

**Elliott Carter's String Quartet No. 2:  
Tracking the Development of a New Compositional  
Language**

by

Chris Rorrer

Dr. Raymond Torres-Santos  
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Elliott Carter's Pulitzer prize-winning second string quartet was completed in 1959 and premiered one year later. The six-movement piece features Carter's ever-maturing harmonic language and ability to intimately depict varying characters to the listener through the vehicle of string chamber music. Carter was certainly fluent in serialism but crafted this quartet using what is more appropriately described as an atonal approach. As such, Carter displays no reliance on scales, modes, or tonal harmony. He also avoids any rote repetition of melodic or harmonic material, except in certain junctures. Instead, he develops an original compositional procedure, standing as a metaphor for the significance of human individuality. Using several compositional techniques such as octave displacement, rhythmic variation, and dissonant layering, Carter can vary the musical impact of each instrument as a separate entity as well as the quartet's overall sound more vividly as the piece progresses. Each movement gradually increases in agitation until the climax that occurs in the fifth movement and pushes the technical limitations of its performers throughout. Elliott Carter, in *String Quartet No. 2*, showcases his original compositional language through the manipulation of large-scale musical elements. Firstly, regarding the element of pitch, Carter manipulates tetrachords to create a stream of melodic lines that beget dissonant layering throughout the piece. To further break from the reigns of his predecessors, Carter shapes musical duration in an equally profound manner, incorporating stark rhythmic variation, polyrhythms, rollercoaster-like tempo shifts, and metric modulation. Lastly, Carter makes use of extremes and careful contouring to vary the intensity, or dynamic level, within each voice of the quartet, to further drive home the aesthetic he strives for.

The element of pitch shapes largely shapes the direction of the piece, notably in

the first movement. Carter himself called his proprietary pitch-class collections "chords" from which he would derive melody. Laura Emery outlines each cell of pitch classes that Carter assigns to the instruments to play, divided into primary chord combinations and secondary chords, or what she refers to as "residuals." Throughout the piece, these sets of intervals are carefully distributed across the quartet in such a way to help establish a narrative role for each instrument. To further augment pitch, Carter uses double stops, octave displacement, and compositional devices whose origins lie in the fugal style. Emery reports that "[Carter] is still working on obtaining 5-, 6-, and 7-note chords by combining the statements of AITs that have one or more pitches in common, and segmenting the chords into trichords that he can manipulate (by the process of inversion, transposition, or retrograde)" (392). Emery's acronym ATI stands for an All Interval Tetrachord, which is a group consisting of four pitch classes. Only two possibilities of ATIs exist in prime, or reduced form (as indicated in the table below). Both contain all six pitch interval classes (PICs), which are the measurement of possible intervals that can exist between any given pitch classes. By using trichords as his building blocks, Carter can continually forge new territory.

Primary Chord Combinations	"Residue" Secondary Chords
(0146) + (0146) or (0137) + (0137)	(0167), (0235), (0347)
(0146) + (0137)	(0134), (0268), (0358), (0369)

**Figure 1** Combinations of AITs and the residue tetrachords.

Pitches are interpolated as appropriate for the personality that each instrument is supposed to take on. Carter indicates in the prefatory note of the score that violin I is to exude the greatest amount of contrast and leadership, violin II to be the timekeeper, viola to create an expressive effect, and the cello to direct the temporal movement of the piece. To help illustrate this, Emmery reports that "...Carter assigns the intervals of a minor third and a perfect fifth to the first violin; the second violin is assigned a major third, major sixth, and a major seventh; the viola is characterized by the intervals of a tritone and a minor seventh; and the cello uses a perfect fourth and a minor sixth. In addition, he distributes the intervals of a minor and major second to all four instruments, in order to assure that interval pairings among the instruments will result in a formation of one or both AITs." (Emmery, 389) These intervals are all built from the starting point of PC0 (pitch-class zero), or "C." The inner voices of the quartet (violin II and viola) are presented with the most traditionally considered "dissonant" intervals.

The introduction begins with an urgent cello line that crescendos from *p* to *f* in the within the first measure, wasting no time in creating an atmosphere of extremes. This first section establishes the aforementioned "chords," or cells, that Carter will use for the remainder of the piece. The meter is  $\frac{3}{4}$  with a metronome marking of quarter note equals 105. Carter first stays within the bounds of standard rhythmic notation, perhaps to limit the variables and place more emphasis on outlining his burgeoning harmonic language. Because Carter is not obligated to repeat themes, he can include many musical events and harbingers for what is to come later in the piece within the roughly four-minute-long first movement, which itself is divided into three parts and begins with the tempo marking

*Allegro fantastico*. It is slightly faster than the introduction and immediately launches into a violin I solo which is indicated to occur until the end of the second part of the movement. The inner voices and cello start by primarily providing color contrasts to the piercing and rhythmically busy violin I line, and proceed to imitate and accompany the solo in fragments. The first use of blatant polyrhythm is in measure 45 with a triplet in the violin I and quintuplet (consisting of dotted eighths) in the violin II line. From here onward, the overall polyphonic texture becomes far denser. Later in the piece, Carter is then able to use subtractive techniques, using space to draw attention to specific motifs in the shape of cadenzas and solos of variable length. The first cadenza is seen at measure 135, marking out the third section of the first movement, *L'istesso tempo*. The viola's primary function is now to provide drama with assistance by the cello line, where there is a dotted arrow marking exactly which notes to *accelerando* into. A metric modulation at the beginning of section three and shortly after features a more relaxed pulse due to the slower metronome marking and the change in the unit of measurement a dotted eighth in measure 137 to a quarter note in measure 139. When the viola is featured, the entire ensemble dynamic shifts to a brooding and meandering emotion. Once the ear has acclimated to the harmonic language and internalized it somewhat, one may be able to focus more deeply on the characters being depicted in the music.

The second movement, *Presto scherzando*, befits its name. What ensues is a strict, percussive rhythmic pattern, returning the angularity of the quartet's sound. Dissonance becomes the main feature of the first section to set the backdrop for a heated dialogue between the instruments. As Tiina Koivisto writes, "Sections and junctures of the works are shaped by the relationship between two modes: rhythmic continuity/stability and

rhythmic discontinuity/ abrupt fluctuation.” (143) Carter is thusly able to create a sense of musical structure without blatant cadences or space between movements. In the second movement, Carter prioritizes the use of all notes in the 12-tone aggregate in a more efficient sense. For example, all 12 tones are written in measure 206, creating a formidable “wall of sound” effect. This is achieved by hocketing, as well as overlapping notes that have not been played before, within that measure. The argument seems to come to some sort of compromise at measure 252, shortly after the beginning of the cello cadenza. The violins I and II lock into a regular rhythmic pattern of eights and dotted eight triplets, respectively. The resulting cello line is violinistic in nature, due to the high tessitura, pushing the technical limitations of the instrument. Following the most flowing section of the cello line, Carter writes a series of fragmented afterthoughts and imitation between the instruments, giving each voice its own pocket to play in, lending to more of a percussive rather than a melodic effect.

The third movement begins with a mournful viola solo, adorned empathetically by the other instruments. While most chordal formations in the quartet are mixed intervals, one of the first tonal sonorities of the entire piece occurs in the second half of measure 297 with the appearance of a Gb minor 7 in its root position. The addition of a familiar harmony gives the movement a sense of arrival early on. The resultant discourse between the instruments is more cooperative in nature. Little reliance is placed on polyrhythms to create interest, as were used in the previous movements. Frequent contouring of intensity level, or dynamics, and octave displacement of the tetrachord assignments into high tessituras bring out certain pitches, especially in the violins, illustrating a person crying for help. This violin “cry” is expanded upon in the violin I cadenza. Here, the 16<sup>th</sup> note

G# B A C motif is repeated from the violin I solo at the outset of the first movement. A ghostly reentering of the muted viola and violin II establish a chilling atmosphere only achieved by disciplined bow technique from the performers who must be careful to not unknowingly accent the attack of the note.

The fourth movement, *Allegro*, begins with the violin I and II notes held over from the previous movement and an *accelerando* cello line that gives way to a carefree staccato eighth-note walking line while the violin wails above. Throughout the movement, Carter writes an extra line above or between staves and notates intervals which he asks for the quartet to “bring out”. A greater unity to the ensemble is created due to the blending of tone color, due to the *cantabile* marking in the violins. Moreover, the first instance of homorhythm in the piece is seen at measure 483 between violin I, violin II, and viola. A teasing violin II line comes in at measure 438 and culminates in a solo at measure 550. Carter’s most clearly delineated imitative polyphony in the piece starts at 534 with the passing of lines comprised of sixteenth notes combined with dotted sixteenth note figures. The *Accelerando molto* section at measure 563 makes way for the climax of the movement, and the piece as a whole, with the return of a dense texture, sustained high dynamic levels, and dissonances to create a sense of unease. Starting on measure 595, Carter indicates in the score the “resultant intervals” from the combination of notes, which seem to favor dissonances such as tritones and major 7ths. The conclusion section mimics the introduction with the same metronome marking and sparse texture. The last thoughts from the violins and viola take the shape of quintuplets, which give way to triplets. All voices produce sustained tones during the last 10 measures. Violin II has the final word with a pizzicato slapped against the fingerboard.

Carter reinvented notions of pitch, duration, and intensity in composing String Quartet No. 2. His departure from his serialist contemporaries results in an atonal piece that is arguably more effective in its depiction of the human condition. Carter still pays homage to the 12-tone system by creating his own language using all-interval tetrachords as his playing field. The use of polychords, metric modulation, chaotic polyphony, and dynamic contrasts give the piece a sense of urgency and turbidity. However, Carter makes the absence of such changes impactful in sections throughout the piece when the pulse is made steady and tone color becomes the main focus. Also, Carter gives each instrument the space to tell its story, delicately accompanied and unencumbered, emphasizing human individuality and self-expression.

Works Cited:

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