Rochberg began his formal musical studies in 1938 as a twenty-year-old student at Montclair State Teachers College in New Jersey. The courses he took stressed the canonical repertory, specifically the Austro-German symphonists and the large-scale works of Johann Sebastian Bach, and provided him with his first intellectual engagement with music. “It was a level of school,” he described, “where only the most ‘popular’ pieces of those masters were played, and I knew little of music then except that I liked it tremendously. . . . The grandeur and solidity of [these] names—Bach, Beethoven, and Brahms—caught my fancy.”¹ He auditioned for and was accepted to the Mannes School of Music in New York City and began his first compositional studies with Hans Weisse, a Viennese theorist widely recognized as one of the fathers of American Schenkerism.² As a teacher, Weisse rarely discussed Schenkerian analysis with Rochberg. Rather, he immersed his student in detailed studies of counterpoint and the German masters. “I studied Bach in a way I’d never dreamed possible,” Rochberg wrote about his earliest mentor.³ “He was tied more to traditional models than other people of his generation . . . [but he taught] me what I hungered to know about the mysteries of writing music.”⁴
In 1941, Weisse passed away from a brain tumor, after which Rochberg studied briefly with Leopold Mannes before being transferred to the compositional guidance of the Hungarian conductor George Szell. According to Rochberg, World War II had played a role in bringing the two together. Szell had held positions at premiere institutions throughout central Europe in the 1920s and 1930s, but the outbreak of war had occurred during a series of guest appearances in South America. Like many artists of stature, he chose to relocate his activities to the United States, where he initially conducted the NBC Symphony Orchestra and taught at Mannes. Throughout their early time together, Rochberg continually found Szell—who had a reputation for exacting standards and a short temper—emotionally cold, as if there was “a bridge ten miles long between us that I could not get across.”

But Szell was an inherently methodical teacher—once described by a colleague as “irritatingly pedagogical”—who emphasized analytical study of the symphonic repertory and technical mastery of the basic genres.

In addition to being a lauded conductor and pianist, Szell had also achieved some acclaim as a composer in his early career. Among his earliest orchestral works was the Variations on an Original Theme, op. 4 (1916), written at age seventeen after his studies with Richard Strauss in Vienna. Szell crafted his approach on canonical models he had studied or performed, but reviewers seized on the young composer’s ability to forge a “distinctive voice” in the work. The opening theme is a dance-like gavotte structured along binary phrases, a simple melody made more interesting by its use of late Romantic harmonic modulations, including chromatic explorations of the parallel modes (I/i) and flat supertonic (♭II). The variations showed his technical grasp, supplying interest through shifting figurations, styles, orchestrations, and tempos. For the young Rochberg, such techniques held endless fascination and provided a rich template for his own ideas. “I saw that sameness could be disguised, altered, reshaped in as many ways as one . . . could invent,” he wrote, taking delight in the genre’s “organic wholeness.” He therefore set out to write his own original theme—with a set of twelve variations and a culminating finale—under Szell’s watchful and experienced eye.

Later self-described as a “youthful view of the old tonal world,” Rochberg’s similarly titled Variations on an Original Theme (1941, rev. 1969) begins with a rounded binary movement that recalls the character pieces of Robert Schumann and early American hymnody. It presents a memorable melody made sweet by harmonization in major sixths in the A section, while the B section develops greater depth through an enharmonic shift (Db to C#) that opens up new voice-leading opportunities as well as access to the sharp side of the spectrum—not unlike some of the devices used in Szell’s Variations. The ensuing variations read like a textbook of generic styles and dance forms—scherzo, etude, capriccio, toccata, arabesque, rhapsody, ballade, gigue,
nocturne, chorale, ricercare, and intermezzo—followed by a virtuosic finale
certainly designed to satisfy one of Szell’s basic compositional teachings:
"Always save something for the end." After a performance in which Rochberg
played the collection for his fellow students, Szell expressed a rare measure of
praise, noting that he was “quite pleased” with “certain places” in the score.
Overall, the Variations demonstrated Rochberg’s early mastery of idiomatic
writing and his youthful reverence for Classical and Romantic piano literature.
As he would later record in his diary, the Variations “speak in their own gentle
way and are right for what they are. . . . Music [should be] of the soul. And if
the soul rings out, sings, speaks, that’s good. . . . [It’s] as simple as that.”

A similar assessment might have been made about his personal life at the
time. In 1939, while at Montclair, Rochberg met Gene Rosenfeld, an encoun-
ter he described as “magical, a sense of heightened super-reality.” The two
were instantly drawn to one another on a spiritual-aesthetic level: “We shared
powerful ideas about what existence should be. She had the same demand of
herself and of life that I had put on myself in life; and that was to convert it
into something that could be beautiful, into something in which beauty would
be a daily part of existence—a kind of ultimate transformation.” They waited
two years for Gene to finish her degree and were married in 1941 in a small
civil ceremony attended by only their close friends Herb and Mitzi McClosky
and the justice of the peace. At that point, Gene joined Rochberg in New York
City, where she worked at Macy’s to bring in additional income. Her presence,
coupled with the onset of his professional career, imbued this period of his life
with a halcyon glow. New York City at that time was a place where “you could
dream big dreams. . . . Life was serious, full of purpose to create art.”
The war seemed a world away, with daily life concerned only with “the anxieties and
fear . . . of being young and all that goes with being young.”

The invasion of Pearl Harbor in December 1941 changed that world mea-
surably, but in interviews and his autobiography Rochberg rarely discussed his
reaction to these larger world events. Rather, the US entry into the war func-
tions as a literary prelude to a more romantic postwar story—his accidental
reunion with Szell after sixteen years: “I was walking on Chestnut Street [in
Philadelphia] . . . [and] remember hearing my name repeated several times
over . . . in a distinctly Mitteleuropa accent. . . . He had picked me out of the
crowd and obviously remembered me clearly . . . after so many years.” In
reality, the military draft was one of the most devastating events in Rochberg’s
early personal and professional life, representing an involuntary separation
from those he loved most and a deferment of what he considered his true call-
ing. In 1942 he received a tellingly large, oblong letter from the government,
informing him that he had been called up for service. The moment was one of
dread and disappointment: “The draft [had been] plaguing me [and] finally,
I was pulled in. . . . Even if you had patriotic feelings, it was a very difficult
experience in every sense.” Gene recalled how devastated her husband felt, especially because he had been gaining traction as a composer in his own right. “Suddenly you’re a young man starting out on your career . . . and then away you go,” she mused in a conversation before falling silently into a private memory. The day before he left, Rochberg traveled to bid his parents farewell. From their house, he sent Gene his first wartime request: “ Millions of kisses, sweetheart . . . Play the last movement of Beethoven’s Ninth for me.”

Rochberg’s initial processing was at Fort Dix in New Jersey, where he underwent his first round of training (fig. 1.1). As Gene would later describe it, this earliest phase of service was in many ways the most unsettling in that it developed both the physical stamina and the psychological mentality soldiers would need on the battlefield. Infantry soldiers anticipated a thirteen-week
program; at Fort Dix, Rochberg underwent a grueling routine consisting of drills, physical exercises, firearms, and marches. A daily schedule would likely have started with reveille at daybreak, followed by a lengthy march to the official training site. There, soldiers would pursue “scheduled training activities from [morning] until [evening], the nine and a half hours broken only for the midday meal.”

In addition to learning how to roll their packs and pitch tents, the infantry soldiers underwent bayonet practice, grenade training, and instruction in how to use rifles, machine guns, mortars, and heavy artillery. At its most extreme, a training day could last nearly sixteen hours before the call for “lights out.” Some nights, recruits were awakened to conduct “field problems,” an additional effort to provide realistic training conditions and enforce military discipline, cooperation, and protocol. All of these activities sought to strengthen the battalion by erasing individuality and assuring loyalty to the command structure and the tactical goal.

The severity of the experience was not lost on Rochberg, who wrote to Gene about its paradoxical aims. “On the one hand, you are supposed to be a great human, considerate of others, [and] courteous,” he shared. “On the other hand, you are told to . . . ‘stick that Jap before he sticks you.’ [To] not mind killing.” In several of these earliest letters he worried about the impact of basic training on his psyche, reaching the conclusion that mankind was “not civilized, not in the least.” As he once recalled, “I awoke [every day] with a sense of horror and physical sickness. How again would I live through a day of physical effort, straining every muscle? How to live through a day of preparing for fighting, for killing? . . . [These things] make their mark on the soul.” More disconcerting to the young composer, however, was the fact that physical and mental exhaustion had begun to hinder his ability to compose. “I find it impossible to think in terms of music any longer,” he wrote to Gene. “I [used to think] constantly in terms of sounds—singing tunes or just listening to them as they went through my head. I have no time now for such reflection. The creative process, I realize now, must have leisure in which to function and develop.” At Fort Dix, music only surfaced during the rhythmic drills and marches designed to create unit cohesion and coordination. In those moments, he shared, “my music is not dead. I know because I find myself singing [to the rhythm] when bad things run through my mind. . . . It is something that will not be put out easily.”

Around Thanksgiving 1942, Rochberg was transferred to Fort McClellan in Alabama for a more specialized round of replacement training that would allow him to be inserted into infantry divisions that had sustained great casualties. As historian Dan Puckett describes, McClellan brought together a wide array of soldiers from throughout the eastern seaboard, including a significant Jewish population from New York. For some, the transfer added a secondary layer of cultural shock, a phenomenon Rochberg detailed in his letters: “You
wouldn’t believe it, dear, but there are some men in my barrack . . . who can neither read nor write! I am now half a secretary [for them].”28 He was also surprised by the overt prejudices among some of the men from his barracks, specifically toward black American soldiers. Anti-Semitism, however, was a quieter affair. “I don’t know how they feel [about Jews],” he wrote nervously about the officers overseeing the servicemen, noting that among his fellow soldiers he had failed to perceive any sense of social ostracism.29

Most disconcerting, however, was the sustained negative impact of further training on his identity as a composer. “I now feel so far away from music [that] it depresses me. It almost seems as though I never wrote any music,” he lamented to Gene: “I have to conjure up tunes I’ve written and the feeling of pieces . . . in order to convince myself I [had ever] composed. Nothing sings in me anymore. The flow has stopped. Either it’s dried up or has been pushed below the surface of my consciousness. . . . If only I could study and play a little, I’d feel better.” Rochberg had, in fact, attempted to create recreational musical opportunities for the soldiers at Fort McClellan—a glee club, a string quartet—but most of his inquiries were either denied or ignored by his superiors. The experience left him feeling “unclean, undignified, and unenthusiastic,” more like an automaton than a man.30 He described the scenario to Gene with some resignation: “Your mind is completely occupied with military matters—marching, drilling, rifle and bayonet practice, map-reading, airplanes, and everything else that we do. There is no time or energy for anything else.”31

Shortly after this letter, Rochberg wrote to Gene with renewed enthusiasm: “Darling, I found, to my delight, a wonderfully equipped music room [with] a good record collection, a piano, comfortable leather chairs, and . . . a fine atmosphere.”32 The music listening room was part of the Army Library Service, a section of the morale branch of the War Department charged with “supplying reading material to military personnel” and establishing “cultural centers for soldiers.”33 Libraries were generally housed in the service club, and at Fort McClellan an entire two-story wing was devoted to its materials and gathering spaces. The librarian in charge was Mary Frances Slinger of the fourth service command, who oversaw 174 library collections during her service tenure. At Fort McClellan she assembled a wide collection of phonographs and records that soldiers could enjoy at smaller listening stations, as well as fostering radio broadcasts for group “concert” settings.34 As Rochberg described, the listening room was open until 11:00p.m. and provided a needed sanctuary for the composer most evenings: “It’s the one room in this camp . . . that has the air of ease and relax[ation]. It has become a symbol for me of all good and artistic values.”35

As Annegret Fauser notes, the morale division “considered music a strong antidote to the more nefarious leisure activities” of the soldiers and found that classical music was requested to “an unexpectedly large degree” in the
The repertory spanned myriad style periods and was often played in full, an aspect of the system that astounded Rochberg at first: “I came in while they were playing [Mussorgsky’s] Pictures at an Exhibition. They followed with Beethoven’s Seventh [Symphony], which I enjoyed tremendously. . . . I left when they began Tchaikovsky’s Piano Concerto, not because I did not like it . . . but because I was tired and had [to] walk back to my barrack.” 37 He returned eagerly the next day, armed with his own requests for the broadcast: 38 “I’ve already heard the end of . . . Tchaikovsky’s Fourth Symphony and they’re now playing some very beautiful Handel. . . . [Repertory] to follow include[s] Shostakovich’s First [Symphony], Mozart’s G minor [Symphony], and one I picked out—the Brahms First Piano Concerto, [which] I am dedicating to you, my darling.” 39 The exposure to classical music created a rich inner world for Rochberg, one in which he reclaimed his sense of self and reconnected with his loved ones, if only through memories. Listening to his requested Brahms, he wrote to Gene, “bring[s] me back to the beautiful concert. Remember how we were together there and hung on every note? Today I feel so close to you darling, because I am relaxed and can really think and reflect.” 40

The listening rooms at Fort McClellan also became a site for specialized musical training of another sort, a process in which Gene played a crucial supportive role. To engage with the broadcasts more actively, Rochberg asked Gene if she might purchase orchestral scores of the works contained in the record library. “I can hear it better with the score,” he explained, and “really see what the music [is] all about.” 41 His list was rather extensive, perhaps betraying his initial excitement about the prospect: Shostakovich’s Symphonies nos. 1 and 5, Brahms’s Symphonies nos. 2–4, Beethoven’s Symphony no. 3, all twelve of Haydn’s London Symphonies, Prokofiev’s Classical Symphony, and the violin concertos of Beethoven, Prokofiev, Tchaikovsky, and Brahms. 42 Understanding their importance to her husband’s morale, Gene saved her earnings meticulously but could only afford to purchase and ship just two scores: Prokofiev’s Violin Concertos in G minor and D major. Rochberg was touched by her gesture and recognized the self-sacrifice she had made. “It felt so good to get the score, to look at it and to know that you bought it for me,” he wrote appreciatively. “It will be a fine addition to our music library, my sweet librarian. As for the next scores, perhaps we’d better wait. Use whatever money you have for [yourself].” 43

Gene also became Rochberg’s conduit to the contemporary music scene, often sending him newspaper reviews of concerts held in New York. For example, in fall of 1942 Shostakovich’s newest work—the Seventh Symphony—was given at least three separate performances at Carnegie Hall, under the batons of Serge Koussevitzky (Boston Symphony Orchestra), Artur Rodzinski (New York Philharmonic), and Leopold Stokowski (Philadelphia Orchestra). Writing
for the *New York Times*, critic Olin Downes noted that the work had become a “must” among the so-called musical elite, despite the fact that he believed its popularity was based on “its qualities as a war document and [not] as a work of art.”

Gene clipped various assessments of the work and sent the articles to Rochberg, who immediately requested the only Shostakovich recording in McClellan’s collection, the Fifth Symphony. After listening to the first movement, Rochberg penned his own Downesian critique from his bunk: “It has seriousness and sincerity and intense conviction, but . . . there is always something missing in Shostakovich. . . . His work doesn’t grow with force and logic. . . . As for the quality of the music—its melodic and harmonic shape and mass—there seems to me to be nothing of [an] unusual nature. Sometimes it is even commonplace and old-fashioned.”

Gene responded with her usual unconditional support, exclaiming that what the world needed was less Shostakovich and more Rochberg. To that end, she contacted the virtuoso Jascha Heifetz to ask if he might premiere one of her husband’s prewar compositions, a violin sonata. Heifetz ultimately never responded, whether because of his recent bout with the flu, his upcoming performance for servicewomen at the Vassar club, or Rochberg’s relative obscurity as a composer.

After six weeks at Fort McClellan, Rochberg waited to learn whether he would be deployed or accepted to the Officer Candidate School (OCS). Based on his prewar training, he had applied for a position in the morale division, which sought to “enhance motivation and cultivate positive feelings about the war” by keeping the soldiers “busy with entertainment, reading, and education.” As he jokingly wrote to Gene, “You see, dear, training for the infantry doesn’t necessarily mean you go into combat.”

But the odds were stacked against him; as Fauser notes, “more seasoned and better-known composers such as Barber, Blitzstein, [and] Copland negotiated more prominent [non-combat] roles for themselves within the institutional context of the armed forces.” In December 1942 Rochberg learned that he had been accepted to the OCS, but as a field specialist. He remained at McClellan for another month before transferring to Fort Benning in Georgia for a new round of advanced training with the 6th Company, 2nd Student Training Regiment. In mid-July 1943 he received a commission to join the 261st Regiment of the 65th Infantry Division at Camp Shelby, Mississippi, which would come under the command of Major General Stanley Reinhart in August. His basic training, as well as his informal score studies, had come to an end.

Camp Shelby was located near Hattiesburg, Mississippi, and was the advanced training site for four full army divisions, including the 65th. Similar to Forts McClellan and Benning, it also boasted an Officers’ Service Club with library facilities; Rochberg even procured musical staff paper, although the rigorous training schedule hindered any sustained compositional projects. The base also gave Rochberg his first glimpse of the enemy, as it was a holding
location for German and Italian prisoners of war (POWs) who had been captured during the current campaign in North Africa. In 1944 the POW population reached nearly 5,300 and would have been visible to any officers stationed there. Under the terms of the Geneva Convention, POWs were not to be subjected to forced labor, but some requested paid jobs—such as picking cotton in the nearby Delta—and used their earnings to purchase musical instruments and provide concerts. In addition to offerings by the POW orchestra and band, US soldiers enjoyed an eclectic musical offering that reflected the diversity of the camp’s population, including standard military band performances, swing and jazz music, traditional Hawaiian music and ceremonial dancing, and a five-act soldier show, “T. S. Buddy,” produced and performed by members of Rochberg’s 65th Division in August 1944.

Life in the Officer Candidate School was “terrifically intensive,” to use Rochberg’s words, but he did compose three morale-boosting pieces in honor of his fellow soldiers at Camp Shelby. While in later life he often presented himself as hostile to popular entertainment music, Rochberg was actually no stranger to writing popular and commercial music. He had played piano in several honky-tonk bands during the Great Depression and was hired by dance ensembles to create big band arrangements. Such music, he argued, had allowed Americans to survive the collective hardship of World War I and the Depression in that popular songs “produced a kind of romantic aura around a dark center which made life bearable.” During the Depression Rochberg “wrote tons of pop tunes,” one of which attained publication but, as he jokingly admitted, “never made a dime.” These early compositional activities were no easy endeavor; on the contrary, as Rochberg explained, writing an effective popular tune required strategy, talent, and attention to a host of musical parameters and social mores. In particular, Rochberg stressed the importance of creating a sense of “melodic infectiousness,” or what cultural historian Regina Sweeney describes as a song’s “power, order, motion, and even predictability—all things the army needed.”

Sweeney was writing about French patriotic hymns during World War I, but as Fauser notes, many of the same aesthetic qualities remained in the later American repertory. In general, the songs had to retain basic functionality, allowing for the widest level of participation so that soldiers might self-consciously re-present themselves through the ritualized practice of communal singing. A successful mobilization song would ultimately stress “the need to do one’s duty for [his or her country], [assert] that a war could be justified, and [acclaim] the . . . soldier’s impetuous power and effectiveness.” Lyrics invoked freedom and “liberty as a shared value of the Allied nations,” while the music remained strictly diatonic (often with a narrow scalar range) and infused with rhythms drawn from military topos (marches; fanfares). The soldiers’ songs were to be memorable and portable tools for building cohesion and courage among the civilians turned combatants.
Rochberg’s OCS compositions for the 261st Infantry all bear these hallmarks, demonstrating his skill as a songwriter within the patriotic genre. He composed the “261st Infantry Song” on November 19, 1943, in collaboration with his colleague Corporal T. G. Keegan, a twenty-three-year-old who had previously worked as an optician in New York City. At the head of the score, the two provided performance directions for their collective expression of brotherhood: “to be sung majestically and pridefully” (ex. 1.1). The stanzas, as crafted by Rochberg and Keegan, furthered the sentiment in explicit terms:

We’re men who march to meet with Destiny,
Three thousand strong, swinging along, singing a song.
We’re brothers in this fight for Victory
And when we are gone the fight will go on and on.
We’ll bear the light of FREEDOM thru the night.
And we will always say we’re proud
To be “The Two Sixty First INFANTRY,
the Two-Sixty-First Infantry!

Rochberg’s music underscores the textual imagery and heroism of the stanzas, with their emphasis on strength, perseverance, and victory. Opening unambiguously in G major, the melody unfolds in a broad march tempo with jovial tripletts that lead the singer in a triumphant full octave ascent to the dominant. Dynamic and articulation markings create the sense of determined progress to the end of the first stanza, which increases in musical strength because of a sustained crescendo. This dynamic apex abruptly ends with a call for the next line—“We’ll bear the light of FREEDOM thru the night”—to be sung quietly. At this point, Rochberg shifts harmonically to B-flat major (♭III), lending the short passage a sense of tonal remove that aligns well with the imagery of nocturnal maneuvers in the dead of night. A variation on the opening material recalls the opening’s bold confidence, now augmented by a slower rhythmic pace that builds to the final unison cadence. The chosen tessitura—including the fact that the highest notes in the piece should be sung quietly, which would allow for falsetto singing—suggests that Rochberg had practical matters in mind, but the song’s harmonic path would no doubt prove challenging for the untrained (and unrehearsed) chorus of marching basses, baritones, and tenors.

A month later Rochberg composed the “March of the Halberds (the 261st Infantry March)” for use during training marches at Camp Shelby, but his account in his autobiography reveals a long-standing emotional connection to the genre: “Marches have always appealed to me since childhood. My earliest vivid, ‘live’ memory is of flags flying, bands playing, and soldiers marching in what looked like endless ranks [down] Main Avenue in downtown Passaic, New Jersey [when I was four]. The crowd went wild. . . . It remains one of the most vivid scenes in a long life—alive, unforgettable.” Rochberg
followed the traditional conventions for a military march in his own version (ex. 1.2). Written in E-flat major and opening with a “call to arms” introduction, the march is organized according to ternary form (ABA), with the middle section firmly in the related key of A-flat major. Filled with fanfares and triadic gestures, it trades in many recognizable military topoi—dotted rhythms, a chromatic ascent to the melodic apex, marcato markings to designate crisp
motions—all of which results in a piece that is heroic, triumphant, and confident in its character. Rochberg included no harmonic indications or scoring instructions, in part because at this point in his training he “knew little about scoring for a military band.” Instead, he wrote it out as a piano score and then converted it into a “short-score [with] amplifications to indicate other parts to be played.” He presented the work to the band director, who agreed to orchestrate it for Rochberg. After its first performance during training exercises, Rochberg recalled that he was pleased with the effort: “It sounded fine, in the grand tradition of John Philip Sousa. In short, it was the real thing, authentic.”

In April 1944 Rochberg wrote his final song for the 261st Infantry—“Song of the Doughboy”—and the score suggests he had learned some lessons from his earlier attempts. Written in 6\(\frac{8}{8}\) meter, the music maintains a steady marching beat, at times even leaving gaps in the melody to allow for the pleasurable percussive effect of marching boots (ex. 1.3). The strophic song bears the hallmark of classic military music; it consists of highly repetitive gestures and phrases in the key of F major that occasionally modulate chromatically to the supertonic, uses the common rhythmic topoi of a triplet leading from the upbeat to the tonic, and is written in a tessitura an untrained mixed men’s chorus could easily cover. The lyrics take a less noble tone, portraying the 261st in the more slap-happy vein of “Johnny Doughboy,” a popular figure in both wartime film and song.

Look at ’em go, Johnny and Joe,
Slogging along the road that leads to Victory.
To hell with the rain and lousy terrain,
They’re the men who’ll beat Japan if there’s anyone who can!
Whatever the cost, no battle is lost.
They’ll never stop until this job is done
They’ll go marching into Germany,
The good ol’ US infantry,
A Fighting million strong,
Singing a lusty Doughboy song.

They’re in to win, on to Berlin,
Nothing can match the courage of the Infantry.
Tho’ tired and sore, they’re ready for more.
They’re the boys who use their guts and their trusty rifle butts!
No matter how few, they always get thru.
They have the spirit of the fighting free,
And they’ll give the Axis all they’ve got.
And you can bet it’s a helluva lot!
So hear their Doughboy Song!
As they go marching along!!!!!!
Example 1.2. Continued.

The redundancy of the music and its colloquial banter would have provided the men with some entertainment during their marches, no doubt also causing a few winks and chuckles at the mention of a “lusty doughboy song”—a clever triple-entendre that recalled spirited singing among the troops, the seductive lyrics of “Johnny Doughboy Found a Rose in Ireland,” and the standard overseas issue of preventative prophylactic creams familiarly called “Doughboy Kits.”
Unlike other members of the 261st Infantry, Rochberg was deployed to the European theater as a replacement in Company “C” of the 357th Infantry regiment, assigned to the 90th Division of Patton’s Third Army after the Allied invasion at Normandy (D-Day). As a result, he was separated from his original battalion and subjected to renewed feelings of isolation and loneliness: “I knew no one in my outfit and there was no chance to get to know anyone. We just slogged along.” After a brief touchdown in England, he and his battalion took
a second flight to the recently captured but still volatile French coastline. Nearly fifty years later, he could still vividly recall the “look of fear” on the faces of the soldiers who had been wounded in the initial onslaught: “Walking away from the plane that had just landed on an airstrip on Omaha Beach . . . and seeing the wounded, walking and on stretchers, going to the same plane that had just taken us from England. The look in their eyes, a look I’d never seen before that day. Almost an animal look; glistening fear, anxiety, uncertainty radiating from their eyes.”77 Upon arrival, his division was immediately dispatched to help with the second stage of the invasion, which involved breaking through the hedgerows in northern France, a deafening assault that required explosive charges to dislodge the thick, thorny bushes of the French countryside.78 The fatigue from constant marching and physical work was overwhelming despite nearly a full year of basic training: “I remember being dog-tired [at] night. Apparently I [once] slept through some minor bombing by German reconnaissance planes.”79

The heaviest fighting of this campaign took place around the town of Saint-Lô, where the Allies met with the Second SS Panzer Division of the German Army; Rochberg vividly remembered marching into the “absolutely destroyed” city after its successful capture.80 “[We] passed through St. Lô [sic] [which] had been chewed up something ferocious. Giant eggbeaters had been applied to the town and environs. Nothing but ruination and destruction all around.”81 His first intensive battlefield experiences were during the Falaise Gap, a tactical maneuver in which the British and American forces hoped to trap the German Seventh Army in a “pocket” created by the closing forces.82 The days, which Rochberg described as “hot [and] heavy [with] dust from tanks, trucks, and human feet on the move,” consisted of an endless and exhausting alternation of constant marching, reconnaissance, and direct combat.83 The impact on his psyche and body was debilitating at times, as he described in a testimonial story written in 1944:

The dust seeks out the most open and vulnerable parts of one’s face to attack. And it is an insidious, slow, subtle infiltration that one is hardly conscious of until overcome and nearly defeated by it. The eyes become irritated, burning and tearing, hot and smarting. The nasal passages dry up; and the inside of the mouth is full of cotton. Thirst becomes real and agonizing. The whole muscular system aches and complains and the brain becomes dull with fatigue. . . . Endless and monotonous was the long column [of troops] ahead—brown against the green fields and blue skies.84

As a platoon leader, Rochberg felt a sense of responsibility to “keep going” in an effort to motivate the troops under his command. But despite nineteen months of rigorous physical training, his body could not keep up under the demands of the march:
At the end of the third day we came to a river. . . . I took off my clothes [and] found both feet a bloody mess. Went in the river anyway. Glorious it was to feel the water, the cool and wet of it. When I came out I got over to a medic station somehow. They taped my feet. I must have put my taped bloody feet back into my boots. . . . After that I completely lose track of my feet. 

Wounds such as these were considered minor, often treated by giving the limping officer a ride to the next encampment and thus time to heal as he waited for his platoon to catch up. Overall, the pace was grueling, as divisional records attest. By the close of August, Rochberg had marched well over 550 kilometers in just two months.

Amid these conditions, the troops sought “some diversion, some refreshment for the senses” to encourage them further, and the impact of these spiritual oases on Rochberg’s mentality cannot be overstated. Joyful encounters with grateful French citizens along the route provided him with a sense of humanity and encouragement: “I found relief in our passage through the multitude of small towns and villages that lay in our route of march. . . . I welcomed the new, eager, and excited faces, the shrill pitch of children’s voices. Men and women and young children ran about frantically passing out cognac, cider, apples, and plums. It was a simple demonstration . . . and helped you forget your aching feet and sore eyes.” But as Rochberg recalled, more meaningful than these generous handouts were those experiences that reinforced his moral pride in his mission: “My tiredness was forgotten [in those] moments. [I remember] a woman leaning out of her window, [saying] in a voice barely audible, looking into my face as though she meant it for me alone: Merci, merci beaucoup. Better than cider or apples . . . were those three words.”

Ultimately, the Allied forces prevailed, bringing Rochberg once again into close contact with German POWs: “I remember we took a lot of prisoners [from the German Seventh Army]. I’ll never forget one day. . . . It seemed to me like thousands of them just kept streaming through our position all day long.” Shortly thereafter, Rochberg’s battalion was relocated to the north of Verdun and pushed forward to the French-Belgium border.

On September 23, 1944, Rochberg sustained his first grave injury during an assault near Mons, Belgium. As he relayed to Vincent Plush: “We immediately bivouacked out on the outskirts. . . . Every army has to have someone at the head of it when you move into a situation. . . . That day my company was designated as the lead company of the battalion of the regiment. My platoon was designated as the lead platoon of the company. So I was out front with my two sergeants, and within an hour we ran into resistance.” Rochberg was shot in the left leg, “dragged off the field,” and brought to triage. Half a century later, he would re-experience the moment in a visceral flashback:
The other day I saw and felt again how it was. . . . The sergeant said, “Hook your hand on my belt, lieutenant, and pull yourself up with your good leg. I’ll move up a little every time.” And that’s how he helped me cover the ground under the sheet of bullets [until] the ground dropped off and the medics gave me sulfur drugs and put me on a stretcher and got me to an ambulance and then to a field hospital outside Verdun.

The next morning, the field surgeons operated successfully, but they were candid about how grave the situation had been. “If this was the First World War, Lieutenant,” they told Rochberg, “we would have had to amputate.”

Rochberg initially recovered in the field hospital, a scene he described as an “atmosphere of calm, assured efficiency” that “augured well for the men and boys who came there begrimed and hurt.” Ever the composer, he captured the soundscape of the installation in a piece of historical fiction he wrote from his place among the litters. “Overhead occasionally roared a transport plane going back toward the front for more wounded, or coming in circling slowly to make a landing at the airstrip. . . . [In the tents] there was a mingled sound of human voices. Sometimes a short staccato laugh pierced through the undertone. Sometimes a low moan rose from the earth floor of the tent.” Once stabilized, Rochberg was ferried out of the tactical situation to England, where he convalesced for the next two-and-a-half months. At nearly the same time, Gene was also under medical care in New Jersey. She gave birth to the couple’s son, Paul, five days later, on September 28. As she wistfully recalled, “We were each in the hospital an ocean apart at that time.”

While in recovery, Rochberg was able to return to his composing, but the works he produced at this time were less musical exercises than love letters to his newborn son. In late October 1944, Rochberg wrote his first musical tribute to his son, “Lullaby for Paul,” from his hospital bed in England (ex. 1.4). An andantino in binary form, Rochberg invented an opening melody that sounds akin to a folk song in 6/8 meter, but modal mixture (D minor/D major) and open fifths in the left hand muddle the tonal anchoring of the piece. Isolated dissonances paired with awkward transitions disrupt the gentle flow of the melody—arguably the most important feature in a lullaby—and the increase in harmonic density and intensity in mm. 11–14 sounds more like an emotional outpouring than a cradle song. The final cadence to D major cannot sweeten the overall temperament. The song is less a functional lullaby and more a communication from the heart of an estranged father.

A similar play with tone occurs in a piano waltz written for Paul a month later, but this time the mood is more ironic and playful (ex. 1.5). The jovial waltz, having just attained a short measure (literally) of harmonic depth, evaporates into a carnivalesque twitter reminiscent of a hurdy-gurdy or carousel—a wry joke shared between father and son. Rochberg’s self-described “spass and
maybe *schtick* would appear in other compositions written during his transition back to the battlefield.\textsuperscript{101} On December 16, having been redeployed to an encampment near Fontainbleau, he sketched an idea for a piano piece titled “Cacophony for Four Hands” (ex. 1.6).\textsuperscript{102} The piece, to be played “like a scherzo,” plays like an off-kilter march awkwardly set in triple meter, with irregular accents on certain upbeats (>) throwing off the balance of the rhythm. Its two-voice fugue generates frequent harmonic dissonances between the lines—hence the title of the sketch—but the mood is neither dark nor intense; rather, its rough humor translates more as an ironic commentary on life in the army, a satirical counterpart to his earlier “Song of the Doughboy.” It is a lighthearted farce with an ironic quality that he would expand upon four decades later when he transformed the sketch into the *scherzo capriccioso* of his Violin and Piano Sonata (1988).\textsuperscript{103}

On January 21, 1945—coincidentally, the date the 261st Infantry set foot on the continent in preparation for the arduous campaign from the Saar to Regensburg—Rochberg penned his last wartime offering for his son. “Song for Paul” is a tender duet “to be sung slowly and tenderly” by Gene and Mitzi McClosky, a close friend from Minneapolis with whom Gene was staying while Rochberg was stationed abroad.\textsuperscript{104} Unlike his earlier lullaby, the vocal duet communicates nothing but diatonic sweetness through its swaying thirds and sixths, even phrases, and rhythmic homophony. Rochberg had been working on a pastoral dance for flute, oboe, and string quartet directly before redeployment, and the two works share the same peaceful regularity.\textsuperscript{105} But such

bucolic settings betrayed the composer’s more serious emotions as he faced a
second round of brutal warfare. Only days before, the composer had sketched
a short “Air” in E minor for oboe and cello.\textsuperscript{106} The melancholy \textit{cantabile} trans-
mits a resignation that Rochberg captured in his revision of the title to “Pensive
Air.” Tellingly, the idyllic “Song for Paul” and the lamenting “Pensive Air” share
the same piece of manuscript paper, representing the recto and verso of his
emotional world.

Rochberg was redeployed to the Third Army and arrived with his bat-
talion at Fontainbleau in mid-January.\textsuperscript{107} At this point, sustaining his
compositional activity became a struggle for Rochberg, who was “more preoccupied with just trying to stay alive” than with advancing his technique. The physical and emotional demands of the final campaign left little leisure time for the troops, and those serving on the frontlines often used so-called down time to rest or to write letters to loved ones at home. When opportunities to compose did present themselves, Rochberg’s sketches took a more formal turn toward short compositional exercises within traditional generic forms. At Fontainbleau, he began work on a “Little Suite”—the outgrowth of a short prelude he had composed in the hospital—and created sketches for a free fantasia, an internal prelude, and a closing toccata.
But as with his earlier service, musical work was always curtailed by the demands of warfare, with clusters of compositional activity taking place only during calmer moments in the campaign. As he described in his autobiography, life on the front was an oscillation between two extremes: “Except for the heavy artillery shells that passed overhead at random times during the day . . . an ominous, unsettling quiet hung over [us]. The biting cold of winter and the occasional patrols on which we were sent kept us from lapsing into somnolence.”\footnote{110} Again, he marched with his division from France toward the German border, but this time with the added difficulties brought about by the depths of winter: “Snow up to my thighs, brutally cold, nothing hot to eat. Just chocolate K-ration and snow.”\footnote{111} Such tactical movements interrupted further progress on his suite until late January, when the composer crafted the final two movements: a fughetta and a humoresque.\footnote{112}

In mid-February 1945, Rochberg and his battalion arrived at Habay-La-Neuve, Belgium, an army rest and rehabilitation center where soldiers could refresh their minds and bodies while their units reorganized for the anticipated mission ahead. For Rochberg, the break from physical combat allowed him the necessary leisure time for composing and considering new insights he had discerned from Donald Francis Tovey’s \textit{Beethoven} (1944), a biography the composer had studied in the hospital. As Rochberg explained, Tovey had “dropped the seeds” of extended musical harmony into his mind at a crucial moment—both the midpoint of his tour of duty and a recovery period during which he had the leisure to read and absorb his ideas. Now, two months later, he began to incorporate some of its most exciting ideas into his harmonic explorations, even if only in miniature form. “Tovey stimulated me,” he would later write, “in as much as I was already [inclined] that way.”\footnote{113} For the remainder of the war, Rochberg carried the book with him in his army-issued rucksack; it essentially became his musical textbook for the year.

Tovey’s discussion of chromatic key relations was a revelation to the young composer, who underscored passages that justified chromatic modulations—primarily to the flat supertonic—and enharmonic shifts to more remote keys. He read with glee Tovey’s assessment that “textbooks on harmony are still all too persistent in regarding modulations to keys a semitone apart as extremely remote,” especially given the musicologist’s assertion that “certain very remote keys can be brought into contact by changing both modes of the relation.”\footnote{114} Such harmonic motions were not merely tonal exercises but were also reflective of a deeper character and revolutionary spirit that Rochberg sensed in Beethoven’s music. As three sequential underlined passages knit together explain: “The remoter key-relations always have directly impressive effects when used by a master who does not squander them. . . . Melodic modulations from a major tonic to its unchanged median or submedian have no very
definite character. . . . Put [modal mixture into play] and you at once have an authentic word of power from Beethoven.”

Rochberg’s works from his second tour of duty put some of these harmonic ideas into play, albeit often in miniature or truncated settings. His emphasis appears to be less on developing larger-scale works—most probably because of restraints on his time—and more on continuing his work with modal mixture and chromatic key relations. On February 12 he wrote a short piano piece, “Song without Words,” an obvious homage to Felix Mendelssohn’s Lieder ohne Wörter but without the latter’s sophisticated Lied-style figuration. The allegretto is a regularly phrased melody supported by sustained chords or homophonic motion in the left hand, often with octave doubling in the flowing passages. As with his earlier songs, Rochberg seems keen to experiment with parallel modes (I/i) and harmonic shifts to the flat side of the spectrum (♭III), along with short chromatic sequences and dissonant voice leading. Rochberg later converted the short miniature into an arrangement for string quartet, an exercise in orchestration that required him to recall the ranges of the instruments (violin, viola, cello) as well as how to notate harmonics for the viola and various string articulations. On February 13 he worked on a fugal dance for wind trio (oboe, French horn, and bassoon), again with a simplistic triple counterpoint that generated open fifths or triads in either root position or first inversion.

The largest-scale composition Rochberg produced—or at least drafted—during his time at Habay-La-Neuve was the first movement of a Sonatina (1945) that he would complete after his return from the war. While Rochberg’s wartime sketches for the work do not survive, the unpublished autograph serves as a postwar culmination of the musical skills and ideas the composer had worked with while on the front. The allegro begins with a short fantasia-esque introduction that leads to the opening theme. The first transition consists primarily of florid runs, percussive open fifths, and arpeggiated triads all doubled at the octave, which gives these modulatory sections a sense of closely coordinated activity. The arrival of the second theme recalls the opening gesture of “Song of the Doughboy”—with its triplets leading to the downbeat of the opening phrase and its following pause to be filled with the imagined footsteps of the battalion (ex. 1.7a). The passage also reflects Rochberg’s increasing desire to employ strategic moments of chromaticism in large-scale forms, a concept he had encountered in Tovey’s analysis of Beethoven’s Symphony no. 3 (“Eroica”) and later practiced in the Sonatina. The second theme ascends chromatically an augmented third (A♭ to C#) to what appears to be its apex, but the enharmonic spelling predicts its resolution to D major, a chord that suggests another world of possibilities through the discordant interval of the tritone. Rochberg resolves this harmonic tension at the close of the movement using an enharmonic revision; the second theme again chromatically rises (G–C),
but this time it only flirts with the tritone (now spelled as D♭) before resolving downward to C major (ex. 1.7b). The resolution recalls Beethoven’s enharmonic play with the same two pitches (C♯–D♭) in the first movement of the Eroica, a moment that had intellectually excited Rochberg given the number of exclamation points littering the margins of his personal copy.

Rochberg’s final months of the war were less productive because of the advance of the Third Army deeper into German territory and a disciplinary
charge brought against the composer. As his battalion moved closer to the German border in March, encounters with German military units were increasingly frequent. Being a musician gave the composer one small advantage on the battlefield; he “could tell whether the firing was a German gun or an American gun” from the timbre and articulation of the rounds, thus allowing him to better triangulate the position of his battalion relative to that of the enemy. In one serious instance, however, this talent led to charges of insubordination being leveled against Rochberg. As Gene relayed:

He got an order from the general. “Rochberg, get your men over there!” And Rochberg said, “We’re not going.” [The general] said, “I gave you an order!” And George said, “I’m not taking my men there,” because he could tell that they were going into a place where the [German artillery] was really sounding. . . . And so he was immediately arrested, and his prison cell was an old lady’s house, and he had the bathroom.

Unlike World War I, when refusal to follow a direct order could have led to immediate execution by firing squad, Rochberg was given a court-martial trial. In the end, his explanation that he was protecting his men from certain slaughter was accepted, and he was declared innocent of all charges. The army validated his actions by awarding him the Purple Heart for bravery—a medal
Rochberg quietly kept in his study until his death in 2005—and promptly sent him back to the front lines. The composer reached Mayen, Germany, on March 22, 1945, a breach he celebrated with a feisty “Scherzo” for string quartet that rapidly accelerated to its closing cadence—a punctuated triad in the unambiguously optimistic key of C major and underscored with the following word: “Germany!!”

Rochberg’s last combat experience, as he explained in an interview with Richard Dufallo, was during the aftermath of the Battle of the Bulge. The Third Army was brought up from the south to begin to break the Germans’ hold, and on February 7, 1945, Rochberg again sustained serious injuries on the battlefield. He was sent to one of the general hospitals located in Chalons-Sur-Marne, France, for further medical attention.

With the end of the war in sight, the army relocated him to a British hospital ward and gave him notice that he would be discharged upon recovery. “Oh God, O God, Darling!” wrote Gene upon receiving the news. “I know you wouldn’t say such things without grounds for them and my heart is bursting with the thought of being with my love again. . . . To see you [and Paul] together! I think I’ll burst with joy.” The emotional toll of their separation—only deepened by the arrival of their son—had worn on her greatly. Awaking in the middle of the night, she often worried that she had only imagined her marriage as a “beautiful, exalted dream.” A month later she laid her soul bare to her husband, able now to share what she had emotionally withheld throughout the war:

Dearest, when you went, no one could console me. As the months went by and you were assigned, wounded, sent back, arrested, wounded again—all those things—walls of iron kept growing up around my heart—my thoughts and emotions—until I was encased so tightly in an ugly unbearable armor. Darling, I was so scared, for you and then for our child and . . . [I suffered] the bitterness of seeing lives untouched, unaffected while so much was being suffered.

Rochberg wrote shortly thereafter with news of his discharge orders. “I feel this iron giving way till I shall be a human being again . . . when I see you,” Gene wrote in an outpouring of relief. “There is so much awaiting us—love first and then hard work. Soon beloved . . . ” And it would be soon; Rochberg returned to New Jersey on June 21, 1945, welcomed by the loving embraces of his wife and the first glimpse of his ten-month-old son.

As Gene had predicted, love soon did give way to hard work. From the sketches he had produced in Habay-La-Neuve, Rochberg immediately set upon writing the final two movements of his Sonatina and completed them only a few weeks after his homecoming. On August 14, the Japanese officially surrendered to the US forces, bringing World War II to a formal close. The news prompted Rochberg to go back to the compositional table with a volume
of William Blake’s *Songs of Innocence*, from which he selected the celebratory poem “Spring” for four-part women’s chorus.\(^{135}\)

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Sound the flute!} & \quad \text{Little Boy,} \\
\text{Now it’s mute.} & \quad \text{Full of Joy;} \\
\text{Birds delight} & \quad \text{Little Girl,} \\
\text{Day and night;} & \quad \text{Sweet and small;} \\
\text{Nightingale} & \quad \text{Cock does Crow,} \\
\text{In the dale,} & \quad \text{So do you;} \\
\text{Lark in sky,} & \quad \text{Merry voice,} \\
\text{Merrily,} & \quad \text{Infant Noise,} \\
\text{Merrily, merrily, to welcome in the year.} & \quad \text{Merrily, merrily to welcome in the year.}
\end{align*}
\]

Little lamb, \\
Here I am; \\
Come and lick \\
My white neck; \\
Let me pull \\
Your soft wool; \\
Let me kiss \\
Your soft face; \\
Merrily, merrily, we welcome in the year.

The poem no doubt had personal postwar associations for Rochberg, its verses suggesting optimism for a new beginning, adoration of a new infant child, and the sweet affection between two lovers. The rhythmic activity of the piece—with its textually motivated shifts between homophony and small imitative gestures passed between the voices—recalls an *a cappella* madrigal setting. As one might expect, the harmonic profile is more intricate than the wartime sketches (Rochberg had access to a piano and more time to develop his ideas), but it does not venture past a fin-de-siècle vocabulary. Chromatic modulations still appear as localized coloristic effects, including brief shifts to the flat keys (\(\flat\) III/\(\flat\) VI) or playful meanderings into standard cadence types (IV-I/V-I). Granted, these decisions serve the cheerful text well; isolated chromatic sequences act as passageways to more stable harmonic arrivals, reflecting the overall poetic structure in that the narrator’s wandering discoveries coalesce to create a collective portrait of the new season. But they also demonstrate how Rochberg’s war service had isolated him from modernist trends such as free atonality and serialism. As a result, his postwar return to composition remained grounded in the comfortable—or, as the modernist camp might argue, *innocent*—modes of nineteenth-century musical communication he had studied both before and during the war.

Rochberg later admitted that his postwar development had been hampered by a form of post-traumatic stress he termed “psychic anesthesia.” As he
described to Reilly, it was “a way of protecting yourself against any form of feel-
ings. . . . There is probably a two-inch layer of something in your psyche that
is holding back immediate impressions.”136 While such a buttress ultimately
allowed a person to persevere despite horrific experiences, the negative result
of building such a coat of armor was that one was “induced into the deepest
passive condition.”137 As a result, the war years were somewhat of a compo-
sitional stalemate for Rochberg.138 He remained suspended in—and yet per-
haps comforted by—the repetition of skills and repertory stressed by Szell and
Weisse in his early training: fugal counterpoint, nineteenth-century harmoni-
zation, traditional genres and forms, and compositions modeled on canonical
literature. Such exercises became a coping mechanism, a tether to the past that
reminded him of his life’s ambition and reassured him of his commitment.

In April 1946, Rochberg returned to choral music to express the bleak
experience of the war and its horrific aftermath. Instead of Blake’s primaveral
poem, he coupled three verses from the Old Testament into an apocalyptic
postwar text. Set for four-part mixed choir, the motet opens solemnly with a
passage from Lamentations 1—“How doth the city sit solitary that was full of
people?”—set to a neo-Baroque fugue reminiscent of the dramatic works of
Bach and Handel (ex. 1.8). The texture shows Rochberg’s development and
advancement in contrapuntal technique; there are no more octave doublings,
the subject is more complex, and the voices are better positioned within appro-
priate choral tessituras. A short stretto gives way to a second passage from
Lamentations 3—“All our enemies have opened their mouth [sic] wide against
us. Terror and the pit are come upon us. Desolation and destruction”—which
is realized as a florid G-minor fugue filled with idiomatic gestures of the eigh-
teenth century.139 The work closes with a return to the opening text and key,
the layered texture replaced by a more introspective homophonic render-
ing of the mid-century’s unanswerable question: “How doth the city sit soli-
tary that was full of people?” Rochberg’s reframing of the verse, which is now
posed from a reflective post-conflict position within the motet, transforms its
tone from a dramatic prompt into a philosophical query about man, war, and
suffering.

The overall effect is old-fashioned, more like a counterpoint assignment
than what one might expect from a mid-twentieth-century composition about
terror and destruction. This assessment makes sense, given that the motet
stems from a period of intense pedagogical study during which Rochberg filled
multiple sketchbooks with transcriptions from the fugal works of di Lasso,
Palestrina, Handel, J. S. Bach, W. F. Bach, Cherubini, Mozart, and Brahms.140
Between the meticulously reproduced copies, Rochberg sketched out his own
contrapuntal ideas based on the older canonical models, usually prompted
by short tutorials provided by his instructor, Dante Fiorillo. But as he would
explain, works like the motet made him believe that this harmonic vocabulary
fell short of capturing the horror and chaos he had seen in Europe: “From the time I came out of the army until about 1948 . . . I began to struggle with absorbing what for a lot of my contemporaries was probably old hat. War shook me out of my dream of the nineteenth century [and] forced me into the necessity to face the realities of the world around me and my relation to that [modern] world.”141 The result was an abandonment of what he called


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“soft romanticism”—the canonical idioms he now considered “the total opposite of [what] human beings have experienced: harsh, short, brutish”—and an embrace of “hard romanticism,” with its “sharp angularities of dissonance.” In short, he noted, “I had to find a way to hook onto the twentieth century.”

Rochberg would discover the works of Arnold Schoenberg the following year, an experience that radically changed the course of his early compositional trajectory. “Schoenberg was [my] great trauma of 1947,” he recalled with
humor, “because . . . I made my first real contact with . . . his twelve-tone works” in that year.¹⁴³ But whereas Rochberg often described Schoenberg’s dodecaphony as an intellectual exercise, he portrayed his own foray into atonality as stemming from a “deep emotional need to express what I felt had happened, what I’d been involved in, and what it meant to me.”¹⁴⁴ He continued: “My need for a romanticism of extremes, an expressionism which could move suddenly and quickly in any and all directions[,] was not sufficiently satisfied by
what I knew before the war of Bartók, Stravinsky, or Hindemith. Indeed, [I needed] a language which felt much more real and palpable in the terms I now saw as the substance of twentieth century experience.”¹⁴⁵ Twelve-tone music thus provided Rochberg with a new vocabulary by which he could “give voice to how I saw the world, how I responded to the experience of being in an uncertain world which, paradoxically, refused to see itself . . . for the dark place of terror it really was.”¹⁴⁶
But the lessons of his war experience, as Rochberg would discover during the next period of his career, were not as simple as adopting a more dissonant musical language. Such techniques provided a more diverse musical palette and a wider range of expression, but his war experience had not simply been about human discord and destruction. The war had driven him to what he considered his lowest and most anti-humanistic form—a killing machine driven by ideological forces outside of himself—but it had also underscored the importance of basic humanistic values to the individual retention of self. Through his wartime compositions, Rochberg deepened and preserved these human relationships: singing with his brothers-in-arms, sharing his musical sense of humor with his infant son, modeling his language on composers he revered. Collectively, such activities created an alternative aesthetic space outside the deafening roar of modern warfare that sustained him through its brutality. As he once noted, “It is a very strange kind of experience to love the world, to love life—which I did—but to be very disappointed in it.” His struggle with that tension—between human love and the false promises of modernism—would ultimately become the foundation for his new aesthetic worldview, a personal philosophy developed on the front lines of the war against fascism and then mapped repeatedly onto his developing ideas about musical time and space.