

Deceptive Cadence

Elliott Carter, Still Composing At 103

07:45 am

December 11, 2011

by GAIL WEIN



Cory Weaver/92nd Street Y

Composer Elliott Carter celebrated his 103rd birthday Thursday at a concert given in his honor at the 92nd Street Y (with Carol Archer, left, co-producer of the event).

[Elliott Carter](#) turns 103 today. Amazingly, he's still composing, still doing fine. At the end of the birthday concert given in his honor last Thursday, the composer trundled up to the stage of Manhattan's 92nd Street Y to receive a resounding rendition of

"Happy Birthday," which, in Carter-like fashion, devolved into clusters of wild sounds.

Carter grew up in New York at a time when World War I British warships hovered in the Hudson River, prohibition had people drinking whiskey from teacups and William Taft was president.

It's almost a cliché, but Carter's inspiration to become a composer came at the iconic Carnegie Hall, at the U.S. premiere of a groundbreaking piece.

"When I heard _____ played at Carnegie Hall — I would say that it was in the '20s, the 1920s or so — half the audience walked out, and I was convinced it was a wonderful piece and I'd love to write music like that," Carter told me recently

in the living room of the Greenwich Village apartment where he's lived for more than 65 years. "I was a kid in 1920," he said. "I'm not that old, you know."

Carter would go on to write music with a reputation for complicated intricacy. But he says that doesn't mean it's limited to academics only.

"I wrote that crazy long First String Quartet that was played in Belgium," Carter said. "It was played over the radio, and I got a letter from a coal miner, in French, and he said, 'I liked your piece. It's just like digging for coal.' He meant that it was hard and took effort. I thought that was interesting."

Carter Clips

Along with his experience, Carter's musical inspiration came from a high school teacher who introduced him to composer Charles Ives. The maverick Ives became a mentor early on. Carter also studied with Gustav Holst and Walter Piston at Harvard and, like many American composers, went to Paris to meet with Nadia Boulanger, who told him to write music "where every note counts." He returned to the U.S., ultimately winning two Pulitzer Prizes for his second and third string quartets in 1960 and 1973.

At the birthday concert organized by cellist Fred Sherry, several works were performed that even Carter hadn't heard because they were so new. In the past five to ten years, as he approached and passed the century mark, the composer has experienced a creative spurt artists of any age would envy.

"I write and write and write," Carter said. "I'm just like a fanatic, composing all the time. I'm not writing for the future. I'm writing for right now. When I wake up in the morning, I think about what I'm going to compose that day. If I didn't have that I don't think I'd be so happy. I'm writing because it interests me. It keeps me going."

And Carter's music keeps going too. The ensemble Axiom will perform the world premiere of Carter's *String Quartet No. 1*, based on T.S. Eliot's *Waste Land*, tomorrow night (Dec. 12) at Alice Tully Hall in Manhattan.

Hear Some of Carter's Recent Music

This music was performed at Elliott Carter's 103rd birthday party Dec. 8 at the 92nd Street Y in New York City. These particular performances were released last year on [Bridge Records](#).