

GEORGE ROCHBERG
Music for the Magic Theater
Octet, A Grand Fantasia

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George Rochberg (born in 1918) has said that his push toward an atonal world of music was prompted by his reaction to the drama and darkness of World War II, in which he served as a second lieutenant. In the period from 1948 to 1951 this preoccupation was reinforced by a confrontation with two scores by Arnold Schoenberg, the Fourth String Quartet and especially the Violin Concerto, which together constituted a kind of musical epiphany for Rochberg. Then, while he was in Rome on Fulbright and American Academy fellowships in 1950, he met the composer Luigi Dallapiccola, who saw Rochberg's first serial compositions and helped to confirm his orientation. In the years that followed, Rochberg became intrigued with the possibilities inherent in the Second Viennese School, which inspired a series of works, but by 1959 he had begun to search for compositional alternatives to both serialism and chance. In a seminal article written that year, "Indeterminacy in the New Music," Rochberg discussed the ways in which composers who were devoted to the precompositional solutions of total organization paradoxically faced problems similar to those encountered by composers who wished to make chance a principle of composition. Rochberg's argument was anchored in a constructive dilemma shared by many composers of the period, and his article concluded with a plea for a direct and intimate connection between the maker of sounds and the sounds they made. Five years later, he identified and evaluated an astounding state of musical affairs that had emerged in the period after the end of World War II. Pointing out that prior to that time composers had searched out the more profound human states and emotions, in the postwar period he noted the accelerating impact of science and technology on all facets of life as well as their mounting role in the arts, where he felt they had now assumed almost total domination.

After exploring the intricacies of serialism in his Chamber Symphony (1953), Symphony No. 2 (1956), and the Webernesque *Cheltenham Concerto* (1958), in his Second String Quartet with soprano (1961) Rochberg shifted into a new phase, wedding the forces of Schoenberg's Second Quartet to an Ivesian time-space. Here two different and simultaneously deployed tempos were introduced in a specific attempt to loosen the gestural strictures typically associated with serialism. Finally, with his Piano Trio in 1963, he bade farewell to his nontonal, serial world, and in 1965 he turned to an exploration of the technique of assemblage in two chamber works: *Contra mortem et tempus* and *Music for the Magic Theater*. The latter work was commissioned by the Fromm Foundation for the seventy-fifth anniversary of the University of Chicago, and it was premiered on January 24, 1967, with Ralph Shapey conducting.

Rochberg identifies a passage from Hermann Hesse's *Steppenwolf* that can stand behind *Music for the Magic Theater*: "I understood it all. I understood Pablo. I understood Mozart, and somewhere behind me I heard his ghastly laughter. I knew that all the hundred thousand pieces of life's game were in my pocket. A glimpse of its meaning had stirred my reason and I was determined to begin afresh....One day I would be a better hand at the game. One day I would learn to laugh. Pablo was waiting for me, and Mozart too."

The idea of a magic theater afforded the space for a meshing of reality and fantasy that could provide a confrontation between past and future in the search for new apertures to a living present.

Hesse's invitation to Picasso's cubist collage game, which could evoke the world of Mozart, among others, was now bonded with Rochberg's "increasing disbelief in the value of all unitary systems or methods of composing 'contemporary' music." It also led him to embrace "a kind of sound-collage in which the past and present are quite literally juxtaposed" (Rochberg 1992: 92). In this act of retrieval of the whole experience of Western music, Rochberg summons a varied roster of composers and styles for his *Music for the Magic Theater: Mozart (Divertimento, K. 287, Adagio)*, Beethoven (String Quartet, op. 130), Mahler (Symphony No. 9, Adagio), Webern (Concerto for Nine Instruments, op. 24), Varèse (*Déserts*), Stockhausen, (*Zeitmasse Nr. 5*), Miles Davis (*Stella by Starlight*), and Rochberg's own String Quartet No. 2 and Sonata-Fantasia for solo piano. Somewhat surprisingly, Rochberg has explained that his choices were not totally random, and that he had been drawn to each of these quotations because they shared a three-tone, descending, half-step progression.

Despite sharp contrasts and what some might take for a complete absence of logic, Rochberg combines his materials in such a manner as to suggest their inevitable association in a dreamscape that is paradoxically anchored and realistic. Philosophical perspectives, however, raised technical problems such as "how to move from one epoch to another, how to 'modulate' from one musical syntax to another without creating a pastiche of 'styles.'" Pitting different dialects against each other both successively and simultaneously as well as at different speeds in a fashion that he has described as cinematic, Rochberg once again recalls not only his earlier experience with Ives, but also the aesthetic of the Cubists and their allies in the world of music during the first decades of the twentieth century. The practical result is a score that poses a special challenge to the performer, since much of the notation is unmetered although visually proportional. And the composer has warned in the preface to the score that the conductor cannot simply beat time, but must convey the pace and direction of the music through a variety of signs and gestures.

Although the work is not a theatrical work, it is cast in three parts or acts, the first and last encasing an elaboration of the Adagio from Mozart's *Divertimento*, K. 287 for strings and two horns, now recast as a concerto for piano and solo violin. The piano part, however, frequently exhibits a silent left hand and newly composed figurations confined to the right, and the violin part repeatedly projects Mozart's material an octave higher, foreshadowing the ethereal first violin part in the slow movement of Rochberg's Third String Quartet of 1972. Further amplifications of Mozart's original ensemble are provided by the addition of oboe, clarinet, bassoon, trombone, and tuba. The subtitle, "for a chamber ensemble of 15 players" recalls Schoenberg's Chamber Symphony, op. 9, for fifteen soloists, and more particularly Berg's Chamber Concerto for violin, piano and thirteen instruments. A 1969 version for small orchestra did not change the character of the whole, Rochberg's augmentation being merely the use of the full string section and a call for four instead of two horns.

While in the second movement the intermittent transferral of Mozart's original string material to the horns, oboe, or the piano can be viewed as a kind of *Klangfarben* arrangement akin to Webern's treatment of Bach's six-voice ricercare from the *Musical Offering* (1935) or Stravinsky's more recent recomposition for instruments of three madrigals of Gesualdo in his *Monumentum* of 1960, Rochberg's circumspect metamorphosis more readily recalls the Russian composer's 1955 rescoring of Bach's *Vom Himmel hoch da komm' ich her* organ variations (BWV 769) for orchestra and unison chorus. Defending the subtlety of approach in his own work of 1965, Rochberg conceded that "People who don't understand think it's by Mozart." The same misunderstanding had attended

Stravinsky's reworking of Pergolesi in *Pulcinella* and Tchaikovsky in *The Fairy's Kiss* as early as the 1920s.

Rochberg continued his reevaluation of the musical past in a series of works, including *Nach Bach* of 1966 (after J. S. Bach's *Partita No. 6*) and the Third String Quartet of 1972 (in the "styles" of Beethoven and Mahler). With *Ricordanza* for cello and piano, also in 1972, Rochberg focused on Beethoven's Cello Sonata, op. 102, as a point of departure to a Romantic world of music that never was. Inherent in all of these works is the composer's reply to a question which he himself posed in 1969: "Why does a collage or an assemblage need to be created from junk? Why not the opposite?" In such a query we sense Rochberg's relation both to the Modernist past as well as to the Postmodernist present. For despite Rochberg's personal battle with Modernism--and seemingly as much with Kurt Schwitters' *Merzbilder* or junk collages, as with the Darmstadt serialists, the emphasis that he places upon the proportions and mode of critique of received material, more than upon the specific models themselves, links him directly to the aesthetic of Picasso, Stravinsky, and Berg.

Rochberg's fleeting references to Webern, Varèse, and Mahler in the first movement of *Music for the Magic Theater* are probably less unsettling, however, than their displacement by a wholesale citation of Mozart's *Divertimento* in the second. In this Rochberg appears as the direct heir to the world of Charles Ives, many of whose works were published or were recorded for the first time in the decade immediately preceding Rochberg's turn away from serialism (for example, Ives's Third Symphony, recorded by Richard Bales in 1950 and by Howard Hanson in 1957; and his Second Symphony, recorded by Leonard Bernstein in 1960). Then in 1965, the year in which Rochberg composed his *Music for the Magic Theater*, Ives's Fourth Symphony appeared in an edition by John Kirkpatrick and a recording by Leopold Stokowski. The aesthetic distance between the last of these works in particular and Rochberg's new direction is not far. But it should also be remembered that in a somewhat more discrete fashion during the same period Stravinsky had also continued to rework the old masters (Bach in 1955, and Gesualdo, in 1960) even as he flirted with the most abstract premises of serialism (*Tbreini*, in 1957, and *Movements*, in 1959).

Although Rochberg's solution could not be mistaken for his predecessors', many of the masters of Modernity had repeatedly charted the viability of a pluralistic discourse in matters of "style." Now, a related attitude was in the process of being formulated for a Postmodern age that lay just ahead, and Rochberg's role in these developments can hardly be overestimated. Like the German Bernd Alois Zimmermann, who was exactly Rochberg's age and who had recently articulated the aesthetic of pluralism and quotation in several works including *Monologe* (1964) for two pianos and an opera, *Die Soldaten* (1958-64), Rochberg understood that "The art of combination is not a theory. It is an attitude." Reflecting on the fundamental question of originality that attends the collage aesthetic and noting that "The copyright law was designed for the nineteenth century," he pondered the contemporary artist's dilemma with the question "How do you pay royalties to the collective unconscious?" (Rochberg 1984: 160).

Rochberg was to pose the question repeatedly in the years that followed, and in the process he reassessed the familiar and recurring dictum that tradition serves not as a straitjacket, but rather as a path to creative freedom. In his *Octet, A Grand Fantasia* for flute, clarinet, horn, violin, viola, cello, bass, and piano of 1980, the composer adopted the mixed wind and string octet, an ensemble with a venerable tradition from the time of Schubert (clarinet, horn, bassoon, 2 violins, viola, cello, and

bass) and Spohr (clarinet, 2 horns, violin, 2 violas, cello, and bass). And in his designation of the work as a "Grand Fantasia," Rochberg emphasized the work's formal freedom as well as the premium placed upon gesture and the transformation of motivic content. Commissioned by the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center in New York, the work was premiered at Alice Tully Hall on April 27, 1980. Having recently completed his so-called "Concord String Quartets" (Nos. 3-6) in 1977-78, wherein he continued to investigate the possibility of coexistence between atonal chromaticism and tonal diatonicism, in his *Octet* Rochberg attempted to capture a musical diction that could promote "a fusion of atonal harmonic means with the directionality of tonal principles derived from the major-minor system" (Rochberg 1992: 103-104). He now advanced an interpenetration of opposing systems with the prospect of yielding fresh perspectives and forwarding the perennial search for a unified cosmos in a pluralistic postmodern world. During the past twenty-five years Rochberg's example has emboldened countless composers both young and old to use their ears and their hearts, to engage their intuition alongside a vigorous intellect, and to resist an authoritarian approach to composition that demands capitulation either to a theoretical system or to an aesthetic label. Few artists of his age have exhibited such courage or such a remarkable catalogue of music.

—Glenn Watkins

Glenn Watkins is the Earl V. Moore Distinguished Professor of Music at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor. He is also the author of *Gesualdo: The Man and His Music*, *Soundings: Music in the Twentieth Century*, and *Pyramids at the Louvre*.

SELECTED DISCOGRAPHY

Between Two Worlds (Ukiyo-e III): Five Images for Flute and Piano. Sue Ann Kahn, Andrew Willis. CRI C 531.

Blake Songs for soprano and chamber ensemble. Jan De Gaetani, Arthur Weisberg. Nonesuch 71302.

La Bocca della verità for oboe and piano. James Ostryniec, Charles Wuorinen. CRI 423, ACS 6013.

Caprice Variations for Unaccompanied Violin. Twenty-three variations, DG 415484, Gidon Kremer; complete, MHS 3719, Zvi Zeitlin.

Carnival Music for Piano. J. McCabe. Continuum 2-CCD 1028/1029.

Concerto for Oboe and Orchestra. Joseph Robinson, oboe; New York Philharmonic, Zubin Mehta, conductor. New World NW 335-2.

Concerto for Violin and Orchestra. Isaac Stern, violin; Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra, André Previn, conductor. CBS M-35149.

Contra mortem et tempus for flute, clarinet, violin, and piano. Aeolian Chamber Players. CRI 231; ACS 6013.

Duo Concertante for violin and cello. Mark Sokol, Norman Fischer. CRI 337; ACS 6013.

Piano Quartet for piano, violin, viola, and cello. The American Chamber Players. Koch International Classics 3-7027-2.

Ricordanza (Soliloquy) for cello and piano. Norman Fischer, George Rochberg. CRI 337; ACS 6013.

Serenata d'estate for flute, harp, guitar, and string trio. Contemporary Chamber Ensemble, Arthur Weisberg, conductor. Elektra/Nonesuch 79222-2-J

Slow Fires of Autumn for flute and harp. Carol Wincenc, Nancy Allen. CRI 436; ACS 6013.

Sonata for violin and piano. M. Bachmann, J. Klibonoff. Connoisseur Society CD 4178.

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

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String Quartet No. 7 with baritone. Leslie Guinn, Concord String Quartet. Nonesuch H-78017.

To the Dark Wood for woodwind quintet. The Pennsylvania Quintet. Centaur CRC 2085.

Trio for clarinet, horn, piano. Larry Combs, Gail Williams, Mary Ann Covert. Crystal C 731.

Twelve Bagatelles for solo piano. David Burge, Advance FGR-3.

Ukiyo-e (Pictures of the Floating World) for solo harp. Marcella DeCray. Grenadilla 1063; Susan Allen. Arch S-1787.

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GEORGE ROCHBERG, born in Paterson, New Jersey in 1918, began his studies in composition at the Mannes School of Music. After serving in World War II, he resumed them at the Curtis Institute of Music. He taught at the Curtis Institute from 1948 to 1954. In 1960 Mr. Rochberg joined the faculty of the University of Pennsylvania, where he served as chairman of the Department of Music until 1968. He retired from teaching in 1983 as Emeritus Annenberg Professor of the Humanities.

THE NEW YORK CHAMBER ENSEMBLE, a collaboration of fifteen musicians under the baton of conductor Stephen Rogers Radcliffe, presents over two hundred formal concerts, radio broadcasts, and educational programs each season. The Ensemble's repertory includes works from the eighteenth through the twentieth century, including Brahms, Beethoven, and Bruckner. They have worked closely with Ned Rorem, Joan Tower, and George Rochberg. The Ensemble presents an annual concert series in New York City and is heard regularly over National Public Radio.

STEPHEN ROGERS RADCLIFFE, made his Lincoln Center conducting debut at the age of twenty-six with Metropolitan Opera sopranos Jan DeGaetani and Dawn Upshaw. Mr. Radcliffe is Music Director of the New York Chamber Ensemble and Artistic Director of the Cape May Music Festival. A student of Leonard Bernstein, Franco Ferrara, and Gustav Meier, he was a prize winner at the 1988 Toscanini International Conductor's Competition. Mr. Radcliffe has conducted at the Tanglewood and Aspen Music Festivals as well as at the Accademia Musicale Chigiana in Siena, Italy, and the Azila Music Festival in Morocco.

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CHAMBER MUSIC OF GEORGE ROCHBERG

80462-2

The New York Chamber Ensemble

Stephen Rogers Radcliffe, Conductor

GEORGE ROCHBERG (b. 1918)

Music for the Magic Theater (1965)

(publ. Theodore Presser Co.)

Act I: in which the present and the past are all mixed up...and it is difficult to decide or to know where reality is...

Act II: in which the past haunts us with its nostalgic beauty...and calls to us from the deeps of inner spaces of heart and mind...but the past is all shallow and dream-insubstantial...and we can't hold onto it because the present is too pressing...

Act III: in which we realize that only the present is really real...because it is all we have...but in the end it, too, is shallow and dream...and disappears...into what?

Octet; A Grand Fantasia (1980)

(publ. Theodore Presser Co.)

1. Declamando, tragico
2. Largo; recitando
3. Tranquillo; flessibile; rubato molto
4. Allegro marziale; rigoroso
5. Adagio molto - Tempo primo
6. Lento; tranquillo
7. Cadenza (horn and violin)
8. Cadenza (flute and viola)
9. Cadenza (clarinet and cello)
10. Molto adagio
11. Allegro marziale; rigoroso
12. Largo, recitando

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