

# contact

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Elliott Carter: String Quartet No. 3

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(G. SCHIRMER)

The appearance of a new Carter score is never less than a major event, but when it is a string quartet there is additional cause for excitement. It was the First Quartet which, back in 1951, took the decisive step into individual and uncompromising modes of expression, while its successor, eight years later, clarified this into a commitment to forms of ensemble writing based on the principle of independent characterisation. Now, with the arrival of the Third Quartet, it is possible to establish whether this essentially concertante line of development has been broken.

The answer is no. The work is, remembering the score with which Carter is now most closely associated, a kind of 'Double Concerto' for string quartet. The group is divided into two duos which, separated on the platform, pursue independent courses of action. Duo I (violin and cello), distinguished by a fluctuating, quasi rubato form of motion, exploits a cyclic arrangement of segments of four 'character'-movements. Duo II (violin and viola), by contrast, builds its six movements into a 'progressive' structure, playing in strict rhythm throughout, often in extended polyrhythms. The overall scheme is such that every possible combination of a Duo I movement with a Duo II movement is realised, with the segments arranged in an unbroken series of overlaps. The result is a definitive exploration of Carter's protracted involvement with multi-layered contrasts, the differentiation achieved, as in the past, by long-range structural processes (divergent paths of evolution progressing through varying degrees of articulation) rather than more localised, and hence limited, means. It should be added that AMP have responded magnificently to the work's special demands. The splendid clarity of the score leaves the reader mercifully free of additional complications. Any blemishes (e.g. the erroneous alignment of the Duo II partners in bar 140) are only incidental.

As may now be evident, in the Third Quartet Carter's musical language has reached a degree of elaboration that could hardly be exceeded. Indeed, an innocent observer of the score might readily be forgiven for mistaking its unprecedented complexity for outright perversity. We must await the British première, or at least (it is to be hoped) the prompt release in this country of the American recording, to prove him wrong.

CHRIS ROOKE