

# Composers Quartet

CONRAD WILSON

AN EVENING of Elliott Carter is an exhilarating affair when the Composers Quartet are responsible for it. This week they have been touring Scottish campuses with all three of Carter's string quartets. Yesterday, on an all-or-nothing basis which lost them an audience, they brought their trip-tych to Edinburgh University.

Carter, at 70, is America's most distinguished composer. His music, on the printed page, can look dauntingly complex — and sounds it, too, when maladroitly performed. But the Composers Quartet, who are not rattled by problems of tempo and rhythm, made these works seem, if not exactly easy, at least wonderfully assured, passionate and eventful.

In the Second Quartet, which opened the programme, the difficulties were hair-raising enough. The first bar of the presto scherzando was divided into 60 equal parts lasting a total of less than two seconds, with each instrument entering on different counts. The Third Quartet reputedly took the count up to 630, though in this work the players were tuned into a taped "click-track" which, through ear-plugs, told them where the beats fell.

Which all sounds very cerebral, though in fact the music hardly seemed cerebral at all. However tiring the rehearsals were — and the Third Quartet, divided into two independent duos, has been compared with the simultaneous projection of two intricate films — the result yesterday was a compelling interplay of lyrical, dramatic, imaginative music, richly wrought and sustained in the First Quartet for nearly 40 minutes without fatigue.

## EDINBURGH UNIVERSITY CONCERTS

TONIGHT AT 7.30 p.m.

### Composers String Quartet

String Quartet No. 2 — Elliott  
Carter  
String Quartet No. 3 — Elliott  
Carter  
String Quartet No. 1 — Elliott  
Carter

REID CONCERT HALL

Presented with the financial support of the Scottish Arts Council.

Tickets 80p (Students 40p) from the Edinburgh Bookshop and the Concert Office, Music Faculty and at the door.

# EDINBURGH UNIVERSITY CONCERTS

## 1978-79

THE COMPOSERS QUARTET  
Matthew Raimondi Anahid Ajemian  
Jean Dane Mark Shuman

Reid Concert Hall, Thursday 8 March 1979

## EDINBURGH UNIVERSITY CONCERTS

THURSDAY, 8th MARCH, 7.30  
p.m.

### Composers String Quartet

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Carter  
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8 March

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Students: 40p

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(with the financial support of the Scottish Arts Council)

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### ELLIOTT CARTER b. 1908

#### String Quartet No. 2 (1959)

Elliott Carter is one of the most imaginative composers working today—though his catalogue of works is not large, each piece has a remarkable individuality, and evolved from an entirely fresh and unique idea. His three string quartets are considered to be the most important additions to the quartet literature since those of Béla Bartók.

In this Second Quartet Carter's four instruments are distinctly separated, each with its own special expressive attitude and repertoire of musical ideas. The voices relate by imitating or opposing each other in a sort of highly animated four-way conversation.

The Introduction and Conclusion present, in brief quotes, the material of each instrument. The first movement, *Allegro fantastico*, is led by the first violin, whose whimsical, ornate music is imitated by the other three, each according to his own individual personality. In a similar way the second violin leads the *Presto scherzando*, and the *Andante espressivo* is the viola's idea. The final *Allegro* is partly led by the cello, who draws the others into one of his characteristic accelerations. In between these movements are cadenzas of instrumental confrontation or opposition: the viola's expressive, lamenting cadenza is met by explosions of what may be anger or ridicule by the other three; the cello, playing in his romantically free way, is confronted by insistence on strict time; the first violin carries on like a virtuoso, to be met by the silence of the others—who then begin the *Allegro* without even waiting for him to finish. Throughout the piece the second violin plays the special role of moderator, a sort of single-minded time-keeper whose fascinating assortment of pizzicato and arco notes mark the passing of regular time in spite of everything.

### ELLIOTT CARTER

#### String Quartet No. 3 (1971)

In the Third Quartet Carter seems almost more concerned with parts of the whole, interactions between instruments and pairs of instruments, than with total effect. He has divided the players into two very separate groups: Duo I (violin and cello) plays four movements in an expressively intense, impulsive style; Duo II (violin and viola) has six movements, and is required to

play them in strict time. These movements are not actually played whole, but rather are in segments, the length and sequence of which are calculated so that each kind of Duo I music is at some point played simultaneously with each of Duo II's, producing a constant interlacing of moods and materials. But it is certainly not necessary (or even possible!) to hear everything at once. The attention should be allowed to wander freely among the instruments and pairs, hearing them separately and in different combinations—each listener, in effect, 'making up' his own music from what he chooses to hear. The musical language is far advanced and extremely difficult, but this 'translation' of Carter's expression into the language of each listener's own personal experience is really the most important interaction in the piece.

Though not, strictly speaking, playing together, the two duos must proceed through the music properly synchronized. This presents a performance problem not effectively solved by conventional methods. The Composers Quartet uses a special 'click-track', a tape recording of the metronomic program of the piece, which gives each duo its separate and precisely calculated tempo information. This makes possible the spatial separation requested by the composer, and frees the players from the obligation of sacrificing musical interpretation and freedom in order to preserve unity.

### INTERVAL

### ELLIOTT CARTER

#### String Quartet No. 1 (1951)

The First Quartet is, as much as the two later ones, a masterpiece of design and order, a thing of beauty from the purely technical standpoint of its organization and construction. But it is also, of the three, perhaps the most openly and warmly human.

The *Fantasia*'s four main themes go through numerous combinations, transformations, disguises, and adventures before integrating into the rapid overlapping fragments—like a sort of high-speed chase—of the *Allegro Scorrevole*. After several interruptions the *Adagio* emerges, a dreamy movement of striking effect: the lower pair of instruments engages in an almost brutally impassioned recitative, while the violins isolate themselves purely above it all in a rarefied atmosphere of ineffable sweetness. The last movement, *Variations*, has several different themes, which become faster in their recurrences until each reaches its vanishing point. Here, as in the first movement, we find a rich variety of textures and counterpoints, and a very

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personal quality of expression. The solo cello music which opened the piece, after all these wonderful flights of imagination and fantasy, has now come around full circle to return as the last variation.

*(Edinburgh University acknowledges the financial assistance of the Scottish Arts Council)*

Next Concert: Thursday 19 April

THE EDINBURGH QUARTET

with KAREN VAUGHAN harp  
BARBARA GASKILL flute  
ALISON WALLER clarinet

BAX Harp Quintet

BEETHOVEN Serenade for flute, violin & viola  
RAVEL Introduction & Allegro

15 pence

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Edinburgh University Concerts 1978-79

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STRING QUARTET No. 2	ELLIOTT CARTER
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STRING QUARTET No. 1	ELLIOTT CARTER

in the Reid Concert Hall  
on Thursday 8 March at 7.30

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and the Concert Office, Music Faculty

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of the Scottish Arts Council

An introductory lecture (with illustrations  
by the Composers Quartet) will be given by  
Mr BAYAN NORTHCOTT on the day of the  
concert, at 5.15 p.m. in the Reid Concert Hall  
(Admission free)