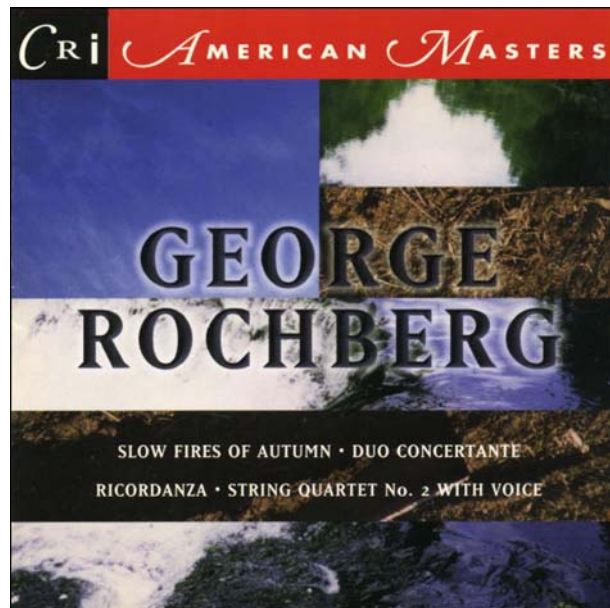


NWCR769

# George Rochberg

## Volume Two



1. *Slow Fires of Autumn* (Ukiyo-e II)  
for flute and harp (1978-79) ..... (17:33)  
Carol Wincenc, flute; Nancy Allen, harp
2. *Duo Concertante* for violin  
and cello (1955; rev. 1959) ..... (1:19)  
Mark Sokol, violin; Norman Fischer, cello
3. *Ricordanza* (Soliloquy for Cello  
and Piano) (1972) ..... (13:11)  
Norman Fischer, cello; George Rochberg, piano
4. String Quartet No. 2 with soprano (1959-61) ..... (27:44)  
Janice Harsanyi, soprano; Philadelphia String  
Quartet

Total Playing Time: 72:47

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## Notes

Having established his career at mid-century as one of America's most eloquent serialists, George Rochberg became perhaps the first of his generation to turn his back on the academicism that had increasingly alienated the public from contemporary music. "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, tranquillity, grace, wit, energy," he wrote in a note on his third string quartet (1971), one of the pivotal works in his return to a more coherent and tonal style. "It became necessary to move on." By confronting the dominant artistic upheavals of his day with honesty and openness—even when it meant writing music that came to be regarded with disdain in academic circles with a vested interest in the avant-garde—Rochberg arrived at "neo-tonalism" well before the startling shift of the early 1980s when composers returned in droves to the gestures and forms of the Classic-Romantic idiom. "The desperate search in the second half of the twentieth century for a way out of cultural replication," Rochberg wrote, "has let loose a veritable Pandora's box of aberrations which have little or nothing to do with art, but everything to do with being 'successful' historically or commercially." Composers should be seeking renewal, he said, "by regaining contact with the tradition and means of the past." And that is exactly what he did, in a series of influential works of the 1970s and '80s that paved the way—with convincing rigor and vitality—for the aesthetic sea-change that came to be called "the New Romanticism."

As early as 1963, Rochberg himself began to grapple with the question of what had gone wrong with twentieth-century music. Schoenberg, he decided, had erred—his model was no longer tenable. "He became too self-conscious about the historical value of his work," Rochberg wrote in 1972, "and lost touch

with the primitive instinct of the musician's ear which had guided him through his early tonal works and even during the works of the atonal period. Once embarked on the twelve-tone works, he succumbed to abstraction and rationalization." (Throughout his career Rochberg helped guide listeners through the treacheries of modern music with engaging and perceptive prose; 17 of his essays, including the provocative "Reflections on Schoenberg" cited above, were published in 1985 as *The Aesthetics of Survival: A Composer's View of Twentieth-Century Music*.)

The present disc includes two compositions from the 1970s—that is, works written after Rochberg's stylistic "shift"—and two of his most richly rewarding serial pieces. *Slow Fires of Autumn* (1979) evokes images of the East, while *Ricordanza* (1972) is lush and sweetly Romantic in Rochberg's most emphatically accessible manner. Juxtaposed are two essential products of the composer's serialist mastery: the dramatic *Duo concertante* for violin and cello (1955) and the dense, visionary String Quartet No. 2 (1961).

*low Fires of Autumn* was first performed in New York on April 23, 1979, with harpist Nancy Allen. Rochberg subtitled the work "*Ukiyo-e II*" because it employs material from his earlier harp piece, *Ukiyo-e*. "The term 'ukiyo-e' refers to a traditional school of Japanese painting," the composer has written, "whose great beauty and often piercing charm lies in its power to image the world not as static, fixed forms of reality but as floating pictures of radiant qualities, which range from states of forlornness and emptiness to quiet or ecstatic joy." Growing out of a traditional Japanese lullaby (heard most clearly at the end), *Slow Fires* places a richly textured flute solo over a ruminating and lyre-like harp accompaniment. It moves seamlessly from the delicately pointillistic introduction into a wildly dramatic central section, which gently dissipates as the folk-like F-minor

tune emerges. Written immediately after his celebrated *Concord* String Quartets (Nos. 4–6), *Slow Fires* represents a sharp contrast to the concentrated focus of those works. “It inhabits a totally different world,” the composer writes, “one which balances, for me, the more strenuous world of Western traditions with other ways of thinking and making music.”

The intensely expressionistic *Duo concertante* was composed in 1955 and revised four years later; Daniel and Jan Kobialka performed its premiere in Philadelphia in 1956. It is cast in two sections built from two principal hexachords of a twelve-tone row. “In this *Duo*,” writes Rochberg, “I hoped for an observable, perceptual simplicity of utterance. That is why the phrases of this work often seem to be entities unto themselves, rarely extended through a process of development, and also why sudden shifts in character, direction, and mood work without the usual interference.” Rochberg says he wanted to give the two instruments the opportunity for dialogue. “I wanted them to be able to ‘talk’ to each other as equals; and, if occasion warranted, even to ‘talk back.’ . . . At the same time there was also the self-imposed problem of creating an impression of a free unfolding, yet one which would reveal, on closer inspection, a formal control which precluded any arbitrary action. In this sense, then, the work is a fantasia, which could be defined as a ‘composed improvisation.’” So successful is Rochberg in creating a miniature cosmos from these two fragile instruments that the enormous climax he is able to effect toward the end of the first section seems out-of-scale to one’s expectations. The recapitulation begins with an exact return to the material of the opening bars.

*Ricordanza* (Soliloquy) for cello and piano (1972), dedicated to the memory of the composer’s nephew, Robert Rochberg, is as lush as Brahms and as wry as Beethoven. Its opening theme, in fact, is an overt commentary on (even a quotation of) the opening cello statement of Beethoven’s C-major Cello Sonata (Op. 102, No. 1). “After 1963,” writes the composer, “the year of my last twelve-tone piece, I began a slow, sometimes arduous approach to the tonal language, believing that a twentieth-century composer should be free to reach out in the widest possible circumference, as far as his ears and mind can stretch. I was (and remain) firmly convinced that the very survival of music . . . requires a renewal of its craft through an immersion in the traditions of the past which, for a time, seemed to have been overwhelmed by the developments in twentieth-century music. The *Ricordanza* was one of the results of this process.” Structured as an A-B-A arch, the work contrasts outer sections (given over to a passionate cello cantilena) with a central passage of dialogue between the two instruments—which comments even more directly on its source in Beethoven than do the “A” sections. The piece was first performed in 1973 in Boston’s Gardner Museum, with the cellist Michael Rudiakov.

One of Rochberg’s most imposing compositions, the String Quartet No. 2 with soprano, was written on commission from the long-defunct Contemporary Chamber Music Society of Philadelphia. It received its first performance in Philadelphia on March 23, 1962, with Janice Harsanyi and the Philadelphia String Quartet. Initially the composer wished to call the work “Fantasias and Arabesques,” because those two terms “describe best the main gestural characteristics of the music.” This bipartite structure pits the abstractness of the first part with the vocal lyricism of the second; only after having begun the work as a purely instrumental discourse, in fact, did Rochberg later decide to balance out things with “the concreteness which only the human voice, singing a personally meaningful and expressive text, could lend.” Based on a twelve-tone row and its

various permutations, the quartet also employs what Rochberg calls “simultaneity of different speeds,” an idea he derived from the music of Charles Ives—itsself based on exaggerations of slow-against-fast tempos. Akin to “total serialism” (the process in which not just pitch but also other elements such as duration are serialized), this method involves pairs of tempos (e.g., quarter-note=108 and quarter-note=54) which, when combined with each other, “produce different conditions of internal intensity appropriate to the emotional plan of the work.”

The dense initial section of the piece—for instruments alone—is characterized by a peerless sense of control over the interplay of vertical sonorities and linear counterpoint. “So far as ‘subject matter’ goes,” writes the composer of this part, “there is none in the usual sense. What takes place is, instead, a purposeful play with order-disorder, a movement between fantasia and arabesque, and tempo combinations which are deeply involved in both.” The second part, with its difficult and highly expressionistic soprano line (which calls to mind the voice part of Schoenberg’s String Quartet No. 2 of 1908, also with soprano), can be divided into two *ariosi* separated by an instrumental cadenza interlude. Functioning not as soloist per se but as an equal partner to the strings, the singer intones text from the 1923 *Duino Elegies* of the late-Romantic poet Rainer Maria Rilke (1875–1926). In the composer’s words, the vocal line “reclaims the music from the abstract and indeterminate, brings it back fully within the sphere of what is most deeply and intensely human—a concern with the questions of existence itself.”

—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 wholehearted embrace of tonal possibilities that 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 George Rochberg’s 1971 Quartet No. 3. 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, New Jersey, on July 5, 1918, Rochberg began his formal studies in composition at the Mannes College 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.

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## Production Notes

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From CRI SD 436

*Slow Fires of Autumn*: Produced by Carter Harman. Original recording made possible by the Walter W. Naumburg Foundation.

From CRI SD 164

*Duo Concertante* and *Ricordanza*. Produced by Carter Harman. Recorded March 1975 in NYC by Marc Aubort. Original recording sponsored by the American Academy of Arts and Letters and the National Institute of Arts and Letters.

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