

ILLUMINATING ELLIOTT CARTER'S VOCAL REPERTOIRE

A GUIDE TO IN SLEEP, IN THUNDER

by

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A guide to *In Sleep, In Slumber*

Thesis directed by Professor, Dr. John Seesholtz

ABSTRACT

Elliott Carter (1908-2012) is a pivotal figure in American music even though his compositions are infrequently performed. His song cycle *In Sleep, In Thunder* (1981), which marks the final installment of a triptych revisiting vocal literature in the late 1970s, exemplifies a duality of American and European musical traditions, blending both classical and modernist elements. Despite its significance, Carter's modernism has often been met with resistance, perceived as esoteric and challenging by both seasoned concert-goers and newcomers. This document aims to deconstruct the intricate musical and poetic layers of *In Sleep, In Thunder*, providing clear, accessible analyses that demystify Carter's aural landscape. By doing so, the author seeks to foster a deeper appreciation for Carter's work, encouraging a reevaluation of his contributions, and promoting wider performance and recognition of this quintessential American composer.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCING ELLIOT CARTER'S *IN SLEEP, IN SLUMBER*

Elliott Carter (1908-2012), an iconic American composer, distinguished himself with a profound contribution to vocal music that extends beyond conventional paradigms into intricate and highly sophisticated compositions. His works are renowned for their complexity, embracing atonal and rhythmically intricate styles that challenge both performers and audiences alike, but providing a rich, rewarding experience¹. Carter's vocal music often features dynamic contrasts and a deep interplay between voice and piano, reflecting his fondness for metric modulation and rhythmic innovation. This compositional technique not only highlights his mathematical precision but also his artistic creativity, allowing for a unique expression in modern music and more specifically his vocal compositions.

Carter's contributions to music theory are marked by his pioneering work in rhythmic complexity and harmonic innovation, both of which have left lasting impacts on contemporary music composition and theory. His development of "metric modulation" is particularly noteworthy: this technique, which involves the precise shifting of one metric pattern to another, challenges traditional rhythmic continuity and has opened up new rhythmic possibilities². Moreover, Carter's exploration of atonality extends the boundaries of harmonic practice. His use of all-interval

¹ Jane Manning, "ELLIOTT CARTER (1908–2012) Of Challenge and of Love," (2020)

² H. Krebs, "Some Extensions of the Concepts of Metrical Consonance and Dissonance," *Journal of Music Theory* 31 (1987): 99,

tetrachords, which ensure that each set of four notes contains all possible intervals, showcases his commitment to expanding harmonic language beyond traditional tonal systems³. Carter's theoretical innovations do not merely alter how music is composed; they also reshape the listening experience, demanding a higher level of engagement and analysis from the audience. His intricate rhythmic layers and harmonic complexities challenge listeners to perceive music in new and unconventional ways, enhancing the depth and texture of musical interpretation. These contributions highlight Carter's central role in the evolution of modern music not just in the United States but also Europe, making him a pivotal figure in the development of advanced compositional techniques that continue to influence musicians and theorists around the world.

Despite some criticisms of Carter's vocal compositions as unidiomatic, and arguably straining the natural capabilities of the human voice, his work compellingly explores the broader potentials of vocal expression. Unlike traditional, melodically-driven vocal lines, Carter's pieces frequently exhibit a textural complexity that aligns more with modernist explorations than classical vocal forms. This approach pushes the boundaries of what is traditionally considered vocal music, inviting performers to engage deeply with both the technical and expressive dimensions of the music⁴. Along with that approach, Carter's choice of texts for his vocal music often reflects his intellectual curiosity and affinity for contemporary

³ John Link, "Harmony in Elliott Carter's Late Music," *Music Theory Online* 25, no. 1 (2019)

⁴ Tony Arnold, "Digging Deeper: Singing the Music of Elliott Carter," *Chicago Review* (2014)

poetry, setting works of modern poets which resonate with his thematic and structural inclinations. This alignment with modernist poets underscores a shared pursuit of innovation and expression that characterizes much of Carter's body of work, marking him as a composer who continually sought to redefine the interaction between words and music in the contemporary landscape⁵. Elliott Carter's vocal compositions represent a significant chapter in the evolution of modern vocal music, characterized by challenging yet enriching explorations of voice and text, which continue to influence contemporary music theory and performance practices.

Even though Elliott Carter is considered one of the cornerstones of American music, his music is widely unknown to most audiences and rarely performed by most seasoned performers. To a further extreme, Carter's vocal works are even more elusive to audiences. Many critics and listeners point to the esoteric nature of the music or the high barrier of the poetry or even the severe lack of quality recordings or performances.

In Sleep, In Thunder encapsulates the main issues audiences and performers have with Carter's music: too modern in sound, too dense to understand musically and rhetorically, and too hard to perform for those non-versed in modern repertoire. *In Sleep, In Thunder* offers a poignant exploration of poetry through music, specifically through its setting of six poems by Robert Lowell. This work is a significant part of Carter's triptych dedicated to contemporary American poetry,

⁵ David Schiff, "The Music of Elliott Carter," (1983)

which also includes *A Mirror on Which to Dwell* (a cycle of Elizabeth Bishop's poems) and *Syringa* (based on John Ashbery's work). Composed for tenor and fourteen instrumentalists, *In Sleep, In Thunder* reflects Carter's deep connection to Lowell, not just as a poet but as a friend whose work deeply resonated with him⁶.

Carter's approach to vocal music, particularly evident in this cycle, is characterized by a complex interplay between the voice and a rich instrumental texture. This allows for a dynamic expression of the poetry's emotional and intellectual depth. His compositions often challenge singers with demanding atonality and intricate rhythms, yet they reward both performers and listeners with a profound auditory experience that captures the essence of the poetry in a uniquely musical context. The choice of Lowell's texts, known for their intense and often troubled introspection, aligns well with Carter's compositional style, which seeks to probe and articulate the human condition through a modernist lens.

The instrumental setting in *In Sleep, In Thunder* is especially notable for how it interacts with the vocal line—often providing a counterpoint that enhances the dramatic expression of the poems. The ensemble's role is not merely accompaniment but an integral part of the narrative structure, echoing and amplifying the emotional states that Lowell's poetry invokes. This thoughtful orchestration underscores Carter's mastery in blending textual and musical elements, making the song cycle a compelling exploration of the power of voice and instrument to convey deep personal and poetic truths.

⁶ David Schiff, "In Sleep, in Thunder": Elliott Carter's Portrait of Robert Lowell," *Tempo* (1982): 2-9,

This guide seeks to offer suggestions to better understand Carter's vocal music by looking at moments of this cycle with careful consideration of the composer's style, the inflammatory poetry of Robert Lowell, and the successful marriage of music and poetry. Mark Swed offers the following commentary after Carter's passing in 2012, "Carter never composed for the casual listener... But after repeated hearings, a listener eventually sorts out the various intertwining lines and meters, and the fragmentary gibberish reveals its fascinating inner workings and purpose."⁷

⁷ Mark Swed, "'Elliott Carter Dies; Inventive American Composer Was 103,'" *The Los Angeles Times* (Nov 5, 2012), <https://www.latimes.com/entertainment/music/la-me-elliott-carter-20121106-story.html>.

CHAPTER 2

ELLIOT CARTER'S *IN SLEEP, IN SLUMBER*

By the time Carter began writing in this late style, when *In Sleep, In Thunder* was completed, he became increasingly isolated despite the accolades he received.⁸ His radical take on the American sound was commonly compared to the iconic and nostalgic tones of Copland. The return to vocal music was very important in the greater view of his own compositional evolution. Having established his voice in non-literary text works, he was able to avoid the trappings of molding words to fit his aural world. Carter composing vocal music once again, after a 20 year hiatus, marks his complete confidence in his own uniquely European yet wholly American voice. "His [Carter's] career has to be seen in a two fold sense: as a continuation of overriding perspectives of the American music history of our century; and as an individual objection against the one-sidedness of these general lines of development."⁹ This reconciliation is evident in the triptych of vocal chamber works in the seventies.

It is obvious that Carter's vocal and instrumental writing is not tethered to the common trappings of cliché art and chamber song tropes. Instead, his music is allowed to become unique characters within themselves. "Only an extraordinary

⁸ David Schiff, *The Music of Elliott Carter*, (Cornell University Press, 1998), 1-31. For a greater detailed look at the periods, see this introduction in Schiff's book. Here, he goes into detail about his time with Ives, frustration under Nadia Boulanger, tensions with Copland, and how he came upon his iconic rhythmic modulation theory.

⁹ Hermann Danuser, "Elliot Carter: Late Work as Lyric Poetry," *Sonus: A Journal of Investigations into Global Musical Possibilities* 19, no. 1 (Sept. 1998), 54.

chaste composer could resist the temptation to embody in the music something of the dynamic of the whirlwind and the earthquake, the immense pressure trying to escape through the small orifice of the bird's throat.... Elliott Carter is a composer particularly gifted at listening to and listening through poetry.”¹⁰ The chastity observed by Daniel Albright is exactly why this portrait of Robert Lowell's body of work is the pinnacle of vocal chamber music. In this cycle of six songs, Carter uses an entourage of fourteen instruments to freely fill the aural world suggested by Lowell's text [see Figure 1.7]. This freedom can allow for varied interpretations across numerous listenings. Danuser points that Carter wants the audience to understand what's going on but he does not write for the “future listener.”¹¹ Instead he requires audiences to flow with a free-flow form of the music each and every moment the music is being experienced. The vast varieties of the orchestral timbres are playgrounds of interpretive gestures and sounds.

Listening to the first song, ‘Dolphins,’ one can hear a freedom from such trivial bindings as “text painting.” In ‘Dolphins,’ Carter uses a variety of gesture, structure and timbres to bring the audience in during the text's invocation to the muses of poetry, art, and lust [see figure 1.1]. The song acts as a sort of secular cantata prelude to the rest of the work using five of the fourteen instruments,

¹⁰ Daniel Albright, “Elliott Carter and Poetry: Listening to, Listening Through.” In *Music Speaks: On the Language of Opera, Dance, and Song*, (Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 2009), 105.

¹¹ Hermann Danuser, “Elliot Carter: Late Work as Lyric Poetry.” *Sonus: A Journal of Investigations into Global Musical Possibilities* 19, no. 1 (Sept. 1998), 65.

Carter's beloved string quartet plus the double bass.¹² The opening gesture in the strings builds an all-interval 12 note chord which contains the varied hexachords in which the whole cycle is subtly tied by [see Figure 1.1 & 1.2]. This opening moment is the invocation of the dolphin, the muse by which the tenor is trying to capture and escape from. The strings slither around the structure while seducing, in vain, the tenor who is singing about their "collaborating muse." With this vividly busy, yet opaque, texture the tenor is presented with endless possibilities in pitch class material. The voice is able to freely roam outside of each small interludes and attempt to defy textures in the instruments while remaining tonally related to the strings, whom play in complex antagonism with the vocal line.¹³ This is typical of Carter's vocal music. The voice is genre defining, edging on Schubert one moment and operatic the next.¹⁴ The end result is a poignant final vocal line, expressive and legato soaring as if it was Verdi [see Figure 1.4]. The voice is left dumbfounded at what it was that happened, is happening, and yet to happen.

Carter follows this opening with 'La Ignota' with an entirely new character and charm. This second song is a duet in many ways between the tenor and the "old

¹² David Schiff, "Works for Solo Voices and Instruments," Chap. 7 in *The Music of Elliott Carter*, 2nd ed., (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1998), 193. Schiff also argues in this passage that Carter is returning to his Bach routes from his early period comparing the cycle to that of a passion.

¹³ Schiff, 'In Sleep, in Thunder': Elliott Carter's Portrait of Robert Lowell," *Tempo*, no.142 (1982): 2-9. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/944811>.

¹⁴ Schiff, "Works for Solo Voices and Instruments." Chap. 7 in *The Music of Elliott Carter*, 2nd ed., (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1998), 169-200. This section provides even more clarity to these general vocal styling of Elliott Carter's writing and philosophies.

soprano” portrayed by a droning, outcasted trumpet.¹⁵ There is a stark reversal of poetic intent in this song. Rather than the tenor embodying the character of the failed Wagnerian soprano, he resists the impulse to become that character and remains an onlooker while the trumpet drones on [see Figure 1.5]. This choice heightens a disdain for women Lowell often expounded on in his poetry [see Figure 1.1]. Daniel Albright makes note of this particular character in the cycle as a whole and the importance of Wagner in Post-War Modernism. He concludes that “Carter doffs his hat to Wagner, but he doesn’t adore him.”¹⁶ The resulting color of the piece is a vivid parody of what the audience would expect of anything evoking Wagner.

No song in the cycle is quite as exquisite an example of Carter’s expertise in text setting as the last song in the cycle, ‘In Genesis.’ Brenda Ravencroft names this expert technique as “the use of structural features to signify his [Carter’s] layered reading of a poem.”¹⁷ Being known for rhythmic modulatory changes, Lowell’s constantly shifting rhythmic hits contrasts sharply to the steady entrances Carter layers in the beginning moments of the finale of the cycle. By intentionally subverting the God figure in the song, he orchestrates every feeling of wrongness with the relationship of the voice and ensemble. These moments can be as subtle as purposefully ignoring the two rhythmic pulses of the song to as raucous as tritone

¹⁵ Elliott Carter, *In Sleep, in Thunder: Six Poems of Robert Lowell for Tenor and fourteen Instrumentalists*, Pocket Score ed, (New York, NY: Hendon Music, 1984). Carter makes note in the score on page 12 to have the trumpet either facing away from the singer or away and behind the whole ensemble in this piece.

¹⁶ Daniel Albright, “Elliott Carter and Poetry: Listening to, Listening Through,” (Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 2009), 115.

¹⁷ Brenda Ravencroft, “12. Layers of Meaning: Expression and Design in Carter’s Songs,” In *Elliott Carter Studies*, (Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 274-275.

leaps [see Figure 1.6]. Even the expected allusion to the all-interval chord from 'Dolphins' is ruined by the composer's design. Having missing intervals within the gesture occur in measures far after the fact. Lowell paints the picture of an all powerful God while Carter showcases his faults with the musical landscape around him. He elucidates within this texture the frustration and dissolution of belief. The schizophrenic cycle is done and the audience is left alone to again contemplate the final triumphant moment of 'Dolphins.'

Carter's clearly explains his reasoning for picking each of the texts within the cycle: "What attracted me about these texts were their rapid, controlled changes from passion to tenderness, to humor and to sense of loss... I tried to write music of continuous but coherent change."¹⁸ The selected texts are separated out into two groups of three with the subjects of women and God; both subjects are centerpieces in Lowell's poetic output. Robert Lowell was an excessive man whose life was riddled with triumphs and tragedies. However there is a harsh dichotomy in the American poets career: though he is out spoken and brazen, his audience is either academic or imaginary.¹⁹ It is not hard in the slightest to see why Carter and Lowell were great friends and colleagues in that light. Both sought and fought for their place in American culture and the artistic pantheon.

¹⁸ Carter, *In Sleep, in Thunder*; (New York, NY: Hendon Music, 1984).

¹⁹ Schiff, "'In Sleep, in Thunder': Elliott Carter's Portrait of Robert Lowell," *Tempo*, no.142 (1982), 3.

The subjects of woman and God intertwine often and none so boldly as the centerpiece fourth song 'Dies Irae.' This poem details the heretical and blasphemous rejection of faith and religion. It is also detailing his failed marriage as the speaker must rectify losing not only love but God. The deity muse of the dolphin, the humor of the soprano, and even the portrait of the child 'Harriet' falls at the bitter irony of the final song. Schiff explains further on this matter, "All the poems oscillate in tone; ideas and images recur from one poem to the next but with ironically opposed connotations."²⁰ Within these faulty comparisons in the piece, Carter achieves his goal of not forcing the text to his musical will but rather letting Lowell's text morph and guide itself as if it was a living, undulating being.²¹ Carter himself spoke on this concept, "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 counter - suggestions against its contents, and so forth."²²

There is a difficulty in separating Carter from his grammatical lineage in American music. Perhaps that is why so many run from his works as actually obtainable performance material. Does the marriage of complex rhetorical poetry and dense compositional style create an insurmountable barrier to performance? In Mark Sallmen's "Listening to the Music Itself," he posits that as serious students of

²⁰ Schiff, "Elliott Carter's Portrait of Robert Lowell," *Tempo*, no.142, 4-5.

²¹ Joseph Coroniti, *Poetry as Text in Twentieth-Century Vocal Music: From Stravinsky to Reich*, Lewiston: Edwin Mellen Press (1992), 37. I would be remiss in ignoring many obvious criticisms of Carter's setting of Lowell's text. In this chapter of his book, Coroniti argues his ears hear no change in mood and intricate tonal shifts in any of the cycle.

²² Ravenscroft, "Expression and Design in Carter's Songs," (Cambridge University Press), 290-291.

this music we must both seek the composer's words while ignoring them all together.²³ This can be a liberating idea for those seeking to perform and share this music. Can there be performance practice with a piece living and breathing with each new attempt?

Singers are faced with two major issues when attempting this cycle: common practice of piano reductions and tracks to help facilitate coaching the work and a lack of quality recordings in which singers now can be inspired by. *In Sleep, In Thunder* is perhaps the most encumbered by these issues. Only two recordings exist of the two tenors who premiered the cycle and the score is only available in a pocket score edition from Boosey and Hawkes before rental prices ensue. Combining this problem with the need for expert players and a conductor willing to dive in and work as a whole to showcase this stunning work. When last performed by the Metropolitan Chamber Orchestra in 2001 and 2003, an American audience was finally able to hear an expert revival by one of Carter's champions, James Levine. Anthony Tommansini was there for this occasion, "Mr. Carter's 1981 setting of six Lowell poems is uncompromisingly complex music, thick with tart atonal harmony, ingeniously intertwining counterpoint and rhythmic dislocations galore."²⁴ The performers must be diligent and masterful in practice while the audience must be hungry for the music itself. Everyone must come in with the understanding of there

²³ Mark Sallmen, "Listening to the Music Itself: Breaking through the shell of Elliott Carter's *In Genesis*," *Music Theory Online* 13, no. 3 (Sept. 2007), 1-2.

²⁴ Anthony Tommasini, "Music Review; Thick with Atonal Harmony and a Stunning Set of Colors," *The New York Times* (Jan. 31, 2001).

not being “pretty poetry” as David Schiff puts it.²⁵ Ravencroft puts it this way, “By exploring the technical means by which Carter expresses these layers of meaning in his songs, we can gain insight into his compositional practices and into the process by which he clarifies the text.”²⁶ Elliott Carter’s music presents a monumental task for the performer. The rhythmic, melodic, and technical aspects of all his music require precision and dedication. But is it that any different from the other great composers of the Western canon? Carter struggled to be accepted by not only his colleagues but by the audience at large. His music was met with admiration by theorists but harsh criticism and musical fear from the rest of the musical world.

At the United States premier of the cycle Edward Rothstein remarked, “Mr. Carter is not overly generous to his listeners; he demands that they, like readers of poetry, learn to comprehend his rhetoric.”²⁷ Elliott Carter is both musical saint and pariah. His embrace of ultra-modernistic ideals in his music exiled him from the same community he strove to be involved with. His return to writing for the voice came from decades of self-imposed isolation. *In Sleep, In Thunder* is a demanding but this should not be a barrier for performers and audiences. Carter’s passion for song is evident in his early frustration, middle isolation and eventual evolution with his compositional voice. This cycle is at the apex of this process. The aspects of the theoretical staples of hexachordal relations and rhythmic modulation are at full

²⁵ Schiff, “Elliott Carter’s Portrait of Robert Lowell,” *Tempo*, no.142, 4-5.

²⁶ Ravencroft, “Expression and Design in Carter’s Songs,” (Cambridge University Press, 2016), 272.

²⁷ Edward Rothstein, “Music: A Tribute to Elliott Carter, 75,” *The New York Times* (Dec 14, 1983), Online Archive edition.

maturity. With these compositional tools in hand, he could finally do what he wanted at its fullest: to thoroughly and thoughtfully set poetry. And in his own words, “Compositions are the result of innumerable choice— many unconscious, many conscious, some quickly made, others after long deliberation, all mostly forgot when they have served their purpose—what the composer is aiming at, after all, is a whole in which all the technical workings are interdependent and combine to produce the kind of artistic experience that gives a work its validity...”²⁸ Elliott Carter filled his portrait of Robert Lowell with validity. It is now up to the performers and the audience to live up to that highest of standards we place on his shoulders.

²⁸ Elliott Carter, “Shop Talk” in *Collected Essays and Lectures*, (University of Rochester Press, 1998), 214-215.

CHAPTER 3

PERFORMER PREPARATION AND CONSIDERATIONS

Elliot Carter's vocal music is a passion project like no other. Requiring an understanding of his theory, his vocal writing and philosophies, and a desire to convince an audience of its worth and relevance. *In Sleep, In Thunder* is the final piece in a triptych of vocal chamber pieces Carter wrote in the late 1970s. This set of works also marked a return for Carter back into the repertoire after a long hiatus due to his belief that he didn't have the proper skills to set text to music. All three pieces have difficulty in terms of vocal demands but none are so great as with the problems put forth by his portrait of the poet Robert Lowell (wherein this piece derives its text). There is a quintessential question that encapsulates the general concern with performing Carter's works in any capacity: How can a piece that is too modern in sound, too dense to understand musically and rhetorically, and too difficult to perform for those not versed in modern repertoire be effectively approached?

It is obvious that Carter's vocal and instrumental writing is not tethered to the common trappings of cliché art and chamber song tropes. Instead, his music is allowed to become unique characters within themselves in the context of the cycle. Carter uses an entourage of fourteen instruments to freely fill the aural world suggested by Lowell's text. This freedom can allow for varied interpretations across numerous listenings. The vast varieties of the orchestral timbres are playgrounds of

interpretive gestures and sounds. It is from this point of view that the preparation can begin and turn a daunting challenge into an artistic, personal experience. We first have to look at the text of Robert Lowell used in the cycle, which explores an inner rejection of religion and the subject of womanhood. Without going too far into Robert Lowell, it is enough to say he is an excessive man with a lot of baggage and never fully accepted by the larger literary world (much like the turmoil of Carter being not American enough to American audiences but too American for European audiences).

The progression of poetic topics flows as follows: Dolphins (God) → La Ignota (Woman) → Harriet (Woman) → Dies Irae (God) → Careless Night (God/Woman) → In Genesis (God). Each song also features an instrument that acts as a foil to the poet as well, like in La Ignota where the poor, bad soprano spoken about by the tenor is portrayed as a wobbly trumpet in a distant room or the slippery nature of the Dolphins in the first song showcased by the strings and their twelve-tone cluster chord at each climatic phrase. Knowing the hate and atheistic attitudes of Lowell also help better understand the harsh *Dies Irae* with the percussive interjections or the climatic ending of the cycle where the cohort tapers into a bitter, drone away after railing against the fates of man. Carter's entire goal was to never force his poetic will on the piece. Instead, he wanted to allow a freedom of expression in the tenor, the ensemble and even the audience much like what would be expected in a personal recitation of a poem. He wanted to provide colors for the audience and

performers, while also providing a counterpoint to what possibly could be interpreted as the intent.

Elliott Carter's music presents a monumental task for the performer. The rhythmic, melodic, and technical aspects of all his music require precision and dedication. One of the many hurdles of this piece is the absence of a piano reduction of the work and no plans through the estate or Boosey & Hawkes to create one. What this means is that the singer is completely responsible for coaching the work and figuring out how to fit into the color palette laid out before them. Understanding the musical theory and compositional philosophy behind what is going on is vital, especially when understanding the hexachordal relationships in every song of the work between the entire ensemble and voice.

The first song is a great example of this relationship and style and serves as a way to learn the whole cycle. This song captures the elusive and graceful qualities of the titular creature through flowing melodic lines and fluid harmonic progressions. Carter employs a subtle yet complex interplay of instrumental textures to mirror the dolphin's movements through water, creating an effect of both elegance and unpredictability. The initial all interval twelve note cluster chord serves as an invitation to the tenor by the strings. The strings are opaque in texture but can still anchor the voice to related intervals and melodic shaping. There is also the attention to the stress of each word and though the rhythmic motion seems complex, it flows with the text in a natural way that allows the angularity of the phrases to feel more responsive than pasted on. Musicologist David Schiff discusses

Carter's setting of contemporary poetry, highlighting the composer's nuanced and context-sensitive approach to text setting, which would apply to the lyrical and flowing aspects of "Dolphin"²⁹.

Then with more conversational songs like *La Ignota* or the innocent *Harriet*, the vocal line takes on a much more median tessitura and, though it has angularity inherently a part of the vocal line, flows much more in reaction to the sounds of the ensemble. In the second song, Carter explores themes of mystery and the distant voice of the opera singer. The music is characterized by ambiguous tonal centers and a dense, layered textural approach. Dissonant chords and abrupt rhythmic changes evoke a sense of searching and uncertainty, mirroring the poem's exploration of uncharted psychological depths³⁰. "Harriet" is marked by a rigorous rhythmic framework that not only underscores but amplifies the narrative tension and emotional depth of Lowell's words. The use of irregular meter changes and syncopation challenges the performer while captivating the audience, propelling the poem's dramatic arc forward³¹. This complex rhythmic structure serves as more than just a backdrop; it is a vital force in the narrative progression. The vocal line in "Harriet" offers a lyrical counterpoint to the rigorous rhythm, adding multiple layers of meaning to the text. This melodic line enables a broad expression of emotions, ranging from introspection to despair, reflecting both the personal and

²⁹ David Schiff, "The Music of Elliott Carter," (1983)

³⁰ Peter Smucker, "A listener-sensitive analytic approach to Elliott Carter's late chamber music, 1990--2012," (2015)

³¹ Peter Smucker (2015)

historical themes of Lowell's poetry. Carter's melodic choices often embrace atonality, avoiding traditional contours to evoke a powerful sense of contemplation and unresolved emotional tension, effectively conveying the poem's mood³².

It is when we reach the middle point of the cycle, *Dies Irae*, that we have to wrestle with complex vocal writing, virtuosic phrases, and the need to express the text in a thorny texture. This song effectively conveys an apocalyptic and solemn theme inherent in the text³³. Carter's use of dissonance and dynamic orchestration in "*Dies Irae*" enhances the song's emotional impact, mirroring the dramatic content of Lowell's poetry which deals with themes of death and final reckoning. The piece serves as a focal point in the cycle, bridging the introspective and sometimes disquieting themes of the surrounding songs with its intense expression and complex construction. This strategic placement and its robust musical setting underscore its role as the emotional and thematic epicenter of the cycle, drawing a direct line to the traditional "*Dies Irae*" sequence which has historically been used in the Mass for the Dead to symbolize the final judgment. The central position of "*Dies Irae*" within the cycle is crucial, as it anchors the overarching narrative arc of *In Sleep, In Thunder*, serving as a pivot around which the other, more introspective songs revolve. Carter's intricate rhythms and challenging vocal lines are not just mere musical expressions but are deeply intertwined with the textual themes, allowing the song to encapsulate the existential and somber reflections of the cycle.

³² John Link, "Elliott Carter's Late Music," (2021)

³³ David Schiff (1983)

The 4th song is a good point to stop and illustrate the vocal demands of the piece in terms of the tessitura and stamina of the voice. The angularity of the vocal line in some ways helps alleviate the wide range needed in the piece. In “Dies Irae,” the opening phrase has you soaring up to a B4 within seconds of the movement. Then you have the following phrase where you are skipping from low middle to upper middle, in a slow ascent to above the staff in a glass-like smoothness needed for the introspective and bitter text. Then in the several final phrases, you have low C#s up to the same B4 in the matter of half a bar. This range is indicative of the demands technically required of the work outside the theoretical understanding and time needed in order to digest what Carter is asking of you.

Tony Arnold discusses the inherent challenges and rewards of performing Carter's vocal music, particularly highlighting the need for singers to adapt to his complex rhythmic and pitch requirements. This approach is crucial in the final song of the cycle, "In Genesis," where the vocal line must convey both the narrative and emotional depth of the text, often navigating through dissonant and rhythmically complex segments that require precise articulation and deep interpretative insight³⁴. Carter's vocal writing, while challenging, provides a richly satisfying experience for skilled performers³⁵. In "In Genesis," this can be seen in the way the vocal lines are crafted—not only to challenge the singer technically but also to express the subtle nuances of the poetry. Manning points out that Carter's use of

³⁴ Arnold, Tony. "Digging Deeper: Singing the Music of Elliott Carter." 2014.

³⁵ Mark Sallmen, "Listening to the Music Itself: Breaking through the shell of Elliott Carters In Genesis," Music Theory Online 13, no. 3 (Sept. 2007), 1-2.

metric modulation and his intricate textural and rhythmic layers enhance the expressive potential of the voice, making each performance a unique exploration of the song's thematic and musical complexities³⁶. The analysis provided by Guy Capuzzo on Carter's broader vocal works offers insight into how "In Genesis" fits within the composer's oeuvre. Capuzzo discusses Carter's sophisticated handling of text and music, where the composer uses his deep understanding of both mediums to create a dialogue between the singer and the ensemble. This interaction is crucial in "In Genesis," where the ensemble's response and interplay with the vocal line deepen the song's narrative and emotional impact, reflecting the layered and complex nature of Lowell's poetry³⁷.

³⁶ Manning, Jane. "ELLIOTT CARTER (1908–2012) Of Challenge and of Love." 2020.

³⁷ Capuzzo, Guy. "Review of Guy Capuzzo, Elliott Carter's What Next?: Communication, Cooperation, and Separation." 2013.

CHAPTER 4

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS ON PRESENTING *IN SLEEP, IN THUNDER*

The tonal language of the vocal line is just as challenging as Britten, Adés, or even Janáček. The key is understanding the philosophical gestures Carter is working with. The result is once the vocal lines are learned in a controlled manner in concert with the rest of the ensemble (i.e. slow vowel work to line the voice up in the phrase in order to find a balanced tone), you will never doubt the direction or tuning of the phrase, merely how you fit into the ensemble and tune in with everyone to create the desired color and tone. It is also in this method you learn the stamina and pacing required to succeed in this twenty-one minute piece. In the first song you have just the strings of the ensemble to sing with which can act as a warmup into the sound world and vocal world. It is important to recognize, perhaps a kinship with the Evangelist of Bach, that the angularity with the top is for color. This frees the singing up by recognizing that the full arch of the is what is important, not the 4-8 notes above the staff. The songs Harriet and Careless night offer more legato lines for the voice to latch on to and spin, as if massaging the voice in preparation for the more declamatory, angular vocal lines in “Dies Irae” and “In Genesis.” Spaced in this way, the vocal pacing is planned efficiently and not nearly as daunting as it can be at first glance.

The strategic structuring of Elliott Carter's *In Sleep, In Thunder* not only challenges vocalists with its demanding lines but also systematically prepares them

to navigate the complexities of the cycle with increasing confidence. The progressive escalation from the more melodically supportive settings in "Harriet" and "Careless Night" to the climactic demands of "Dies Irae" and "In Genesis" reflects a deep understanding of vocal mechanics and artistic expression. This approach ensures that performers are not just singing notes but engaging deeply with the music's emotional and intellectual demands. By the time singers reach the more strenuous pieces, they are well-prepared to handle the intricate interplays of rhythm and melody that Carter demands, allowing for a more nuanced and profound delivery that captures the cycle's thematic essence.

This careful pacing underscores Carter's meticulous craft in composing vocal music that is as intellectually rigorous as it is expressive. The demands placed on singers to find their place within the ensemble, to be able to tune and blend to achieve the desired sonority, emphasize the collaborative nature of modern musical performance. It's a dynamic that highlights the importance of each individual's contribution to the collective impact of the piece. The integration of philosophical, rhetorical gestures within the musical structure invites performers and audiences alike to experience a deeper layer of engagement with the work.

Ultimately, the challenge posed by Carter's complex vocal writing does not merely test the technical skills of the performers but enriches their interpretative capabilities, leading to a richer, more textured understanding and appreciation of his musical innovations. This complex interplay of technical prowess and expressive depth makes *In Sleep, In Thunder* a seminal work that continues to influence

contemporary music performance and interpretation and also a work that deserves a real revival in the chamber music space in the 21st century.

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Appendix

Figure 1.1 (texts by Robert Lowell)

DOLPHINS

My Dolphin, you only guide me by surprise,
a captive as Racine, the man of craft,
drawn through his maze of iron composition
by the incomparable wandering voice of Phèdre.
When I was troubled in mind, you made for my body
caught in its hangman's-knot of sinking lines,
the glassy bowing and scraping of my will
I have sat and listened to too many
words of the collaborating muse,
and plotted perhaps too freely with my life,
not avoiding injury to others,
not avoiding injury to myself—
to ask compassion . . . this book, half fiction,
an eelnet made by man for the eel fighting—

my eyes have seen what my hand did.

ACROSS THE YARD: LA IGNOTA

The soprano's bosom breathes the joy of God,
Brunhilde who could not rule her voice for God—
her stately yellow ivory window frames
haven't seen paint or putty these twenty years;
grass, dead since Kennedy, chokes the window box.
She has to sing to keep her curtains flying;
one is pink dust flipped back to scarlet lining,
the other besmirched gauze; and behind them
a blown electric heater, her footlocker with Munich
stickers stood upright for a music stand.
Her doorbell is dead. No one has to hire her.
She flings her high aria to the trash like roses
When I was lost and green, I would have given
the janitor three months' rent for this address.

HARRIET

Spring moved to summer—the rude cold rain
hurries the ambitious, flowers and youth;
our flash-tones crackle for an hour, and then
we too follow nature, imperceptibly
change our mouse-brown to white lion's mane,
thin white fading to a freckled, knuckled skull,
bronzed by decay, by many, many suns. . . .
Child of ten, three quarters animal,
three years from Juliet, half Juliet,
already ripened for the night on stage—
beautiful petals, what shall we hope for,
knowing one choice not two is all you're given,
health beyond the measure, dangerous
to yourself, more dangerous to others?

DIES IRAE

On this day of anger, when I am Satan's,
forfeited to that childless sybarite—
Our God, he walks with me, he talks with me,
in sleep, in thunder, and in wind and weather;
he strips the wind and gravel from my words,
and speeds me naked on the single way
You who save those you must save free; you, whose
least anger makes my faith derelict,
you came from nothing to the earth for me,
my enemies are many, my friends few—
how often do you find me, God, and die?
Once our Lord looked and saw the world was good—
in His hand, God has got us in His hand;
everything points to non-existence except existence.

CARELESS NIGHT

So country-alone, and O so very friendly,
our heaviness lifted from us by the night
we dance out into its diamond suburbia,
and see the hill-crown's unrestricted lights—
all day these encroaching neighbors are out of sight.
Huge smudge sheep in burden becloud the grass,
they swell on moonlight and weigh two hundred pounds—
hulky as you in your white sheep-coat, as nervous to gallop .
The Christ-Child's drifter shepherds have left this field,
gone the shepherd's breezy too predictable pipe.
Nothing's out of earshot in this daylong night;
nothing can be human without man.
What is worse than hearing the late-born child crying—
and each morning waking up glad we wake?

IN GENESIS

Blank. A camel blotting up the water.
God with whom nothing is design or intention.
In the Beginning, the Sabbath could last a week,
God grumbling secrecies behind Blue Hill
The serpent walked on foot like us in Eden;
glorified by the perfect Northern exposure,
Eve and Adam knew their nakedness,
a discovery to be repeated many times
in joyless stupor? . . . Orpheus in Genesis
hacked words from brute sound, and taught men English,
plucked all the flowers, deflowered all the girls
with the overemphasis of a father.
He used too many words, his sons killed him,
dancing with grateful gaiety round the cookout.

Figure 1.2 (Figure of tetrachords used in *In Sleep, In Thunder* from Schiff)

all-interval 12-note chord at opening of "Dolphin": 5 10 11 8 3 6 9 4 1 2 7

Typical spacing of hexachords:

6-4 6-5

6-42 6-6

Chart 31 *In Sleep, In Thunder*: harmony

Figure 1.3 (Opening gesture in *Dolphin*)

$\text{♩} = 72$, *Allegretto capriccioso* (1981)

Violins I

Violins II

Viola

Cello

Double Bass

enorm

pp espr. *ppp* *p* *ppp* *pp* *p espr.* *mp*

p espr. *ppp* *mp sub.* *p* *ppp* *mf* *pp* *p > pp*

p espr. *ppp* *mf sub.* *ppp* *pp* *pp* *p > pp*

pp espr. *p sub.* *pp* *p* *ppp* *mf* *mf* *pp*

mf

Figure 1.4 (Ending vocal gesture in Dolphin)

← $\frac{1}{2}$ = $\frac{1}{4}$ → $\frac{1}{2}$ = 48, **Drammatico**

67

ff *fp*

my eyes have seen what my hand did.

Figure 1.5 (Example of opening line of voice and trumpet in La Ignota)

(sempre sola, al fine)

p *5* *mp* *pp* *5* *mp*

p *mf*

Siz. Cy. (Una corda) >

S.Dr. sticks *p* *5*

mf

so - pran - o's bos-om breathes

9

Figure 1.6 (Example of rhythmic dissonance from In Genesis curtesy of Ravencroft pg. 276)

1 $\frac{1}{2}$ = 60, **Maestoso**

Tenor

16 $\frac{1}{2}$ 8 $\frac{1}{2}$

Bliss A cam-el bleed-ing up the wa-ter

Brass: MM 11.25 *f* *mf* *mf* *pp*

Piano

Strings + Winds: MM 17.4 *f* *mf*

Ten. 6

God with whom sleep-ing in the sign or in ven-ture

Br.

Pno.

Str. + Wnd.

Figure 1.7 (List of instrumentation)

Flute (Piccolo*, Alto Flute in G*)

Oboe (English Horn*)

Clarinet in B \flat (Bass Clarinet*)

Bassoon

Horn in F* (metal & cardboard mutes)

Trumpet in C } (straight metal mutes, straight cardboard
Trombone (Tenor, Bass) } mutes, tight cup mutes)

Piano

Percussion:

Vibraphone, Marimba, Wood Block, Medium Cowbell, Guiro,
Bottle, Maracas (high), Small Sizzle Cymbal, Medium Suspended
Cymbal, Side Drum (releasable snares), Tenor Drum or Field
Drum (releasable snares), Bass Drum (2 stiff metal brushes),
Tam Tam

Violin I

Violin II

Viola

'Cello

Double Bass*