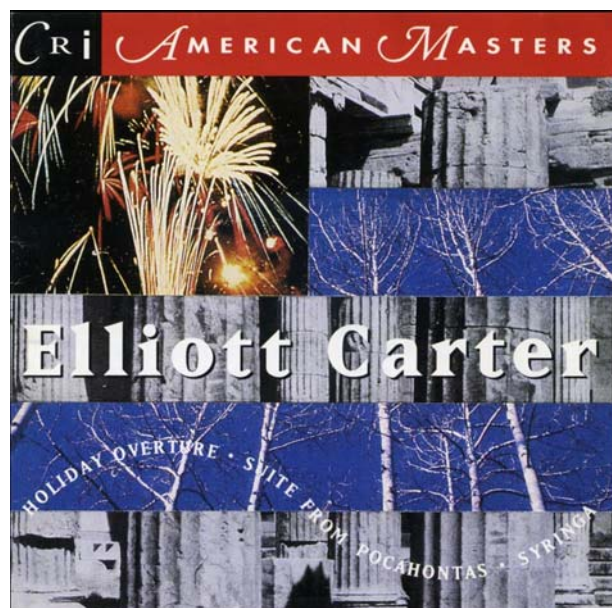


## Elliott Carter



- Holiday Overture* (1944, rev. 1961) ..... (9:13)
- Suite From *Pocahontas* (1939) ..... (19:48)
1. I. Overture (Allegro vigoroso)..... (1:35)
  2. II. John Smith and Rolfe Lost in the Virginia Forest..... (3:18)
  3. III. Princess Pocahontas and Her Ladies (Allegretto grazioso)..... (3:59)
  4. IV. Torture of John Smith (Maestoso)..... (6:35)
  5. V. Pavane – Farewell of Pocahontas (Andante sostenuto e pesante)..... (4:21)
- American Composers Orchestra,  
Paul Dunkel, conductor
6. *Syringa* (1978) ..... (20:00)
- Jan DeGaetani, mezzo-soprano; Thomas Paul, baritone; Speculum Musicae & The Group for Contemporary Music, Harvey Sollberger, conductor

Total playing time: 49:20

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## Notes

**Elliott Carter's** *Holiday Overture* was written on Fire Island, New York, during the summer of 1944 to celebrate the liberation of Paris. It won the Independent Music Publisher's Contest in 1945. The prize was to include a performance by the Boston Symphony, but though Koussevitzky was one of the judges that awarded the prize he permanently postponed playing it and the premiere took place, ironically, in Frankfurt, Germany in 1946.

In the *Holiday Overture* Carter once again confronts neo-classicism and populism with his own need for a more dynamic musical language. The music begins buoyantly like Walton's *Portsmouth Point Overture* and ends in a blaze of Ivesian frenzy. The passage from classicism to chaos is built into the basic structure of the music. The Overture begins with a syncopated theme whose accents conflict with the four-four meter. Two other similarly syncopated themes appear: their super-imposition soon gives rise to a complex, cross-accented polyphony. Despite a profusion of contrapuntal devices—canons, augmentations, inversions—the spirit of the music remains comic, as fugal episodes suddenly dissolve into giggles and shrieks on the piccolo. The mood of the music darkens, however, when a vast augmentation of the third theme appears in the tuba and slowly ascends through the brass while strings and woodwinds continue their fugal banter. The brass line slices upward through the orchestra, undeflected by a recapitulation in the other instruments, until the two unrelated strata collide in flutter-tongued clusters. The music ends with a series of dense *stretti* in a five-part prolation canon—sounding very much like exploding fireworks.

*Pocahontas* contains some of Elliott Carter's earliest compositional ideas, or at least the earliest he chose not to discard. In 1935 Carter returned to the USA from his compositional studies in Paris with Nadia Boulanger. His

Harvard friend Lincoln Kirstein soon invited him to become musical director of Ballet Caravan, a touring company whose repertory was to include works of a strong American character such as Paul Bowles's *Yankee Clipper*, Virgil Thomson's *Filling Station*, and Aaron Copland's *Billy the Kid*. From Carter, Kirstein commissioned the score for a ballet on the Pocahontas story for which Kirstein himself wrote a scenario stressing the “naive trust and inherent tragedy of the original Americans.” According to a note in the score, the idea and character of the ballet were suggested by “Powhatan's Daughter,” the second section of Hart Crane's poem *The Bridge* - a work to which Carter would return in his *Symphony of Three Orchestras* forty years later.

The original version of the ballet, with choreography by Lew Christensen, was premiered on August 17, 1936 in Keene, New Hampshire, with a piano accompaniment. From that time until the premiere of the final orchestrated version of the ballet in New York on May 24, 1939 the score evolved considerably. Most notably a large selection of sparkling, neo-classic music was excised; it would later serve as the finale of the *Symphony No. 1* (available on CR1 CD 551).

The score's eclectic style and uneven finish may suggest that its main interest today lies in its record of Carter's early influences. There is much evidence, however, that the styles of the work do far more than mirror the composer's enthusiasms of the time, for the music sharply contrasts two of the main tendencies of early twentieth-century music, primitivism and classicism, and uses these contrasts as the basis of its dramatic structure. Most of the score is written in a dissonant, chromatic idiom recalling the early, brutal works of Prokofiev and Milhaud (and occasionally Stravinsky's *Le Sacre du printemps*). This atavistic mood appears immediately in the opening Overture, perhaps the strongest section of the score. The explosive gestures of the opening

give way to squarer Hindemithian motives at the entrance of John Smith, so that the neo-classic style is immediately associated with the coming of the Europeans. As Smith and Rolfe become lost in the forest, their themes are erased by bursts of the opening material in a fadeout typical of the later Carter. Indeed the shape of the first two sections—played without a pause—anticipates the large-scale structural *diminuendos* of works such as the Sonata for Flute, Oboe, Cello, and Harpsichord.

The dramatic contrast of atavistic and civilized styles continues throughout the ballet, often in unexpected ways. In the third section, Pocahontas' naïveté gives rise to an un-Indian and un-Carterian pop tune, though its scoring for solo instruments and written-out cadenzas are characteristic gestures of freedom in Carter's music. The dramatic shape of the "Torture of John Smith" is prophetic of the later Carter. At the climax the entire orchestra sounds a violent chord that continues to ring only in the barely audible resonances of piano and harp; harp and flute then continue with a recall of Pocahontas's gentle music. The sudden juxtaposition of brutality and sensitivity, and the victory of quiet music over loud will recur often in later works.

The closing section of the Suite, the Pavane, is the most neoclassical. In fact Kirstein asked Carter to write an American version of the Apotheosis from Stravinsky's *Apollon musagète*. Despite Carter's obvious fondness for the *Fitzwilliam Virginal Book* and other Jacobean music (evident also in "To Music" and "Tell Me Where is Fancy Bred" from the same time) the musical triumph of European classicism is here given an ironic treatment, with a disturbing conclusion far from Stravinsky's Apollonian calm.

*Syringa*, dedicated to Sir William and Lady Glock, was made possible by a Composer-Librettist Grant awarded to the composer and John Ashbery by the National Endowment for the Arts. Its premiere, sponsored by The Group for Contemporary Music and Speculum Musicae, took place on 10 December 1978, the eve of Carter's seventieth birthday, and the performers were those heard on this recording.

*Syringa* is the most original of Carter's creations. It is not a song cycle, but a new genre: a cantata, a chamber opera, a polytextural motet, and a vocal double concerto all in one. The novelty of its conception springs from Carter's response to John Ashbery's poem, "Syringa," where as in so much of Ashbery's poetry, what is not said seems as important as the printed text. Ashbery's poems combine deadpan irony, campy humor, and exquisite lyricism in startling juxtapositions. They are rent by silences and cut-offs, implying experiences too painful to mention. In "Syringa" what Ashbery mainly leaves unsaid is Orpheus's passion; his Orpheus is a very modern poet, all too aware of the futility of his art. Apollo, no less, tells him: "Leave it all on earth/Your lute, what point? Why pick a dull pavan few care to/Follow except a few birds of dusty feather/Not vivid performances of the past." The whole poem is a response to the god's rather academic despair, and celebrates the fresh discoveries of the present moment against the claims of a lost past.

In order to present a musical contrast of past and present, text and subtext, Carter scored the work for two singers. The mezzo-soprano declaims Ashbery's poem in a flat, matter-of-fact patter remarkably close to the way Ashbery reads his own poetry. The bass, by contrast, intones a "vivid performance," intense and emotional, of words whose meaning is lost. Carter assembled a collage of classical Greek texts, some related to the Orphic cult that developed, as Carter enjoys saying, when, after his dismemberment, Orpheus' head floated across the

Aegean, still singing. In wide-arching phrases of extravagant lyricism the bass sings in an archaic tongue of a world of undistanced passion set in motion by the demands of Eros.

Like nearly every aspect of the work, its extraordinary solo guitar part has a double meaning. While composing *Syringa*, Carter traveled to Morocco; visiting the ruins of the Roman city of Volubilis he came upon the "house of Orpheus" where there was a large circular mosaic of Orpheus playing his lyre to a small concert audience of birds and beasts. The mosaic suggested the work's opening, where the guitar and bass gradually charm the other instruments into joining them. On the other hand, the Greek text tells us that "Orpheus, unrewarded, they sent back from Hades. They showed him a phantom of the wife for whom he came: her real self, however, they did not present, for they considered him not courageous, since he was a musician (*kitharodos*) and would not have the heart to die for love."

If Orpheus in Ashbery's poem appears as a self-portrait of the poet, Carter's music seems like an idealized embodiment of all those expressive qualities most personal to the composer. He has often said that the true medium of musical composition is not sound but time. *Syringa* celebrates time: it is a ceaselessly flowing temporal stream. The two texts contain all of time, from creation—"Time gave birth to the egg"—to a distant future. "When all record of these people and their lives/Has disappeared into libraries, onto microfilm." *Syringa* demands that we plunge into the river of time: there are no recurrences, no formal guides of fixed landmarks. The poetic quality so magically projected by the score is one of instantaneousness, as a succession of ravishing sound-images appear and then vanish. As John Ashbery's poem says: "But it is the nature of things to be seen only once. As they happen along, bumping into other things, getting along/Somehow..."

—David Schiff

The preceding notes were condensed by the author from articles on these works in: *The Music of Elliott Carter* by David Schiff, Eulenburg Books, London - Da Capo Press, New York

**Elliott Carter** (b 1908, New York City) is one of America's leading composers. His awards and honors are the highest a composer can receive: two Pulitzer Prizes, honorary degrees from Harvard, Yale, and Princeton universities, membership in both the American Academy and the Institute of Arts and Letters (and a gold medal from the latter), membership in the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, honorary membership in the Akademie der Künste in Berlin, and the impressive Ernst von Siemens Prize (1981) previously awarded to composers Benjamin Britten, Olivier Messiaen, and Pierre Boulez and many eminent performers. He is also a scholar, author, and teacher.

As an undergraduate at Harvard, he majored in English literature, but studied and heard a great deal of music inside and outside college. After taking his B.A., he remained to do graduate work with Walter Piston, Archibald T. Davison, Edward B. Hill and Gustav Holst, then a visiting professor. Upon taking the M.A. degree in 1932, Carter went to Paris for three years of study with Nadia Boulanger. The first public performances of Carter's music took place while he still was a student. He writes:

"I am told that the line of continuity of my works is very definite, each deriving from the previous one with little apparent relation to the various musical trends that have come and gone during the past forty years. The initial influence may have been the constructivism prevalent in American music in

the '20s and '30s somewhat related to Scriabin, Roslavetz, and the Schoenberg school. Ives, Varèse, Ruggles, and Ruth Crawford all had certain tendencies in that direction as did Copland and Sessions.

“In fact, I was very much attracted to the avant-garde in the '20s and '30s with its interest in randomness, its collages, its fun and games with audiences and its artistic paradoxes, and

have felt that this cause was effectively presented then and did not need to be repeated again. The next step had to be taken and this is what I have tried to do in so far as my work can be said to adopt any aesthetic position, for I have been more concerned with writing the works than in demonstrating aesthetic notions.”

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## Production Notes

From CRI SD 475

*Holiday Overture*  
*Suite from Pocahontas*

Producer: Carter Harman. Recorded by David Hancock at Walt Whitman Auditorium, Brooklyn College, Brooklyn, New York in February 1982. Original recording was made possible by a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts.

From CRI SD 469

*Syringa*

Producer: Carter Harman. Recorded by David Hancock at the Church of the Holy Trinity, NYC, on May 11-13, 1981.

All published by Associated Music Publishers (G. Schirmer) (BMI).

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