

# The Daily Telegraph

## Leaping Over Olympic-standard Hurdles With Split-Second Timing

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By Geoffrey Norris

There is no getting away from the fact that Elliott Carter's five string quartets present a tough challenge to performers and audience alike. But the conviction and broad expressive scope that the Pacifica Quartet brings to them ensure that the effort yields rich dividends.

The Pacifica, named Ensemble of the Year for 2009 by the Musical America directory, has established a special relationship with the Carter canon, while also excelling in the more mainstream repertoire. Its Carter performances were a highlight of the 2003 Edinburgh Festival. Its Naxos recording of the First and Fifth Quartets has been nominated for a Grammy award in a couple of days' time; and a companion disc of the Second, Third and Fourth is imminent.

This concert of all five quartets demonstrated those qualities that make the Pacifica such a compelling Carter advocate. His writing for the four instruments is vigorously conversational, at times pithily argumentative, at others amiable. Each work has a distinct personality, be it the division of instruments into two pairs (violin I and cello, violin II and viola) that conflict and coalesce with contrasted material in the Third Quartet, or the almost whimsical way in which Carter gets the musicians to "rehearse" the ideas that go to make up the Fifth. Merely by watching the players, you can appreciate the fact that split-second synchronization is a key requirement in realizing this music.

There is no room for slip-ups or a momentary lapse in concentration. But if you look at the scores, you can see that the situation is often even thornier than it seems. In a passage of four layers of hurtling texture Carter might deploy four different rhythmic schemes, with ever-changing note-values and diverse time signatures.

Moreover, the separate strands are expected to contribute an apparently isolated fragment or note to a complex "melodic" line, which Carter sometimes writes out for guidance above the actual score.

The technical hurdles in these quartets are of Olympic standard, but the Pacifica negotiated and surmounted them with breathtaking suppleness and skill. Even more important, however, is the fact that these players respond with equal acuity to the intricate interpretative implications of the music. I have long felt that the Pacifica's experience of the wider repertoire enables it to find the heart and humanity in Carter's quartets, and so it was here in a riveting evening.