George Rochberg, American Composer

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Introduction

The war years were much more than an interruption in my musical studies. They taught me what art really meant because I learned what life really meant. The war shaped my psyche. . . . I came to grips with my own time.

—George Rochberg (2003)

In 1984, George Rochberg dashed off an irritated letter to his friend, the Canadian composer Istvan Anhalt, about the Ronald Reagan presidency (“so many small people, luft menschen”) and a film he had recently viewed: “I saw an 1½ hour documentary of World War I . . . which stunned me with the utter stupidity of what we so euphemistically always refer to as ‘mankind.’ Such pride, arrogance, wrong-headedness, lack of understanding, brutality; such unwillingness on all sides to let go of all the falsities that govern men’s behavior when they are in positions of power and authority.” As he wrote to Anhalt with some vigor, “Stick a uniform on someone, give him a high-sounding title, tell him the fate of the country . . . depends on him—and suddenly everything that is possible to imagine that is against humanity emerges.”1 Rochberg’s commentary was not unusual for the time; ruminations about totalitarianism and the uncritical participation of Americans in their government were common, in part because the year of George Orwell’s dystopian novel 1984 had finally come. Published in 1949, the book had posed serious postwar questions about how governmental control over messaging could “invade and destroy . . . relationships: children’s belief in their parents; close friendships; the love between a man and a woman.”2 Indeed, Rochberg had always seen a connection between the memory holes of “Orwell’s monsters” and the Nazi propaganda machine run by Joseph Goebbels.3 “When language no longer reflects reality,” he wrote in his journal on New Year’s Day, “it becomes a tool of propagandists . . . and a means not only for deluding others but oneself as well.”4

Rochberg was speaking not only as a cultural critic but also as someone whose life experiences and human relationships had been impacted by the political implications of mid-century nationalist rhetoric—whether Hitler’s fascist decrees or Roosevelt’s description of the attack on Pearl Harbor as a
“day that will live in infamy.” In response to these global events, Rochberg was drafted into the United States Army and fought in the European theater as a second lieutenant in the infantry. The experience was life-changing, as he candidly shared with an unlikely confidant, the conservative political theorist and Reagan staffer Robert R. Reilly: “Somewhere around the late 1940s [or] early 50s, I began to realize that this confrontation with death had been probably the most potent experience in my life up to that point. I had been severely wounded at one stage. I recovered and was sent back to the front. As the years passed, I began to realize that this was really an incredible thing.” Only these most basic details of his service surface in the literature, primarily because Rochberg was famously tight-lipped about his war narrative; as he cautioned Reilly at the onset of the interview, “I rarely talk about my experiences in the war.”

Rochberg’s reticence to share his World War II experience has created an Orwellian “memory hole” in the composer’s accounts of his career, although it is unclear if the narrative gap is the result of deliberate autobiographical revision or avoidance of a traumatic period of his life. In interviews, he often glosses over the war (unless asked pointedly about his experience) or briefly touches on his service before pivoting to what he considered his greater legacy: the recovery of music from the threat of modernism. Even in the composer’s posthumous autobiography, Five Lines, Four Spaces (2009), his time in the army becomes reduced to a shadowy graphic on the page, an extended gray field that could be interpreted along myriad lines: a foggy blackout, a visual scar, a dividing wall, a self-imposed silence. On one side stands the young student Rochberg (“I was drafted into the army in 1942”) and on the other side, the veteran composer reemerges from the foxhole (“In July 1945, after three long years in the army, I returned home”).

External agents have also facilitated the war’s narratological sidelining by interpreting Rochberg’s war service as tangential to his postwar creative life. For example, the 2001 edition of the New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians relays basic information about Rochberg’s early studies and primary teachers at the Mannes School of Music (1939–42) and the Curtis Institute of Music (1945–47), separating the two formative periods with a brief transitional phrase: “War service interrupted his studies.” Alexander Ringer’s detailed evaluation of Rochberg’s early career—to date, the most extensive treatment of his pre-1965 compositional corpus—provides a small measure of additional information based on personal correspondence with the composer. Ringer notes that the “deep emotional scars left by the war had by no means healed when the former infantry lieutenant returned to Europe [in 1950–51] to take stock of himself in relative peace and quiet” during a residency at the American Academy of Rome. Most musicological accounts since Ringer’s have followed suit by either ignoring his wartime experience altogether or mentioning it only
as a curious piece of trivia. Instead, authors generally move quickly through his serial period (1952–63) to emphasize another tragic moment in the composer’s life—the premature death of his twenty-year-old son, Paul, in 1964—which is almost unanimously interpreted as the event that “prompted the composer to discard serialism” and embrace postmodern citation as a valid compositional technique.\textsuperscript{12} This touching narrative remains one of the cornerstones of the composer’s humanistic legacy, a story that is both deeply heartbreaking and emotionally relatable.

After his death, this compassionate portrait of Rochberg’s work was maintained by one of the few people with firsthand knowledge of his inner emotional life: his wife, Gene, who passed away in 2016. Throughout her life, Gene was a dedicated champion of her husband’s music and intellectual work, a devotion that continued well after the composer’s death in 2005. In the time that followed, she spearheaded the posthumous publication of \textit{Five Lines, Four Spaces}, including sending the manuscript to academic presses for consideration, overseeing the editorial process, and writing the introduction. She also pursued the publication of Rochberg’s final intellectual project—a thousand-page scholarly treatise on chromaticism, published in an abridged version as \textit{A Dance of Polar Opposites} (2012)—a venture to which she contributed her opinion on everything from content to title. In rare moments, she gave interviews about her husband’s life, and I was privileged to have met with her in 2013. During our first visit, she freely answered questions about Rochberg’s wartime service, but the letter I received the following week suggested that perhaps it was a fruitless line of inquiry: “‘The war’ is quite \textit{another story quite by itself},” she asserted.\textsuperscript{13}

This book represents my attempt to tell that “other” story and to integrate it meaningfully into Rochberg’s artistic biography. It also represents the first critical study devoted to contextualizing and tracing the broader arc of Rochberg’s career, including his work as a leading American composer, public intellectual, and college educator. The past few decades have witnessed renewed attention to Rochberg’s music—in part as a result of the arrival of his centenary in 2018—but musicological focus has generally remained limited to a ten-year period (1964–74) that corresponds with his “postmodern turn” to \textit{ars combinatoria}, a compositional philosophy that encourages overt references to “music of the past” as a means of reconnecting with a premodern, humanistic basis for musical expression. This study significantly expands that scope of inquiry by examining the earliest roots of his aesthetic thinking—hatched while serving as an infantryman in Patton’s Third Army—and following their threads through his mature compositional period into the final stages of his long career. In doing so, I assert that Rochberg’s military service was a transformative life experience for the young humanist, one that crucially shaped his worldview and impacted his aesthetic thinking for the next sixty years of his life.
Drafted into the war in 1942, Rochberg was forced to interrupt his compositional studies to begin basic training. He found its exhaustive and at times dehumanizing conditions antithetical to the creation of music, noting in several letters to Gene that he was afraid of the emotional consequences military service would have on his development and success. Rochberg was not the first young composer to have suffered such fears; in 1918, the Austrian composer Alban Berg wrote to his teacher, Arnold Schoenberg, with similar dismay that World War I had resulted in “three years stolen from the best years of my life, totally, irretrievably lost.” Nor was his anxiety singular in the specific context of World War II. Illustrative of the concerns of the time was a 1942 essay in the journal *Modern Music*, which advised enlisted composers to “make their abilities known as early as possible in their Army careers and, during training, to be as good soldiers as possible.” The impact of such advice was mixed, even for composers with well-established reputations in the 1940s. Barbara Heyman explains that Samuel Barber’s “low appetite for military duty” was influenced not by a “lack of patriotism but rather out of a desire to continue writing music,” a pursuit he found nearly impossible during his active administrative service with the Second Service Command of Special Services. Others parlayed their established careers into fruitful creative work for the armed forces. During his active duty with the US Army Eighth Air Force Division, Marc Blitzstein scored documentaries for the Office of War Information (OWI) and served as music director of the American Broadcasting Station in Europe (ABSIE). In some cases, documented medical conditions exempted individuals from active duty, allowing contemporaries of Rochberg such as Leonard Bernstein and William Schuman to remain musically active on the home front.

As these limited examples remind us, the personal experiences of modern warfare were as diverse as the musicians who encountered it; but for those who experienced active combat on the battlefield, its effects had direct physical and psychological consequences that stayed with them for a lifetime. Unlike the composers profiled above, Rochberg was among these directly impacted veterans, and yet most scholarly treatments of his life provide only a skeletal account of his tour of duty: that he was deployed shortly after D-Day, wounded, redeployed, wounded again, and then honorably discharged at the close of the war. But such vague details tell us little about the significance of the war on Rochberg’s creative work. They only situate his activities within a general sea of statistical knowledge: that he was one of nearly eight million soldiers serving in the army in 1944, that he was among the nearly 325,000 US troops who landed on the beaches of Normandy by June 11 (D+5), that his injuries were attended to by field doctors who treated over 380,000 casualties in the European theater alone, that he served less than the average time a typical recruit spent overseas (sixteen months versus Rochberg’s twelve), and that his approximately 250
days in the operational field suggests he was at risk for developing severe post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).\textsuperscript{18}

The fleshing out of Rochberg’s unique experiences and their significance to his musical career required me to locate specific details and personal reflections from a variety of sources and integrate them into broader historical and cultural contexts for his thoughts, actions, and compositions. The tale that unfolds was therefore stitched together from bits and pieces—a quality the collagist composer might have found amusing—drawn from published interviews, oral histories, unpublished correspondence, love letters, military documents and maps, music sketchbooks, marginalia, and scraps of papers strewn throughout two continents. Bound together, they form the first coherent narration of Rochberg’s war story and provide a biographical prelude to his first two significant style periods—his embrace of serialism in the 1950s and his later turn to \textit{ars combinatoria} in the mid-1960s—that lends insight into the traumatic backdrop from which his deep and abiding ideas about art, love, and humanity ultimately emerged. Connecting the war to Rochberg’s emerging ideas about musical humanism also provides an unexplored context for the significance and impact of his son’s death in his biography. As he noted in one interview, Paul’s death—generally recognized as the personal catalyst for \textit{ars combinatoria}—had ultimately taught him something he had already experienced “during the war, but not that deeply yet”: “[It] confirmed in me all kinds of tendencies that had been there, and I could only give expression to them in my music.”\textsuperscript{19}

Rochberg’s combinatorial method earned him a host of critical detractors who characterized him as a plagiarist and a neo-conservative, but others saw in his music a courageous attempt to confront the consequences of modernism. Such heroic language appears in the \textit{Oxford History of Western Music}, in which Richard Taruskin characterizes the composer as facing a noble but impossible mission: “Rochberg’s quest to regain the full range of sincere emotional expression that had been available to artists (and other humans) before the horrors of the twentieth century is thus doomed to failure; but the failure is noble, because it faces the unhappy truth of contemporary life rather than retreating, as modernism had done, into a self-satisfied, self-induced (and socially isolating) delusion.”\textsuperscript{20} Rochberg also portrayed his artistic struggle in intrepid terms, contending that the restoration of the postwar musical landscape would only be achieved by composers with moral fortitude and self-reliance who “depend entirely on their own taste, their own range of musical experience” and thereby allow “sensory order [to take] precedence over external logic and methodology.”\textsuperscript{21} As he argued in 1944, an artist “needs a special and unique courage—not the courage of the battlefield, but a longer-lasting courage with which to overcome indifference, lack of understanding, and the very problem of physical existence itself. . . . [His] victory [is] proof that man is capable of forgetting himself in service to the [human] race.”\textsuperscript{22}
Rochberg once famously described his *ars combinatoria* as “standing in a circle of time, not a line,” noting that such a perspective allowed for “movement in any direction” so long as one could “keep your balance.” Similarly, each chapter of this book traces the course of a thematic radius—sometimes with overlapping chronology but representing independent strands of thought—to evaluate the impact of World War II on various aspects of Rochberg’s creative and intellectual work. Chapter one begins with a reconstructed account of Rochberg’s war experiences, with specific attention to the impact of the war on his musical education and earliest compositional efforts. Music served many roles for the aspiring composer during this time, providing him with a way to cope with the trauma around him and remain emotionally connected to his family and his craft. He also encountered a rich array of musical materials that stimulated his imagination and intellect in ways that would last throughout his lifetime.

The chapter ends with his return to the home front and his struggle to find a musical voice capable of reflecting the trauma he had just experienced.

After the war, 1969 emerges as a crucial year in terms of his creative and intellectual output, and the internal chapters circle around it to contextualize works from his corpus that reflect his postwar humanistic thinking. Chapter two begins with an exploration of the essay “No Center” (1969)—Rochberg’s most explicit and poetic description of *ars combinatoria*—and then moves back in time to trace the seeds of its anti-modernist leanings from the personal discontent of his serialist period (1952–63). In chapter three I detail the composition of his first large-scale combinatorial work, the Symphony no. 3 (1969), and argue that Rochberg intended it as a pointed postwar commentary on the destructive consequences of the war and the lingering impact of fascism on postwar aesthetics. The symphony contains several stylistic references to an unpublished Holocaust lament Rochberg completed in 1967, the “Passions According to the Twentieth Century,” and thus might be read itself as a piece of secondary musical witness that portrays the war’s Jewish victims through musical symbols. Rochberg’s musical response to the Holocaust moves the narrative forward to chapter four, in which I consider his shifting and complex postwar relationship to Judaism and identify his evolving interest in Kabbalah as a possible mystical foundation for both *ars combinatoria* and his essay “The Avant-Garde and the Aesthetics of Survival” (1969).

The final section of the book is concerned with moral aspects of Rochberg’s career, reflecting both affirming and dissenting portraits of the composer’s vision of an aesthetic recovery for twentieth-century culture. Chapter five examines his long teaching career and draws heavily from interviews and firsthand accounts provided by his former students, many of them well-known figures in American art music. Through their memories, a complex portrait of Rochberg emerges that testifies to the moral and aesthetic impact of his work on nearly
three generations of postwar American composers while also recognizing his human faults and weaknesses. An afterword looks broadly at the concept of aesthetic recovery in Rochberg’s discourse and hermeneutically connects it to recent revelations about moral injury and trauma in the field of war psychology. This final section also contends directly with humanistic complications to his legacy and places such discussions within recent interpretive frameworks of paranoid readings and reparative scholarship.