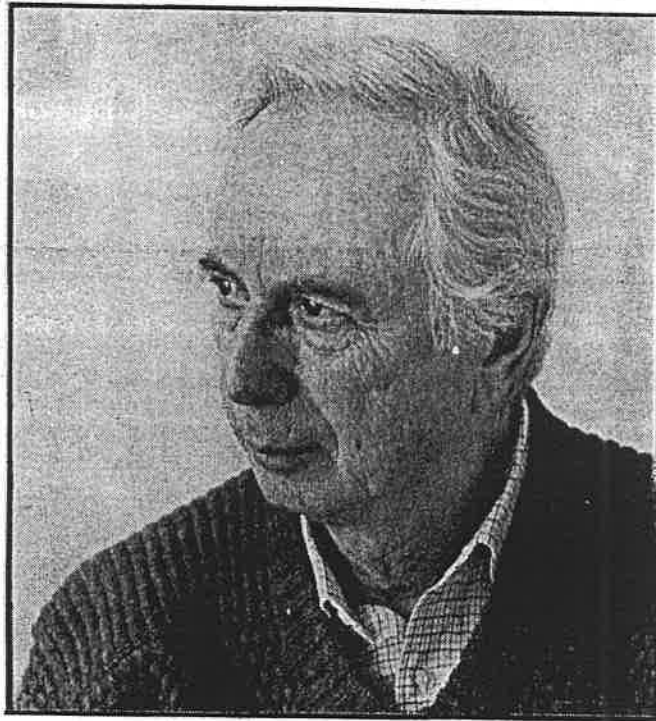


George Rochberg

Out of Your Mind-Set

BY KYLE GANN



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Why do you want to write music nobody can love? Do you hate yourself? Or do you hate them?

—George Rochberg

The late 20th century has produced better composers than George Rochberg, but none who has more eloquently symbolized the era's inner conflict. At one time this University of Pennsylvania professor wrote the best 12-tone music in America. The transparent textures of his *Serenata d'Estate*, *Sonata-Fantasia*, and *Second Symphony* shine more from the lyrical world of Dallapiccola than from Schoenbergian dogma. In 1964, following the death of his son, Rochberg got fed up with dodecaphony's boxed-in realm and championed what was then an aesthetic no-man's-land of Romantic tonality. The *Third through Sixth String Quartets* flung together tonality and atonality, and made disconcertingly explicit references to Beethoven and Mahler. More recent works like the *Fifth Symphony* synthesized a style, though still Romantic, more distinctively his own.

Now Rochberg has collected his essays detailing that odd path under a title I wish he hadn't beaten me to: *The Aesthetics of Survival* (University of Michigan Press, \$19.95). Written between 1955 and 1982, the essays reveal a surprising unity for so convoluted a career, proving that Rochberg's apostasy was no opportunistic ploy, but a response to urges stronger than those that might have steered him toward greater acclaim. Here is an artist out of step with his time, though insightful enough to see through the self-deceits of his colleagues and honest enough to blow the whistle. His musical solutions may never be widely imitated, but his book offers a prolonged look into a remarkably open mind.

Rochberg's target is the incomprehensibility of contemporary music, and his culprit is the devaluation of subjectivity, the overworship of superficially ingested science. The positive note is that he explains the present period as a transition between paradigms, those pervasive models by which music, society, and science are explained. Unable to find nourishment in such journals as *Perspectives of New Music* (where some of these articles

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Such are the incipient paradigms battling to replace the one that died. The first clings to a harmonic conception geared toward climaxes (implied by the tension and release of Western harmony); since Rochberg, many academics have backstroked to Neo-Romanticism after jumping ship. The other is rhythmic, structuring time directly, taking its competing models from jazz, medieval music, every non-Western culture under the sun, and the American experimental tradition itself. Rochberg is simply from the wrong generation (and the wrong side of the tracks) to consider the latter. But what's refreshing is that, realizing there is no third point from which to short-circuit circular argument, he defends his side without twisting the ideas of his opponents or sinking to insults. He shies from suggesting that a new model could sprout from either minimalism or non-European influence, but the groundwork he lays—based on such criteria as continuity, memory, and aural depth—is open enough to include the possibility. Retreat, he implicitly concedes, isn't the only way out.

In fact, few academics have been so sensitive to the "false sense of security and insularity" granted the composer by a university job. In "The Composer in Academia: Reflections on a Theme of Stravinsky," he quotes Stravinsky's doubts about whether teaching is a suitable secondary activity for creative work, but also his dictum that "there is no pattern for the real composer." Competing as a performer, he concedes at once, is realistically impossible in the overspecialization of today's star system. The problem of the university composer, Rochberg claims, lies not in the teaching, but in self-identification with the institution. The solution? *Resistance*. The composer must identify himself as an artist, not an academic, know the difference, build "an intensely private world" in which to do his real work, and arm himself against the trap of musical fad.

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culprit is the devaluation of subjectivity, the overworship of superficially ingested science. The positive note is that he explains the present period as a transition between paradigms, those pervasive models by which music, society, and science are explained. Unable to find nourishment in such journals as *Perspectives of New Music* (where some of these articles first appeared), he draws his ammunition largely from physics, cultural analysis, and psychology, and his best essay, "The Fantastic and the Logical" (1973), extends a political/scientific analogy from T. S. Kuhn's *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. Conceptual shifts in science and politics, Kuhn argues, produce periods of "pronounced professional insecurity." Society splits into competing camps, one sector defending the existing mindset, others fighting for new ones. And since scientific argument can only take place *within* a paradigm, a choice can't be made under normal evaluative procedures; argument *between* paradigms can only be circular.

Art, says Rochberg, is "the single human activity that manages to combine the objectivity of science with the subjectivity of politics." Unlike science, art has no external reality against which to test its results, yet art creates objects, transforming "human experiences and capacities into objectified (but not quantified) structures"—nicely put. Following the collapse of the sonata form paradigm that sustained music from Haydn past Webern, composers have lusted after science's factitious certainties, forgetting that even physicists put their reason at the service of intuition and imagination. University composers are most at fault because they fall into the trap of identifying their goals with those of other colleagues, and "feel they must justify their existence, not as artists, but as masters of logical procedures, demonstrable, observable, and (last but not least) teachable." The balance between subjective and objective must be reasserted: "fiction is, after all, a form of truth."

To some extent, Rochberg's gripes are generational. Born in 1918, he is part of

what Dietrich Erdmann (b. 1917) has called the "lost generation," a victim of what Henri Dutilleux (b. 1916) calls the serialists' "aesthetic terrorism." Nevertheless, Rochberg's remarks apply not only to the 12-tone matrix rats from whom he had to defend himself with some professional urgency. As early as 1959 he recognized that both Cage and Boulez represented "an abdication of subjectivity in favor of technical certainty," and unlike most of Cage's critics, he never misrepresents Cage's ideas. Later he might have included early minimalism, whose explicitly predictable processes out-totaled even Boulez's "total organization." More recently, he might have singled out downtown's incomprehensible mirror image of uptown: the game theory pieces, aleatory collages, and "fractal geometry" structures perpetrated in revenge against uptown charges of insufficient gray matter.

No musical system based on precompositional matrices (serial, stochastic, information theory, whatever), Rochberg points out, achieves meaningfulness, because the "music it produces depends for its understanding not on the perceptual functions... but on a post-intellectual comprehension of its externally predetermined rationalizations." (Don't expect Tom Wolfean wit from someone who's trying to persuade Ph.D.s.) "In such cases the 'ear,'" he continues, "has been bypassed and ignored." He cites a Jorge Luis Borges story about a poet who embroidered each of his stanzas with lengthy commentary: "The poet's labor lay not with the poetry, but with the invention of reasons to make the poetry admirable; naturally, this... labor modified the work for him, but not for others." A composer resorts to highfalutin techniques, Rochberg quotes Adorno, "to ensure that his music is immune from any conceivable reproach." The profusion of new shticks has "nothing to do with art, but everything to do with being 'successful' historically or commercially." Such criticisms have hardly decreased in relevance.

What knocks a leg off Rochberg's argument is that he's too close to 18th and 19th century music to always see around it. In the book's weakest article, "The Avant-Garde and the Aesthetics of Survival" (1969), he says that the music of Mozart, Brahms, and Tchaikovsky(!) remains popular because it is the music most analogous to the way our central nervous system works. Quoting John von Neumann's *The Computer and the Brain*, he distinguishes parallel mental operations, in which many pieces of logical information are processed simultaneous-

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ly, from serial operations such as those used by computers, which process quickly one bit at a time. Romantic music, he argues (though not with complete consistency to his source), satisfies the central nervous system by offering parallel musical structures (harmony, polyphony) organized in a serial fashion by melody. If this is true, then what neurological blind spot prevented Monteverdi, or some early Japanese court musician, from coming up with *Swan Lake*?

Here's a deep distinction that may continue to separate uptown from downtown long after 12-tone method and minimalism have been consigned to the dustheap. Music professors, teaching 19th century theory day in and day out, tend to become mesmerized by the Romantic idea of climax, the hierarchical organization of phrases. Cage (for whom Beethoven represents "the most intense lurching of the ship away from its usual even keel") drew a line, and those on the other side of it see Romanticism's up-and-down emotional flow as an aberration in the history of world musics, perhaps even a psychologically unhealthy one. Hierarchies, they feel, are a symptom of the inherent imperialism of the post-Renaissance European mind-set. Where performance practice arises not from voice or winds, but from percussion and rhythm (as in African music, early Cage, and Nancarrow) or the

poser must identify himself as an artist, not an academic, know the difference, build "an intensely private world" in which to do his real work, and arm himself against the trap of musical fad.

In "Reflections on the Renewal of Music," Rochberg arrives at a more sympathetic justification for his stylistic borrowing. Taking his cue from Borges's notion that history consists of "the infinitely varying individual inflections of a universal mind," he calls "narcissistic individualism, which thrives chiefly on the belief in originality and rationalizes the excesses of self-indulgence... a kind of metaphysical cop-out." Ives, when he quoted Beethoven's *Fifth*; Stravinsky, when he appropriated Pergolesi; Webern, when he emulated Heinrich Isaac's *Choralis Constantinus*—they were stealing only from themselves. In short, Rochberg comes to the same conclusion that Cornelius Cardew did, that composers have sold their place in society for the sake of a specious concept of originality. The inconsistency is that while Cardew composed for political use, Rochberg professes to live by Faulkner's "Kilroy was here" concept of art, the romantic idea of an individual leaving his own mark on the world. The marks Rochberg's made haven't always been his own.

It may turn out to be true of Rochberg what has been misstated of Cage, that his music is transcended by his ideas. Unlike Artusi, who opposed Monteverdi in the great paradigmatic shift around 1600, Rochberg's no gloom-and-doomsayer; he not only appreciates the beauty of the previous model, but is optimistic about the "new simplicity which will undoubtedly come." However, he cautions that "ever-increasing acts of self-awareness and... responsibility" are required to bring it to birth, and that we can't escape the spurious mandates of avant-gardism by just playing along. "We are not slaves of history," he exhorts; "we can choose and create our own time." Partly true; from these honest, soul-searching essays one can reconstruct the time Rochberg would have liked to help create, and sense the sadness that it lay outside his abilities to do so.