Composing for Voice: A Twentieth-Century Approach

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In an interview that took place in the late 1960s, the American composer Elliott Carter was asked how he felt about dealing musically with a literary text. Carter admitted that he found it "difficult to find a text that I would like to set to music," and explained that "with a text there is a whole other time-structure to be thought of and dealt with, something I'm not sure I could teach myself to work with now without wasting a large amount of effort" (Edwards, 1971, p. 106).

Text-setting was not new to Carter. Every work he composed until 1938 includes the voice in its scoring, and vocal music continued to dominate his compositions until 1947, when he composed *Emblems* for men's voices and piano.[1] That work, however, marked the start of a hiatus from vocal composition that lasted nearly thirty years.

If we examine Carter's music of that period, it is clear that the problem of coordinating his sophisticated rhythmic language with the temporal structure of a text was compounded by other aspects of his complex compositional style that did not lend themselves well to the voice. His music is contrapuntally dense, comprising many different simultaneous yet independent lines, quite unlike the traditional melody-and-accompaniment texture of songs. Carter's melodic lines, which often develop from the accumulation of short figures characterized by large intervallic leaps, are not appropriate for the setting of texts with long lines. The possibility that words might be obscured is made greater by the rate at which notes are usually attacked, a rate that is considerably faster than the general pace of textual rhythm.

Nevertheless, in 1975, only a few years after the interview in which he voiced his aversion to text-setting, Carter started to work on a song cycle. *A Mirror on Which to Dwell* is a setting of six poems by the American poet Elizabeth Bishop for soprano and instrumental ensemble.

What induced him to return to the vocal medium? The short answer is that he received a commission from the vocal group Speculum Musicae in honour of the United States Bicentennial. The answer that the composer himself gave to that question when Jonathan Bernard posed it to him in 1990 focused on the vast improvements made by professional singers in performing music that was, like his music, "previously considered unsingable" (Bernard, 1990, pp. 184-185).

While there is some truth to both of these responses, I believe that there is more to the answer than either of them suggests. That in Bishop's poetry Carter finally discovered texts that resonated with his established musical ideas. And that, as we shall see when we examine the songs in the *Mirror* cycle, Carter found ways of adapting his mature compositional style so that he could establish a new standard in 20th-century vocal writing.

A Mirror on Which to Dwell

Carter's artistic ideas parallel those of his contemporary, Elizabeth Bishop, in many ways. Their work is firmly rooted in the modern aesthetic, and both artists exert considerable technical control over their materials. Bishop's preoccupation with the passage of time, her focus on how time shapes human existence, corresponds to Carter's own interest in temporal issues and experiments with musical time.

In his notes for the Speculum Musicae recording of the cycle he explains that Bishop's poems impressed him: "because of their clear verbal coherence as well as their imaginative use of syllabic sounds that suggest the singing voice. I was very much in sympathy with their point of view, for there is almost always a secondary later of meaning" (Carter, 1980, liner notes). These layers of meaning find their musical expression in Carter's established practice where layered musical events proceed simultaneously.

Carter's own account of the compositional process reinforces the notion that the poems he selected for the *Mirror* cycle were chosen because they resonated with his established musical ideas. In a discussion of text-setting with Bernard (1990), Carter describes how he starts with more poems than he will actually need (thirteen in the case of the *Mirror* cycle), and, after trying to set them, discards the ones that he has difficulty working with. Carter explains further:

> I wanted [the settings to be] linearly interesting and linearly related somehow to the details of the poems . . . , using the accompaniments as an added dimension. But my idea was not to make explorations into the verbal medium itself of the poem. Rather, I wanted to explore the way one could suggest things that were in the poem, emphasize certain details, evoke its general ambiance—but also make countersuggestions against its content, and so forth. In this way, I was really taking the standard, familiar point of view of vocal settings in older songs (Bernard, 1990, p. 187).

An examination of the songs themselves demonstrates how Carter expresses these ideas musically. I will begin by presenting some of the basic characteristics of his vocal style in the *Mirror* cycle, before showing how Carter's settings convey his interpretation of Bishop's poems. Several typical features can be observed.

In terms of overall density and the ability for the voice to be heard, the texture in these songs is reduced to fewer simultaneously independent lines than are common to Carter's music. Each song is set for a small, unique combination of instruments. For example, "Insomnia," the fourth song in the cycle, is scored for only four instruments—piccolo, marimba, violin and viola—while in "O Breath," the sixth and last song, the ensemble comprises eight instruments. Adding to the effect of reduced density, the instruments do not all behave as independent lines, but are frequently grouped by having similar or identical rhythm and melodic contour. In "Insomnia," the piccolo and violin exhibit similar behaviour, as do the marimba and viola. In "O Breath," the strings and winds each group together to present sustained chords.

Carter treats the vocal line as an independent part of the contrapuntal fabric, but modifies it in three ways in order to render the words audible. Firstly, in terms of rhythm, notes in the voice frequently have a slower attack rate than the other instruments, and the vocal lines are generally much longer than the instrumental ones. Secondly, the singer's melodic lines are relatively conjunct, with leaps that rarely extend beyond the major ninth, in contrast to the other melodic lines that exhibit more characteristically extreme intervallic leaps. Somewhat self-evidently, the soprano's range is also more limited than the other instruments, lying within a two-octave span (b to b^2). Thirdly, clarity of the vocal line is ensured through register, with the soprano usually being positioned at a registral extreme. In most of the songs the voice is given the highest registral placement and the accompanying instruments are positioned below her. There are two exceptions: in "Insomnia" Carter places the voice in the lowest register, with the

four instruments hovering above her, and in "Anaphora," the first song in the cycle, the voice and instruments share a fixed pitch/register scheme.

While Carter's practice is to set the voice as an independent line within the contrapuntal texture (independent in terms of both pitch and rhythm), this does not mean that material is not shared between the soprano and the other instruments. Certainly there is no consistent doubling of the vocal line by an accompanying instrument as one would expect in a traditional setting, but there are often pitch duplications that both serve a dramatic function and act as cues for the singer.

In "Argument," for example, the second song in the cycle, pitch duplication occurs as a result of Carter's use of two referential pitches that recur throughout the song, and that play a thematic role. The "Argument" of the title is between the speaker and her partner, and in the poem she describes their relationship in terms of the days and distance that separate them, days and distance being symbols of time and space. Musically, Carter establishes two prominent pitches that correspond to these factors of separation: $g\sharp^1$ is associated with the word "Days," and b^1 is associated with the word "Distance." In measures 6-7, the alto flute and bass clarinet double the soprano's $g\sharp^1$ as she describes the "Days that cannot bring you near." (In the preceding measures the alto flute and cello introduce this pitch and prepare the singer for her entry.) Then, at the end of measure 7, the cello presents an accented b^1, foreshadowing the soprano's first pitch in measure 8 on the word "Distance."

Both pitch and rhythm are shared between voice and instruments in the *Alla marcia* section from "View of the Capitol" (starting in measure 24). Here the speaker's description of the military "Air Force Band" is characterized in the soprano by a fixed pitch set—$d\flat^1$, $e\flat^1$, $b\flat^1$ and c^2—and by quintuple subdivision of the half-note beat. The soprano's line is supported by the viola, which introduces the pitch set in measure 23, and which also proceeds with quintuple eighth-note subdivision, without, however, duplicating the same rhythmic figures as the voice. (The piano also supports the voice, in pitch only.) The quasi-regular rhythms and limited pitch repertoire are clearly intended to represent military band music, although, somewhat ironically, the more traditional band instruments like the piccolo, E♭ clarinet and snare drum do not participate in this scheme.

The rhythmic congruence between the voice and an element of the instrumental ensemble in the excerpt from "View of the Capitol" is rare in the *Mirror* song cycle. However, rhythm is the central organizing force in Carter's compositional style. Most often it is speeds, in the form of measurable series of evenly spaced attacks, that Carter uses to shape both large and small-scale rhythmic structures, and, in the case of songs, to express his understanding of the text.

"Anaphora," the first song of the cycle, demonstrates the primary role played by speeds in Carter's music. In this song the constant presence of two steady speeds, or pulses, forms the structural skeleton over which all surface rhythmic activity is draped. Typically of Carter, the pulses are unrelated to the notated meter of 4/4, or, more accurately, are related in unconventional ways. The first pulse consists of an attack every 13th triplet eighth-note, articulating a speed of MM 16.62 (at a tempo of $\theta = 72$), while the second pulse comprises an attack every 23rd quintuplet sixteenth-note, articulating a speed of MM 15.65. Although the two pulses are present in the instrumental ensemble throughout the song, the voice does not participate in the pulse scheme except for on one notable occasion. In measures 57-58, on the word "stupendous [studies]," the voice articulates the two pulse attacks for the first and only time in the song. These attacks occur at the climax of the song, as the speaker describes

the "stupendous studies" (a metaphor for the artist's creative processes) that will reverse the decline in solar energy described in the poem to this point. Carter highlights this dramatic moment and emphasizes his deliberate inclusion of the voice in the pulse scheme by presenting the two vocal pitches fortissimo and having them cover the widest possible registral range, articulating the highest pitch ($b\flat^2$) and then the lowest pitch (b) of the fixed pitch/register repertoire of the song.

Having determined what one might call the mechanics of Carter's vocal writing, let us examine "Sandpiper," the third song in the cycle, in order to consider how Carter's musical settings express his interpretation of Bishop's poems, and what role the voice plays in this expression.

Carter's own description of "Sandpiper" gives us insight into his understanding of the poem, and into the basic structural elements of the song. In an interview with Charles Rosen (1984), he says:

> The sandpiper . . . is seeing the world in a grain of sand, and the sandpiper is totally oblivious to the waves and the dangers of the sea. So he is continually moving around, always at the same speed, while the rest of the song is always changing in speed as the poet considers various aspects of the scene. (p. 41)

Carter thus characterizes the structure of the song in terms of its speeds and their associations with the text, emphasizing the contrast between the figure of the sandpiper—fastidious, myopic, obsessed with details—and the vast and threatening natural world around him, the ocean and the beach.

The opening of the song, establishes the most important speeds and their corresponding textual associations. The constant rate of the sandpiper is represented by the oboe, whose prominent presence maintains an animated speed of MM 525 throughout the song.[2] Carter's claim that the rest of the song is "always changing in speed" does not mean that the rhythms are in a permanent state of flux, but rather that local steady speeds establish themselves only for brief periods of time. In the piano, for example, intermittent gestures comprising sextuplet sixteenths articulate a speed of MM 630. Simultaneously, in the strings, an irregularly accelerating series of attacks in measures 1-2 culminates in the brief establishment of the speed MM 157.5 (an attack every second triplet eighth-note), which is initiated by the violin attack at the end of measure 2. A second example of the same speed, out of phase with the first, is articulated again in the strings, starting in mid-measure 3. Both the piano and string gestures are used by Carter to suggest the ocean as it roars and swirls over the sandpiper's feet. The characteristic registral and dynamic contours of the gestures—rising then falling—evoke the waves that ebb and flow alongside the sandpiper, while the low tessitura connotes the depth and vastness of the ocean. The contrasting attack densities of the piano and strings invoke images of waves swelling and breaking at different rates, suggesting the quasi-regular rhythmic quality of the ocean.

As is characteristic of Carter, speeds are also associated with harmonic vocabulary in "Sandpiper," specifically with pitch intervals. The oboe/sandpiper, whose speed is fixed at MM 525, has a limited repertoire of intervals that includes minor and major 2nds, minor 3rds and perfect 5ths only. The strings and piano, which, as we have seen, articulate various changing speeds in the role of representing the ocean, have a correspondingly more flexible interval

repertoire. They feature minor 6th and major 9th dyads, but are not restricted to those intervals.

So far we have observed how Carter uses the instrumental ensemble to suggest elements of the poem, but what is the role of the voice in these representations? It is important to remember that, in his comments, Carter makes it clear that he shares the poet's perspective and that their common viewpoint is central to his musical setting. Thus, as the soprano, the voice of the poet, contemplates various aspects of the scene, so does the composer. When she sings of the roaring ocean, the "ocean" music comes to the fore in the accompaniment. When she describes the sandpiper, the ocean recedes, the oboe/sandpiper line becomes more aurally prominent, and Carter introduces new music in the strings to support the representation of the bird. This string music is characterized by triplet eighth-note rhythms, articulating a speed of MM 315, presented pizzicato and staccato. In contrast to the slow, sustained string events that suggest the ocean, these fast staccato string events connote the sandpiper's rapid and sharp movements.[3]

The function of the voice, however, is not simply to cue the accompaniment. It is the soprano's music, as much as her words that describe a scene or portray a character. When she describes, for example, how the bird "runs," the soprano proceeds with the same staccato triplet eighths as the accompanying strings.[4] In the excerpt reproduced in Example 2, one can observe how the soprano's rhythmic behaviour and intervallic content alternate between the two established repertoires, depending on the image she is currently depicting. When the singer describes the misty, "vast" world and the indistinct tide ("higher or lower")—aspects of the scene that are beyond the sandpiper's limited vision—she imitates the "ocean's" slower attack density (and legato articulation), and uses intervals from its repertoire, particularly minor 6ths. However, when she focuses on the bird's "minute" world briefly in measure 44, and when she describes his confusion ("He couldn't tell you which"), then she adopts speeds (MM 315 and MM 157.5) and intervals (minor and major 2nds and minor 3rds) from the oboe/sandpiper's repertoire, as well as its *staccato* articulation.

The degree to which Carter empathizes with Bishop's point of view, and the way in which he uses his setting of the vocal line to express the inflections of her writing, can be observed in two other passages from "Sandpiper." The first occurs at the climax of the song. As the singer describes the bird's increasingly frantic movements and desperate mental state, the texture, instead of expanding to portray the intensity, is distilled down to voice and oboe. Both proceed with "sandpiper music": the oboe presents its continuous speed of MM 525, while the voice, in measures 51-52, establishes locally steady triplet speeds (MM 315 and MM 157.5) and features oboe-repertoire intervals. The other instruments are silent. In this way the music, like the text, focuses intently on the bird as his emotional crisis deepens. However, as the oboe and soprano crescendo to the dramatic climax in measure 53 ("he is obsessed"), Carter, like the poet, detaches himself from the sandpiper's preoccupation, and stands back to observe the bird's obsession. The soprano, the voice of the poet/composer, abandons the "sandpiper's" triplet rhythms and characteristic intervals, and articulates minor 6ths from the piano/strings interval repertoire instead.

The contradictory perspectives that are embodied in this climactic moment are returned to at the end of the song, although the effect in the final measures is more one of integration than paradox. The soprano's practice of alternating between "sandpiper" and "ocean" music, in accordance with the shifting perspective of the poet, undergoes a transformation in the last

part of the song to a more complete mixing of these two elements that reflects the sense of resolution reached by the bird at the close of the poem. The sandpiper's focus on the exquisite details of his world ("the millions of grains are black, white, tan and gray, mixed with quartz grains, rose and amethyst") releases him from his anxious searching; he resolves the dichotomy of the "minute" and "vast" world, and finds the rewards of his obsession. As the soprano describes the multi-colored grains, she combines intervals from both established repertoires and incorporates rhythmic gestures from both elements (sporadic steady speeds in triplet eighths and long sustained notes). Carter appears to be conveying a belief shared with the poet, that if we, like the sandpiper, focus our attention on the intricate details of our world, musical or otherwise, it too will be revealed to us as both "vast and clear."

Concluding Remarks

The examination of the songs in Carter's *Mirror* cycle has revealed the anatomy of his mature vocal style, has shown the integral role that the voice plays, and has illustrated the depth of the relationship between words and music in these songs. Carter's multi-layered contrapuntal style facilitates the expression of his interpretation of the poems, allowing him to depict multiple characters and to suggest inflections of meaning.

In Carter's next vocal composition, *Syringa*, composed in 1978, he expanded his multi-layered approach to vocal composition by scoring the one-movement work for two voices, mezzo soprano and bass. He treats one voice as the conveyer of words with meaning, and the other as musical commentary. The mezzo presents John Ashbery's poem, *Syringa*, a fantasy on the Orpheus legend, while the bass sings fragments of Ancient Greek texts, providing an emotional interpretation of the poem's narrative.

Carter's role in establishing a new standard in 20th-century vocal writing is a central one. Characteristically, however, his aspirations for the music are modest. The final word goes to the composer himself, as he reflects on *A Mirror on Which to Dwell*:

> By [the time I came to writing song cycles] I felt I had a very large repertory of ways of dealing with pieces of music. So that all the songs in that cycle summon up musical expression . . . I hope the music is an analogue of the text. (Rosen, 1984, p. 40)

Reference List

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Endnotes

[1] Later, the role of literature in Carter's compositional process took the form of literary inspiration for purely instrumental works, particularly in the *Double Concerto* (1961) and the Concerto for Orchestra (1969). For example, David Schiff (1998) describes how the large design of the *Double Concerto* is modeled on the dramatic plan of *De rerum naturae* by Lucretius and on Pope's *Dunciad* (p. 208).

[2] Carter's interpretation of the idea of speed is, however, influenced by the exigencies of text expression. Although he describes the sandpiper's movement as being "always at the same speed," this is not literally true. The oboe line incorporates both local rests between notes and longer periods of silence, techniques that serve to invoke the "awkward" quality of the bird's running motion.

[3] Carter is particularly adroit at transcending timbre in this way: by using contrasting musical properties—rhythm, articulation, pitch—he creates new "voices" in the same instrument(s).

[4] Revisiting the musical setting of the opening line, one can see how the appearance of the bird ("he takes for granted") introduces the speed of MM 315 (triplet eighths) for the first time in the voice, together with the associated staccato articulation. It is also clear that the two speeds of MM 157.5 in the strings in measures 2-3 are related to this speed (an attack every second triplet eighth), and that they foreshadow the appearance of the sandpiper. Soon afterwards, in measure 4, the strings combine to present MM 315 and the characteristic staccato articulation is introduced.