

Elliott Carter (b.1908): 8 Études and a Fantasy (1950)

I Maestoso

II Quietly

III Adagio possibile

IV Vivace

V Andante

VI Allegretto leggero

VII Intensely

VIII Presto

IX Fantasy

Born in New York 1908 Elliott Carter's amazing life span was celebrated in centenary concerts throughout the world during 2008. The extent of his creative journey, (which continues in a steady stream of composition to this day,) is revealed in the meeting of Carter as a teenager, with Charles Ives who sold insurance to his family and who encouraged and inspired the younger man's interest in composition. Educated at Harvard University, Elliott Carter was able to hear critical American premieres of the time, hearing works by Varese, Ives and in 1924 Stravinsky's *The Rite of Spring* which led him to Paris in 1932 to study with the celebrated teacher Nadia Boulanger. This iconic figure in American music who at the age of 34 had taught Aaron Copland (he revered her all his life) and who single-handedly moulded a generation of American composers, imposed a formal discipline on all her composition students, encouraging the study and use of classical models, from Renaissance madrigals to symphonies. Undoubtedly it was in studies with Mde. Boulanger that Elliott Carter developed the polyphonic interest which characterises and defines his music. Later too in his rigorously intellectual work as a creator of compositional systems, categorising single pitches and chords in a method which would become classified as 'set theory'.

The quartet heard today, began as a series of demonstrations for students at Columbia University, New York, which were to illustrate various aspects and possibilities in woodwind writing. Fortunately, as so often is the case, an expressive potential blossomed from the exercises themselves resulting in a highly entertaining suite of short pieces. Dominated in character by polyphonic invention, the four instruments engage in various tasks, skipping from low to high registers, passing short motives in virtuosic and bewildering rhythmic inventions, sometimes even stopping to exchange timbres of a single note or chord. After the eight études themselves, the concluding fantasy reviews all the previous elements by combining them in a parody of a classical fugue. However there is nothing dry in this exercise as Carter's rhythmic fluidity and ability to quote directly from the études, creates an astonishing mix of wit, contrapuntal interest and sudden expressive charm in a style which is entirely individual.

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