

**GEORGE ROCHBERG**  
**String Quartets**

**New World Records 80551**

Some revolutions are noisy affairs from the start. The riot with which the Parisians greeted the premiere of Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring* comes immediately to mind (although it was Nijinsky's wildly modern choreography more than Stravinsky's music that provoked the brouhaha). But other revolutions start quietly and get noisier only with time. Twenty years after the event, the first performances of George Rochberg's Concord Quartets appear to have been the beginnings of that second kind of revolution. At their New York premiere on January 22, 1979, Leonard Bernstein embraced the composer with his legendary bear hug and called the quartets masterpieces. But other critics weren't so sure. Most are now. In those and other works, Rochberg boldly challenged the music world's status quo, and his challenge has resonated through the ensuing decades, shifting the profile of modern music at the century's close into a shape that thirty years ago would have been unthinkable.

In the decades following the Second World War "progressive" composition generally was pulled in two directions: toward "serialism" and "chance." The former was a way of composing in which the twelve pitches of the octave are organized into melodic sets and presented forwards, backwards, upside-down, transposed, and fractured. The serialism of Anton von Webern (1883–1945) was the first to exert its dominance. Webern's teacher, Arnold Schoenberg (1874–1951), is credited with inventing serialism, but in the decade before his death, Webern refined twelve-tone composition into a means of producing music of the highest delicacy and most astringent intellectualism. By the 1950s, Webern had replaced both Stravinsky and Schoenberg as the brightest star in the twentieth-century musical firmament, and his works became the model for all "smart" composition.

There were many reasons for serial composition's attraction for composers. One lay in the fact that the music and the mystique of Romanticism had been so appropriated by the Nazis that many intellectuals simply wanted it to perish in the *Götterdämmerung* of Nazi Berlin. Serialism, and the distance it established between cerebral composition and emotional response, was seen as a language purified of the kinds of excesses that had led to the horrors of the mid-century.

Another reason for serialism's attractiveness lay in the fact that, at least in America, composers were increasingly university professors, and not performers. The star departments in American universities were the science departments, and the most acclaimed faculty were physicists. The language of science is mathematics, and it was only natural that composers/professors would find themselves gravitating to the lingua franca of their locale. The professors didn't compose for audiences, but for faculty peers (and tenure and promotion committees). Serial music, with its sets, subsets, graphs, and pseudo-algebraic incantations, was a perfect artistic language for such a society—indeed, the music didn't even have to be defended by the way it sounded at all, but rather could be justified by the numerical and graphic brilliance of its description.

Serial music also just looked modern. Webern's works were like the buildings of the new International style, bare of ornament, sleek and lean. Later composers would preserve that austerity, but would make the music look much more complicated, the kind of thing you might think a physicist would understand. But the most important reason for the style's attraction lay in the fact that, at least in Webern's hands, serialism could be used to make extraordinarily beautiful and elegant works of art.

While—at least to some—the folksy Americanism of Copland seemed contrived, the traditional tonality of Menotti little more than kitsch, and the modal twists of Britten just Anglican obscurantism, serialism looked like an adventurous way to the music of the future. With typical bluntness (and brutality) the young French composer Pierre Boulez wrote, "Any musician who has not felt . . . the necessity of the twelve-tone language is of no use!"

At the same time as Boulez's malediction, a second—and very different—way to this music of the future was being championed by the Californian John Cage. In his 1951 *Imaginary Landscape No. 4*, Cage wrote for twenty-four performers "playing" twelve radios, each radio tuned to a different station. The music was whatever "chanced" to be broadcast at that moment; no two performances of the piece were alike. Just as serial music appealed to the culture of science, Cage's "aleatoric" pieces appealed to the strong antinomianism of the Beat Generation, and their hippie successors. Music, like tie-dye T-shirts, could be anything thing you wanted it to be. It just had "to be."

George Rochberg, born July 5, 1918, established his career as a major figure in the serial camp. The son of Ukrainian Jews who came to the United States in 1912 and 1913 (and thus part of that remarkable generation of East European emigrants and their children—including Aaron Copland, Marc Blitzstein, George and Ira Gershwin, Leonard Bernstein, and Irving Berlin—who propelled American music into the forefront of international artistic significance), Rochberg began composing when he was 10. He attended Montclair State Teacher's College, and upon graduation in 1939 went on to study at the Mannes School of Music in New York. Soon after his marriage to the writer Gene Rosenfield in 1941, Rochberg was drafted into the army. He was commissioned a second lieutenant in the infantry (90th Division) and saw active duty in Europe. Although he was wounded in the leg during the Normandy invasion (he was later awarded the Purple Heart with Oak Leaf Cluster), he recovered sufficiently to participate in Patton's famous relief of the U.S. First Army in the Battle of the Bulge. The war had a tremendous effect upon Rochberg. Although he had wanted to be a composer since his youth, the destruction that he witnessed and in which he participated propelled him to consciously devote himself to a life of creation.

Upon his discharge, Rochberg returned to America renewed by this new conviction. He was admitted to the Curtis Institute and later to the University of Pennsylvania. His works quickly gained attention, and in 1950 he left for Italy, having won both the Rome Prize and a Fulbright fellowship. In Italy Rochberg became friends with the anti-Fascist composer Luigi Dallapiccola (1904–1975), then the leader of the Italian serialist avant-garde. Rochberg became convinced of the "inevitability" of twelve-tone composition, and began writing his first serial compositions. He later wrote of this period that he felt himself "living at the very edge of the musical frontier, of music itself."

Upon returning to Philadelphia, Rochberg published the first study of twelve-tone music, received awards from the Guggenheim and Koussevitsky foundations, and was appointed to the faculties of Curtis and the University of Pennsylvania. His works were performed by the country's major orchestras and chamber music ensembles, and he supported his compositions with highly regarded and influential essays. By his mid-forties, Rochberg was among the most successful artists of his generation. And he was a thoroughly "modern," that is, serial, artist.

In 1961 the Rochbergs' seventeen-year-old son, Paul, fell ill with a brain tumor. He died three years later, throwing his father into despair. Confronted with his son's death, Rochberg struggled to give that

tragedy some meaning through his music, but the serialism upon which his career had been built he now found empty and meaningless. It was a language that could not bear the weight of his sorrow.

In the next decade, Rochberg struggled to find a musical syntax suitable for that sorrow. Both that struggle and its resolution are recorded in a set of string quartets he wrote for the resident quartet at Dartmouth College, the Concord Quartet. The ensemble first requested a quartet from the composer in 1971 upon a commission from the Naumburg foundation. This, Rochberg's Third Quartet, was first performed on May 15, 1972, in New York's Alice Tully Hall. Five years later, the group returned with a second request, but now asked for a set of quartets instead of just one. Rochberg sketched a series of three quartets simultaneously. The first quartet was completed on December 18, 1977 (String Quartet No. 4), the second on March 25, 1978 (String Quartet No. 5), and the third (String Quartet No. 6) on August 14, 1978. They received their premiere in Philadelphia in January 1979. These three quartets have become known as the Concord Quartets.

There were no riots at Rochberg premieres, but tongues did begin to wag. These were not serial works. No were they all even atonal. Rochberg abutted tonal movements with atonal ones. He was even audacious enough to make the third movement of the sixth quartet a variation upon Pachelbel's famous *Canon in D*. It might have been acceptable if Rochberg, like Cage, had simply adopted aleatoric techniques, but using tonality was a gross breach of etiquette. Strict serialist composers—his old allies—began to attack Rochberg's new tonal works. The works were cowardly and cheap. Rochberg had betrayed the "progress" of music. His tonal harmonies were "Victorian" (the period's ultimate derision). Rochberg had betrayed his "moral vision." Some critics even suggested fraud. The consensus was that Rochberg had replaced the artistic integrity of his earlier music with a kind of delusional nostalgia. He was no longer a progressive artist but a recalcitrant crank. Andrew Porter, writing in *The New Yorker*, dismissed his work as "almost irrelevant."

The critics' animus was justified, but not for the reasons they gave. These quartets were not cowardly or cheap. They were not—nor did Rochberg intend them to be—mere imitations of previous styles, as any investigation of the scores would show. The real scandal lay not in Rochberg's rejection of doctrinaire serialism or aleatoric composition, but rather in his far more radical rejection of the whole philosophical foundation of the postwar avant-garde. The Concord Quartets were the manifesto of a revolt.

Although they represented ostensibly contrary styles, postwar serial music and aleatoric music were twin utterances of the same creed. They were ways to suppress, and if possible suffocate, the individuality of the artist. In the strictest serialism, the personality is incapacitated by the imposition of mechanistic devices, the individuality of the artist disappearing into the operations of the machine. The music is the way it is because this is the way the machine makes it to be. In aleatoric music, the artist loses his unique voice within the babble of random happenings. There is no difference between music and non-music, between the excellent and the tawdry, and, ultimately, between being and nothingness.

It was this descent into artistic nihilism that Rochberg rejected, and it was this kind of music that he found incapable of expressing either the depth of his despair or the hope of his vision. Unlike Stravinsky, who fundamentally viewed his music as entertainment, and Cage, for whom music was a kind of self-effacing game, Rochberg had always taken a prophetic view of his art. Like Beethoven (and Schoenberg himself), Rochberg believed that art had the noble purpose of lifting humanity beyond

itself to a more exalted, and eventually metaphysical, height. Twenty years after he had consciously dedicated himself to a life of creation, that decision was forcing him to reevaluate his art and to challenge the artistic establishment of which he had been so successful a member.

Part of that reevaluation led Rochberg to re-embrace tonality and discard serialism. But while Rochberg rejected serialism (his last serial work was a trio for violin, cello, and piano completed in 1963), he did not reject the atonal composition out of which serialism had grown and which characterized its harmonic syntax. Instead, Rochberg began to construct his music out of both tonal and atonal languages. This decision had two important musical consequences. First, by mixing harmonic languages Rochberg dramatically reinterpreted the notion of stylistic uniformity that had been a hallmark of the Western aesthetic since antiquity. He refused to abandon "past" musical styles, insisting that they continue to live—transformed by his individual artistry but recognizable nonetheless—in his new art. Second, he had found a solution to the dissonance problem that had plagued art music since the advent of atonal composition. Musical propulsion, or forward movement, was created by the tension caused by harmonic dissonance and its expected relaxation caused by harmonic consonance. This ebb and flow of dissonance and consonance gave Western music its fundamental character. But, in twentieth century atonal composition, dissonance so thoroughly pervaded works that they appeared to be motionless. Without the corresponding levels of consonance to relieve the tension typical of atonal harmonic syntax, the pieces frequently became static, and eventually, dull. By juxtaposing tonal movements with atonal movements, Rochberg, in a linear manner, extended the definition of consonance and dissonance to include not just individual sonorities, but entire movements as well.

This was the contemporary language that could both bear the weight of his sorrow and point to transcendence. And it was a language that was immediately communicable to Rochberg's listeners. Further, unlike either strict serialism or aleatoric composition, it was a language that was pointedly individualistic.

All of these things Rochberg introduced in his Third Quartet but brought to tighter focus in the set of Concord Quartets. The Third Quartet is a long, five-movement work. Both the first (Introduzione: Fantasia) and the final movements present Rochberg's aesthetic in microcosm. In the first he superimposes six dramatically contrasting musical gestures—birdsong-like writing, traditional tonality, atonal expressionism, and so forth—in an eighteen-section movement. In the fifth, he contrasts atonal, expressionistic sections with tonal—although chromatic—movements. The second and fourth movements are marches, while the third movement is a theme and variations reminiscent (but not in the style of) late Beethoven.

As in the Third Quartet, Rochberg opens the Fourth Quartet with a highly charged atonal Fantasia full of expressionistic rage. In the second movement, Fugue, which is tonal, he resolves that rage into the relative quiet of sad introspection. The third movement is a Serenade (which the critic Theodore Libbey insightfully described as "nostalgia deepened by torment"), while in the fourth movement Rochberg returns to the world of the first with another Fantasia.

The Fifth Quartet's first movement comes as a bit of a shock. It has a sparkling A Major sonata form (but with only the exposition's second section repeated). The second movement (in E flat minor and marked *mesto*, "sad") is a series of tightly constructed canons, which more than anything else is

reminiscent of Bartok's almost engineered forms. The third movement is a short scherzo in A minor. The fourth movement, Serenade, is a through-composed atonal movement which Rochberg contrasts with the traditional Rondo fifth movement, but a rondo where each of the appearances of the main theme are subtly altered by changes of accompaniment, tessitura, or key.

Rochberg opens the Sixth Quartet with a through-composed atonal movement. He follows this with a tonal scherzo, but a scherzo that descends from B to B-flat major. The third movement is a set of variations upon Pachelbel's *Canon in D*. Here, Rochberg writes a deeply moving set of variations that become so chromatic as they progress that Rochberg strains the furthest limits of tonal syntax. He follows this with a short atonal Serenade. The final movement is the set's longest. Here Rochberg writes an extended sonata form movement in G major in which, almost with knowing winks to his audience, contains quotes from Mozart's 1782 14th Quartet in G, Schubert's 1826 15th Quartet in G, and snatches from the first movement of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony.

Yes, Rochberg's musical language is personal, yet it is also the continuation of a tradition shared by those earlier masters, Rochberg himself, and Rochberg's contemporary listeners.

—Michael Linton

Michael Linton *is on the faculty of Middle Tennessee State University. A former student of Lukas Foss and Krzysztof Penderecki, Mr. Linton is a composer and twice been twice awarded National Endowment for the Humanities fellowships.*

*(Portions of the Mr. Linton's notes first appeared in the June/July 1998 issue of First Things.)*

The **Concord String Quartet** (Mark Sokol, Andrew Jennings, violins; John Kochanowski, viola; Norman Fischer, cello) was founded in 1971. That same year it won the Naumburg Award for chamber music. The quartet developed a reputation as a strong advocate of American music. They were closely associated with the work of George Rochberg; Lukas Foss, Ben Johnston, and Jacob Druckman also wrote for the quartet.

### **SELECTED DISCOGRAPHY**

*Bagatelles*. Martha Thomas, piano. ACA Digital Recording CM 20044.

Concerto for Oboe and Orchestra. Joseph Robinson, oboe; New York Philharmonic, Zubin Mehta conducting. New World 80335-2.

*Music for the Magic Theater*. The New York Chamber Ensemble, Stephen Rogers Radcliffe conducting. New World 80462-2.

*Octet; A Grand Fantasia*. The New York Chamber Ensemble, Stephen Rogers Radcliffe conducting. New World 80462-2.

*Summer 1990*. Beaux Arts Trio. Philips 438866-2.

*To the Dark*. Pennsylvania Wind Quintet. Centaur CRC 2085.

### **SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY**

Dixon, Joan DeVree. *George Rochberg: A Bio-Bibliographic Guide to His Life and Works*. Stuyvesant, N.Y.: Pendragon Press, 1992.

Dufallo, Richard. *Trackings: Composers Speak with Richard Dufallo*. New York: Oxford University Press,

1989.

- Gagne, Cole and Tracy Caras. *Soundpieces: Interviews with American Composers*. Metuchen, N. J.: Scarecrow Press, 1982.
- Porter, Andrew. *Music of Three More Seasons, 1977–80*. New York: Knopf, 1981.
- Reise, Jay. “Rochberg the Progressive.” *Perspectives of New Music*, xix (1980–81): 395–407.
- Ringer, Alexander. “The Music of George Rochberg.” *The Musical Quarterly*, lii (1966): 409–430.
- Rochberg, George. *The Aesthetics of Survival: A Composer’s View of Twentieth-Century Music*. William Bolcom, ed. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1984.
- Watkins, Glenn. *Pyramids at the Louvre: Music, Culture, and Collage from Stravinsky to the Postmodernists*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1994.

Producer: Joanna Nickrenz (Quartet No. 3); Sam Parkins (Quartet Nos. 4, 5, 6)

Engineer: Elite Recordings Inc. (Quartet No. 3); Johnnie Cue (Quartet Nos. 4, 5, 6)

Editing: Joanna Nickrenz (Quartet No. 3)

Reissue producer: Jon M. Samuels (Quartet Nos. 4, 5, 6)

Reissue engineer: Michael Drexler (Quartet Nos. 4, 5, 6)

Digital mastering: Dirk Sobotka, SoundByte Productions, Inc., NYC

Cover art: Philip Taaffe, *Composition with Ornamental Fragments I* (1998). Mixed media on board, 32” x 24”. Thanks to Raymond Foye Ltd. Fine Art Services.

Cover design: Bob Defrin Design Inc., NYC

**This recording was made possible with grants from The Aaron Copland Fund for Music and Francis Goelet**

FOR NEW WORLD RECORDS:

Herman E. Krawitz, President; Paul Marotta, Managing Director; Paul M. Tai, Director of Artists and Repertory; Lisa Kahlden, Director of Information Technology; Virginia Hayward, Administrative Associate; Mojisola Oké, Bookkeeper; Ben Schmich, Production Associate.

RECORDED ANTHOLOGY OF AMERICAN MUSIC, INC., BOARD OF TRUSTEES:  
David Hamilton, Treasurer; Milton Babbitt; Emanuel Gerard; Adolph Green; Rta Hauser; Herman E. Krawitz; Arthur Moorhead; Elizabeth Ostrow; Don Roberts; Patrick Smith; Frank Stanton.

Francis Goelet (1926-1998), Chairman

© 1973 Nonesuch Records (String Quartet No. 3)

Licensed by BMG Entertainment. © 1982 BMG Entertainment (String Quartets Nos. 4-6)

© 1999 Recorded Anthology of American Music, Inc. All rights reserved. Printed in USA.

**GEORGE ROCHBERG (b. 1918) 80551-2**  
**STRING QUARTETS 3, 4, 5, 6**  
**CONCORD STRING QUARTET**

**Disc 1**

Quartet No. 3 (publ. Galaxy Music Corp.)

1 Part A (9:56)

- I Introduzione: Fantasia
- II March
- 2 Part B (15:55)
- III Variations
- 3 Part C (21:32)
- IV March
- V Finale: Scherzos and Serenades

Quartet No. 4 (publ. Theodore Presser Co.)

- 4 Fantasia (Ironica) (4:31)
- 5 Fuga (8:37)
- 6 Serenade (8:17)
- 7 Fantasia (Serioso) (6:14)

## **Disc 2**

Quartet No. 5 (publ. Theodore Presser Co.)

- 1 Molto allegro marziale (6:24)
- 2 Mesto (7:00)
- 3 Scherzo (2:25)
- 4 Serenade (4:47)
- 5 Rondo-Finale (5:43)

Quartet No. 6 (publ. Theodore Presser Co.)

- 6 Fantasia (4:26)
- 7 Scherzo—Humoresque (6:34)
- 8 Variations (on Pachelbel *Canon*) (8:18)
- 9 Serenade (2:44)
- 10 Introduction and Finale (12:41)

Concord String Quartet: Mark Sokol, Andrew Jennings, violins; John Kochanowski, viola; Norman Fischer, cello

Quartet No. 3 originally released as Nonesuch H 71283. Quartets Nos. 4, 5, 6 originally released as RCA ARL2-4198.

**NO PART OF THIS RECORDING MAY BE COPIED OR REPRODUCED WITHOUT  
WRITTEN PERMISSION OF R.A.A.M., INC.**

**NEW WORLD RECORDS**  
16 Penn Plaza #835  
NEW YORK, NY 10001-1820  
TEL 212.290-1680 FAX 212.290-1685  
Website: [www.newworldrecords.org](http://www.newworldrecords.org)  
email: [info@newworldrecords.org](mailto:info@newworldrecords.org)

**LINER NOTES © Recorded Anthology of American Music, Inc.**

