

In Tokyo, as in other major cities around the world, many concerts and festivals of 20th and 21st century music are organized throughout the year. The artistry and level of performers has led to an abundance of concerts featuring outstanding modern and contemporary music. Additionally, new compositions have continued to premiere in recent years because of this artistry presented. Composers from around the world also visit Japan to collaborate with Japanese artists. However, while the popularity of modern and contemporary music in Japan is not inferior to that of Europe and the United States, American music featured in Japan is unfortunately biased.

American composers known or talked about in Japan include John Cage (1912-1992), a major experimental music composer and Steve Reich (1936-), a representative of minimal music. Other names that are mentioned include Charles Ives (1874-1954), Aaron Copland (1900-1990), and Henry Cowell (1897-1965), who all asserted the concept of independence and liberty through their compositions. Because the contextual background of diversity in The United States is not commonly acknowledged in Japan, most audience members have accepted this one sided view of what contemporary American music represents. However, there is another important facet of American music that has not been highlighted. It is this other facet of American music that I have come to deeply embrace and admire.

The fact that I have come to specialize in modern and contemporary piano music, and more recently, in American music in particular, is not a mere coincidence, but has much to do with the 19 years I spent living in The U.S. In 1980, I was a typical sixth grader wearing a skirt and white knee socks, carrying a radoseru (a Japanese backpack for elementary school children), but was suddenly thrown into a classroom at a junior high school in the suburbs of New York City. It was as if I had been transported in a time machine into a different era and

¹ Mari, Asakawa. 2022 *Shimei*. Tanba, Hyogo: Shimei-no-kai.

space. Although there was no overt discrimination in this new space where more than 90% of the population was white, I spent my junior high and high school years in a very cramped environment as a minority, always observing what was going on inside from outside the enclosure. Needless to say, this experience left an indelible impression of what I considered to be “American” society. It would be another 10 years or so before I would realize that the America I had experienced was only a small part of the fabric of American society.

In 1999, I left New York City, where I had lived for many years, and moved my residence to Italy. Interestingly, it was during this period of living in Italy that I became immersed in American music. It was during this time in Italy that I encountered the works of Elliott Carter (1908-2012), one of the greatest American composers of all time, who is also highly regarded in European musical circles. I was immediately captivated by Carter's works and began performing many of his piano works throughout Europe. In 2005, after returning to Japan for the first time in 25 years, I began performing as a pianist specializing in modern and contemporary music, especially Carter's works, to introduce them to Japanese audiences. In 2012, I returned to the United States for the first time in 13 years and had the wonderful opportunity to give an all-Carter recital at Carnegie Hall Weill Recital Hall in New York City, where I was able to meet the 103-year-old composer for the first and last time. Through these experiences, I recognized the intersection of my Japanese and American identities and perceptions. After living in various spaces and the accumulation of those experiences parallel with the music of an extraordinary American composer, my perspective of American society that I had experienced during my childhood was now beginning to shift. I was able to see the diversity of the society such as race, culture, and religion and the dynamism and creativity that this society generates. This is how I became captivated by Carter's work.

This great American composer, who lived over a century, was born in New York City in 1908 and died in New York City in 2012. Carter, who spent his childhood in Europe and was strongly influenced by its culture, decided to become a composer as a teenager after hearing Stravinsky's "The Rite of Spring" which premiered in the United States in 1922. After studying

English literature at Harvard University, he went to France to study composition, and since the postmodernist era of the late 1950s, he developed a highly complex and graceful style that is uniquely Carter.

American music of that era was divided into two categories: uptown music and downtown music. Downtown music, developed in the Downtown Manhattan area, was experimental music in the broad sense of the word, and was composed based on a completely different concept, breaking with tradition and rebelling against the music of the 20th century that had developed, such as the 12-tone technique and the serial technique. In the 1960s, John Cage, the experimental composer, went to Japan and shocked and astonished people, causing the phenomenon known as "Cage shock," and as a result, the stereotype of experimental music as American music took root. Uptown music, on the other hand, is music that developed at universities and concert halls in the Uptown area of Manhattan, and refers to the music of Carter and his colleague, Milton Babbitt (1916-2011), amongst various others. Their music was deeply rooted in the tradition of European classical music and was cultivated into their own personal style.

As the name suggests, Uptown Music was criticized by journalists at the time as music composed and performed only within the confines of academia, and was labeled as too academic and uninteresting for general audiences. This may have been one of the main reasons why this music was avoided in Japan. Neither Carter nor Babbitt denied this sentiment that the music was too academic, but their background and experiences provide a rationale and justification for it. After WWII, there were no venues for composers to establish themselves in the contemporary music world, and in order to do so, it was necessary to establish oneself in an institution, such as in a university. Universities welcomed these creative and avant-garde compositions, where they could be presented and exchanged. In the 1930s, Carter studied with Nadia Boulanger in France, and was influenced by the fundamentals of traditional classical music and the music of the Viennese school, Stravinsky and beyond. Babbitt was greatly influenced by his encounter with Schoenberg, who was living in exile in the United States at the time, and by Roger Sessions (1896-1985), a leading American composer who had just returned from Europe. Carter and

Babbitt were both surrounded by and lived within the rich development of pop culture and jazz, products of the diversity of American society, and both directly experienced and learned from it. They were brilliant intellectuals whose mastery of wide ranging subjects included, yet was not limited to the compositional techniques of classical music. They believed that the music they were working on could be more than music for entertainment or music that was easily accessible; their music required a sincere attitude of learning and a willingness to listen deeply.

Although the public at first did not warmly welcome these composers of Uptown music, both Babbitt and Carter took in the world's most advanced and current musical developments and developed their own unique music out of it, instead of merely emulating it. They were cultivating an original and unique field through their outstanding intellectual ability, influenced by the diversity surrounding them in American culture. Elliott Carter and Milton Babbitt did not stop innovating until their deaths at the ages of 103 and 94, respectively. Their paths as American composers must have been long and difficult and Carter himself described those years with unflinching humility. He talks about contemporary music in America in the following excerpt from *Collected Essays and Lectures*: “Art music in America has been like a plant, transplanted to a new place that provides a very different environment from the one in which it developed... The plant is sturdy, the environment strange to it, the desire for adaptation great, and the process of adaptation filled with difficulties which at times seem insurmountable and threatening to the life of the plant, yet the wish to live and develop is very strong”².

I am currently recording this “other American music” as a 3 CD set of piano works of American modernist music; the first collection of Carter's works was released in 2018, and the second collection of Babbitt's works will be recorded in New York this September.

² Elliott, Carter. 1997 *Collected Essays and Lectures, 1937-1995*. Rochester, New York: University of Rochester Press.