

The Perception of a Dynamic Time: Carter's 'Riconoscenza per Goffredo Petrassi'

Over the last 20 years, Elliott Carter has mainly written chamber music and short solo pieces. At the same time, the American composer has simplified enormously his music's means and procedures. 'Riconoscenza per Goffredo Petrassi' for solo violin is a good example of Carter's late style and his different ways to create narrative through the use of different pitch-class sets and temporalities, as this paper will briefly show.

As a solo piece, Carter exploits to a maximum the possibilities of the violin in order to create different materials that contrast with each other in speed, register, texture, timbre, dynamics and pitch content. However, the most interesting feature of the piece is how these contrasting materials define 3 different perceptions of time that grow and expand together in a large scale polyphony of gestures.

Context of the Piece

'Riconoscenza per Goffredo Petrassi' was the third piece of a series of short works for solo instrument or small chamber group that Elliott Carter started in 1983, being his last piece for this genre 'Au Quai' (2002) for bassoon and viola. Among this set of works, we find three recent violin solo pieces: 'Statement, remembering Aaron' (1999), 'Fantasy, remembering Roger' (1999) and 'Rhapsodic Musings' (2000). 'Riconoscenza' ('Gratitude') was written in 1984 for the 80th birthday of the Italian composer, Goffredo Petrassi. Carter wrote in the program notes of the premiere: 'He [Petrassi] has tried to get a sense of an unpredictable spontaneity in his music, and sometimes it becomes very fragmented, as though he wrote little bits of music which, when assembled, contrast surprisingly with each other. I love his music'. The piece is a real homage to Petrassi whose rhapsodic quality is taken as a starting point; The Italian Master died in March 2003, the 'spontaneity' of his works still remain as fresh as this small homage of Elliott Carter, his 'Riconoscenza'. The piece is becoming part of the violin repertoire and has been recorded in several occasions.

The Characters of the Plot

The idea of using different characters in his instrumental music and the establishment of a plot between the instruments was contemplated by Carter in the early 1940s and was especially important in his 2nd String Quartet. Carter used to compare his plots to the dramatic approach of Mozart in his late operas. As J. Bernard (1994) points out: 'Carter's concern to express "character" and "behavior" brings to his work a notably human aspect; that the collective exigencies of his music can never, in the end, suppress the individual voice is, for the listener, a source of deep involvement and satisfaction'. The different characters of the piece are:

a) The 1st material or the 'Unsteady-pulse Melody' (mm. 1–15). It consists of a long melodic line whose durational framework oscillates in speed by the use of different figures. These figures are grouped to define different *tempi* or pulsation of a metrical grid; the change of figure implies a contraction or expansion of the previous *tempo* (*tempo* modulation) and introduces *accelerando* and *ritardando* patterns, a typical means of the American Composer (Double Concerto, 1961). These patterns give the melody a degree of flexibility that matches the 'Quasi Improvvisando' style that Carter marks at the beginning of the piece. The speed oscillates between the figures of an eight-note triplet (shortest value) and a quarter-note quintuplet, a middle speed in the piece that is always juxtaposed to the 2 other temporalities.

b) The 2nd material or the 'Explosive Gesture' (mm. 16–18). It is a fast and continuous passage that confronts the 1st material with an almost steady figure (sixteenth notes and sixteen note quintuples) and a new pitch set: whereas the first material is organized through a 7-note set included in the octatonic scale, this gesture is highly chromatic. The register, articulation (*staccato*) and dynamic (*forte*) are also different. It also deploys the left hand *pizzicato*, a new timbre effect.

c) The 3rd material or the 'Contemplative Dyads' (mm. 25–36). It contrasts with the two others through its extremely slow pace, double step chords, *legato* articulation and *pianissimo* dynamic. The register is now the lowest of the violin. Its abrupt change of speed destroys the feeling of pulse and metrical grid created by the two other materials. The perception of the passage is that of contemplation. Example 1 and 2 show the different temporalities or characters of the piece:

Example 1. Materials A and B; beginning of *Riconoscenza per Goffredo Petrassi*.

Example 2. Material C; mm. 23–35.

Carter, therefore, bases this piece upon 3 philological perceptions of time:

- 1) Time as process (dynamic), associated to the 'unsteady-pulse melody' (A);
- 2) Time as a continuous, associated to the 'explosive gesture' (B);
- 3) Time as contemplation (static), associated to the slow dyads (C).

From this perspective we see the frequent 'interference' of B in the course of the other two materials in order to establish a referential *tempo* to be destroyed. This is particularly effective in the last section in mm. 104–106, the final dissolution of the fast gesture.

Analysis of the Piece

The piece is divided in 3 Sections following this permutation of materials:

1st Section (mm. 1–24): A (1–15) – B (15–18) – A (18–24)

2nd Section (mm. 25–82): C (25–36) – A (36–41) – C (41–46) – A (46–51) – C (51–66) – A (66–78) – C (78–82)

3rd Section (mm. 82–121): B (82–92) – A (92–103) – B (103–106) – C (106–121)

The 1st Section exploits contrast between A and B. The 2nd section juxtaposes and finally integrates A and C. Finally, the 3rd one reaches to the climax of the piece (m. 91); after this point, a final reprise occurs and the tension is gradually release.

Besides this apparent conventional form, it is worthy to notice:

1) Since the 1st material A is present throughout, it is the presence of the 2 other characters, which articulates the form. This is quite remarkable in the sense that the music form is not just defined by the actual presence of a character but also by the absence of others.

2) Carter's tendency to overlap sections and phrases is quite remarkable in this case. In order to allow the music flows, 1st and 2nd sections are not clear-cut. The overlap occurs between measures 21–25: the open string D is set in the background with a softer dynamic and works firstly as a pedal note, to become later the beginning of the new material. Something similar happens with the anticipations of C# and C#–D in mm. 11 and 13, respectively. This differentiation of intensity and activity between layers suggests the idea behind the composition: the piece is a complex polyphony of layered materials ordered successively (instead of superimposed like in most works of Carter's production, due to the nature of the solo instrument).

3) Besides the previous overlaps and anticipations that foreshadow new events, there is also 'interference' of characters, or moments in which gestures related to a character seem to 'jump into' the monologue of another. This effect can be seen as an application of Eisenstein's 'cutting and continuity' technique, a cinema influence in his music. As J. Bernard (1995) points out, Carter was impressed by the creativity of Sergie Eisenstein's movies in the 1920s, and his inventive narrative: 'There was a whole period of the Russian cinema that developed very interesting kinds of cross-cutting. The idea, for instance, of stopping an action just before its culmination, which is something that I've done in a number of pieces, was something that I thought was very remarkable. So it certainly has had an influence on me' (E. Carter in interview with F. Lesh).

The 'interference' of characters in 'Riconoscenza' is related to the 2nd material, the most gesture related. It is under this 'cutting and continuity' technique that we can understand the presence of B in the context of A in m. 38; their subsequent quasi-dialogue in mm. 46–51; and their final integration after the climax in mm. 92–95 and 103–106.

This technique of 'cutting and continuity' is also used in a larger scale in order to connect a material through time. In the 1st section, the juxtaposition of materials breaks the continuity of each character, creating the mentioned 'rhapsodic quality'. There is, however, a clear connection through time between the different returns of the materials. This is achieved by the use of similar notes or melodic profiles at the end of an 'interrupted' material and at its new beginning. This means is used in mm. 14–15, where the melodic ending of A is connected to its return in m. 18, four bars later. The same ideas is used in the 2nd section between m. 22–23 and m. 36; mm. 40–41 and mm. 46–47; and finally between m. 51 and m. 66. The 3rd material deploys a similar means in mm. 44–46, and mm. 51–53. At the end of the 2nd section, this technique is gradually abandoned and the materials seem to integrate more by sharing pitches and relating to the others, creating a more straightforward continuity, as in mm. 78–80.

4) There is a co-evolution in the growth of all the materials. The term 'co-crescere' (literally 'to grow together') was coined by Alfred N. Whitehead to describe different processes related to organisms in the Biological world. It was introduced by this philosopher to a young Carter at Harvard and has been a major influence in his work since then. D. F. Breedon (1975) and D. Ungar (2005) have discussed the influence of Whitehead in Carter's dramatic forms. In an interview with A. Edwards, Carter says: 'As far as I am concerned [...], what contemporary music needs is not just raw materials of every kind but [...] works whose central interest is constituted by the way everything that happens in them happens as and when it does in relation to everything else'. On his Second String Quartet (1959), Carter comments: 'As the piece progresses, the diverse 'characters' of the beginning come to influence each other and the repertoires of each 'actor' begin to be shared. The work progresses through a climax involving each instrument's sharing the repertoires of each of the other instruments to an ending...' (Carter, 1965).

In 'Riconoscenza' two of the characters fully develop and grow together throughout the 2nd section: C and A have their longest phrases at the end of this section (m. 51–66) and (m. 66–78), respectively. The return of B at the beginning of the 3rd section drives the piece to its climax. This 'explosive' moment matches both the natural growth process of this material and the 'co-crescere'-scheme set from the previous section. After this moment the characters seem to integrate and the tension is gradually released.

Sets and Subsets: functionality

The pitch content of the different materials reveals an interesting association of speed and tonal stability: the unsteady pulse (A) brings the pitch-class set of the piece and its smaller subsets. The fast, dynamic continuous (B) is associated to the chromatic scale. Finally, the slowest material (C) is linked to two fixed dyads. Carter has used other pitch systems during the last years like the all-interval hexachord, the all-trichord hexachord or the all-interval tetrachord (Budelier, 2004). His approach to pitch-class set, however, is different than that of the main theorists, Forte or Lewin. Carter considers the set and its inversion as different possibilities (Carter, 2002) differentiating the real interval distance (a major 3rd is considered different from a minor 6th) and the octave displacement (a major 3rd is not equivalent to a major 10th) (M. Andrew, 1994).

Example 3a. Collections and groupings, mm. 1–10.

Example 3a shows three staves of music. The first staff has two measures with labels C_1 and $C_2 \equiv S = [0, 1, 3, 4, 6, 7, 9]$. The second staff has four measures with labels C_3 , C_4 , C_5 , and $C_6 \equiv S$. The third staff has four measures with labels C_7 , C_8 , C_9 , and $C_9 \equiv S$. The music includes dynamic markings like *mf*, *mp*, and *p*, and a *pizz* marking.

Example 3b. Collections.

Example 3b shows three staves of music, each with a single measure. The first staff has $C_1 = [0, 1, 4, 6, 9]$ and $C_2 \equiv S = [0, 1, 3, 4, 6, 7, 9]$. The second staff has $C_3 = [0, 2, 3, 5]$, $C_4 = [0, 1, 3, 4, 6]$, $C_5 = [0, 1, 3, 4, 6]$, and $C_6 \equiv S$. The third staff has $C_7 = [0, 1, 3, 6, 9]$, $C_8 = [0, 1, 3, 4, 6]$, and $C_9 \equiv S$.

In this association of materials and pitch, the 1st material is the only one that is not fixed and has the potential to develop. In the 1st section, it is linked to 5-note subsets and the whole set. After the chromatic gesture (B), the return of A is built on 6-note subsets. It is not until the 2nd section where 4 note-subsets are first introduced and later juxtaposed against 5-note subsets and finally the whole set. The 3rd section deals with these same cardinal subsets, developing their internal relationship.

It is relevant to mention that there are different intervals associated to the materials: the double-stops are associated to the held chords and are fixed throughout the piece. These dyads consist of an alternation of a major 3rd and a perfect 5th (see in Example 3 how these 4 notes represent also a 4 note-subset of S). These intervals are classically perceived as the most consonant, reinforcing the static character of the 3rd material. In an interview with F. Lesh, Carter says: 'certain intervals, of course, have more tension than others, and I use all of these techniques. But I am very old-fashioned in that particular sense that I like to have the music move [...], having a propulsive line from beginning to end'.

Other intervals have also a specific function: the minor 3rd is the recurrent interval of A and its sequential use introduces the tritone (see the passage mm. 5–11). The semitone is the main interval of the chromatic gesture. The end of the piece introduces a pedal note, the note C (m. 101–121), as a way of stabilization.

An important feature of the piece is the dynamic use of two difference pitch systems: the octatonic sonority against the chromatic one. The main set of the piece is $S = [0, 1, 3, 4, 6, 7, 9]$ (Example 3), a 7 note-set included in the octatonic scale that might have been a kind of dedication to his admired Petracchi. All the sets used in the piece (except those in the chromatic passage) are related to this one and are therefore a transposition, an inversion or a subset of this one. The use of the set is linked to the grouping and phrasing and has a structural significance in the way the piece is articulated (see in Example 3 how the first sets of the piece coincide with the phrasing).

Tempo and Tonal Stability

As J. Bernard (1995) has observed, 'One of the main musical achievements of Elliott Carter is his handling of time'. After the previous discussion, it seems, however, that time is coupled to pitch stability to define a more forward-looking line.

Example 4 shows the temporal evolution and pitch content of A in 4 different passages. The main idea of these passages is an *accelerando-rallentando*:

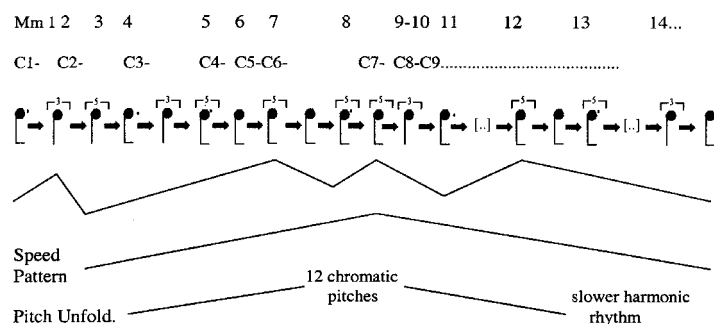
The first passage (mm. 1–15) speeds up in tempo within the sequence mm. 4–7. This sequence is linked to the introduction of the 12 chromatic notes (sets 3–6, marked as S3–S6 in the example) and foreshadows the chromatic gesture, B. After this increase of speed and instability, a *ritardando* follows. The *ritardando* is coupled to the return of the whole set (Sets 7 and 8) and a slowdown of the pitch unfolding (Sets 9–10).

The second passage (mm. 18–23) consists of a big *accelerando* followed by a small 'detour'. The *accelerando* brings 11 chromatic notes and the 'detour' is again a slowdown in chromatic activity that leads to the held chords.

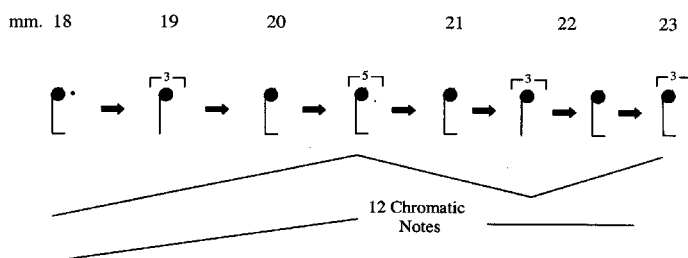
The third and fourth passages (mm. 36–41 and mm. 66–78) can be analyzed in a similar way. Both the tempo profile and the pitch profile follow the same tensional pattern. **This analysis shows a clear association between temporality and stability in the piece in order to achieve formal growth.**

The process of growth of the two other materials is easy to follow: C grows by the increase of rhythmic and harmonic activity. This growing process is associated in time to the growth of A ('co-crescere') at the end of the 2nd section, and drives the piece to the climax in the next Section. The 'explosive' gesture, B, presents an increase of length, speed, registration and density in relation to its 1st appearance. This way, B leads the piece to its climax and the growing process to an end.

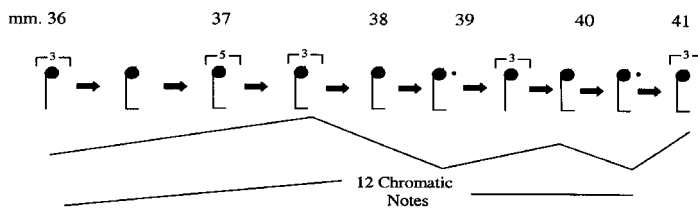
Example 4a. Tempo and pitch evolution. Passage 1, mm. 1–15.



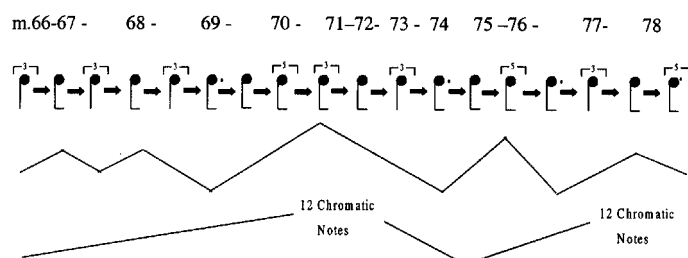
Example 4b. Passage 2, mm. 18–23.



Example 4c. Passage 3, mm. 36–41.



Example 4d. Passage 4, mm. 66–78.



Conclusion

Despite the limitation of a solo instrument, Elliott Carter is able to create in this piece a large-scale polyphony of layered materials. These materials define three different temporalities as characters of an intricate plot: after a rhapsodic beginning, the three characters converse with each other, fuse and develop creating a compact and 'organic' form. The plot shows an imaginative solution to accomplish this goal, driving its dynamic and psychological perception by its managing of time and continuity through time ('cutting and continuity technique') and establishing a correlation of growth of its characters ('co-crescere' technique). Besides the dramatic or theatrical influence behind the piece, these techniques add two new perspectives: the original narrative of the cinema of Sergie Eisenstein and concepts of the organic world of Alfred N. Whitehead, both of them major influences of Carter. Different pitch-class sets and intervals are linked to each of these structures, but above this, a larger formal plan is set: **Temporality and stability are coupled to define a directional vector which drives the piece to expand its content towards a climax, and integrate its contrasting materials.**

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Santrauka

Analitinis požiūris į vėlyvąjį E. Carterio stilių

Per pastaruosius 20 metų, po septintąjį ir aštuntąjį dešimtmečius trukusio eksperimentinio kūrybos laikotarpio, E. Carterio muzika tapo gerokai skaidresnė. Supaprastėjus muzikinėms priemonėms, kompozitoriaus stiliui tapo būdinga subtili harmonija ir garso aukščio tvarkymo technika.

Pranešime analizuojama, kaip Carteris naudojo motyvus ir submotyvus bei priemones perteikdamas kryptingumą ir pasakojamąjį charakterį, kontrastingai gretindamas chromatiškai prisodrintus ir tonaciškai pastovius epizodus. Tai pasiekama poliarizuojant garsus ar submotyvus. Susieti šiems priešingiems būviams taip pat pasitelktos ir kitos priemonės, pvz., bendri garsai. Šie tvirtai į šiuolaikinį repertuarą įėję kūriniai yra nepaprastai dinamiški.