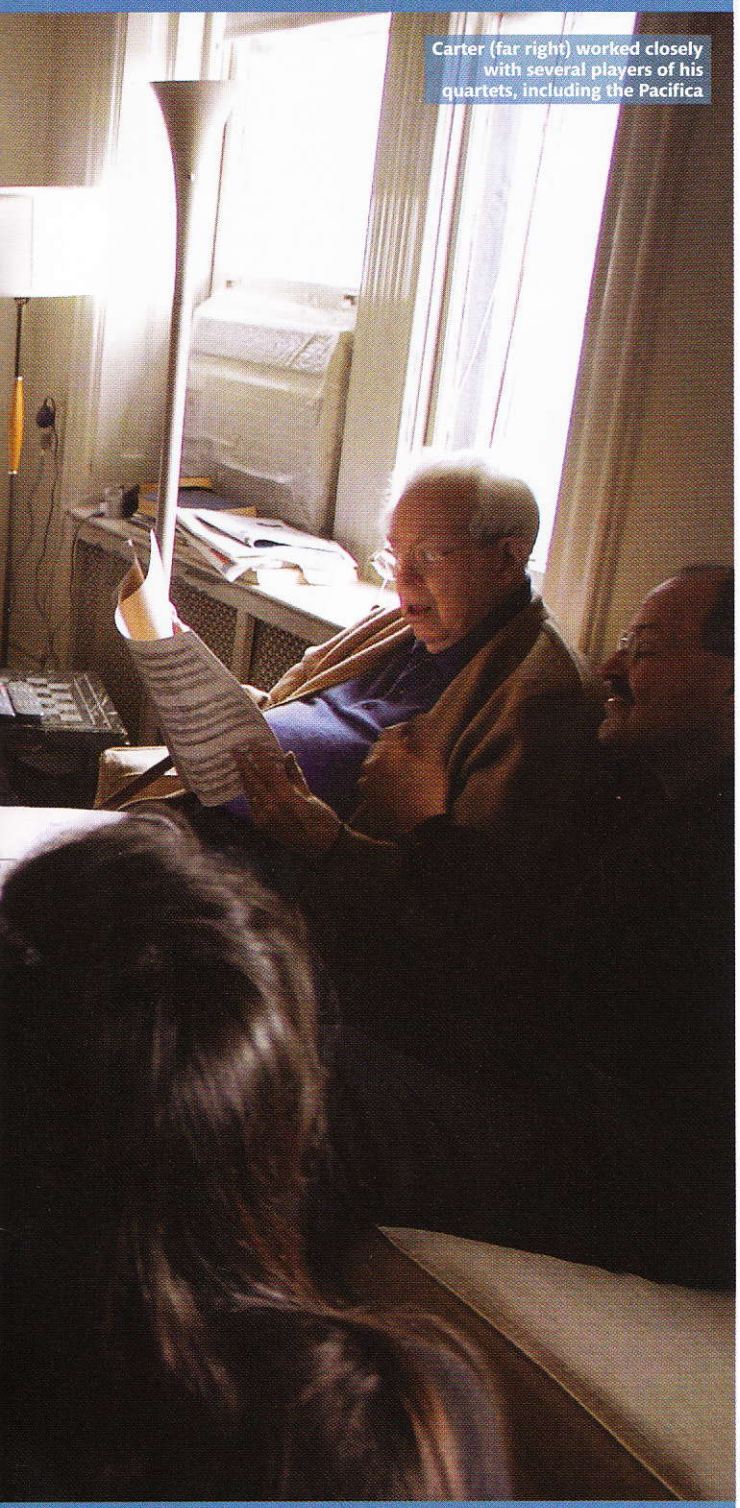
PROFOUND COMPLEXITIES

The late Elliott Carter's five quartets are classics of 20th-century string repertoire. Players tell **DAVID KETTLE** how they have dealt with the US composer's fascinating challenges



Carter (far right) worked closely with several players of his quartets, including the Pacifica

ALLEN COHEN

'JUST TO PUT IT OUT THERE, THIS MUSIC IS really, really hard!' That's Masumi Per Rostad's view on Elliott Carter's string quartets. And he should know: as the Pacifica Quartet's violist, he's played all five of them as a cycle numerous times. The Pacifica's second violinist Sibbi Bernhardsson agrees: 'The music is extremely difficult to learn, but it's so well written and logical, it makes sense.'

The Pacifica players are relative newcomers to Carter's music, though – they played their first cycle in 2003. Violist Samuel Rhodes, soon to retire from the Juilliard Quartet, has also played all five of the quartets, and took his first steps into Carter way back in 1973. 'The demands are formidable,' he confirms. 'It takes a little while to break that barrier. But once you do, you begin to see the ideas behind it, and start making them more vivid. That's when you really get into the music.'

There's no denying that this is tough music – technically, musically and emotionally. In his later works, the veteran US composer – who died in November 2012 at the remarkable age of 103 – was renowned for pushing players to their limits in some of the most powerfully intellectual pieces ever written, full of multiple-stops, irrational rhythms and incessant tempo changes. But his five quartets are also acknowledged by many players as masterpieces of the genre, continuing a line that stretches back via Schoenberg and Bartók to Beethoven.

But what is it that makes the music so challenging? Rhodes's first experience of Carter, back in 1973, is a good place to start. 'That was the world premiere of the Third Quartet,' he explains. 'And it was one of the most difficult pieces of music I've ever come across.'

The Third is indeed the most notorious of Carter's quartets – although perhaps it shouldn't be called a quartet at all. Carter actually splits the foursome down the middle – literally – into two duos, with first violin and cello on one side of the stage, and second violin and viola on the other, and very few connections between what the two duos play. 'It was a complete surprise when we received the score,' continues Rhodes. 'When we came together for the first rehearsal, it took us about two hours just to figure out how to start the piece and get to the second bar in time and together.'

IRVINE ARDITTI IS the founding first violinist of the Arditti Quartet and one of the world's most respected contemporary-music players. He has played all five of the quartets on many occasions. On the subject of Carter's Third, even he agrees: 'This is an extremely complex piece – probably one of the most challenging quartets in the repertoire. You have to know it really well to be able to play accurately with the distance between players.' The Third Quartet was also the Ardittis' first experience of Carter, when they were asked in 1981 to give a performance in Paris at just a few weeks' notice. To make it work, they resorted to using a click-track, a recorded electronic pulse that they'd hear on headphones while playing – which caused its own problems, as Arditti admits. 'The most complicated thing was listening for intonation, because with headphones on it's not easy to hear your colleague next to you, let alone the others who are far away on the other side of the stage.'

The Second Quartet, which Carter completed in 1959, was Rhodes's first encounter with the composer's music as a listener. 'I remember hearing an early performance by the ▷

STEVE J. SHERMAN

Quartet no.3 is dedicated to the Juilliard players

MICHAEL WILSON

Carter preferred the Kronos Quartet to play his Second Quartet a little slower than he wrote it

ALLEN COHEN

Ahead of its first Carter cycle, the Pacifica Quartet spent two months practising nothing else

Lenox Quartet – I was still a college student back then. I'd never heard anything like it, and by the end I was changed for life.' But it's a piece that poses its own challenges, with each performer assigned a distinct personality and playing style. 'Carter was very interested in depicting a society of people in his music,' explains Bernhardsson. 'But it's a society of very different people, with different personalities and backgrounds, yet somehow we still function together. It reminds me of a Mozart opera – you'll have different singers doing their own thing, but when they sing together, it's unified.'

In terms of performance, though, that kind of role-playing can go against everything you've been taught as a quartet musician. 'Usually, you're cultivating the ability to play with somebody exactly, or to relate to what you hear – that's paramount in chamber music,' explains Rhodes. 'But because the parts here are so independent, you can't do that. You have to find a way to hold your own against what the other people are playing.'

> 'With this music, there's an endless fount of exploration that we can dive into'
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> MASUMI PER ROSTAD

THE IDEA OF CONTRASTING PERSONALITIES is already present in embryonic form in the expansive First Quartet, written in 1951. The four musical characters from the Second Quartet are reunited in the Fourth of 1986, but they have matured and developed in the intervening 27 years. And the Fifth Quartet, dedicated to and premiered by the Ardittis in 1995, relocates the idea of personalities into the quartet environment itself. 'Carter's trying to imitate a string quartet rehearsal,' explains Irvine Arditti. 'He thought of the piece as a conversation, with string players coming together, rehearsing and talking.' This Carter achieves by inserting interludes between the piece's movements, during which the musicians musically prepare for what's about to come, or mull over what they've just played.

For audiences, Carter's string quartet music is undeniably complex and sometimes tough to listen to, but certainly not unrewarding. 'He understood what makes a good string quartet, and that's dialogue,' explains Arditti. 'In his music, it's a dialogue that's coherent – you can easily follow it as a listener.' For Rostad, the sheer complexity is a mark of the music's depth: 'Sometimes there are pieces that sound nice, but after a while you can feel like you've exhausted what's there. But with this music, there's an endless fount of exploration that we can dive into. Every time we play it there's a revelation.'

But how do players go about tackling the quartets' fiendish difficulties? Long practice sessions are an inevitability, as Rostad explains: 'When we were preparing for our very first Carter cycle, we had these crazy rehearsals. We'd start at nine ▸

The Arditti Quartet premiered Carter's String Quartet no.5 in 1995

LUKAS BECK

in the morning, and there was no end time – we just knew we had to get this work done. I think we did about two months of pure Carter.'

Violinist David Harrington, who with the Kronos Quartet has frequently played Carter's first three quartets, takes a pragmatic approach: 'First, it's a matter of tackling the sound, intonation and rhythm. Then in a piece with the demands of the Second Quartet, we would start very slowly and gradually work it up to speed. When we rehearsed it with Carter, as I recall, he actually preferred it a little slower than he wrote it. But that might be wishful thinking!'

THE ARDITTI, KRONOS, PACIFICA and Juilliard quartets all rehearsed extensively with the composer. 'He was always very accessible to people who were playing his music,' Rhodes points out, 'and he always had a clear vision of what he wanted.' But he was far from a tyrant, according to Arditti. 'He knew his music was difficult, but he didn't tell you how to play it – instead, he'd encourage you to think about how you should play it. He was very happy to let players work things out for themselves.'

Harrington expresses a similar view. 'It's very easy to think of Carter as this austere figure who wrote music that was really thorny, with things just flying past that nobody could really hear. But that's not what it was like to rehearse with him at all. He had a great sense of humour, and of fun.'

Harrington remembers Carter enjoying the rehearsal process and respecting the individual perspectives that different musicians brought to his music. In Rhodes's view, that meant ▷

IN A NUTSHELL: CARTER'S QUARTETS

Quartet no.1 (1951)
A huge, 40-minute monolith of a piece, which Carter retreated to the Arizona desert to compose. It's one of his first works to use metric modulation, where, for example, triplet crotchets in a 2/4 bar might become the new pulse of the following bar. This became a hugely important technique in Carter's later music.

Quartet no.2 (1959)
Inspired by Samuel Beckett, Carter allocates contrasting personalities and playing styles to the quartet members: the first violin fantastical and ornate; the second violin laconic and orderly; the viola expressive, with a lot of rubato; and the cello impetuous. He also instructs the players to sit as far apart as possible.

Quartet no.3 (1971)
The most infamous of Carter's five quartets, and generally considered one of the most difficult quartets ever written. Carter divides the foursome into two duos, who sit at opposite sides of the stage, as far apart as possible, and play almost entirely unconnected material. After one early performance, Aaron Copland reputedly walked on stage and said: 'If that's music, then I don't know what music is any more.'

Quartet no.4 (1986)
A reunion of the four characters from the Second Quartet, after 27 years apart. Here, though, Carter seems more interested in how they communicate and come together, rather than in the contrasts between them.

Quartet no.5 (1995)
After the density and complexity of the preceding four quartets, Carter's Fifth is surprisingly sparse and full of otherworldly silences, with more than a third written for just one or two instruments. Inspired by quartet rehearsals, Carter composes interludes between its six short movements where the players mull over material they have just played or are about to play.

the composer didn't become too involved in performance technicalities. 'He never got into how to put it together – he left that to the performer. I'm not sure that he necessarily knew or cared too much about that. You had to solve that for yourself.'

Instead, Carter would stress some unexpected angles on his quartets. 'It was surprising how light and transparent he wanted his music to be,' says Bernhardsson. 'It looks so thorny on paper, which is maybe why performers tackle it with so much vigour, but he wanted it to be filled with humour. He was a very funny man, with a very warm personality.' And he had an unusual way of conveying his thoughts on the music's developing moods, as Bernhardsson continues. 'He had an extremely expressive face, which would change with every phrase that we played, giving us a visual image of how he wanted the music to be.'

For Rostad and Bernhardsson in the Pacifica Quartet, performing Carter's five quartets as a cycle changed the way they viewed other repertoire. 'After trying to capture the independence of voices and playing in a way that's not related to others in Carter,' continues Bernhardsson, 'when we worked on Beethoven or Mozart, that frame of mind became very helpful. Sometimes the music requires a very unified sound, but sometimes it asks different instruments to step outside.'

RECOMMENDED RECORDINGS

String quartets nos.1 & 5
Pacifica Quartet
NAXOS 8.559362

String quartets nos.2, 3 & 4
Pacifica Quartet
NAXOS 8.559363

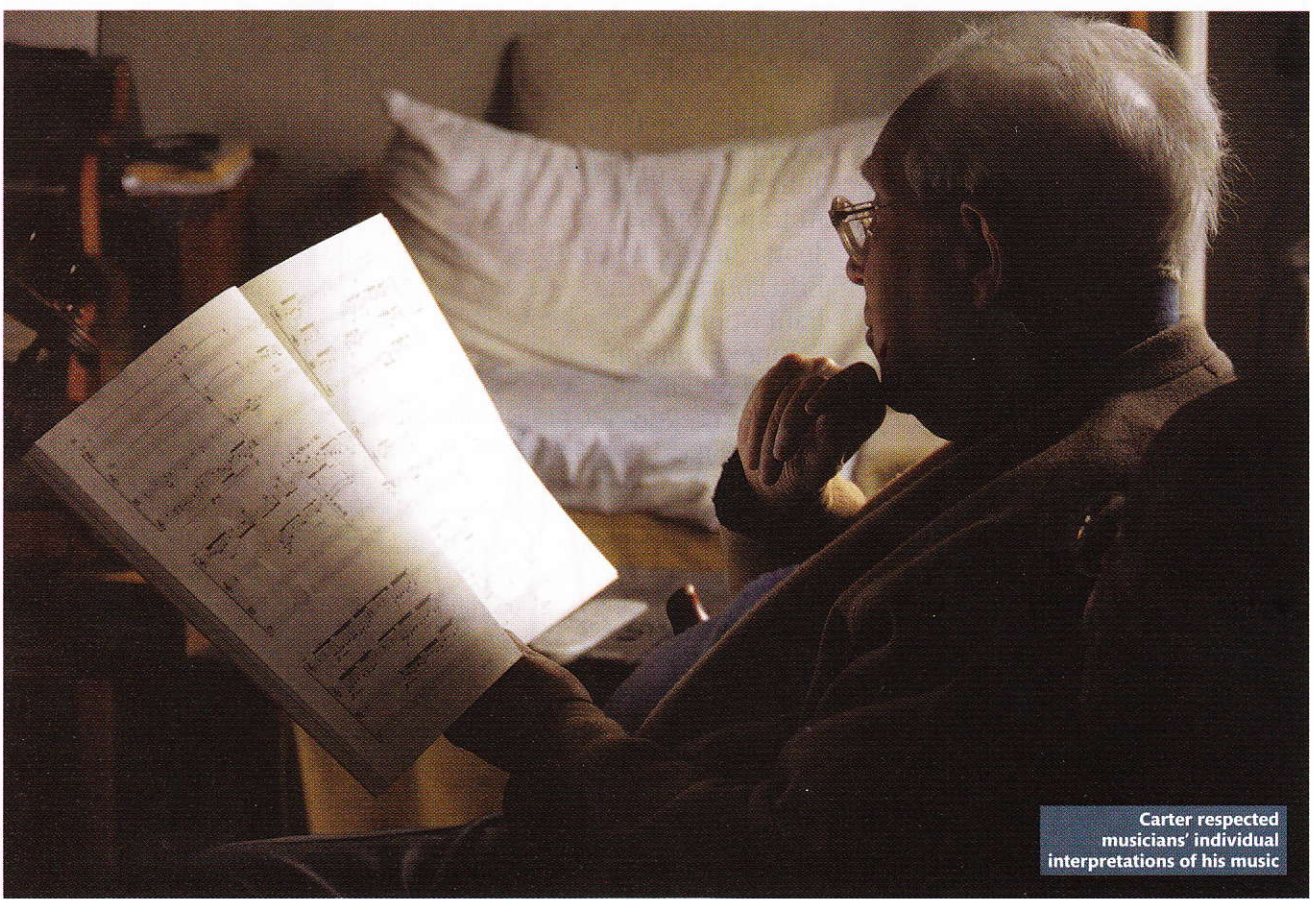
String quartets nos.1–4; Elegy
Arditti Quartet
ETCETERA KTC 2507

String Quartet no.5; 90+; Cello Sonata; *Figment* no.1; Duo for violin and piano; *Fragment*
Arditti Quartet, Ursula Oppens (piano)
DISQUES MONTAIGNE MO 782091

String quartets nos.1–4; Duo for violin and piano
Juilliard Quartet, Christopher Oldfather (piano)
SONY S2K 47229

A COMPARISON WITH BEETHOVEN is far from an overstatement in Rostad's view: he sees parallels between the great German's middle and late quartets and Carter's output, with its grand statements, heroic ambition and sense of inward-looking exploration. Arditti goes further: 'For me, Carter's language follows through from a classical heritage: Beethoven, Schubert, Bartók, Schoenberg, then Carter. He stands there as the next important quartet composer. But the clarity in his music makes him a Beethoven and Haydn rolled into one.'

There might even have been the outside chance of an additional quartet, according to Arditti. 'I did ask him if he would consider writing a sixth – I jokingly reminded him that Bartók did. But I think he'd had enough, to be honest.' And with the huge demands on his seemingly ceaseless creativity in the last years of his long life, that's entirely understandable. Yet despite the breadth of quartet achievements that his century-long life allowed, there's still a sense of loss among quartet players who knew Carter well. 'He was a beloved man,' says Rhodes. 'Nobody could ask for a longer life, but it's still very sad when he leaves us.' ■



ALLEN COHEN

Carter respected musicians' individual interpretations of his music