

GEORGE ROCHBERG
Concerto for Oboe and Orchestra

New World Records 80335

JACOB DRUCKMAN
Prism

During the 1960s, the horizons of American music suddenly expanded. A decade and more of the rigid theoretical and intellectual hegemony of post-Webernism was coming to an end: just as in sex, politics, and society, the watchwords became freedom, individuality, and adventurousness. Under the querulous battering of a new generation, the ramrod-straight dodecaphonic highway to the future shattered into a multiplicity of paths, some of which doubled back onto roads already traveled. The decline of Darmstadtism freed composers once again to give voice to individual modes of expression; while initial reactions were tentative and uncertain, within fifteen years a thousand flowers had bloomed.

George Rochberg (born July 5, 1918, in Paterson, New Jersey) seems an unlikely revolutionary, yet it was he, more than anyone else, who dealt the crushing blow to serialist orthodoxy. A student of Gian Carlo Menotti (New World Records NW 241) at the Curtis Institute in Philadelphia, Rochberg began as a modern mainstream composer. He later became involved with serialism, but with *Contra mortem et tempus* (1965), written after the death of his son, Rochberg hesitatingly but irrevocably re-embraced not only tonality but the whole universe of emotional states commonly associated with it. From this "collage," which quoted stray bits of music by other composers, Rochberg eventually evolved a style predicated on pastiche; the explicit references to Haydn, Mahler, Bartok, and others were meant to function not as parody but as signposts pointing the way back to the (in his opinion) lost expressivity of the past.

By the time of the seminally neoromantic *Third String Quartet* (1973), with a slow movement that might have been written by Beethoven, Rochberg had broken decisively with his own serialist roots (it should not be forgotten that this iconoclast wrote one of the most elegant of twelve-tone chamber works, the Dallapiccolan *Serenata d' estate*). Since then, he has continued in the neoromantic vein in such works as the Violin Concerto and the *Concord Quartets* (Nos. 4,5, and 6).

The Concerto for Oboe and Orchestra was written on commission from the New York Philharmonic and first performed by that orchestra with soloist Joseph Robinson and conductor Zubin Mehta in December 1984. Although it contains no overt quotations from earlier music in its four continuous, thematically linked movements, there are, inevitably, recollections. The oboe's sad, plangent musings in the first section bring to mind the desolate lied of the English horn in Act III of *Tristan*, while the rolling-gaited march of the third part is reminiscent of Prokofiev. Elsewhere, the dense textures and sudden emotional outbursts invite comparison with the Berg of the *Three Pieces for Orchestra*.

The solo writing is deliberately unvirtuosic, relying instead on the performer's tone and command of musical line. Rochberg has said: I have made no effort to exploit the extremes of the oboe because, as I see it, the main reason for writing a piece is to say something, not to concentrate on the purely technical characteristics of an instrument." The effect is elegiac, but restrained. The lumbering, sardonic march, recalled near the concerto's end; the indeterminacy of the closing measures; the overall sense of unease--these characteristics indicate a disquiet in the concerto's soul, and for the oboe there can be no peace.

Jacob Druckman (born June 26, 1928, in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania) is another composer for whom eclecticism comes naturally. Through his direction of the New York Philharmonic's annual Horizons festivals, Druckman has become a prime mover in the new romanticism. His pedigree, like Rochberg's, is impeccably northeastern; it includes study with Vincent Persichetti and the late Peter Mennin at the Juilliard School in New York and with Aaron Copland at Tanglewood. But a major influence on Druckman's music was his work at the Columbia-Princeton Electronic Music Center, beginning in 1965, which showed him the expressive possibilities of technology when used in conjunction with live performers. In works like the "Animus" chamber series, Druckman's predilection for the dramatic gesture is clear.

The imagination of the performer plays a large role in Druckman's music. The Viola Concerto (1978), for example, demands that the soloist contribute his own temperament to the musical mix, using all his wiles to circumvent "the terrible power of the full orchestra," as the composer has put it. The orchestral piece *Windows* (Pulitzer Prize, 1972) employs carefully defined aleatory, which demands that the musicians listen to one another as they improvise. Druckman has written:

The "Windows" of the title are windows inward. They are points of light which appear as the thick orchestral textures part, allowing us to hear, fleetingly, moments out of time--memories, not of any music that ever existed before, but memories of memories, shadows of ghost. The imagery is as though, having looked at an unpeopled wall of windows, one looks away and senses the afterimage of a face.

Scraps of traditional-sounding music--half-remembered waltzes here, a chorale there--float through the score, glimpsed as the windows open briefly.

Much the same technique informs *Prism*, commissioned by the Baltimore Symphony and first performed by them with Sergiu Commissiona conducting on May 21, 1980. The irresistibly dramatic myth of Medea has long had a potent hold on Druckman's imagination, and he has turned to it repeatedly throughout his career. He addressed the legend in *Lamia*, a 1974 scena for soprano and orchestra, and has returned to it again in his opera in progress, based on a new treatment of the Medea myth, commissioned by the Metropolitan Opera.

Both those works rely on the human voice to carry much of the dramatic burden. *Prism*, on the other hand, makes its effect through exclusively orchestral means. It is scored for large orchestra, including an electric harpsichord and augmented percussion section, and is in three movements, each incorporating music from an earlier Medea opera: Marc-Antoine Charpentier's *Médée*, 1694, Francesco Cavalli's *Il Giasone*, or *Jason*, 1648, and Luigi Cherubini's *Medea*, 1797.

(Editor's note: The *Prism* score recommends that approximately one-third of the strings be placed at the rear of the stage, for a differentiation of sound [which is most apparent on the second movement]. For the recording, this was accomplished by placing them behind and above the rest of the orchestra.) In the opening movement, a jaunty allegretto, the bouncing Baroque line struggles to maintain its profile in the face of periodic outbursts from the twentieth century; Charpentier is occasionally swamped, but it is his fragmentary tune that sticks in the mind's ear.

The second movement, a grave sarabande, introduces Cavalli's stately G-minor melody against an accompaniment that soon loses its way and begins melting into indeterminate pitches, periodically punctuated with incantational chimes. After a while, the music dissolves completely into ornamented

atonal lines that are passed along from one instrument to the next, like some scurrying *Klangfarbenmelodie*; still, the ghost of the Cavalli tune is always present, floating serenely along, until the melody reappears intact near the close. The brisk finale erupts with an insistent repeated-note figuration that will dominate the movement in an almost minimalist way; from it emerges Cherubini's stalking, Beethovenian theme, the first idea's chief competition for the remainder of the work. The struggle between the two kinetically propels Prism toward its cataclysmic conclusion.

—Michael Walsh

Michael Walsh is a 1971 graduate of the Eastman School of Music. He was music critic of the Rochester Democrat and Chronicle and the San Francisco Examiner and was a winner of the ASCAP/Deems Taylor Award for music criticism in 1980. Since 1981 he has been music critic of Time magazine.

Zubin Mehta assumed the post of music director of the New York Philharmonic in the 1978-79 season. With his 1983 contract renewal he became the longest-tenured music director in the orchestra's history. Concurrently he is music director for life of the Israel Philharmonic. Mehta was born in Bombay, India, in 1936, the son of the Bombay Symphony's founder. At sixteen he began studies at Vienna's Academy of Music; he made his conducting debut in Vienna at the age of twenty-five. From 1961 to 1967 he was music director of the Montreal Symphony, and in 1962 he became music director of the Los Angeles Philharmonic. He conducts leading opera companies and orchestras throughout the world. His recordings are on the Columbia, London, Deutsche Grammophon, RCA, Angel, and New World labels.

The New York Philharmonic, founded in 1842, is the oldest symphony orchestra in the United States and one of the oldest in the world. Among its celebrated conductors have been Gustav Mahler, Arturo Toscanini, Artur Rodzinski, Dimitri Mitropoulos, Leonard Bernstein, and Pierre Boulez. The Philharmonic has made hundreds of recordings; the first was for Columbia in 1917. Recordings of the New York Philharmonic are found on the Columbia, London, Deutsche Grammophon, RCA, and New World labels.

Joseph Robinson, a native of Lenoir, North Carolina, studied with Marcel Tabuteau and John Mack. He became principal oboist with the New York Philharmonic in 1978. Prior to that he was principal oboist for six seasons with the Atlanta Symphony. He is a former faculty member of the North Carolina School of the Arts and has participated in the Marlboro, Blossom, Berkshire, and Grand Teton festivals. At the last, he is president of the educational program, the Grand Teton Orchestral Seminar. In 1975 Robinson established the John Mack Oboe Camp in Little Switzerland, North Carolina.

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See also Selected Bibliography, NW 318.

SELECTED DISCOGRAPHY

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Serenata d'estate. Contemporary Chamber Ensemble; Arthur Weisberg conducting. Nonesuch 71220.

String Quartet No. 3. Concord Quartet. Nonesuch 71283.

Violin Concerto. Isaac Stern, violin; Pittsburgh Symphony; Andre Previn conducting. CBS M-35149.

Jacob Druckman

Animus II. Jan DeGaetani, mezzo-soprano; Richard Fitz and Gordon Gottlieb, percussion, tape. CRI S-255.

Aureole. St. Louis Symphony; Leonard Slatkin conducting. New York NW318.

Delizie contente che l'alme beate. Dorian Woodwing Quintet; tape. Vox SVBX-5307.

Incenters. Contemporary Chamber Ensemble; Arthur Weisberg conducting. Nonesuch 71221.

Windows. Orchestra of the 20th Century; Arthur Weisberg conducting. CRI S-457.

See also Selected Discography, NW 318.

New York Philharmonic

Zubin Mehta, conductor

George Rochberg

1- Concerto for Oboe and Orchestra (18:32)

(publ. Theodore Presser Co.)

Joseph Robinson, oboe

Jacob Druckman:

Prism

(publ. Boosey and Hawkes, Inc.)

2- After Marc-Antoine Charpentier (4:35)

3- After Francesco Cavalli (9:30)

4- After Luigi Cherubini (8:10)

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