

NARRATOLOGY IN THE PRACTICE SESSION MODEL OF ELLIOTT CARTER'S STRING QUARTET NO. 5

Christian Carey

Abstract: Elliott Carter's programme notes for his String Quartet No. 5 describe it as being about the embodiment of human interaction within the rehearsal process. This article develops this concept, evaluating the musical figures that are foreshadowed by the fragments that Carter suggests are rehearsal outtakes. Certain motives are reiterated and developed through slight variations, thus exemplifying the rehearsal process, and perhaps the editorial process, in detail. Interactions within this model are suggestive of the character types that Carter has delineated in his previous string quartets, notably No. 2. Using the Practice Session model also alludes to the real-life circumstances of the preparation of previous quartets by ensembles, and anecdotes about the Juilliard Quartet's rehearsals for the premiere of the String Quartet No. 3 can enhance a narratological understanding of the No. 5's construction. Finally, String Quartet No. 5 is considered as an example of one of the transitional works that initiate Carter's late style and its consolidation of material; its use of all-interval chords, their subsets and supersets reflects the constructive elements of human interaction that Carter has stressed as a principal thematic element.

One of the fascinations of attending rehearsals of chamber music, when excellent players try out fragments of what they later will play in the ensemble, then play it, and then stop abruptly to discuss how to improve, is that this pattern is so similar to our inner experience of forming, ordering, focussing, and bringing to fruition – and then dismissing – our feelings and ideas. These patterns of human behavior form the basis of the 5th String Quartet. Its introduction presents the players, one by one, trying out fragments of later passages from one of the six short, contrasting ensemble movements, at the same time maintaining a dialogue with each other. Between each of the movements the players discuss in different ways what has been played and what will be played. In this score the matter of human cooperation with its many aspects of feeling and thought was a very important consideration.¹

Elliott Carter's String Quartet No. 5 is a watershed work that undertakes his late late style. Like Carter's other quartets, it is a piece that is ripe for investigation from the vantage points of pitch and rhythmic design: this has been explored by authors such as John Link, John Roeder, David Schiff, J. Daniel Jenkins, Laura Emmery, Yeon-Su

¹ Elliott Carter, 'Note from the Composer', *String Quartet No. 5* (New York: Hendon Music, 1995), unpaginated.

Kim and John Aylward. Their research uncovers pitch material, such as the linking of all interval tetrachords into octachords and employment of the Complement Union Property, which would continue to be used in Carter's work for the rest of his life.

The most transitional aspect of the quartet is its rhythmic design. Aylward's research analyses a polyrhythm in a single movement, the *Allegro Energico*, as well as metric synchronisations in others.² Emmery discusses instances of metric modulation.³ While nowhere near as complicated as String Quartet No. 3,⁴ String Quartet No. 5 provides rhythmic challenges aplenty to its players. Indeed, it serves as a farewell to large-scale rhythmic design; Carter's late music is often more fragmentary than his earlier works, employing localised rhythmic construction.

String Quartet No. 5 is also ideal for narratological investigation. Mieke Bal describes narratology as 'the theory of narratives, narrative texts, images, spectacles, events; cultural artifacts that "tell a story"'. Such a theory helps to understand, analyse, and evaluate narratives,⁵ and Carter frequently supplied clues as to narratological frameworks for his pieces. His delineation of the individual parts of String Quartet No. 2 into characters is an example.⁶ In a pivotally important article about narratology in Carter, Joshua B. Mailman relates musical elements in the solo flute piece *Scrivo in Vento* to the poem that inspired it, Petrarch's love sonnet 212.⁷ He also unpacks many facets of conflict and cooperation of instrumental characters in Carter's approach. Roeder's chapter in *Elliott Carter Studies* supplies a detailed narratological examination of String Quartet No. 5.⁸ Elsewhere I have written about the narratological framework for *Dialogues*, an inverse of the power dynamics of the Piano Concerto, and have also raised narratological questions about both instruments and voices in an article about Guy Capuzzo's monograph on Carter's opera *What Next?*⁹

Carter's programme note for String Quartet No. 5 suggests two different possible narratological pathways.¹⁰ The first is the Formulation of Thoughts, the consideration and development of musical motives as stand-ins for the process of argumentation. The second is the Practice Session model, in which motives are tested and rehearsed in the interludes and played with the rest of the quartet in the movements proper. While Carter equates these two pathways as equally legitimate narratological frameworks, this article focuses on the Practice Session model.

² John Aylward, 'Metric Synchronization and Long-Range Polyrythms in Elliott Carter's Fifth String Quartet', *Perspectives of New Music*, 47, no. 2 (2009), pp. 88–99.

³ Laura Emmery, *Compositional Process in Elliott Carter's String Quartets: A Study in Sketches* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2020), pp. 206–207.

⁴ Andrew Mead, 'Pitch Structure in Elliott Carter's String Quartet No. 3', *Perspectives of New Music*, 22, nos 1 and 2 (1983–84), pp. 31–60.

⁵ Mieke Bal, *Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997), p. 16.

⁶ Elliott Carter, 'Program Note', *String Quartet No. 2* (New York: Associated Music Publishers, Inc., 1959); see also David Schiff, *The Music of Elliott Carter*, 2nd edn (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998), pp. 171–78.

⁷ Joshua Mailman, 'An Imagine Drama of Competitive Opposition in Elliott Carter's *Scrivo in Vento*, with Notes on Narrative, Symmetry, Quantitative Flux, and Heraclitus', *Music Analysis*, 28, nos 2 and 3 (2009), pp. 373–422.

⁸ Marguerite Boland and John Link, eds, *Elliott Carter Studies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), pp. 110–36.

⁹ Christian Carey, *Les Actes du colloque Hommage à Elliott Carter* (Paris: Editions Delatour, 2013); Christian Carey, 'Capuzzo's Questions', *The Open Space*, no. 21 (2018), pp. 394–98.

¹⁰ Elliott Carter, 'Note from the Composer', *String Quartet No. 5* (New York: Hendon Music, 1995).

The work is cast as an introduction, five interludes and six movements:

- I Introduction
- II Giocososo
- III Interlude 1
- IV Lento Espressivo
- V Interlude 2
- VI Presto Scorrevole
- VII Interlude 3
- VIII Allegro Energico
- IX Interlude 4
- X Adagio Sereno
- XI Interlude 5
- XII Capriccioso

A measure of the interactivity implied by the Practice Session model is displayed in the deployment of pitch intervals. As is Carter's custom, rather than using pitch classes, each interval is distinct in the composition: for instance, a major third and minor sixth are treated as intervals to be assigned separately. Like String Quartet No. 2's sharing of major and minor seconds between parts, in String Quartet No. 5 there are both intervals that are shared and those kept exclusive. This sharing of intervals helps to allow certain harmonic configurations to involve overlap and interpenetration. Interval deployment (as ordered intervals) in String Quartet No. 5 is as follows:

- Violin 1–2, 3, 5, 6, 8
- Violin 2–1, 3, 7, 10
- Viola 1, 4, 5, 9
- Cell0 2, 6, 7, 11

From this it can be seen that 1, 2, 3, 5 and 7 are shared, 4 is assigned only to the viola, 6 and 11 only to the cello, 8 only to violin 1 and 10 only to violin 2.

While what Link calls the core harmonies¹¹ – all-interval tetrachords (0137) and (0146) and the all-triad hexachord (012478) – are important, they are by no means ubiquitous. Indeed, the first two tetrachords of the piece, articulated as quadruple stops in the first violin, are both (0148) tetrachords. Emmery indicates that Carter incorporated (0148) into his harmonic sketches for the quartet.¹² Sometimes, Carter uses (0369) to complete the aggregate, the tetrachord supplying the notes left over from an octachord combining two all-interval tetrachords. Two types of octachords are utilised, those built out of the two all-interval tetrachords I have already mentioned, and those created using the Complement Union Property, employing tetrachords (0167) and (0248). The Complement Union Property is also possible with (0167) and the dyad (04), creating all-triad hexachords. These are the most important harmonies in String Quartet No. 5, and in most of the works that follow it. Building on Robert Morris' research, Guy Capuzzo's article on octachords in Carter is a thorough introduction to his use of the Complement Union Property.¹³ J. Daniel Jenkins has written about the Complement Union Property and its employment to construct

¹¹ John Link, *Elliott Carter's Late Music* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022), pp. 37–76.

¹² Emmery, *Compositional Process in Elliott Carter's String Quartets*, p. 175.

¹³ Robert D. Morris, 'Pitch-Class Complementation and Its Generalizations', *Journal of Music Theory*, 34, no. 2 (1990), pp. 175–245; Guy Capuzzo, 'The Complement Union Property in the Music of Elliott Carter', *Journal of Music Theory*, 48, no. 1 (2004), pp. 1–24.

octachords in String Quartet No. 5. He provides a case for this technique being fundamental to the Lento Espressivo movement of the quartet.¹⁴

Subsets and supersets persist and are another component of the quartet's materials to evaluate. Carter's *Harmony Book* demonstrates the composer's idiosyncratic labelling system for sets and their constituent subsets and supersets.¹⁵ Jonathan W. Bernard has evaluated the supersets of the all-interval tetrachords and described their employment in String Quartets Nos 1 and 2. His chart of supersets, using Forte's system instead of Carter's, is a helpful tool for analysis.¹⁶ Like Emmery, Bernard points out that despite their importance to Carter, AITs are not necessarily ubiquitous. He writes:

What if neither tetrachord is plainly distinguishable as an element 'marked off' within the larger set? Actually, there is no reason why the larger sets validated by a superset structure could not function independently of their role as literal supersets. For them to do so might well signify that the composer meant the generating tetrachords to be present at certain moments only by implication, or at least in somewhat obscure form, instead of appearing always in explicit presentation. This generalization of the superset principle reaches beyond the limits upon analysis imposed by reading the tetrachord or tetrachords as simply present or absent.¹⁷

John Roeder points out that in the Introduction and interludes gestures do not use the same notes as in the movements proper, but this need not concern us overmuch: Carter often eschews exact repetition in favour of repeating gestures, textures and harmonies that share affinities.¹⁸

Marguerite Boland's article on the linking and morphing of sets is a useful analysis of Carter's transitioning between harmonies and the role of subsets and supersets in these moments. Linking and morphing are often shared between quartet members, another place of interactivity and cooperation. She suggests that:

A contemporary metaphor that might not be too far-fetched in relation to Carter's technique of using linking gestures is that of 'morphing' – a modern digital graphics effect where one image is turned into a different image and the transitional phases of this transformation are shown as the process occurs. By maintaining some of the old image and gradually introducing some of the new image, independent transitional shapes emerge. However, these transitional shapes acquire their meaning only through references to the initial image (where they came from) and the final image (where they are heading).¹⁹

One set of collections that Carter used extensively prior to String Quartet No. 5 but which appears less frequently in the late late music is all-interval 12-note rows, although Jenkins describes a sketch in which this is considered, and ultimately rejected, for this quartet.²⁰

Roeder models his article on David Schiff's idea of 'polyvocality',²¹ dividing the aspects of narrativity into the more programmatic ideas

¹⁴ J. Daniel Jenkins, 'After the Harvest: Carter's Fifth String Quartet and the Late Late Style', *Music Theory Online*, 16, no. 3 (2010), pp. 16–38.

¹⁵ Elliott Carter, *Harmony Book*, eds Nicholas Hopkins and John F. Link (New York: Carl Fischer, 2002).

¹⁶ Jonathan W. Bernard, 'Problems of Pitch Structure in Elliott Carter's First and Second String Quartets', *Journal of Music Theory*, 37, no. 2 (1993), pp. 235–43.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 244.

¹⁸ John Roeder, 'A Transformational Space for Elliott Carter's Recent Complement-Union Music', in *Proceedings of the First International Conference of the Society of Mathematics and Computation in Music* (Heidelberg: Springer Verlag, 2009).

¹⁹ Marguerite Boland, "'Linking" and "Morphing": Harmonic Flow in Elliott Carter's *Con Leggerezza Pensosa*', *TEMPO*, 60, no. 237 (2006), p. 35.

²⁰ Jenkins, 'After the Harvest'.

²¹ Schiff, *The Music of Elliott Carter*, p. 26.

hinted by Carter and the musical means used to structure the work. The two operate in conjunction in String Quartet No. 5. Emmery describes this as synthesis.²² Roeder points out that the trajectory of the piece is from the more fragmentary Introduction and early interlude material to greater coordination and fuller textures. One can analogise this to the rehearsal process of a piece in which – one hopes – the preparation for performance will become increasingly assured. John Link remarks in his book *The Late Music of Elliott Carter* that although the audience may be said to witness a rehearsal preparation of the piece, Carter never allows the quartet to give the piece an unmediated performance. Link makes an analogy between this and Moses seeing but not entering the Promised Land, and also with Jacques Tati's *Traffic*, the cinematic inspiration for Carter's opera *What Next?*, suggesting that:

the Fifth Quartet ends with a destination in sight, if still out of reach. The rehearsal scenario's implied goal of individual voices working together to recreate a piece in performance remains unrealized, perhaps to suggest that the broader vision of a society of individuals collaborating in harmony remains a dream of the future.²³

In discussing the Horn Concerto, Link makes an observation that applies well to String Quartet No. 5: 'the late works more often resemble a mode of cinematic story-telling in which discrete scenes that may or may not be synchronic are cross-cut to form a linear sequence'.²⁴ This is certainly the case in the Introduction, interludes and many transitional passages in the movements proper. One could also see a sort of Beckettian twist: *Godot* goes to rehearsal. According to Schiff, Samuel Beckett's *Godot* and *Endgame* were both inspirations for String Quartet No. 2, which we have seen echoed in both the conception and narrative in String Quartet No. 5. Schiff quotes Carter: 'I regard my scores as dramatic scenarios, for performers to act out with their instruments, dramatizing the players as individuals and participants in the ensemble';²⁵ and Shreffler and Meyer have observed that 'Carter's "personification" of the instrumental ensemble gives performers particularly propitious opportunities to identify with the music.'²⁶

In 2012, in his last interview, Carter described the quartet to Laura Emmery:

I feel that my Fifth Quartet is my farewell to the quartet. It's a rehearsal of the string quartet. When they come to play, a little bit of the quartet is one of the four quartets I have already written. So, I was rehearsing the quartets I've written. I'm not going to write another string quartet.²⁷

Anne Shreffler and Felix Meyer concur with this late assessment and have pointed to the valedictory quality of the musical relationships with Carter's earlier quartets, suggesting that, for example, the pizzicati found in the last movement of the String Quartet No. 5 can be traced back to the last section of String Quartet No. 3.²⁸

²² Emmery, *Compositional Process in Elliott Carter's String Quartets*, p. 193.

²³ Link, *Elliott Carter's Late Music*, pp. 331–32.

²⁴ Boland and Link, *Elliott Carter Studies*, pp. 47–49.

²⁵ Schiff, *The Music of Elliott Carter*, p. 26.

²⁶ Felix Meyer and Anne C. Shreffler, *Elliott Carter: A Centennial Portrait in Letters and Documents* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2008), p. 15.

²⁷ Laura Emmery, 'An American Modernist: Teatime with Elliott Carter', *TEMPO*, 67, no. 264 (2013), pp. 25–26.

²⁸ Meyer and Shreffler, *Elliott Carter*, p. 15.



Example 1:
Elliott Carter, String Quartet No. 5,
opening, first violin.

Considering late style and the design of the quartet, Link writes:

Given Carter's age when he wrote the Fifth Quartet, the fragmentary nature of its large-scale form and of the interludes within it has some affinity with the idea of 'late style'... Indeed, the fragmentation at least partly reflects Carter's aesthetic response to the practical constraints of aging, which increasingly limited his composition time as he got older. Working with musical fragments, though, was always a part of Carter's process.²⁹

Next I want to consider a few of the instrumental character types that Carter uses in String Quartet No. 5. As I suggested earlier, the presentation of expressively and materially different characters is perhaps most fully drawn in String Quartet No. 2, and Carter characterises the instruments thus: Violin 1: 'Fantastic, ornate, and mercurial'; Violin 2: 'Displays a laconic, ordinary character that is sometimes humorous'; Viola: 'Expressive'; Cello: 'Somewhat impetuous'.³⁰

Carter does not specify instrumental characters in his remarks on String Quartet No. 5, but one can certainly find suggestive moments in each part that give us clues to its prevailing character. The first violin seems to return to its role in String Quartet No. 2: 'fantastic, ornate, and mercurial', opening the quartet with double forte multi-stops (see Example 1), and, from measure 14, florid, bravura, leggero gestures (see Example 2). The first violin also initiates most of the work's metric modulations. The viola is another story. At the end of the second movement, the viola's obstinate repetition of emphatic multi-stops and its tendency to disrupt the rhythmic feel of a passage otherwise typified by cooperation suggests that they are either ignoring or trying to annoy the other players, practising a different passage so loudly that the others can't think. Performers and composers have all met this person.

Roeder suggests that the second violin and viola are involved in rhythmic 'timekeeping', while the first violin and cello often introduce and render motivic material.³¹ The second violin can be slippery, frequently changing roles. They spend the entire Introduction and the beginning of the *Giocoso* first movement playing varieties of pizzicato, and then dovetail fast arco gestures with the first violin. The *Giocoso* itself seems to be a 'follow the leader' movement; the viola steals the bravura style from the first violin and then appropriates pizzicati from the second violin. The motivic material introduced by the cello tends at first to be more legato and sustained than the rhythmically active motives in the first violin. The cello's major sevenths are presented linearly in long notes, but as the *Giocoso* movement unwinds, it too engages in the leggero gesture profile, in brief flourishes rather than extended lines. This exchange of roles is another analogue to rehearsing, where different members of a quartet try out

²⁹ Link, *Elliott Carter's Late Music*, p. 327.

³⁰ Schiff, *The Music of Elliott Carter*, pp. 73–74.

³¹ Boland and Link, *Elliott Carter Studies*, pp. 129–31.

Example 2:
Elliott Carter, String Quartet No. 5,
measure 14, first violin.



various gestures that are shared by one another. Later, one hears these played together.

The small motivic units one sees at the beginning of the quartet and in subsequent interludes foreshadow what is to come in the movements proper. For example, the single harmonics, which begin in the viola in measure 4 and are echoed by the first violin in measure 10 and many times subsequently, allude to Movement X, the all-harmonics *Adagio Sereno*. In her dissertation on the quartet, the late Yeon-Su Kim outlines the characters of gestures via the score's markings, such as *tranquillo*, *ruvido*, *tenero* and the like.³² Kim's approach serves to detach the characteristic gestures that are shared among the members of the quartet. It is thus useful in viewing narratology through a primarily cooperative lens (see [Example 3](#)).

My own preferred delineation of character types overlaps somewhat with both Roeder and Kim and is modelled on the character types in Carter's String Quartet No. 2, which I mentioned earlier:

- Violin 1: as in the Second Quartet: fantastic, ornate, and mercurial.
- Violin 2: a mimic and a resolute timekeeper.
- Viola: subversive and rhythmically incisive.
- Cello: determined, sustained, and angular.

Over time, the piece gradually coheres: more entrances coincide, and strong beats frequently include multiple simultaneous attacks. Thus, we are progressing from the disparate playing of the beginning of the rehearsal period to a greater coordination and assuredness as the quartet moves closer to its conclusion. The conclusion itself contains an echo of the very beginning of the piece (see [Example 4](#)): the last dyad, A#3–F#4, is the same minor sixth that appeared in the second chord of the Introduction.³³ It is also preceded by two triple-stops in the second violin and cello that allude to the first two chords of the first violin in terms of gesture, although not of pitch content. Emmery and Jenkins both point out that on the last date of composition, Carter returned to the Introduction, making sure that it accurately nested material and pitch designs that would provide appropriate foreshadowing of the close.³⁴

Solo turns by each of the quartet members are added to the last four interludes as the piece progresses. One might consider each of these a final flourish, testing the hardest part before going onstage; they also offer another glimpse of each instrument's essential character:

Movement V (Interlude 2): Viola

Off-kilter accentuations, beginning *tranquillo* and then, using persistent double-stops, building to fortissimo; interspersed by a solitary bravura melodic passage.

³² Yeon-Su Kim, 'Stylistic Analysis of Elliott Carter's String Quartet No. 5: Aspects of Character and Rhythm' (DMA dissertation, Boston University, 2006).

³³ Felix Meyer and Anne C. Shreffler, *Elliott Carter: A Centennial Portrait in Letters and Documents* (Woodbridge, Suffolk: The Boydell Press, 2008), p. 15. Emmery 2020. 212.

³⁴ Emmery, *Compositional Process in Elliott Carter's String Quartets*, pp. 216–17; Jenkins, 'After the Harvest'.

1
ruvido *ff* *mf*

2
sul pont – sul tasto *p* sul pont → sul tasto

3
tenero *p* *mf* *p*

4
tranquillo

5
molto espressivo *f* *mf* *f* (espr.)

21
un poco espressivo *pp* un poco espr. *p*

23
espressivo legato *f* espr. legato

Example 3:
Yeon-Su Kim's 'character table'.

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arco *p* *f*

arco *ff*

arco *pp*

arco *leggero, rapido* *f*

arco *f*

Example 4:
Elliott Carter, String Quartet No. 5,
final measures.

Movement VII (Interlude 3): Violin 2
 Borrowing from the other instruments and their material: a cello-like gesture (with interval of minor ninth instead of major seventh), a coordinated eighth-note melody with violin 1; harmonics, pizzicati and a flourish emulating violin 1.
 Movement IX (Interlude 4): Cello
 Appassionato, linear passages using interval 11 and interval 2, interspersed with pizzicati.

Movement X1 (Interlude 5): Violin 1
Fast, loud flourishes.

Whenever we are considering narratology in the context of polyvocality or synthesis, the technical aspects of the music are an objective analytical affair. The programmatic elements inherently involve a measure of subjectivity. In raising the Practice Session as well as the Formulation of Thoughts as two possible models, Carter gives us permission to consider narrative frameworks. String Quartet No. 5, synthesising elements from previous quartets as well as its own, is an ideal piece in which to consider issues of narratology in music. Given Carter's predilection to discuss his pieces in polyvocal terms, one hopes that the approach taken here may lead to fruitful narrative analyses of other Carter compositions.