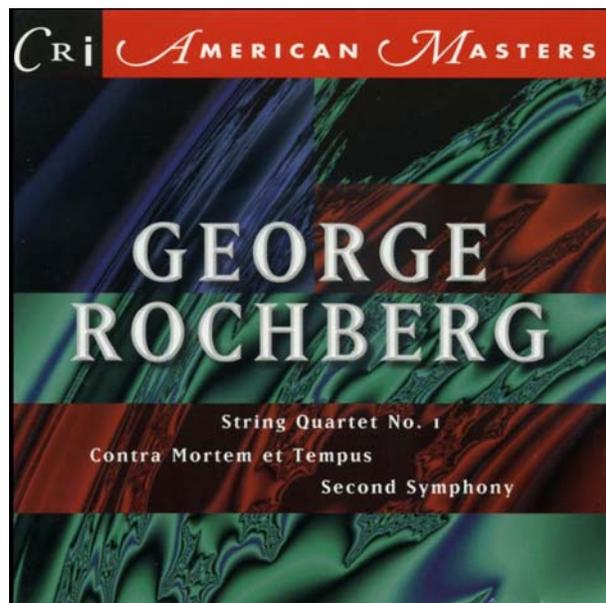


NWCR768

George Rochberg

Volume One



String Quartet No. 1 (1952)	(24:06)
1. Molto adagio	(7:12)
2. Vivace	(3:25)
3. Molto tranquillo	(6:49)
4. Allegro energico	(6:40)
Concord String Quartet: Mark Sokol, violin; Andrew Jennings, violin; John Kochanowski, viola; Norman Fischer, cello	
5. <i>Contra Mortem et Tempus</i> for flute, clarinet,	
6. violin and piano (1965)	(11:31)
Aeolian Quartet of Sarah Lawrence College	
Symphony No. 2 (1955-56)	(29:34)
7. Declamando	(9:01)
8. Allegro scherzoso	(6:54)
9. Molto tranquillo	(7:20)
10. Tempo primo, ma incalzando	(6:19)
New York Philharmonic; Werner Torkanowsky, conductor	

Total playing time: 65:11

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Notes

Few eras of Western music have been so fraught with peril for composers as the second half of the twentieth century. The deaths of Béla Bartók (1945) and Arnold Schoenberg (1951) ushered in an epoch of bewildering stylistic uncertainty and diffusion, even rootlessness. The 1950s and 1960s became decades of exploration, in which the preeminence of serialism (which even the stalwart Igor Stravinsky had taken up by 1954) received serious challenges from a whole host of trends and directions, including aleatoric and chance procedures, performance art, *musique concrète* and other electronic applications, and audacious techniques of collage and “assemblage.” The composers who navigated these uncertain waters most successfully were those who dared to confront the larger artistic issues of the era with directness, honesty, and faith.

Among the Americans who gained prominence around 1950, no composer has been more passionately engaged with these larger issues than George Rochberg. Born in Paterson, N.J., while World War I still raged, he came of age in the midst of World War II (in which he served), and his early career reflects the changing nature of the world order brought about by these two global conflicts. Rochberg’s works up to 1950 show him wrestling with the contradictory influences not only of Hindemith and Bartók but also of Mahler, Schoenberg, Berg, and Anton Webern. During a Fulbright residency at the American Academy in Rome in 1950–51, he began to explore the means of achieving an intensely personal lyricism within the context of atonality, somewhat in the manner of the great Italian serialist Luigi Dallapiccola, whom he befriended at this time. By the mid-50s he had grown into one of the most eloquent serialists of his generation, as attested in the Twelve

Bagatelles for piano (1952), the Chamber Symphony for nine instruments (1953), the *Duo Concertante* for violin and cello (1955), and the *Sonata-fantasia* for piano (1956). He spoke optimistically of the future of dodecaphony: “Schoenberg left much yet to be done,” he wrote in an article “Tradition and Twelve-Tone Music” (1955). “In discovering the principle of the mirrored hexachord he opened a vast unexplored area in which creative personalities can yet stake their claims.” (Like Ives and Cage, Rochberg has helped guide listeners through the treacheries of modern music with prose that is at once engaging and penetrating; seventeen of his essays were published in 1985 as *The Aesthetics of Survival*, edited and introduced by the composer William Bolcom.)

But around 1963 Rochberg’s increasing unease with the Schoenberg aesthetic brought him to an abrupt halt. In a move that the music world would at first scorn—but later follow—he abandoned serialism as a principal means of composition. “By the beginning of the dissatisfied with its inherently narrow terms,” he wrote a decade later. “I found the palette of constant chromaticism increasingly constricting, nor could I accept any longer the limited range of gestures that always seemed to channel the music into some form or other of expressionism. The over-intense manner of serialism and its tendency to inhibit physical pulse and rhythm led me to question a style which made it virtually impossible to express serenity, tranquility, grace, wit, energy. It became necessary to move on.” (This process of “moving on” would continue to take Rochberg into unexplored territory and his neo-Romantic and neo-tonal works of the 1970s and 80s would be heralded as milestones of the post-modernist age—but that is to jump ahead of the music contained in this collection.)

Three major trends of Rochberg's early career are represented on the present disc. The dissonant but not yet serial style of his works up to the early 1950s is represented in the First String Quartet, begun in Rome in 1950 and completed in Philadelphia two years later. The dark *Contra mortem et tempus* (Against Death and Time), written shortly after the death of the composer's twenty-year-old son in 1964, is one of the most potent of his "assemblages"—with its quotations of works by Boulez, Ives, Varèse, Berio, and by Rochberg himself. Finally the Second Symphony (1956) represents the full flowering of his serial mastery; it remains one of the most eloquent expressions of the serialist idea, and one of the undervalued achievements of twentieth-century American symphonic music.

The String Quartet No. 1, completed in 1952, was the first of seven works Rochberg composed in this genre over the course of thirty years—though it was preceded by several early attempts at quartet writing. It received its premiere in New York on January 10, 1953, with the Galimir String Quartet performing on the Composer's Forum Concert. (It was published in 1986 with a revised ending from 1979.) "In composing the quartet," Rochberg has written, "I came closer than ever before to grappling with the rigors of the twelve-tone method without committing myself as I did in the work that followed [i.e., the Second Quartet (1961)]."

In its rhythmic vitality and contrapuntal mastery, the First Quartet bears the stamp of Bartók, though its lyrical strain also reveals the composer's affinities with Dallapiccola and with Berg's *Lyric Suite*. Cast in four sharply delineated movements, it is linear rather than vertical in its emphasis. An initial Molto adagio with the character of an introduction articulates two motivic ideas: a soaring melody over slowly changing chromatic chords, and a rapid ascending-descending sextuplet figure that sets itself in sharp contrast to the accompaniment. A Bartókian vigor imbues the Vivace, a clearly defined A-B-A scherzo, while the organic counterpoint of late Beethoven is evoked in the lyric Molto tranquillo. The broadly scaled and (in the composer's words) "not-too-conventional" sonata-form movement is reserved for the bracing Allegro energico finale.

In the chamber work *Contra mortem et tempus* for flute, clarinet, violin, and piano (1965) we enter a very different universe. "With the loss of my son," Rochberg has written of this work, "I was overwhelmed by the realization that death—and time, which, as we humans reckon it, brings an end to all living things—could be overcome only by life itself; and to me this meant through art, by practicing my art as a living thing ... free from the posturing cant and foolishness abroad these days which want to seal art off from life." Rochberg's personal loss, which occurred at a time he was already questioning the directions of his own music, helped spur him to a new aesthetic. "It became crystal clear to me that I could not continue writing so-called 'serial' music." With *Contra mortem*, Rochberg used his art to rail against time and death. "If there is such a thing as spirit," he writes, "then human life is surely its expression here on earth; and art is just as surely one of the great doors ... through which we can pass, or peer into the world of the infinite." Written for the Aeolian Chamber Ensemble, the work was completed in 1965 and first performed on August 18, 1965, at Bowdoin College in Maine. It was this work, together with the *Music for the Magic Theater* for 15 players (also from 1965), that constituted the decisive moment in the composer's new stylistic orientation.

Juxtaposing explosive sound-bursts with serene quotations from several of Rochberg's fellow experimentalists, *Contra mortem* is marked as much by its skillful use of silence as by

its instrumental virtuosity. The pianist leads the process, and has the last word as well—first, with notes struck while the strings are manually dampened inside the piano (which the composer says "should simulate the toll of a bell") and finally, with a passage of "speech-song" in which the words of the title are half-sung into the piano. Poised on the brink of Rochberg's impending return to a more tonal and coherent musical language during the late 1960s, this work's potent images of time and death—and its foreboding quotations from Boulez, Berio, Ives, Varèse—almost seem a farewell to the avant-garde, a final parting nod to traditions he had found wanting.

The Second Symphony from a decade earlier is cut from a wholly different cloth. Composed in 1955-56 (though parts had been sketched as early as 1952-54), the work received its premiere with George Szell and the Cleveland Orchestra on February 26, 1959. The musical material for its four movements—which are played without pause—emanates from the two halves (or "hexachords") of a single symmetrical twelve-tone series (A-F-Bb-Db-Gb-D / D#-B-C-G-G#-E), together with three "mirror inversions" of that row. "The problem," the composer has written, "was to find a way to employ a total chromatic palette, melodic and harmonic, on a large scale true to what the term 'symphony' has come to mean after Beethoven, without losing a sense of proportion, continuity, growth." Rochberg achieves this through a careful sense of organic development; the tripartite opening statement of the "Declamando," for example, contains not only the original row itself—*tutti*, and in bold unison—but also the basic motivic cells of the movement. The soaring first theme, stated by strings and horn, is contrasted with a lyrical oboe subject; through an accretion of permutations of the row, the movement builds to a climax of feverish intensity, leading to a recapitulation that is reenergized with fresh countermelodies. The Allegro scherzoso features a wild fugato (begun by clarinet) and Trio that demonstrate the full range of the composer's orchestral savvy; so assertive is this movement that it only reluctantly gives way to the ensuing Molto tranquillo, a slow movement that is expansive and lush in the grand Romantic manner. The bracing finale ("Tempo primo, ma incalzando"—"urgently") begins with a reinstatement of introductory material, and effects a sort of apotheosis of the entire work's contents before dying into hymn-like, post-Mahlerian oblivion—"a note of resignation which, despite the generally assertive character of the music, seems quite appropriate."

—Paul J. Horsley

When **George Rochberg** (b Paterson, NJ, 5 July 1918; d Bryn Mawr, PA, 29 May 2005) was presented the Gold Medal of Achievement of the Brandeis University Creative Arts Award in 1985, the citation read in part: "We celebrate George Rochberg for his craft, poetry, and determination to melt the ice in contemporary music...Rochberg is a towering figure in American music." This recognition climaxed a long career during which Rochberg produced a large body of orchestral, chamber, and vocal works including his opera *The Confidence Man*, which emerged first from his involvement with atonal and serial music. It was his turn from atonality and serialism to a whole-hearted embrace of tonal possibilities which warmed up the musical climate and helped other composers to express themselves with greater freedom and latitude. The storm center of this change of heart and mind came with the first performance and recording of Rochberg's 1971 Third String Quartet. Rochberg has produced his music out of what he has called a "deep concern for the survival of music through a renewal of its humanly expressive qualities."

Born in Paterson, N.J., on July 5, 1918, Rochberg began his formal studies in composition at the Mannes School of Music and after serving as an infantry lieutenant in World War II, resumed them again at the Curtis Institute of Music. Beginning in 1948, he taught at the Curtis Institute. In 1960 he 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. Rochberg has received numerous awards and citations including honorary degrees in music and is a member of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, and the American Academy of Arts and Letters. He is the recipient of awards from the National Endowment for the Arts and the Guggenheim Foundation. In 1979 his String Quartet No. 4 received first prize in the Kennedy Center Friedheim Awards.

Production Notes

Digitally remastered by Joseph R. Dalton and Robert Wolff, engineer at Sony Music Studios, NYC.

From CRI SD 337

String Quartet No. 1:

Produced by Carter Harman. Recorded by Marc Aubort. Recorded March 1975, NYC. Original recording made possible by grants from the Alice M. Ditson Fund of Columbia University, the Pennsylvania Arts Commission, and the University of Pennsylvania.

From CRI SD 231

Contra mortem et tempus:

Produced by Carter Harman. Recorded March 1967, NYC. Original recording made possible by grants from the American Academy of Arts and Letters, and the National Institute of Arts and Letters.

From CRI SD 492

Symphony No. 2:

Produced by Carter Harman. Original release on Columbia Records, reissue by CRI with assistance of the Alice M. Ditson Fund of Columbia University, and private donors. Recorded under the auspices of the Walter W. Naumburg Foundation.

CRI Production manager: Allison Wolf

All works are published by Theodore Presser Inc. (ASCAP)

CRI *American Masters*

Executive Producer: Joseph R. Dalton