

## Elliott Carter's American Narratives

### A Composer Exploring Complementary Views of America

Early in his career, Elliott Carter<sup>1</sup> wrote a work that revealed his preoccupation with the specifically American experience, a preoccupation that was to surface again and again also in his lectures and essays: the ballet *Pocahontas* (1938), inspired by the Native American saga of the Earth Mother. Carter's seeking, then and later, revolved around the question of what it meant to be an American open to the best of what Europe had to offer, yet not betraying one's heritage in favor of a simple Europhile attitude.

In an interview with Charles Rosen, Carter speaks about his choice of Hart Crane's epic poem of 1930, *The Bridge*, for his late-period symphonic work, *A Symphony of Three Orchestras*, and of his somewhat ambiguous feelings towards the work that he ultimately found "much too confused, although it had very many beautiful moments."<sup>2</sup> As he tells it, he found a way out of the predicament (his fascination with the poet and his topic versus his difficulties with the work itself) by adopting what he considered the main image shared by the poem and its creator's life—"the total idea of the movement from high to low registers and the blurring of various kinds of characters together." As Carter judges in retrospect, "The Symphony of Three Orchestras starts with a vision of New York harbor and a gull flying above it and ends with the suicide of Hart Crane himself: but that is the way I saw it *after* I had the conception of the music."<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup>For biographical sketches please see pp. 614-615 (Carter) and 604-606 (Perse and Crane).

<sup>2</sup>Crane's contemporary, William Carlos Williams, seems to concur with Carter with regard to both the musical qualities of the work and its problematic details. In his contribution to Alan Trachtenberg's *Hart Crane: A Collection of Critical Essays* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1982) Williams writes that "Crane wanted to be cosmic, I think. This is the reason he often took his eye from the word—and the word slipped away from him" and "The Bridge is a more advanced realization on Crane's part of this interplay of words and music—and a further demonstration of its dangers" (p. 33).

<sup>3</sup>Charles Rosen, "An Interview with Elliott Carter," in *The Musical Languages of Elliott Carter* (Washington, DC: Library of Congress, 1984), pp. 41-42.

As these words reveal, the literary analogs were not primary. The same is true, albeit to a lesser degree, in the case of the second poem on which Carter based a symphonic composition: Saint-John Perse's *Vents* (*Winds*), the epic poem that became the basis for his 1969 *Concerto for Orchestra*. Yet while in the case of Crane the actual poem was abandoned in favor of a more general portrayal of the poet, this did not occur with regard to *Vents*. Although here, too, the attraction to the poem arose out of the challenge to write music with a continually shifting focus, and although Carter admits that he neglected some of the poetic details that spoke less to him, the relationship between the musical and the literary work is of a much more intimate and direct kind here than in the case of Crane's poem. For the purpose of this study, I will thus focus specifically on the *Concerto for Orchestra*. However, before I do so, I wish to make an attempt to shed some light on why Carter chose just these two poems as the only two works of poetry that he decided to transform into absolute music.

Both *The Bridge* and *Vents* traverse time and space. Crane's quest takes the reader from Columbus to Brooklyn and from "infinity's dim marge" to the experience within an underground train in the depth of the tunnel; Perse's poem reaches back beyond the early conquerors of the New World to shamans in a timeless age, yet ends with a return to post-war Europe; it describes a large East-to-West sweep that many believe he felt originating in East Asia and drawing to a halt only on the outlying Pacific islands in the American West (thus coming practically full circle). Crane's imagery never leaves the poet's own consciousness, while Perse's is concerned with humankind at large—neither temporally nor geographically specified—of which he considers himself an integral part.

The major difference, and perhaps the most significant one when it comes to the creation of "an American epic," is the fact that Crane was American by birth, education, cultural background, daily surroundings, and native language, while Perse was born in central America, educated in France, a citizen of the world who spent many years in Asia and traveled extensively, and—while he spoke many languages, including very good English—wrote in French. The perspective these two dissimilar men give of what "America" stands for is what makes Carter's initial choice so interesting. Crane speaks as an insider, and while other American poets have portrayed vastly different experiences, critics like Yvor Winters insist that Crane's were in many regards representative of his generation of Americans. Perse, by contrast, experienced America aged 58-75, at a time of his life that Crane never reached, and as a result of political exile

rather than personal circumstances, events, and choices. His view thus represents a particularly perspicacious foreigner's insight into what "America" may mean as a symbol for non-natives.

What the two poems share is that they are both expansive, book-length epics. Hart Crane's *The Bridge* consists of a proem followed by eight sections; six of these are taken up by single, multiple-page poems,<sup>4</sup> the two others are collections of what appear as parallel narratives.<sup>5</sup> *The Bridge* explores the metaphor of its title by interpreting the arch as connecting a proud past with a hopeful future across the abyss of a sad and distressing present, as linking the visions of Whitman (whom Crane admired) and Poe (who seems to have haunted him somewhat; Poe's face appears to the narrator, reflected in the window of the train in "The Tunnel") across his own hoped-for insights.<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, the bridge functions as a multiple symbol of union. The American continent itself is likened to a bridge between two oceans, and Crane refers to himself not merely as one who is writing a poem entitled *The Bridge*, but one who is painstakingly building the edifice. Lee Edelman describes this as a "process of writing as rhetorical construction," which "supplants 'America' as the subject of the poem itself."<sup>7</sup> The rainbow as the aesthetic image of the symbolic arch appears as a signifier of hope for those who are in peril. Crane himself described his project in variations of phrases like "I'm on a synthesis of America and its structural identity now"<sup>8</sup> and "What I am really handling, you see, is the Myth of America."<sup>9</sup> Depending on the

<sup>4</sup>See sections I "Ave Maria," III "Cutty Sark," IV "Hatteras," VI "Quaker Hill," VII "The Tunnel," and VIII "Atlantis."

<sup>5</sup>Section II, entitled "Powhatan's Daughter," embraces five poems: "The Harbor Dawn," "Van Winkle," "The River," "The Dance," and "Indiana"; section V is called "Three Songs" and includes "Southern Cross," "National Winter Garden," and "Virginia."

<sup>6</sup>"Going backward in time as he goes westward in direction, the poet assumes the identities of Columbus, Rip van Winkle, railroad tramps, and derelict sailors to equate his restless quest with seekers of the past and present. The second part of *The Bridge* [...] dramatizes the poet's quest for a synthesis of the conflicting forces within America's present in an effort to create an apocalyptic vision of America's future." Samuel Hazo, *Hart Crane: An Introduction and Interpretation* (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1963), p.68

<sup>7</sup>Lee Edelman, *Transmemberment of Song: Hart Crane's Anatomies of Rhetoric and Desire* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1987), p. 180.

<sup>8</sup>In a letter to W. Underwood regarding announcement of *The Bridge*, cited in J.E. Unter-ecker, *Voyager: A life of Hart Crane* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1969), p. 19.

<sup>9</sup>From letters of 12/3/25 and 9/12/27 respectively; quoted in Warner Berthoff, *Hart Crane: A Re-introduction* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), p. 84.

level on which the work is read, one can summarize with R.W.B. Lewis that “the plot of *The Bridge* is the gradual permeation of an entire culture by the power of poetic vision,” and conclude that “nothing in [Crane’s] conception dictates the exact order or the exact number of its parts.”<sup>10</sup> One can follow the implied narrative literally and metaphorically as “a movement from dawn to midnight, or from past to future, or from earth to spirit, or from living death to resurrection,” aware of a bi-partite structure in which the “rediscovery of a lost paradise [...] and the consequent purgation of national guilt” is juxtaposed with “the reality of modern America [...] unaffected by the symbolic purgation enacted in [the first half].”<sup>11</sup> Or one can sense with Sherman Paul that “the space in which the poet journeys is an infinitely larger space than any traversed before—the space of consciousness, at once of self, world, and word, a new field of discovery. Here the heroic deed, the culturally redemptive act, the particularly modern exploit is performed. Crane called it the ‘conquest of consciousness,’ meaning also that the conquest is achieved by consciousness alone.”<sup>12</sup>

Crane’s epic poem about America has been compared to William Carlos Williams’s *In the American Grain* of 1925. However, *The Bridge* is ultimately a poem not about America but about Crane. This transmutation from the idealistic to the personal appears reversed in *Perse*.

<sup>10</sup>R.W.B. Lewis, *The Poetry of Hart Crane: A Critical Study* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1967), p. 382.

<sup>11</sup>R.W. Butterfield, *The Broken Arc: A Study of Hart Crane* (Edinburgh: Oliver & Boyd, 1969), pp. 213-214. Butterfield ends an excellent and largely appreciative close reading of each section of Crane’s poem summarizing that “the second half of *The Bridge* makes the first half virtually irrelevant. The protagonist has exchanged his roles. Where before he was modern America’s chosen representative, or at least its spokesman, now he is its outcast. For him, so convincingly, America is Hell, wherein he is trapped.” (p. 214) “Visionary yearning had been debased into greed for material gain. Cathay had become Eldorado, [...] God and Mammon had become inextricably comingled. The Word was made money. Thus, with the vision degraded, the way was open for that intense American disillusionment, and ‘barren tears’ were the only treasure the pioneer woman had brought back from her quest for the goal.” (p. 172)

<sup>12</sup>Sherman Paul, *Hart’s Bridge* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1972), p. 299. Paul’s interpretation is worth quoting in full. “Each episode presents directly rather than symbolizes a different kind of stage of consciousness. All contribute to the ‘world dimensional’ of the poem, the world in which the poet, after the fashion of Satan in the epigraph from *The Book of Job* that prefaces *The Bridge*, goes to and fro in the earth and up and down in it, enacting in his movement the doubleness and balance that distinguish so many elements of the poem. To follow him is to learn of heaven and hell, of vast continents and seas, of immense elemental energies [...] and processes [...], of evolutionary and human history. It is indeed to know the constituents of chaos—and cosmos.” (p. 300)

When Saint-John Perse came to live in the United States—a political dissenter deeply saddened by all he had lost: his country, his professional position, his home, and his unpublished manuscripts which the Nazi invaders destroyed—he soon expressed this experience in poems. Two of them, *Exil*, written on the (then) lonely shore of Long Beach Island in 1941, and *Poème à une dame étrangère* (Poem to a Foreign Lady), written in Washington in 1943, deal directly with the experience of finding oneself an alien in a foreign land. The three others are held together by their seemingly sequential titles: *Pluies*, *Neiges*, *Vents* (Rains, Snows, and Winds). *Pluies* originated during a 1942 trip to the South, near Savannah, Georgia; *Neiges* was written in New York City in 1944; and *Vents*, the longest of the “five America poems,” was completed in 1945, at a time when Perse had been reinstated in all his rights and privileges as a French citizen and a member of the Foreign Service and was thus able to regard his adopted country with different eyes.

*Vents* is a long and complex epic poem. Many succinct descriptions have been attached to it, including “epic of mankind” (Galand), “meditation on the fate of man and his civilization” (Sterling), “the Bible of shadows and freshness” (Vigée)<sup>13</sup>. The eminent French poet, Paul Claudel, in a long article about *Vents*, recognizes the poem as “a question of America [...] under northern latitudes, this vast spreading out of the long vertical continent which has come to be a countenance lending expression to the whole body—an expanse of humanity homogeneous as the sea.”<sup>14</sup>

The imagery the two poets use—in their titles and as driving metaphors—is contrasted in interesting ways. Crane noted that his poem, like the physical structure that gives it its name, “is begun from the two ends at once,” that once a bridge was completed, what were its beginnings become its ends. As one of his interpreters adds,

The poem is thus not the summary of linear progress towards a goal, sought with difficulty but finally and firmly grasped. It is an attempt to diagram but regions of heaven, hell and purgatory within the poet's own mind, to find the proper discipline necessary to achieve that perspective.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>13</sup>See Claude Vigée, *Honneur à Saint-John Perse* (Paris: Gallimard, 1965), pp. 345-352.

<sup>14</sup>Paul Claudel, “A Poem by Saint-John Perse,” *The Hudson Review* 4 (1951): 399.

<sup>15</sup>Vogler, who renders Crane's opinion in his introduction to an edition of the poem (*The Bridge: A Poem*, with commentaries by Waldo Frank and Thomas A. Vogler [New York: Liveright, 1970], p. xiv.), does not reveal where or when the poet made this statement.

Elliott Carter, in search of an American narrative that matched his own needs of expression, recognized the extraordinary musical and architectural qualities of Crane's poetic language but struggled with the "too confused" content. In basing his *Symphony of Three Orchestras* loosely on "the man and his work," he found a solution that allowed him to skirt an actual ekphrastic transformation. Perse's work, by contrast, he described as an "impassioned incantation," which touched him as "communicating a vision of the American continent being swept by the winds of change—winds that destroy and blow away the old, scattering seeds and bring in the climate for the new in an ever-variable series of cycles."<sup>16</sup> It is this poem, then, and the composer's musical ekphrasis of it, that I will explore in more detail here.

### Saint-John Perse's *Vents (Winds)*

*Vents* has been referred to as an "epic" more often than merely as a poem. While it draws in several respects—including structure and language, symbolism and themes—on previous poems, *Vents* is unique in its particular message, and is generally perceived as the climax of this period in Perse's literary life. René Galand sums up very beautifully what the word "winds" encompasses for Perse: "The wind is that power in man which will not allow him to be satisfied with what is. The wind is that force which lifts man and carries him forward, then leaves him with the memory of his lost greatness, with the dreams he dared to dream, with the vision which transcends all human wisdom. The wind is the voice of revelation speaking through the poet who has become its instrument. The function of the poet, in the society of men, is to welcome the voice which comes from the unknown, from the empty space which lies beyond the real, to heed the lightning which strikes on the frontiers of the soul and will guide mankind to the shores of divinity."<sup>17</sup>

Let me begin with some formal observations before I try to trace the various threads of the epic narrative. The rhythm of the poem and the internal impression of what I would like to call the "pulses of images and thoughts" are truly captivating—in Perse's native French, but also in

<sup>16</sup>Elliott Carter, from the introduction read on occasion of a special concert given by the New York Philharmonic under the direction of Pierre Boulez, on 5 February 1974. The full text of Carter's talk is reprinted in *Collected Essays and Lectures*, pp. 250-256; the quoted passage appears on p. 252.

<sup>17</sup>René Galand, *Saint-John Perse* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1972), pp. 106-107.

Hugh Chisholm's English translation. Metric patterns, never too obvious but always subtle, are wrapped into lines that are almost invariably too long for the width of a printed page. Hardly a line remains without a line break; in fact, two and three breaks within a poetic "line" are frequent, and even more appear occasionally. The impact created by these extensive clauses is not prose—not even the lyric prose poetry of Aloysius Bertrand or Léon-Paul Fargue. Particularly when read aloud, these comprehensive lines engender an almost physical evocation of breadth and vastness, of temporal as well as spatial depth: thoughts and images that need a deep long breath to be articulated, and an at least equally deep long breath for us who ponder all their implications.

Perse's patterning with these lines creates a next level of "rhythm." Passages in which two-line sentences in groups of three follow one another invite more poetic introspection from the reader than do passages with long, seemingly irregularly spaced clauses.

In terms of its overall layout, *Vents* consists of four sections (sometimes referred to as "books"); these are subdivided into seven, six, six, and seven cantos respectively.<sup>18</sup> The manifest symmetry is in part confirmed, in part counteracted by the patterning inside the individual cantos. Here, to begin the exploration, is a brief synopsis of the book-length poem that, in the edition of the Bollingen series, covers 103 pages of French text and 104 pages of English translation.<sup>19</sup>

### *Section I*

There are great winds blowing over the earth, we are told. They clean the air of all that is stale and old and thus making room for new growth. They are greeted with joy, although some of the relentless banishment they effect is by necessity violent. The winds reveal the presence of death and decay at the very heart of so-called civilization, among the poor and the rich, the disenfranchised and the powerful alike. They break up old forms, free the world from the deadening restraints of conventions that have become meaningless, and restore the fertility of the primeval chaos. They tear down the most respected institutions of the past, be they religious,

<sup>18</sup>The proportion of the parts is 7 : 6 : 6 : 7 cantos or 196 : 116 : 139 : 178 poetic lines. The individual cantos are of very different length, between 4 (IV-7) and 58 (I-6) poetic lines.

<sup>19</sup>For the following synopsis, I am much indebted to the excellent, very detailed summary that René Galand gives in his chapter "The Epic of Mankind." (René M. Galand, *Saint-John Perse*, pp. 88-107). Verbatim quotations from Perse are taken from Hugh Chisholm's English translation in *Saint-John Perse, Winds*, bilingual edition (New York: Pantheon Books, 1961, c1953).

political, or cultural. The winds of change have to deal with libraries, archives, and museums, those places filled with dust and ashes, hollow marble and bronze, sterile stone and metal. An age is drawing to a close—we are not told whether this age is measured in human terms or in those of a larger organism: that of the earth or the universe. Just as the life force has abandoned the dry straw of the past era, divinity has left the “heart of men” as well as “the great works of the spirit.” A new world, a new age will grow. The winds are associated with the spirit of renewal that led to the exploration of the New World, to the abundant energy in wild life and, by extension, to the orgiastic energy in our own suppressed animality. The winds also serve to divulge “new scriptures enclosed in the great schists of the future.” The future of humankind is linked in a chain of symbolic associations to the revelation of new sacred texts and the ultimate metamorphosis of humans themselves who, freed from the limits of past visions of humanity, rise to a higher state. The birth of a new poetry, written on leaves in which the winds rustle, is one manifestation of the sacred energy symbolized by the winds. The creation of a poem equals the ritual traditionally performed to assuage the cosmic forces and entice them to serve human endeavors. These powers are summoned. The Narrator, impersonating a kind of shaman, performs ritual acts that aim to evoke the regeneration brought about by a fierce storm, connecting it to the eternal cycle of life and death. Poetry is presented as having a mantic power that can unleash sudden explosions of forces. The shaman evokes Eâ, the Babylonian god of the watery chaos to which all things must revert, in the hope of performing a ritual exorcism that may seal the end of the past era and celebrate the dawn of a new time. The poet-shaman himself is not the initiator of new trends or the creator of new wisdom; he is a receptacle waiting to be filled with the gift of the immortals who alone can impart the highest knowledge. Three voices join the shaman in welcoming the wind: the voice of action (an action born of impatience and intolerance, asking for new leaders who are to come from among the previously powerless, and for charismatic prophets, “men nourished on new wine and as though transfixed by lightning”); the voice of the revolution against the city and all it stands for, the “golgotha of scrap iron and garbage” on which man is crucified; and the voice of poetry (the poetry of perpetual rebels and heretics who, singing from the hymnbook of the winds while the master of all songs, the god of the winds, “exults at the keyboard of the passions,” celebrates the passionate energies that will carry humankind to the shores of the future). The fertility of regenerated nature is linked to the cycles of history and, on a larger scale, to the evolution of life through the ages until the very end of time.



*Section II*

Whereas Section I is situated and dated very generally, without specifics regarding geographic location or historic moment, Section II is explicitly centered in America. The discovery of America serves as a metaphor for the gift of a new world, the birth of a new civilization, the renewal of fertility, the return of the sacred, and even for poetic revelation. Everything American is perceived as overflowing with the primal energy of life. The westward movement that brought us from the Old World to the New now continues on the American continent. Here, however, it is presently winter. Stone, metal, and iron speak of arrested life. In the light of this stasis that threatens the flow of time and energy, America seems strewn with relics of past civilizations and the dead remains of long-extinct life. Soon, however, other images promise the rise of new waters, the return of the divine fire, the revelation of new knowledge. The West and its promise are "the great bronze country" where the poet will question the Power, pleading that it respond to the human claim. However, at this point in the poet's journey his request is answered with nothing but silence. As a result he turns south, following the path of migrating birds. The decadence of the south symbolizes the ever-present menace of disintegration; once again, the relics of the past must be exorcised so as to allow a new future to arise. The advance of history is linked to the workings of erosion, the relentless flow of rivers, and the biblical Flood: all metaphors for the clearing away of what is not firmly rooted in order to make space for new creation. What ensues is a struggle between the old and decaying and the young, fragile, and regenerative. The forces of life triumph, and the symbols of metal, iron, and stone give way to swarming bees and a profusion of other animals. The conflict between the seduction of the South and the call of the West is presented as related to the relative strength of the spirit of life. The South appears fated to disease and sterility: the Wind no longer blows, the emissary of the god has failed in his divine mission, and dissolution and extinction hold sway. Recognizing this, the traveler awakens from his stupor, tears himself loose from the debilitating sweetness of the South, and joins the whistling of the wind again in westward direction. In the arid and masculine American West, presented as the spiritual antithesis of the luscious and feminine South, "the great cries awaken and smoke again on their shamans' beds." The rivers of time and change have resumed their flow, the eagle reappears at the crest of the wind, symbolizing strength and vision. The traveler is again presented as the poet-shaman who receives "texts in clear language" but is unable to preserve the purity of the message when transmitting it to others. He is a "man assailed by the god" but incapable of sustaining the assault of mantic revelation. The black Sun that is to allow us to decipher the "new writings" on the "layered pages of great schists" is not the disabling light of logic, but the illumination of poetry.

*Section III*

Insofar as America is a symbol for the extension of the human experience, there have been men connected with it whose quest was informed by the spirit of the wind; men who have striven for change, renewal, deeper knowledge, and poetic revelation. However, navigators, explorers, and conquistadors, while intent on widening the borders of the known world, were often motivated by greed and the craving for power. The "great Protesters," by contrast, "the dissenters and rebels," turned America from a land of exile into a haven of refuge, even for people not recognized as making history, people with strange minds who actually contribute essentially to make humankind what it is. After the protesters came the scientists. Their prophets, however, are no longer "the adventurers of the soul," the dreamers and visionaries, but the explorers of matter. The impending discovery of the secret of life itself fills humankind with excitement and fear. On the one hand, research scientists appear as the modern equivalent of the "blazers of trails westward"; on the other, they have unleashed forces they may prove powerless to control, and their science is far too often used to dehumanizing ends. These men are demonic in their hunger for knowledge. When humankind has reached this point in the journey and has become the "exterminator," the fulfillment of the quest for the force of life threatens to bring about the destruction of life. What, then, is the future for humankind? What is the next goal if "the West" has been reached? The poet asserts that this future has innumerable faces, that there is an infinite variety and plasticity to what humans can become. The men of science must yield to the men of poetry. These, the "adventurers of the soul," must interrogate the earth to know the "meaning of this great disorder." They must wait for an answer patiently, without despair. Their destiny will not be revealed with the tools of the disabling logic in which humans have mistakenly placed their trust. (Poet: "I shall liquidate you, logic!") The "clear eye" of reason is not capable of showing the way we have lost; this is reserved to the mysterious forces: with lightning, the sudden onslaught of the "nether god," the "black Sun from below," and the dark forces of instinct. The poet celebrates ritual ceremonies to ready himself to receive the sacred message. His ecstasy is that of mantic possession. He is "man infested with dream," "man overtaken by the divine infection." Through him the "piercing cry of the god" will one day be heard.

*Section IV*

The poet finds himself deserted by the god. The voice of the wind is quiet, the mantic power has abandoned him, he feels cut off from the cosmic flow of life, faced with "the immense emphasis of death, like a great yellow tree before us." The poet has run out of arguments to counter those who, ridiculing the human condition, seek consolation in illusion and

a regressive effort back to the sheltered world of infancy. At the same time, the burning intensity of our fascination with the monstrous unknown includes the danger of vanity. This obsession is particularly destructive as it pits men against women. Women are presented as the faithful preservers of human values, whereas men refuse this gift in their obsession with the message of the wind. Faced with the choice between the attraction of the beyond and the "ardent history of living creatures," man resumes once again his journey in pursuit of an answer to the riddle of humankind's fate. Is there any answer? And if so, will it be found in the "high nameless country, illuminated with horror and void of all sense"? Is it hidden in the Andes, or on the Pacific coast? The search westwards goes on, past the first solitary islands, the volcanic islands, past the "inviolable reefs," on to those islands where life has already become extinct, until there is nothing further west than the empty expanse of the ocean. The sequence suggests a powerful conclusion: humankind, too, may one day become extinct. At this, the traveler dramatically reverses his course. A scar-faced stranger, emerging from the depths of the earth, blocks his way and calls out to him, urging him to regain control of his horse, that symbol of the wild energy that might have driven him beyond the human realm and destroyed him. The traveler acquiesces and contemplates the return to his native land. He will travel by air, and his imagination blends the flashing green light on the plane's metal wing with the "gushing forth of green sap" and with the return from the arid outposts to the green land. Regeneration and rebirth are essential particularly for the land still ruled by Mars. France in 1945 is such a country: a civilization whose material goods have been destroyed and whose spiritual values have proven corrupt. The traveler returning from other lands appears as an emissary to his war-torn homeland. Men who go to the frontiers of the human do not return empty-handed: they bring back with them the message of the winds. France and its immediate past are likened to the decaying civilizations experienced before, which must be rejected so that life may be restored. Her biggest mistake was that she had renounced the spirit of the winds and instead relied on excessive prudence and superannuated wisdom. This lack of vision led to her destruction. New waters must clean her of the narcissistic complacency and the moral stagnation fostered by the attachment to decaying values, the "tartars" deposited by a culture that has reached senility. The song of the wind expresses the faith in the rebirth of humankind. Will the gods also return again and again? The poet is convinced that divine messengers will return to the daughters of the earth and give them children, a new race will be born, his poems will bear fruit among the inhabitants of another age, and his visionary cry will echo from land to land and from generation to generation.

## Structure and Texture, Themes and Voices

Neither the sections nor the cantos in *Vents* bear headings. This detail may be more consequential than it would seem at first. While various Perse scholars have attributed topics and titles to each segment, no doubt in an effort to orient their readers, they invariably do so at the risk of either overlooking the many cross-references, or having to include an inordinately large number of disclaimers and parenthetical remarks accounting for “material from another section” making an appearance at a moment when, according to the neatly subdividing heading, its turn has either not yet come or already passed. Such cases of reminiscence or “pre-echo”<sup>20</sup> may involve any or all levels of linguistic realization. We find the poet sometimes creating a direct parallelism of phrasal expression, at other times alluding to imagery or to concepts that are more exhaustively explored elsewhere. He may momentarily abandon a speech attitude for another “voice,” or adopt an historical or geographical perspective that we are elsewhere asked to associate with a whole set of parameters not presently in the focus. The result is a narrative that can be perceived as woven of four main strands, each of which is brought to the fore and particularly emphasized in one of the poem’s sections but subcutaneously present throughout the other three, surfacing repeatedly.

The strands can be described most succinctly using the focal points towards which the reader’s attention is drawn in each section of the poem: I The winds, II America, III Men, IV Human limitations. Interwoven but not identical with these strands are four quests: (1) the quest for movement and activity, expressed in the drive westward; (2) the quest for an advancement of history and the evolution of humankind; (3) the quest for ever-renewed, living wisdom versus accumulated, dead knowledge; (4) the quest for shamanic ecstasy and poetic revelation. Or, to use the words with which Carter himself summed up what he regarded as the “four main ideas” of the poem: “(a) the drying up of autumn, suggesting the dryness and death of a previous time—men of straw in a

<sup>20</sup>This term, interestingly, was introduced by Charles Rosen in an interview with Elliott Carter, in the context of discussing a compositional technique that I perceive as directly analogous to Perse’s poetic device. Rosen offers the following explanation: “It is like what a tape engineer would call ‘pre-echo’: in the middle of one kind of sound, you suddenly get something which will then turn out to be the basis of the next section.” From an interview with Elliott Carter produced for the BBC in April 1983; reprinted in Charles Rosen, *The Musical Languages of Elliott Carter* (Washington: Library of Congress, 1984), pp. 33-43: 40.

year of straw; (b) the swiftness and freshness of the winds that blow away the old and bring the new; (c) the exhortation of a shaman-poet calling for a rebirth and a destruction of worn-out things; and, finally, (d) the return of spring and life."<sup>21</sup> Furthermore, I distinguish four different voices in the complexly woven texture: (i) the narrative voice—which may or may not “tell” in the third person, since the narrator is clearly part of those men who face the winds; (ii) appellations and invocations—often discernible by verb forms expressive of “let ...,” “may ...,” “O thou ...,” etc.; (iii) quoted and inserted voices—usually specified only by punctuation, not by a suggestion of the speaker’s identity; (iv) the voice of timeless wisdom.

As even my brief synopsis will have shown, the four quests are not squarely matched to the four sections, although each of them is emphasized in one section more than in the other three. This overlaying is even more pronounced when it comes to the four “voices”: while each of the four quests has a “natural” voice (the quest for movement and activity is primarily expressed by the narrator, the quest to advance history and human evolution mainly by the quoted multiple voice, etc.), all four types of voices actually partake in the rich fabric that is each topic and each strand. With all due caution, one might try equaling the four kinds of voices to those of the narrator, the poet-shaman, the humans, and the god of the winds. Steven Winspur argues convincingly that Perse’s many-layered speech integrates “the ideal, authoritative, and living voices of those who are dead and living.”<sup>22</sup>

In addition to the overlay of these foursomes, there are patterns within many of the cantos: cadencing clauses that create emphases, structural parallelisms that create rhythms and large brackets, and symbolic clusters that can be likened to overarching modulations of ongoing “tones.”

<sup>21</sup>Elliott Carter, “Music and the Time Screen,” in *Collected Essays and Lectures*, pp. 262-280, quoted from p. 277.

<sup>22</sup>Steven Winspur, “*Vents et la rhétorique retournée de Saint-John Perse*,” in *St-John Perse: l’obscur naissance du langage* (Paris: Minard, 1987), pp. 218-219. Winspur’s view helps towards explaining the otherwise confusing number of quotation marks in Perse’s text. He believes that the poem’s narrator refers to quoted speeches, which in turn refer to another speaker outside of the poem, and calls the tone of the poem “a clarification of age-old messages rephrased in contemporary language.” Richard Sterling similarly speaks of “the living voice of inspiration, always enclosed in quotation marks,” and, commenting on Winspur, observes that “the living, authoritative language of the dead and the living that is described by the embedded speeches of the poem becomes confused in the reader’s mind with the language of the poem itself. Therefore, *Vents* is read as containing this living language.” (Richard L. Sterling, *The Prose Works of Saint-John Perse: Towards an Understanding of His Poetry* [New York: Peter Lang, 1994], pp. 98, 78-79.)

Let me give one fairly extensive example for patterns both internal and overarching; thereafter I will merely name the others. This example is of interest not least because Elliott Carter quotes extensive portions of it in the preface to his *Concerto for Orchestra*. (I mark internal parallelism with alternating right- and left-pointed single slashes preceding each component, and overarching parallels with double slashes.)

## I-1

1 //C'étaient /de très grands vents  
sur toutes faces de ce monde,  
2 /De très grands vents en liesse  
par le monde, \qui n'avaient d'aire ni  
de gîte,  
3 \Qui n'avaient garde ni mesure,  
et nous laissaient, hommes de paille,  
4 En l'an de paille sur leur erre...  
Ah! oui, /de très grands vents sur  
toutes faces de vivants!

5 \Flairant la pourpre, le cilice,  
\flairant l'ivoire et le tesson, \flairant  
le onde entier des choses,  
6 Et qui couraient à leurs offices  
sur nos plus grands versets d'athlètes,  
de poètes,  
7 //C'étaient de très grands vents en  
quête sur toutes pistes de ce monde,  
8 \Sur toutes choses périssables,  
\sur toutes choses saisissables, parmi  
le monde entier des choses [...]

## I-3

1 //C'étaient de très grandes forces  
en croissance sur toutes pistes de ce  
monde, et qui prenaient source plus  
haute qu'en nos chants, en lieu  
d'insulte et de discorde; [...]

## IV-6

1 ...//C'étaient /de très grands vents  
sur la terre des hommes—/de très  
grands vents à l'oeuvre parmi nous,

1 //These were /very great winds over  
all the faces of this world,  
2 /Very great winds rejoicing over the  
world, \having nor eyrie nor resting-  
place,  
3 \Having nor care nor caution, and  
leaving us, in their wake,  
4 Men of straw in the year of straw...  
Ah yes, /very great winds over all the  
faces of the living!

5 \Scenting out the purple, the  
haircloth, \scenting out the ivory and the  
potsherd, \scenting out the entire world  
of things,  
6 And hurrying to their labours along  
our greatest verses of athletes, of poets,  
7 //These were very great winds  
questing \over all the trails of this world,  
8 \Over all things perishable, \over all  
things graspable, throughout the entire  
world of things [...]

1 //These were very great forces  
increasing over all the trails of this  
world, rising from sources higher than  
our songs, from heights of insult and  
discord; [...]

1 ...//These were /very great winds  
over the land of men—/very great winds  
at work among us,

4 //C'étaient /de très grandes forces  
 au travail, sur la chaussée des hommes  
 —/de très grandes forces à la peine  
 5 Qui \nous tenaient hors de cou-  
 tume et \nous tenaient hors de saison,  
 /parmi les hommes coutumiers, /parmi  
 les hommes saisonniers,  
 6 Et sur la pierre sauvage du mal-  
 heur nous dépouillaient la terre ven-  
 dangée pour de nouvelles épousailles.

4 //These were /very great forces at  
 work on the causeway of men—/very  
 great forces in labour  
 5 \Holding us outside of custom and  
 \holding us outside of season, /among  
 men of custom, /among men of  
 season,  
 6 And on the savage stone of mis-  
 fortune stripping bare for us the land  
 that is vintaged for new nuptials.

Internal patterns like the ones shown above occur in many cantos and are too numerous to list. External patterning within each of the four sections is also frequent. In section I alone, the opening line of the second canto, “O vous que rafraîchit l’orage [...] Fraîcheur et gage de fraîcheur [...]” (O you, whom the storm refreshes [...] freshness and promise of freshness [...]) recurs not only four lines later in inverted order, but also in the two closing cantos of section I (see I-6: line 35 and I-7: line 31). Canto 6 begins by picking up the second-to-last line of canto 3, with “Ivre, plus ivre, disais-tu, d’avoir renié l’ivresse” (Drunken, the more drunken, you were saying, for denying drunkenness), cantos 5 and 7 both begin with the same appellation to “Eâ, dieu de l’abîme” (Eâ, god of the abyss), and cantos 4 and 7 both end with the same cadencing line “S’en aller! s’en aller! Parole de vivant!” (which Chisholm translates somewhat unfortunately as “Let us be gone, be gone! Cry of the living!”)<sup>23</sup>

That this cadencing line actually serves as a larger bracket becomes obvious as soon as one grasps the related motive behind “s’en aller!” and “se hâter!”: be off! and hurry! Both phrases are expressions of the quest for action. They are thus most characteristically found in section I but echo in sections II and IV.<sup>24</sup> Another verbal cadence epitomizing the force

<sup>23</sup>This translation has three problems. First, it seems a pity that Chisholm destroys the verbatim repetition that is so distinctive of Perse’s lyrical language. Second, by introducing the first-person-plural imperative, “let us,” he obfuscates for readers of the English translation the important parallel of “s’en aller, s’en aller” with “se hâter, se hâter,” which he renders in the second person imperative as “make haste, make haste.” Third, by unnecessarily choosing “cry” for parole, he creates a parallelism that does not exist in Perse’s French between “cry of the living”/“cry of the Prodigal” (cf. “parole de vivant”/“parole du Prodigal” [II-4:15]) and “cry of the King”/“piercing cry of the god” (“cri du Roy” [III-2:16], “le cri perçant du dieu” [III-6:24+31]. Italics mine.)

<sup>24</sup>Se hâter!/hurry! appears in I-2:5, I-6:39, I-6:44 and recurs in IV-5:39. S’en aller!/be off! is found in I-4:10, I-7:33, and taken up in II-4:15.

of the winds in section I is “Ah, yes, all things torn loose!”<sup>25</sup> Finally, a concluding line that is first heard in section I and then echoed in section II speaks of “the tone of a new modulation.”<sup>26</sup>

I will comment only briefly on the other three sections. A bridge erected with the help of another conspicuous word-repetition formula links the drive westward in section II with the impossibility of going yet further in section IV, stressing the underlying restlessness.<sup>27</sup> A formula associated with the evolution of humankind centers around the admonition that we have “so little time to be born to this instant.” This clause appears in two versions in section III; however, it has an echo in section IV and a “pre-echo” in section I.<sup>28</sup> A second cadence, also moored in section III but surfacing both before and after, reaffirms that “the poet is still with us.”<sup>29</sup> A third formula attached to the same topic, which speaks of “the causeway of men,” is heard through sections III and IV.<sup>30</sup> Finally, a cadence exclusive to section IV, about the prudent limits of the human search and its return to life, echoes with “if living is like this...”<sup>31</sup>

What I like to call “symbolic clusters”—words that, in the context of this particular poem, are closely related in terms of their expressive direction—create another cross-structural play. Let me limit myself to three such collections of words to show what I mean. The poem’s most prominent motif, expressed as the drive westward, the quest for knowledge, and the power of the winds insofar as it brings renewal, is captured

<sup>25</sup>See I-6:3 and I-6:31 “Ah! oui, toutes choses descellées!”

<sup>26</sup>See I-6:44 “n’y a-t-il pas pour nous le ton d’une modulation nouvelle?” II-6:4 “Qu’en m’enseigne le ton d’une modulation nouvelle!”

<sup>27</sup>See “plus loin, plus haut” II-2:1 (2x), “plus bas, plus bas” II-3:3, “plus loin! plus loin!” IV-2:17, “plus bas, plus bas” IV-2:18, “plus bas, plus bas!” IV-2:24, “plus vite, plus vite!” IV-2:25, “plus loin, plus loin” IV-2:31+32, “et au delà” IV-2:33+34, “et au delà, et au delà” IV-2:35+36

<sup>28</sup>See I-2:6 “Et vous avez si peu de temps à naître à cet instant”; III-6:5 “Et vous *aviez* si peu de temps à naître à cet instant”; III-6:27 “Et *nous avons* si peu de temps à naître à cet instant”; IV-5:49 “Et vous *aviez* si peu de temps à naître à cet instant” (italics mine).

<sup>29</sup>“Et le poète encore est avec nous” appears, with small variations, in I-7:29, III-6:7, III-6:15, III-6:27, III-6:30, and IV-5:46.

<sup>30</sup>See “la chaussée des hommes” in III-4:30, III-5:7, III-6:7, IV-2:1, IV-5:1, IV-6:4, IV-6:24.

<sup>31</sup>See “si vivre est tel, qu’en n’en médise!” (If living is like this, let it not be slandered! IV-1:4);, “si vivre est tel, qu’on s’en saisisse!” (If living is like this, let us seize upon it! IV-1:7); “si vivre est tel, si vivre est tel, nous faudra-t-il chercher plus bas faces nouvelles?” (If living is like this, if living is like this, will we have to seek new faces further down? IV-2:4).



in five words. These occur, either directly or in a derived form, with conspicuous frequency throughout the entire poem: west, dream, fresh, new, and drunk.<sup>32</sup> Some of the combinations are:

fresh - rites - poem - the living (I-2), refreshed with a dream of promises (I-3), torn loose - new men - dreamed dreams - drunk - new wine (I-6), west - freshness (I-7), western sky - signs - new solemnities (I-7), new lands - freshness (II-1), flashes of gold in the West (II-4), freshness newly risen from the sea (III-1), sacred freshness of offertory jars (III-5).

The reverse side of the same process, the shedding of the dead and old and fossilized, plays on the words dead, seas/waters, silence, and sun:

dead seas - aberrations - infested (I-3), dust, deposits, dead of too much noon - sterility - crumbling, scaling, stale - faeces, slime, dreg (I-4), dead seasons (I-5, II-3), withdrawal - silence - dead waters (I-6), silence of knowledge (II 2), sea - its monster (II 3), black sun from below (III-5), sun of the dead (IV-4).

Humankind's troubled relationship to the god(s) is expressed in combinations that link man with images of contamination and onslaught:

one does not visit the bed of the gods without infection (II-3), a man of language grappling with the ambush of his god (II-4), man assailed by the god (II-6), divine infection (III-6).

Finally, there is one image that brackets the entire poem in such a way as to suggest something akin to a musical introduction and coda. Perhaps befittingly, it is mythically situated even beyond the winds themselves. This is the image of the tree. In the initial canto, the dying age is compared to a tree, and this symbolism spawns a sequence of related images, all of them highlighting facets of the doom of an era: a great tree clothed in the "rags and remnants of last winter," a "magical tree" wearing icons and fetishes, the "tree of language" fallen into its dotage, etc.

In section IV, the symbol of the tree recurs: this time it signifies the continuity of life, but also its cyclical nature, its periodic interruptions and repetitions. As other symbols in the poem suggest and the appearance of the "cosmic tree" (or shamanic tree, as Sterling calls it) at the very beginning and the very end underscores, humankind's progress through

<sup>32</sup>Sterling, while interpreting *Perse* in the right direction, may be trying to narrow him down too much when he asserts that "drunk" should here be understood particularly with the nuance of "drunk in the freedom of the wind." (Sterling, *The Prose Works of Saint-John Perse*, p. 94)

history is cyclical: war alternates with peace, death with rebirth, periods of spiritual barrenness with mantic revelation. In the very brief final canto, the infinitely old tree described at the beginning of the poem has survived the assault of the wind, although now barren of leaves. Meanwhile, another tree is “already rising from the great subterranean Indies, / With its magnetic leaf and its burden of new fruits.” The overindulging old world and its sterile wisdom are being superseded by a new world in which revelation is once again honored.

The fact that the first canto of section I and the sixth and seventh cantos of section IV frame the remainder of the epic poem, both with regard to the recurring images and formulas and in that they constitute a large preview–summary bracket, can be understood in both a musical and a spiritual way. With regard to the spiritual significance of this correspondence of beginning and end, many Perse scholars have pointed to the poet’s faith in the cyclic regeneration of the life force, and argued that a device that seems to join the end back to the beginning is to be understood as a symbol for all things cyclical. From a musical perspective, the same features can be interpreted as introduction and coda; these are the terms many literary critics have attached to these segments of the poem.

### **Elliott Carter’s *Concerto for Orchestra***

Like Saint-John Perse’s epic poem *Vents*, Elliott Carter’s *Concerto for Orchestra* follows several different topics throughout. The music’s individual streams blend and separate, interlock and contrast with one another in the course of this through-composed symphonic composition.

I agree with David Schiff when he says that, while the swirling, cyclonic texture of the piece is strongly evocative of all manners of winds, “the Concerto is not a tone poem.” However, I suspect that our agreement may be fed by very dissimilar arguments. I concur with Schiff who stresses that “*Vents* suggested colours and gestures from which Carter abstracted a grand fresco of musical motion.” In his own description of his piece, Carter claims that “[m]any of the poem’s images—winds, the rustling of dry straw, clouds of flying insects—inspired the remarkably evocative sonic textures.” This sounds very much like a support of the most direct manner of tone painting. At the same time, I feel Schiff may have missed something very important in Perse’s poem when he states that “the many possible interpretations that the Concerto can sustain all stem from its

structure; here Carter broke decisively from Saint-John Perse's poem."<sup>33</sup> Indeed, I find myself fighting the temptation to frame my description of Carter's composition in a rondo structure whose refrain would sing "As in Perse's poem, Carter's Concerto ..." But let me begin by describing Carter's work in purely musical terms before I come to what I regard as striking congruencies between the two works of art.

Carter's *Concerto for Orchestra* is laid out in four movements. These movements are distinguished *least* in the way we are most likely to expect, i.e. in terms of temporal succession. They are, however, very much differentiated in many other respects, above all with regard to instrumentation and tessitura, texture, harmony, rhythmic character, expression, agogic development, and distribution of its material over the entire composition. Here is an overview:

1 *Instrumentation and tessitura:*

Corresponding with the four "movements," the orchestral body is divided into four groups, creating an effect reminiscent of Debussy. They represent the tessituras of soprano, alto, tenor, and bass, in such a way that Carter's movements I II III IV correspond with the sequence T S B A. If we consider that soprano and bass are the two exposed, contrasting tessituras which, adjacent to one another, are surrounded by the two less extreme registers, it becomes possible to see how the order of the four registral groups, although in no way related to traditional notions connected with the tempo and character indications of symphonic movements, follow a symmetrical pattern similar to a common sequence like Moderato – Presto – Adagio – Allegretto.

The individual instrumental colors that contribute to each register are carefully chosen also with regard to the percussion that characterizes each group.

- The tenor register of movement I combines celli and bassoons with piano, harp, and wooden percussion (marimba, xylophone, woodblocks, temple blocks, slap stick, maracas, etc.)
- The soprano register of movement II is represented by violins, flutes, and clarinets complemented by metallic percussion (cymbals, triangles)
- The bass register of movement III is dominated by double basses, trombones, and tuba, supported by timpani and the bass drum.
- The alto register of movement IV combines violas with oboes, trumpets, and horns, and with snare drums for an idiosyncratic color.

The division into groups is not, however, mechanically observed. Strings sometimes help to flesh out the sound of another contingent, and oboes and horns adapt their colors to more than their home group. Carter himself described his technique as "an oscillating, wavelike fading in and out of

<sup>33</sup>For all quotations see David Schiff, *The Music of Elliott Carter* (London: Eulenburg Books, 1983), p. 246.

different sonorities and characters, making polyrhythms out of a whole system of music—a technique which I wanted to carry out in a full-length piece.”<sup>34</sup>

2 *Harmony and expressive color:*

The “movements” and their respective timbral/registral representatives are further distinguished by tonal material. Already when writing his Piano Concerto (1963-65), Carter had abandoned his previous harmonic language based on intervals for a chordally based tonal idiom. Part of the reasons, or so several Carter scholars seem to believe, is purely mathematical. While intervallic harmony remains limited to the eleven interval-classes, chordal organization has at its disposition a much larger resource of differentiated building-blocks: 12 three-note chords (and their nine-note complements), 29 four-note chords (and their eight-note complements), 38 five-note chords (and their seven-note complements), and 50 six-note chords.<sup>35</sup> This consistent enlargement of the harmonic idiom marks, in Schiff’s words, “the most important enrichment of harmony since Schoenberg. In these works the harmonies are not merely systematically consistent, they are imaginatively compelling. The listener is often surprised to find that, despite the cloud-like textures of the music, its pitch-sense and harmonic direction are forcefully palpable.”<sup>36</sup>

For the four “movements” of his *Concerto for Orchestra*, Carter’s chart lists the following harmonic building-blocks. To begin with, there are 3 intervals and 3 three-note chords each.<sup>37</sup> Carter’s plan, later varied in one detail, called for complementing these with 17 characteristic four- and five-note chords for movement I, 18 for II, 15 for III, and 17 for IV. What he does not reveal but close scrutiny shows: the specific chords Carter chose for each movement are strikingly different on the scale from highly chromatic to rather diatonic. Movement I includes 6 chords with chromatic three-note clusters, movement II only 4; movement III absorbs the only five-note cluster, 3 of the 4 possible four-note clusters, as well as 8 three-note clusters, whereas the four-note chords in movement IV include no cluster at all and the five-note chords only

<sup>34</sup>Elliott Carter, “On Saint-John Perse and the Concerto for Orchestra,” *Collected Essays and Lectures*, p. 251.

<sup>35</sup>Carter made his own computation of all possible chords in the chromatic scale around the time of his Piano Concerto. His list differs only in its descriptive numbering from the more commonly used one compiled and discussed in great detail by Allan Forte in *The Structure of Atonal Music* (New Haven: Harvard University Press, 1973), pp. 1-21.

<sup>36</sup>Schiff, *The Music of Elliott Carter*, p. 242.

<sup>37</sup>Given that avoidance of the octave leaves only eleven different intervals, one had to be used twice. Carter chooses: I = m6, M6, M7; II = M3, P5, m7; III = m7 [sic], m9, P4, IV = M2, m3, d5. As for the distribution of the twelve possible three-note chords, here is a listing, using Carter’s numbers followed by pc description: I = 1 [048], 9 [015], 11 [014]; II = 5 [027], 3 [024], 8 [026]; III = 4 [012], 12 [013], 6 [037]; IV = 2 [036], 7 [016], 10 [025].

a single one.<sup>38</sup> The variance in dissonance is further corroborated through intervals: the two chromatic intervals are found in movements I (major seventh) and III (minor ninth).<sup>39</sup> It is intriguing to observe how the slight differences in the numbers of harmonic building-blocks that is employed for each movement —6+17 : 6+18 : 6+15 : 6+17— give rise to a symmetrical pattern related to that created through instrumentation; the high-pitched second movement exhibits the greatest degree of harmonic variety, whereas the bass-register third movement has the lowest number of generically different tonal components. In turn, Carter gives the bass-register “Andante” movement the greatest chromatic intensity, a considerably lighter load to the soprano-register “Presto,” and the most diatonic vocabulary of all to the final movement.

<sup>38</sup>The plan, apparent from the composer's explicitly spelled-out notes at the margins of his hand-written chart, allots 7 four- + 10 five-note chords to movement I, 8 four- + 10 five-note chords to II, 6 four- + 9 five-note chords to III, and 8 four- + 9 five-note chords to IV. Strangely enough, the compositional process seems to have led to a minutely changed result: movement I has ended up with not 10 but only 9 five-note chords, and the extra chord was absorbed into movement IV. This small emendation (visible in Carter's chart right next to his margin notes which claim differently!) ruin the interesting symmetrical layout of harmonic densities. Since Carter's stated plan corresponds so beautifully with all his other decisions for the design of this piece, I take it as more relevant than the perhaps pragmatically motivated reallocation of the one five-note chord. Here are the details, in the order in which the composer lists them in his hand-written chart: Four-note chords:

I = 10 [0156], 8 [0145], 13 [0345], 15 [0158], 20 [0125], 24 [0348], 25 [0237];  
 II = 2 [0167], 4 [0257], 6 [0127], 11 [0246], 19 [0157], 27 [0247], 12 [0268], 16 [0248];  
 III = 1 [0123], 9 [0134], 17 [0124], 21 [0147], 22 [0126], 26 [0135];  
 IV = 3 [0235], 5 [0369], 7 [0136], 18 [0146], 23 [0137], 28 [0236], 29 [0258], 14 [0358].  
 (Note that the two all-interval chords, numbers 18 and 23 in Carter's numbering system, both occur in movement IV.) Five-note chords:  
 I = 3 [03458], 8 [01478], 10 [01348], 18 [02347], 21 [01458], 26 [02458], 27 [01256], 29 [01258], 35 [01457];  
 II = 4 [01268], 7 [02479], 9 [02469], 23 [01358], 6 [02468], 25 [02357], 28 [01257], 30 [01267], 34 [01378], 37 [01468];  
 III = 1 [01234], 2 [02346], 11 [01235], 13 [01237], 15 [01246], 16 [01247], 14 [01245], 17 [01248], 20 [01347];  
 IV = 5 [01356], 12 [01236], 19 [01346], 22 [01357], 24 [02358], 31 [01367], 32 [01368], 33 [01369], 36 [02368], 38 [01479].

<sup>39</sup>I = 2 three-note clusters in four-note chords (chords 13 [0345] and 20 [0125]) + 4 three-note clusters in five-note chords (chords 3 [03458], 18 [02347], 27 [01256], 29 [01258]);  
 II = 1 three-note cluster in four-note chords (chord 6 [0127]) + 3 three-note clusters in five-note chords (chords [01268], 28 [01257], 30 [01267]);  
 III = 1 five-note cluster (five-note chord 1 [01234]), + 3 four-note clusters (four-note chord 1 [0123], five-note chords 11 [01235] and 13 [01237]), + 1 three-note cluster in three-note chord 4 [012]; 2 three-note clusters in four-note chords (chords 17 [0124] and 22 [0126]), + 5 three-note clusters in five-note chords (chords 2 [02346], 15 [01246], 16 [01247], 14 [01245], and 17 [01248]);  
 IV = 1 cluster only, a four-note cluster in the five-note-chord 12 [01236].

3 *Texture and distribution of “movements” over the composition:*

The four “movements” with their assigned instrumental groups and individual harmonic vocabulary are not juxtaposed with one another sequentially but polyphonically, as it were. Carter had worked for some time prior to this composition with permeable boundaries between the segments of his compositions. In several of his works (see, e.g., the *Variations for Orchestra*), events normally expected to occur sequentially enter with considerable overlap of a unit over the preceding one; in other cases, individual parts or instruments deny participation in the contrast between sections in which everybody else engages. (Such is the case, for instance, with the second violin in the Second String Quartet, which simply “refuses” to participate in the overall pattern.)

Here in the *Concerto for Orchestra*, each of the “movements” is split into fragments of very different size which appear interlocked and partially superimposed with those of another “movement.” When Carter, in his above-mentioned chart, notes “Mvt. I: 24-140” (the printed score,<sup>40</sup> which differs in several details, has “mm. 16-141”), he immediately adds a line that reads: “During this movement, materials from other movement [*sic*] are heard briefly:” (and there follows a meticulous list of all the measures that witness even the briefest surfacing of another instrumental body and its parameters). The reassurance a musician might gain from a glance at the score’s “Foreword” and its easy matching of compositional segments with bar numbers is thus deceptive. There we are led to believe that the layout is straightforward: Introduction: mm. 1-15, Movement I: mm. 16-141, Movement II: mm. 142-286, Movement III: mm. 287-419, Movement IV: mm. 420-517, Coda: mm. 518-600.

The full truth, however, is both more complicated and more exciting. (Please refer to the illustration below for a graphic visualization of the complex weaving.) Apart from the fifteen-bar introduction and several portions of the coda, there are three more points at which all four instrument groups join to a full orchestral sound. These climactic moments are spaced over the duration of the composition in highly significant ways that suggest, by virtue of the numerical sequence their corresponding bar numbers express, a kind of exponential growth. The “merger points” occur at mm. 141, 284, and 488 respectively. The first of these climactic unifications spans 1 bar (m. 141), the second 3 bars (mm. 284-286), and the third 7 bars (mm. 488-494). Furthermore, the entries of each “movement’s” significant fragments (significant not necessarily because of length, but owing to the expressive impact created) are spaced across the composition in a polyrhythmic pattern of strict lawfulness. The soprano section of movement II has ten regularly spaced entries over nine in the alto-group (mvt. IV), eight in the tenor group (mvt. I), and seven in the bass group (mvt. III). The spacing corresponds with real-time duration, not numbers of bars: a daunting task whose laboriousness has left no

<sup>40</sup>New York/London: Associated Music Publishers, 1972.



trace in the perfectly smooth transition from one compositional component to the other. (For a visual aid of this highly organized randomness of large-scale polyrhythm, see the four brackets in the graphic illustration above.)

4 *Rhythm and agogic development:*

The movements are further distinguished by what Carter, in his two-page handwritten chart that lists all the relevant data for the organization of the composition, marks “speed”: their agogic character. Here are Carter’s words, complemented with my brief explanations:

I “Each ritard starts from a faster point.” Each phrase in the “movement-I” segments is conceived as a written-out ritardando, beginning with faster note values leading to ever slower ones. In consecutive phrases, the beginning is ever faster, with the slow-down following consistently each time. Correspondingly in III: “Each accelerando starts from a slower point.” (See the short, repetitive arrows in my illustration.)

II “Constant ritardando: grows slower from beginning to end of work,” and correspondingly IV: “Constant acceleration: grows faster from beginning to end of work.” These two overall developments of the underlying pulse form cross paths towards the center of the composition (mm. 350-353) where both momentarily reach the same pulse. During the segment where “movement II” is dominant (mm. 142-283), the tempo is thus between lively and fairly swift; subsequent sprinkles of the material sound ever slower. By contrast, “movement IV,” which begins calmly, has gained fantastic momentum by the time the corresponding group comes to dominate the texture from m. 420 onwards, and continues to increase in speed. In this subtle respect, Carter thus enhances the impression given in his symmetrical patterning of the registral groups: by the time the final “movement” takes over control, it is in fact a fast movement. (See the continuous arrows in my illustration.)

As the discussion of the four different aspects has shown, Carter’s *Concerto for Orchestra* posits four instrumental groups, four aggregates of harmonic material, four large-scale rhythms, and four characteristic developments of rhythm, pulse, and tempo. The cross-matching of these parameters is ingenious and leads to more combinations, miraculously without blurring the relatively accessible color distinctions. The soprano group is the most active in terms of polyrhythmic frequency but the most passive in its protracted rallentando. By contrast, the bass group seems the most reserved insofar as it has the fewest number of significant entries; at the same time, each of its phrases is forward-moving in itself, thus showing an eagerness unmatched by any other group. And while the large-scale polyrhythm divides the real-time performance on four overlapping levels into segments of absolutely matched durations that have a certain inorganic perfection, the division by climactic “merger” points,



separated by exponentially growing distances but also growing exponentially in extension, superimposes another, organic reality.

The work begins with an introduction in which a twelve-tone chord is presented in four groups (or chords) of three notes. Each of these three-note aggregates will later serve as a "basis" of one of the movements. At the end of the introduction, after what the composer himself described as "a clamorous outburst" (still based on the combination of all materials), three of the movements fade momentarily into the background and allow the material and instruments of the first movement to dominate. Corresponding with the introduction, the *Concerto for Orchestra* ends with a multi-layered coda (from m. 532) in which the four sets of materials alternate rapidly. Finally, fewer and fewer notes of the characteristic chords of each "movement" are heard, until the work finally dies away as wind does when it moves to other areas.

### Summary: Carter's Modes of Transmedializing Perse

When speaking about his relationship to Perse's poem *Vents*,<sup>41</sup> Carter confessed that "[i]n particular, the rediscovery of freshness among the sources of language is something I have hoped for"; this "led me to see in the poem [...] many patterns of thought, feeling, and poetic expression which gave direction to my piece."<sup>42</sup> Linking his musical structures to the four ideas distinguished in Perse's poem, he states more specifically:

These ideas are brought together in many different contexts, blended and mixed as the poet constantly stresses the motions of the wind. The music, too, has four main characters, and while hints of all four are being referred to constantly, the concerto picks out one facet after another to dwell on at some length, subordinating the others. Thus, while there can be said to be four movements, these are almost constantly heard in combination.<sup>43</sup>

<sup>41</sup>Introduction to the New York Philharmonic/Pierre Boulez performance of the *Concerto for Orchestra*, in *Collected Essays and Lectures*, pp. 250-256.

<sup>42</sup>David Schiff, *The Music of Elliott Carter*, p. 251.

<sup>43</sup>Carter, "Music and the Time Screen," p. 277. He goes on to match music and poetic imagery: "the celli, combined with harp, piano, wood percussion, and middle-register winds, are related to the autumnal rattling of pods and straw; the violins with flutes and metallic percussion, to the freshness of the wind; the basses, combined with tuba, timpani, and sometimes trombones, to the poet's invocations; and the violas, trumpets, upper-middle winds, and snare-drums, to the awakening."

As my juxtaposition of the analyses of Perse's poem and Carter's composition have shown, the *Concerto for Orchestra* is a particularly interesting example of musical ekphrasis. The fact that Carter claims, in an interview with Charles Rosen, that the poem came to his attention only *after* he had had the idea of "attempting to write a piece in which there would be a continually shifting focus on all the members of the orchestra"<sup>44</sup> is in no way contradictory here, since the composer then proceeded to create a work with the most astonishing array of transmedializations. Here is a summary of just the most striking relationships:

- On the most fundamental level, Perse's four sections can, of course, be recognized in Carter's four movements.
- The poet's "musical" devices of introduction and coda recur as introduction and coda in Carter's composition (where they are paired with lines from exactly those cantos).
- The twelve-tone chord of introduction and coda that encompasses all that will develop within the *Concerto*—as a composite of the four significant three-note chords—can be read as a musical counterpart to the image, appearing in Perse's introduction and coda, of the Cosmic Tree: all-encompassing, endowed with shamanic powers, symbolic of the cycles of death and rebirth. (One could even go so far as to see a correspondence between Perse's "tree of languages" and what turns out to be Carter's root chord of all tonal "vocabulary" in the composition.)
- The four "voices" in which the poem has been shown to speak correspond with the four "voices" of the orchestra as Carter has divided it: tenor register, soprano, bass, and alto.
- Perse's four narrative strands (or "four ideas" according to Carter) as well as the poem's four quests—foursomes that are to a degree independent of the four poetic sections—have a musical analog of the most beautifully subtle nature in the four different tonal vocabularies used and the four different kinds of rhythmic and agogic impulse that characterize each material.

<sup>44</sup>"An Interview with Elliott Carter," in Charles Rosen, *The Musical Languages of Elliott Carter*, p. 42.