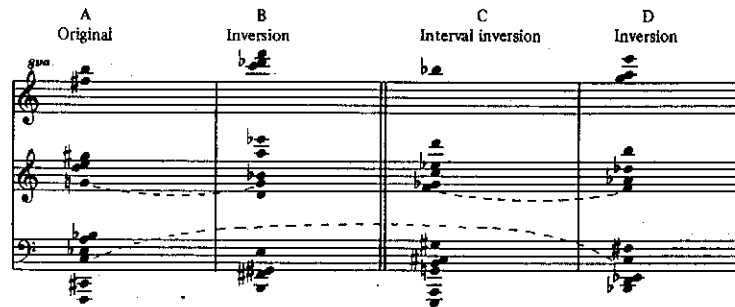
1	40-61 291-314	M7		360	giocoso
2	75-100 185-221	M3		24	sostenuto
3	108-136 233-245	P4		180	flutter-tongue tremolandi
4	150-171 254-280	M6		105	espr. cantabile

Introduction bars 1-39; Coda, bars 318-394

Each orchestra has four movements—the work's only trace of traditional symphonic form—which are split and cross-cut. The twelve movements are distinct in harmony, timbre, expressive character and tempo (Chart 36).

The harmonic motion of the work is controlled by the interplay of the dominant intervals and triad of each movement with a recurrent forty-five-note 'tonic' chord, made up of four versions of an all-interval twelve-note chord three of whose notes are the same (Chart 37).

Chart 37 Four versions of all-interval chord (5, 10, 4, 2, 7, 9, 1, 6, 3, 11, 8)
= 45-note 'tonic chord'



The chart displays four versions of an all-interval chord across three staves (treble, middle, and bass clefs). The versions are labeled A, B, C, and D. A: Original, B: Inversion, C: Interval inversion, D: Inversion. The notes are F#4, G#5, A#6, B7, C8, D9, E10, F#11.

Each interval of the twelve movements has four fixed positions in the forty-five-note chord, which focus harmonic motion within them (Chart 38).

Form

The word 'Symphony' here denotes not form but process, the bringing together of sounds. Stravinsky implied this meaning in his Symphonies of Wind Instruments. There, disparate materials gradually merge in a nearly static chorale. Carter's materials are more fluid than Stravinsky's; their convergence yields fission, not fusion.

Chart 38 Location of each interval of the twelve movements in the four fixed all-interval chords

The chart displays musical notation for twelve movements, organized into two systems of six measures each. The first system contains movements I,1 through III,2, and the second system contains movements I,3 through III,4. Each measure shows a piano score with treble and bass clefs, and various chords are labeled with letters A, B, C, D and Roman numerals. Above the first system, the four all-interval chords are defined: C (C major), D (D major), A (A major), and B (B major).

A,B,C,D designate the four all-interval chords.
 Roman numerals indicate each of the three orchestras.
 Arabic numeral indicates movement number.

The work falls into three distinct parts: an Introduction in which the highest notes of the tonic chord in suspended strings and screeching woodwinds frame a soaring trumpet solo; the main body of the work, a three-levelled collage of the twelve movements; and a coda in which all the material is reduced to chordal sounds beginning with explosive thunder-chords sounding the central notes of the tonic. The coda proceeds through a series of terrifying factory-noise ostinati, unprecedented in Carter's music, to a concluding piano solo, diving downwards to the lowest notes of the tonic chord which reverberate and rumble in the final notes of the tuba and double basses. The introduction and coda are the extremes of the double dramatic trajectories of the work, from high to low, from lyrical to mechanical. The main body of the music is a kaleidoscopic *mélange* of characters, which gradually transforms the opening trumpet flight into the piano's clattering descent.

A Symphony of Three Orchestras is Carter's most complex exploration of collage. Not only are there more movements and strata than in the Third Quartet; the motion of the music is also much faster. Listeners do not have time to analyse the constituent elements of the texture, but must let the rapid currents of the music carry them along. The seemingly chaotic whirlpool of sonic textures follows a regular and elegant pattern, however. The music sweeps across the orchestra in swelling waves, beginning with one orchestra alone, mounting to two, cresting to three, then subsiding. Each 'trough' is a unique isolated occurrence of one of the twelve movements. The following

chart outlines the form of the middle section of the work, from bar 40 to 318, identifying the movements by the number of their dominant triad:

<i>Orchestra I</i>	<i>Orchestra II</i>	<i>Orchestra III</i>
1-augmented triads	5-bells	11-scherzando
8-espressivo	10-clarinets (grazioso)	6-major & minor triads
3-flowing	7-cellos	9-leggero
4-angry	2-piano (accel.)	12-cantabile
I 1 8 8 <u>8</u> 8 8 3 3 3 4 4 4 3 3 <u>3</u>		
II 5 5 5 10 10 <u>10</u> 10 10 5 5 <u>5</u> 5 5		
III 11 <u>11</u> 11 11 6 6 6 9 9 <u>9</u> 9 9 12 12 12		
I 3 3 8 8 8 1 1 <u>1</u> 1 1 4 4 <u>4</u> 4 4		
II 7 7 7 2 2 <u>2</u> 2 2 10 10 10 2 2 2 7 7 <u>7</u>		
III 6 6 <u>6</u> 6 6 9 9 9 12 12 <u>12</u> 12 12 11 11 11		

Each vertical unit in the chart lasts about fifteen seconds. Obviously it would have been impossible to use every combination of movements as the Third Quartet had done. The montage of movements was selected for variety; the most active materials of each orchestra are reserved for the final intersection, bars 300-9. Because of the great speed of textural change, the interest of the music lies not so much in the interplay of materials as in the constant transformation of the entire tapestry as movements are added and subtracted. Each exposure of a single movement appears as the end of one transmutational progression and the beginning of the next. Repeated hearings reveal ever-receding echoes of the trumpet's opening flight—in the flowing movement of Orchestra I (see bars 169-76), in the *grazioso* music for the clarinets beginning at 82, and in the shimmering *leggero* movement of Orchestra III, as well as in the constantly encroaching intimations of mortality.

The thunder-chords which blot out the last traces of expressive music in Orchestra II are the climactic 'sounding-together' of the symphony. As the last wisps of solo violins disappear the silence between thunder claps becomes awesome, terrifying. (As a young boy Carter was once nearly struck by lightning.) The coda that follows is a transformed world. A few fragments of the earlier music, 'mashed and shapeless debris', remain: the violas of Orchestra III, the cellos of Orchestra II, and the trumpets of Orchestra I give intense but fading restatements of their lyrical material. But these are dispersed by frighteningly extended, mechanical *ostinati*, built of scattered intervals, each repeated at a different frequency (bars 348-52). With a grotesque halo of xylophone and marimba, echoing the screeching gulls of the opening bars, the piano, the transformed persona of the opening trumpet, leaps downward, *con bravura*.