

## Still On Top of The World: Richard Carpenter

by Daniel Levitin

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Richard Carpenter was one half of the brother/sister duo The Carpenters along with his sister Karen. While Karen drew most of the attention as the vocalist and sometime drummer (Hal Blaine was a frequent session ringer), Richard's behind the scenes contributions were critical to the Carpenters' success. He acted as A&R man, selecting tunes; he wrote many of their songs (such as "Yesterday Once More" and "Top of the World"), and he played keyboards. In addition to these roles, he also arranged and orchestrated nearly all of their recorded output, earning him a reputation among insiders as one of the best pop arrangers of the idiom; he was nominated for a "best arrangement" Grammy five times.

So what has he been doing lately? In addition to producing the critically acclaimed television movie "The Karen Carpenter Story," and overseeing the group's business affairs, the 32-year GRAMMY member has just recorded his second solo album, "Pianist, composer, arranger, and conductor." The album is comprised of Richard's instrumental arrangements of Carpenters hits as well as a couple of new songs.

The Carpenters have remained one of the most popular bands in Japan across the last two decades, and this formed the initial impetus for RC recording his new album. "In 1995 we did a Japanese release, Twenty-two Hits of the Carpenters, which was enormously successful," Richard explains. "It became the biggest selling international album of 1996, and we sold 3.2 million units of these things. I received the Japanese equivalent of a Grammy for it, and of course the rest of our catalog went well, too.

"At some point it dawned on the brass at Polydor Japan that I can actually play the piano so they asked me to do a new album of Carpenters songs on piano. I thought it could be fun, but only if I could record some new stuff as well. Also, it was important to me to do something new with the tunes, and that led me to the rearrangements. I thought they could be treated in almost a light classical mode - very little rhythm, more symphonic. The CD was designed for one piece to segue into the next piece, either in the same key, or to end on the tonic where the I would become the V of the next piece - a deceptive cadence." The result is a harmonically rich album, featuring intriguingly clever arrangements, at times pushing the harmonic envelope of the AC format that Richard is generally credited with having invented.

The past five years have seen the Carpenters praised by a new generation of artists including Red Kross, Sonic Youth, Cranberries and Sheryl Crow. What did Richard think of the 1994 tribute album featuring these and other alternative artists? "Well, our music seems to hold up very well - we're at 100 million units worldwide - and they're still selling in large numbers. The critics who dismiss us must not be getting it - someone is buying those albums. It only stands to reason that younger artists would be listening to the music. It is like when Frank Sinatra heard Bing Crosby and said 'that's what I want to be - a singer.' Now obviously Frank would have been a singer anyway, and just listening to Bing wasn't enough, he had to have had the chops, and that voice, but it was a catalyst.

"Even if you put the arrangements aside and the songs, what you're left with is Karen's marvellous singing. And that has an affect on a lot of people. I've always thought that if something is well done, musicians will like it no matter what genre is. People think that if you do soft pop like we did, we couldn't possibly like rock and roll or alternative. But that's not true, as long as the music is well done. So It didn't surprise me that these alternative artists like us. And I find a lot of their music very interesting, too."

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