

Elliott Carter's SHARD: An analysis by Guy Capuzzo

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Elliott Carter is most commonly known to guitarists for his composition *Changes*, inarguably one the most important pieces of 20th century guitar repertoire. But his piece *Shard* is an equally crystalline example of the composer's work, and a true prize of the repertoire. *Shard* was premiered on June 11, 1997 by David Starobin in Humlebæk, Denmark.¹ Many guitarists will find *Shard* more approachable than Carter's, *Changes* (1983). Seventy-one measures long and barely three minutes in duration, *Shard* is more compact than *Changes*. On first hearing, one is struck by the extended passages of unbroken triplets and sixteenths—hardly rhythms that we associate with Carter. And while *Shard* is by no means a beginner's piece, it lacks many of the formidable technical challenges of *Changes*. Despite these differences, *Shard* shares much with *Changes*, a point I shall return to.

The straightforward character and reduced technical demands of *Shard* are characteristic of Carter's recent compositions. In a discussion of Carter's post-1990 music, David Schiff notes that "the general tendency of this period has been toward an ever-greater lucidity."² Many of Carters' recent compositions are brief, single-movement works for solo instruments or small ensemble. The composer addressed these points in an interview with this writer:

Q: "Has simplifying the technical features of your music freed up performers in their interpretive tasks?" A: "Yes. I suppose I've simplified the technical matters. [The recent pieces] are in a sense simpler, and I guess there are more people who can play them, especially the short pieces."³

Malcolm MacDonald notes that "the title *Shard* suggests a piece split off from a larger entity."⁴ This is partly true. *Shard* is a self-standing composition, but immediately upon its completion, Carter wrote an ensemble work that includes all but the final chord of *Shard*. The work *Luimen* places *Shard* in the context of a small ensemble consisting of trumpet, trombone, vibraphone, mandolin, guitar, and harp.

The form of *Shard* is best described as episodic. It emerges from the interplay of four textures: loud staccato dyads and chords; high harmonics ringing above low notes; loud six-note chords; and the aforementioned streams of triplets and sixteenth notes. These gestures are distributed fairly equally for the first two thirds of the piece, but the work concludes with a gradually ascending line set to even sixteenths disrupted by an uneven pattern of accents. This jagged, exceptionally syncopated line immediately calls to mind the piece's title. A convincing interpretation of the large-scale form of *Shard* calls on the performer to balance the fluctuating textures with the "long line" that binds the entire piece.

Tempo relations indicated by Carter's signature "metric modulations" also articulate the form of *Shard*.⁵ The initial metronome marking of *Shard* is = 108. At measure 4, the tempo increases to J = 144. Above the staff, Carter writes that the previous sixteenth note is equal to the new triplet eighth note; the tempi relate in the ratio of 3:4. Metric modulations in *Shard* suggest an A, B, A1 form. The A section contains tempo relations in the ratio of 3:4:3, with J = 108, 144, and 108 respectively. The A1 section brings back the 3:4 ratio with the same tempi. The B section explores other, non-even ratios. The metric modulations in the A and A1 sections correspond to formal landmarks that can aid the performer in interpreting the work. For instance, the acceleration to J = 144 in the A section coincides with the piece's first unbroken triplet eighth passage. The return to J = 108 ushers in several measures of sustained dyads. In the A1 section, the piece's final marking =

144 launches the climactic ascending line mentioned earlier. Guitarists who have performed *Changes* are well-positioned to perform *Shard* and will notice many similarities between the two pieces. To begin, several of the six-string chords in *Shard* appear in *Changes*. Example 1 shows two instances of these chords.

One reason for the recycled chords involves the technical features of Carter's harmonic language. Both *Shard* and *Changes* feature Carter's favored hexachord type (0, 1, 2, 4, 7, 8) (e.g. C, C#, D, E, G, G#). There is a limited number of ways to voice this chord on the guitar without creating unreasonable stretches. Indeed, a look at the sketches for *Changes*, housed at the Paul Sacher Foundation in Basel, Switzerland, reveals the effort Carter put forth to devise feasible voicings of this hexachord type. The recycled chords thus appear for pragmatic as well as allusive reasons.

Shard and *Changes* also share what Starobin calls "little duets."⁶ Example 2 shows the first such passage from each piece. The little duets present special challenges to the performer. Precise left-hand placement is required for the very high harmonics to "speak"; for without extreme care, the low staccato note could easily overpower them.

The score, currently in preparation by Boosey & Hawkes, contains only one misprint. In measure nineteen, the low D is a misprint for low E (open sixth string). Because the guitar is tuned in standard fashion for *Shard*, the low D is not possible. While the D note also appears in the *Luimen* score, Starobin plays E in his recordings of both pieces.⁷

The brevity and exuberant character of *Shard* make it an ideal piece with which to begin a concert program. Starobin did just this at a 1998 concert at Columbia University's Miller Theater celebrating Carter's 90th birthday. Starobin's fine performances and recordings of the piece, coupled with Carter's stature, make it likely that *Shard* will find its way into the repertoire. *Shard* warrants the attention of every guitarist with an interest in contemporary music.⁸

Example 1. Two chords from *Shard* and *Changes*:

Shard: Mm. 33-34

Shard: M. 64

Changes: Mm 3-5

Changes: Mm. 3,7,8



Example 2. "Little Duets" in *Shard* and *Changes*.

Shard, mm. 30-32

Changes, mm. 29-32

1. John Link, Elliott Carter: A Guide to Research (New York 5) and London: Garland, 2000), p. 47.
2. David Schiff, *The Music of Elliott Carter*, 2nd ed. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998), p. 29; Anthony Tommasini, "Catching Up With Elliott Carter," *New York Times* (April 27, 2002), p. B14.
3. Guy Capuzzo, interview with Elliott Carter, May 22, 1996.
4. Malcolm MacDonald, liner notes to the recording *The 8) Music of Elliott Carter Volume 4* (Bridge 91 1 1), p. 8.
5. The term is a misnomer, for such modulations indicate change in tempo, not meter.
6. Starobin discusses the "little duets" in Allan Kozinn, "Elliott Carter's *Changes*," *Guitar Review* 57 (Spring 1984): 1-4.
7. *Shard* appears on Bridge 9084 and 91 1 1; *Luimen* appears on Bridge 91 1 1.
8. I wish to thank Brian Edgar, John Link, and David Nadal for their suggestions on an earlier draft of this article.