

Melodic Practice in Elliott Carter's Clarinet Concerto

by Stephen Heinemann

Elliott Carter's 1996 Clarinet Concerto consists of seven connected movements, the first six of which feature the soloist performing with – and moving among – different sections of the accompanying chamber orchestra (consecutively, piano/harp/marimba, unpitched percussion, muted brass, woodwinds, strings, open brass); the seventh movement employs the whole orchestra with the clarinet to the fore. As befits its capacity as the prototypical doubling instrument (its unique acoustics – every other overtone missing – allow its timbre to be absorbed easily by other instruments), the clarinet takes on aspects of the expressive character of each accompanying group. It abandons this chameleonic portrayal only in the concluding movement where it asserts a more characteristically Carterian opposition.

Carter's sketches for the Clarinet Concerto confirm that the composer continued several innovative melodic techniques introduced earlier: the employment of a limited repertory of intervals, which first appeared in the Second String Quartet (1959); the construction of a twelve-tone fixed-pitch sonority (or "spatial set") called a "source chord" that can be regarded as a harmonic/melodic microcosm of the work as a whole, as in the Double Concerto (1961); and the initial through-composition of a solo line around which a harmonic environment is subsequently developed, as in *A Mirror on Which to Dwell* (1975).

Carter's melodic practice here can be divided into three categories: melodies with all pitches taken from spatial sets (the only aspect of melody covered adequately in the theoretical literature); melodies built from incomplete spatial sets; and free melodic practice, which encompasses the great majority of Carter's melodic lines.

Most of Carter's works since 1980 use as their source chords one or more of the all-interval dodecachords with a total range of sixty-six semitones. The Clarinet Concerto diverges from this procedure: its source chord is the inversionally symmetrical dodecachord shown in *Example 1a*. Called the "Clarinet chord" in the sketches, it covers a range of forty-five semitones, all within reach of the solo instrument. The complete spatial set appears in the solo part in measures 31–40 and 436–47, and incomplete derivations appear in measures 3–9 and 222–26.

Example 1 consists of two musical staves, labeled a) and b). Staff a) shows a melodic line in treble clef with notes: C4, D4, E4, F4, G4, A4, B4, C5, D5, E5, F5, G5. Below the staff, brackets indicate intervals between adjacent notes: 4 (C-D), 9 (D-E), 2 (E-F), 4 (F-G), 3 (G-A), 1 (A-B), 3 (B-C), 4 (C-D), 2 (D-E), 9 (E-F), 4 (F-G). A larger bracket under the entire line is labeled 'adjacent intervals'. Staff b) shows a similar melodic line with notes: C4, D4, E4, F4, G4, A4, B4, C5, D5, E5, F5, G5. Below the staff, brackets indicate intervals: 7* (C-D), 7 (D-E), 7* (E-F), 7* (F-G), 7* (G-A). A larger bracket under the entire line is labeled 'vertical intervals'.

Example 1

In the Clarinet Concerto, as in many of his other works, Carter assigns to the solo instrument a limited number of simple intervals plus their compounds – but not their inversions – for both spatial set and free melodic practice. In his procedure, any note can be followed only by itself or by another that is related by one of the assigned intervals. For example, given interval 2, a melodic line can move from *C* up to *D* or down to *B*_♭; but the inversion interval 10 will be denied, so that *C* cannot move down to *D* or up to *B*_♭.¹ With a heterogeneous interval repertory, each melodic note represents not a serialized mandate but an array of possibilities.

In the recent concertos for oboe (1987) and violin (1990), the soloist's interval repertory is drawn from one half of the all-interval source chords, the orchestra's complementary repertory from the other half. In the Clarinet Concerto, however, the limited intervallic content of the source chord requires some manipulation in order to yield a repertory that will include no more than a single representative of each interval class.² The intervals of adjacent pitches in the source chord, as measured in semitones, are 1, 2, 3, 4, and 9. Interval class 3 is doubly represented by intervals 3 and 9, and there is no interval class 5 (intervals 5 and 7); this shortage is compensated for by substituting interval 7 for interval 3, resulting in a repertory of intervals 1, 2, 4, 7, and 9. (The limited intervallic resources of the source chord are inextricably linked to the sharing of musical materials by soloist and orchestra.) Interval 7 is chosen for its prominence within the source chord, as demonstrated in *Example 1b*; compound intervals are marked with asterisks.³ When Carter's melodic technique is applied to this interval repertory, the clarinet can move, for example, from *C* up to *C*_♯, *D*, *E*, *G*, or *A*, or from *C* down to *B*, *B*_♭, *A*_♭, *F*, or *E*_♭. Once a new note has been reached, the interval repertory is applied to it, so that any pitch can be reached within two notes.

Example 2 illustrates the use of this technique in two clarinet passages. Intervals between changing pitches are shown above each staff. *Example 2a* demonstrates the technique as applied to the source set (compare the pitches here with those of *Example 1*). *Example 2b* involves free melodic prac-

interval: 4 7 7* 9 2 4 7 4 9 7* 9 1 7* 2* 7 4 1* 1*

a)

7* 7 4 7* 4 7* 4 7 4 4 1 7

interval: 7 4 2* 4 4 9 7 2 7 9 1* 9 1 9 4 9 7 9 4 9

b)

4 1 4 9 1* 1 7 1* 2 4 4 1 2 1 1

The image displays musical notation for two parts, labeled 'a)' and 'b)'. Part 'a)' consists of two staves of music. The first staff starts at measure 31 and the second at measure 36. Above the notes are interval numbers: 4, 7, 7*, 9, 2, 4, 7, 4, 9, 7*, 9, 1, 7*, 2*, 7, 4, 1*, 1*. Part 'b)' also consists of two staves. The first staff starts at measure 196 and the second at measure 199. Above the notes are interval numbers: 7, 4, 2*, 4, 4, 9, 7, 2, 7, 9, 1*, 9, 1, 9, 4, 9, 7, 9, 4, 9. The notation includes various note values, accidentals, and slurs. The word 'etc.' appears at the end of the second staff in both parts.

Example 2

tice in a passage that emphasizes intervals 4, 7, and 9. The succeeding phrases gradually shift the emphasis to intervals 1 and 2. Orchestral lines favor the interval repertory but are not as bound by it as are orchestral simultaneities; voice-leading from one chord to another will often employ intervals from outside the repertory.

Example 2 demonstrates that Carter employs his interval technique whether or not melodic pitches are drawn from a source chord; a focus on the spatial disposition of the source chord without reference to the way that one note moves to another overlooks the linear motivation of the solo line. An equation between source chords and tone rows is less than convincing since the spatial set, when present, is not the only, nor even necessarily the principal, organizing factor in melodic creation.⁴

The ingenuity and significance of this technique within Carter's oeuvre merits greater attention. Melodies assert their individuality from one work to the next and consistently refer, directly or indirectly, to their source chords. (The extent to which a melody can thereby "generate" a harmony, as occurs in tonal music, remains open to question, but it is compelling that the sketch score for the Clarinet Concerto consists almost entirely of the solo line; much of the accompaniment appears first in the ensuing draft score.) The reference to source chords thus grounds the melody within each piece without recourse to traditional thematic practice. The composer has ready access to the entire range of pitches, as no note is more than two notes away. Melodic diminution is feasible: for example, given intervals 2

and 4, a *C* can move up to a *D* or go to it indirectly through a higher *E*. The perceptual immediacy of the melodic lines contradicts the ascription of cognitive opacity to atonal composition, even extending to the perception of “wrong notes.”⁵ Perhaps most crucially, the technique is sufficiently flexible for the spontaneous invention of melodies. Carter’s melodies in the Clarinet Concerto are especially “improvisational” in their sound; the fourth movement in particular contains lines that reflect his affinity for jazz. This is clearly an outgrowth of the interval repertory: intervals 1 and 2 make traditional scales possible, although in practice these appear only by implication.

Igor Stravinsky once said, “I compose with intervals.” This statement rings even more true for Elliott Carter. For most composers, the interval is a function of pitch, a result of moving from one pitch to another. For Carter, pitches are the agents of intervals, their sonic expression, and are hierarchically secondary. The proper focus on the role of interval in his work attends to a vital aspect of that which makes his music unique and valuable.

¹ Carter has found that distinguishing between an interval and its inversion is entirely appropriate to his purposes. In the Second String Quartet, he also experimented with distinguishing between an interval and its compound (for example, assigning the M3 and M10 to different instruments) but found the technique unsuitable and subsequently discarded it.

² Among the recent concertos, the tritone is included in the interval repertory only in the Oboe Concerto, where it is shared by the soloist and orchestra. In Carter’s all-interval dodecachords, interval class 6 occupies the center position, with one representative of every other interval class on either side: for example, the intervallic structure of the Oboe Concerto source chord is 9–10–1–5–4–6–3–2–11–7–8. Connecting inversions within this structure will reveal a parallel construction that has characterized Carter’s all-interval source chords since *esprit rude/esprit doux* (1984).

³ *Example 1* is derived from sketch pages dated 23 May and 7 June 1996.

⁴ That Carter’s melodic interval technique is fundamentally related to pitch and not pitch class can be verified by substituting pitch-class intervals for the pitch intervals shown in *Example 2*. Carter’s use of compound intervals represents a very limited application of pitch-class equivalence.

⁵ A few erroneous notes appear in the solo in the pre-publication score, including (concert pitch, *C*⁴ = middle *C*): m. 305, *Fn*⁵ for the correct *F*_♯⁵; m. 328, *E*⁶ for *G*_♯⁶; m. 339, *F*⁴ for *E*_♭⁴; m. 418, *G*⁵ for *F*⁵; m. 439, first *C*⁵ for *A*⁴.