George Rochberg, American Composer

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Chapter Two

The Long Road to

*Ars Combinatoria*: 1943–63

Reclaiming tonality was not that simple. . . . I could not give up my own direct heritage, which was that of a man [who] inherited the legacy of the giants of the time: Schoenberg, Stravinsky, Bartók. There are still aspects of their music . . . which I believe to be viable and valid.

—George Rochberg (1976)

In 1969, Rochberg assembled ideas drawn from his personal journals into the essay “No Center,” a quasi-poetic manifesto for a new aesthetic philosophy: *ars combinatoria*, or the art of combination. Therein, he advocated for a postmodern technique of assemblage and collage that would result in “a complex of attitudes and ideas . . . surrounded by a vague aura of association.”¹ But Rochberg’s philosophical conceit was more existential than the mere collection of objects and stylistic gestures into new musical contexts. In his mind, *ars combinatoria* was not a compositional technique or theory but an “exploration of deep inner space, mental space.”² It promoted artistic expressions of human connection that reflected “a state of mind and soul against death and time” as well as “the survival of our inmost, immaterial essence.”³ At the core of his philosophy were the values of love and inclusivity, which manifested themselves in the repetition and embrace of the canonical repertory. As Rochberg described, “Everything we love belongs to us. That includes the past and the future. We are the present.” He continued: “360 degrees of past, present, future. All around me. I can look in any direction I want . . . Inclusivity. . . . The liberation of the imagination . . . implies the freedom to move where the ear takes us and to bring together everything which seems good to it. . . . We can choose and create our own time.”⁴ The result was a rich multi-directionality limited only by one’s imagination and aural reach.
While it has been suggested that Rochberg drew inspiration from the philosophical ideas of Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, who wrote about an “art of combination” in his *Dissertatio de arte combinatoria* (1666), the composer actually seized on the term after reading *Labyrinths* (1962), a collection of writings by the Argentinian writer Jorge Luis Borges. As he shared with his friend Alexander Ringer, his discovery of Borges’s ideas about literary correspondences were revelatory, and he was compelled by the author’s “conscious re-creation of [past] attitude, stance, and word” as a means to pursue distinct compositional identities in the present. He saw this as a “method of literature turning in on itself,” with the “spine-tingling” potential to become a metaphysical philosophy “of cosmic proportions.”

Borges appears in “No Center” along with other scholarly and historical influences, among them the specific humanistic challenges posed by modern war. In the essay, Rochberg frames one of his central queries—Why should one create art?—with literary reflections on the brutality of twentieth-century warfare. The first response comes from a letter written by Rainer Maria Rilke in 1915, when he was serving as a soldier in the trenches of World War I. Rilke bemoans the inability of prewar art to inspire men to humanistic values and acts: “The whole sad man-made complication of [World War I] was necessary to force out evidences of wholehearted courage, devotion and bigness. While we, the arts . . . called nothing forth in these very same people, brought nothing to rise and flower, were unable to change anyone.”

Rilke’s pessimism cedes a second reflection drawn from Norman Mailer’s *Why Are We in Vietnam*, which Rochberg describes as speaking about the impotency of art through a crude “language of despair [and] the obscenities of human suffering and pain.”

Residing in the no-man’s land between these two texts is the mid-century catastrophe, World War II, which is never explicitly mentioned and yet directly influenced Rochberg’s development of the core tenets of *ars combinatoria*. Over the course of two decades bracketed by personal tragedy—his wounding in the European theater and the diagnosis of his son with brain cancer—Rochberg sought positive models for his own work, historical figures who seemed to answer Rilke’s plea for musical heroes who might serve humanity through their art. But as World War II had taught Rochberg, heroes are necessarily defined by their struggle against nemeses in ethical conflicts. Correspondingly, he constructed the other side of the artistic world as a realm of vain egoists whose work reflected the crudity Mailer had identified in his novel. As his ideas matured, Rochberg would assign different aesthetic practices to these archetypes—with some composers and styles shifting between the two categories as his allegiances changed—but the guiding ethical criteria, as outlined in “No
Center,” remained fairly consistent throughout. The essay therefore reflects Rochberg’s mature philosophical response to the war he experienced and its impact on humanity and artistic culture.

The earliest seeds for *ars combinatoria* can be traced to three wartime essays written during Rochberg’s first recovery stay in a British hospital, roughly around November 1944. While recuperating, Rochberg began to sketch a vision for the type of composer he wished to become—an authentic artist whose music espoused the human values at the core of his wartime experience. In the earliest essay, “Love and Art,” Rochberg contemplated the relationship between human joy and artistic creation that would later form the heart of *ars combinatoria*. Of great initial concern was what he observed as a lack of awareness in the modern world that love has always been the cornerstone of great musical creations. The spiritual power and beauty of “meaningful music,” he argued, surfaces only when an “artist bring[s] to bear on his work all of himself—his mind, his heart, his physical and mental stamina all joined to the common purpose by an overwhelming, loving, creative passion.”

Moreover, an artist’s capacity to love ultimately expands or restricts one’s musical language, which Rochberg believed reflects the quality of one’s inner being:

Art is a view of life which depends not on the mechanism of that view but on its ultimate meaning to man. . . . From his capacity for love the artist creates a “view of life” [that is either] full of warmth, vitality, and passion or [is] a drab, colorless world—dull, futile, and passionless. The ratio that exists between [the artist’s] love for life and nature is distinctly related to his work.

At this point in the essay, he posited two general archetypes for the modern composer, one positive in nature and the other negative. The ideal artist is one who abdicates self-importance in aesthetic service to the world; by directing his or her loving energy toward the needs of the artwork, the artist generously creates a vastly greater art. The opposite is an artist who is “completely self-loving,” in that “all interest and purpose is directed inward, where the ego burns with ever-increasing intensity, demanding more fuel and giving more heat than light.” As a result, the self-serving artist “generates power in himself. . . . He absorbs life and . . . assimilates it into himself” rather than into his creation.

These themes were developed further in two other essays from 1944, in which Rochberg assigned historical examples to the two archetypes. The first identified Ludwig van Beethoven as the supreme model of a loving artist, a “great creator and great man” who “never ceased probing the depths of his soul, of nature, of life and man.” In Rochberg’s opinion, Beethoven possessed two important qualities—spiritual accessibility and introspection—that allowed him to escape the grasp of the “superficial world” and draw his energy from more abstract sources like “nature and the cosmos.” This ability to relocate his art from the material to the spiritual realm marked Beethoven as “a
“king among all men” who heroically “rode music like a God.” Similarly, the ability to be introspective—to reflect nothing of his external life or temperament in his works—allowed him to create supposedly universalist works like the Fifth Symphony, which Rochberg considered a “monument to the spirit of mankind, [a work] from a man who has tasted bitterness but [who seizes instead on] a deep welling power of inner joy.” Such accolades are glowingly superlative and transcendent, a portrayal that conveniently distanced the composer from his national and worldly contexts as well as from Germany’s fascist legacy.

The negative archetype appears in the persona of Richard Wagner, who Rochberg praised for his “musical contribution to western culture” but savaged as “the most egotistical musician who has ever inhabited the globe.” Rochberg briefly mentioned some of his ethical objections to Wagner, including his extra-marital affairs and the “racial prejudices” the composer circulated in his anti-Semitic “pamphlets on music and art,” but his greater objection related back to ideas about generosity developed in “Love and Art.” Wagner’s perceived selfishness and the direction of his creative energy toward his personal gain therefore establish him as Beethoven’s spiritual antithesis: “Beethoven’s great ego sought not its own justification but justification for man. He sought his inspiration from the great outer life of nature and God. The opposite is true of Wagner. Whatever he uses as his vehicle of expression, it is invariably turned inward and is used to feed [his] ever-hungry self. Wagner had no need of God for he had himself.” In the end, Rochberg concluded that Wagner might be viewed as a “victim of his own tyrannical sensualism and need for self-expression,” which expressed itself as a “fever [and a] disease” that relentlessly drove him. “He has meaning only for himself,” Rochberg argued, “and not mankind as a whole.”

Such portrayals reflect the influence of the wartime context in which Rochberg conceived the essays, including texts he had access to in England as well as prevailing attitudes toward Beethoven and Wagner in Great Britain. One guiding source was again Tovey’s biography of Beethoven, which had been drafted between 1910 and 1936 and published posthumously in 1944. The opening pages of Tovey’s study offer a parallel assessment of Beethoven and Wagner, suggesting it was a possible model for Rochberg’s essays. “Beethoven is a complete artist,” writes Tovey, “He was eminently a man who held himself responsible [to the world].” Tovey then establishes Wagner as a spiritual antithesis to Beethoven’s humanism, a curious insertion given that Wagner is neither the subject of the study nor a contemporary of Beethoven. “We have now come to see,” Tovey contends with a measure of Allied patriotism, “that a reverence for the music dramas of Wagner is quite compatible with a dislike for the Saxon (I will not say Anglo-Saxon) traits by which Wagner the man... was apt to pray to his gods to prosper his ends and sanctify the means he
used to gain them.”21 Such portraits are common in Tovey’s writings, which had long celebrated Beethoven and maintained skepticism about Wagner. As Joseph Kerman notes, “Whatever complimentary words Tovey ever found to say about Wagner, in his bones he felt that the great [German] tradition” had reached an apogee with Beethoven and ended with Brahms.22

In the context of the war, comparisons of Beethoven and Wagner as spiritual adversaries took on new political and national dimensions within the realm of public musicology, in which musical figures were used as ideological symbols on both sides of the Allied-Axis divide.23 Indeed, a perennial topic in the British press was the debate over whether composers associated with Germany—specifically those favored by Hitler and Goebbels in their cultural propaganda—should be broadcast on BBC classical programming. Notably, Beethoven was broadcast throughout the war without controversy and often in prominent ideological moments of uplift; for example, the Fifth Symphony was the BBC Orchestra’s first offering after Victory Europe (V-E) Day. Beethoven’s music was consistently defended as reflecting humanist rather than German values, and BBC researchers noted that his instrumental music was uniquely able to unite British listeners across the various spectrums of musical taste and social background.24 Conversely, the case of Wagner provoked more heated discussions, with opponents arguing that his work expressed an intrinsically “German spirit . . . [which was not] good for life.” Ultimately, the BBC did continue to broadcast Wagner because of his importance in the classical repertory as well as the argument by liberal critics that an outright ban would drag the BBC “down to the level of what we are fighting against.”25 The assessments parallel those of both Tovey and Rochberg; Beethoven is able to transcend the current political context, while Wagner remains implicated in it.

Rochberg’s foray into musicological commentary ceased when he returned to active duty in January 1945. After his honorable discharge in July, he returned to America and took advantage of the GI Bill, which had been instituted in 1944 to provide stipends to cover college tuition for veterans; the funds allowed him to enroll at the Curtis Institute of Music, where he studied with Rosario Scalero and Gian Carlo Menotti.26 To make up for lost time, Rochberg started working fourteen hours a day to develop his contrapuntal skills—often assigning himself additional exercises beyond what Scalero had required—but his post-mortems on his work were laced with more philosophical thoughts about the distinction between musical craft (the material and technique) and artistry (the spiritual intent). In a sketch from August 1946 that featured a particularly dull fugal realization, Rochberg consoles himself that such rote exercises are necessary at this early point in his career. “Double counterpoint is a device to be utilized within the framework of true contrapuntal writing,” he writes while imploring himself to make even these exercises “musical in feeling.”27 Advancement to triple and quadruple counterpoint brought additional
worries about color and line, but his commentaries in the margins speak of a greater concern for a work’s energy and spirit: “The composer is a colorist with his harmonic sense and a draftsman with his contrapuntal sense. The combination of the two is the ideal. In this way, craft becomes a vehicle of many ways to expression. There must always be warmth and passion. Dry Music is a living fact today, and how unappealing and unmeaningful it is!!”

By dry music, Rochberg was not referring to twelve-tone or serial music—as one might assume from his later, more polemical essays—but rather to “commercial” or “populist” music composed to appeal to external taste rather than to reflect the artist’s inner emotional being. Within this camp he included well-known American composers such as Aaron Copland and Virgil Thomson, but he felt the most disappointed in those closest to him, his mentors Fiorillo and Menotti. In a journal entry from May 1948, Rochberg wrote extensively about his memory of Fiorillo as a “sure, independent artist” whose prewar ideas about uncompromising art “corroborate[d] my own attitudes and feelings about art and what an artist must be.” But after the sudden death of Fiorillo’s daughter, Andrea, from a ruptured appendix, the composer’s writing changed drastically in both style and existential concern. As Rochberg observed, “He is desperately trying to establish connection with the world as a composer so that he can earn more money. . . . He is writing music which will appeal to the more ordinary emotional life of the concert listener. He is really writing a commercial product, not art.” Even Menotti, who had warmly embraced Rochberg as a colleague, did not escape criticism: “Menotti is a man of the real world [who has] taken every advantage presented to him and [made] it work for his benefit. . . . [He] can only turn out music which entertains and delights for a moment but [which] make[s] no lasting impression because it is neither original nor strong.” Likening him to Wagner, Rochberg concluded that without the external crutch of the libretto and the conventions of the stage, “Menotti is probably lost as a composer.”

Admittedly, such youthful aesthetic division of the world into craftsmen and artists was a common trope in the twentieth century. “A craftsman can do—good and bad, shallow and profound, new-fangled and old-fashioned,” wrote the thirty-seven-year-old Arnold Schoenberg in 1911, only five years after the premiere of his atonal Second String Quartet. “But the artist must. He has no say in the matter; it is nothing to do with what he wants. . . . [He] learns from nature. . . . Feeling is already form, the idea is already the word.” In 1948, the thirty-year-old Rochberg would similarly turn the mirror on himself and make a self-assessment of his talents and intentions since the war:

It’s now a little more than one-and-a-half years since my piano sonata [1946]. I have accomplished a lot in that time—more freedom of expression, greater command of the technical means, more freedom in sound. . . . Nevertheless I still feel a certain stiffness . . . which bothers me. My mental images are
always freer than the ones I realize on paper. . . . Better to write less if necessary, but make Every Thing Count. Every effort of composition should be toward something personal and strong and new. . . . I am not interested in writing pleasant music. Let the others do that. . . . I want my [work] to have . . . sounds as even Beethoven never wrote. Let the DAEMON have his way!!

As with any dance with the devil, however, the journey toward artistic authenticity was filled with personal struggles, including what he increasingly saw as the limitations of his own musical vocabulary. As he wrote to Gene from a composers’ conference at Middlebury College in 1949, the core problem with his most recent compositions was that they indulged “so extensively in sheer mechanical contrapuntal devices for their own sake. [My] practice was excellent but it doesn’t produce the best music.” The following year, he would call more desperately on a higher power for inspiration. “Where is the man whose soul speaks?” he lamented to his journal. “I am almost thirty-two and still seeking and searching. I must will myself to life. . . . O God, Lord, the Universe, Help this suffering spirit to abundance and strength, to create works of which even you will be glad!”

In the early 1950s, Rochberg’s search led him to embrace serialism, a decision that would later pose broader autobiographical challenges for the composer, given the anti-modernist polemics on which he had founded his musical legacy. Although wise enough to avoid casting his embrace of the twelve-tone technique as a youthful indiscretion, Rochberg does inject a conscious personal distance into his autobiography, written in the final years of the composer’s life. He admits to feeling external pressure to conform with his modernist colleagues (“I felt I had to master Schoenberg’s ordered chromaticism”) or portrays himself as a somewhat passive student (“I see I was being ‘educated’ . . . in what was then . . . the latest variety of ongoing modernism”). Although both explanations are plausible, one short passage hints at another motive—genuine excitement for the new musical and harmonic vocabulary he was developing: “My old passion for making variations took on renewed energy and enlarged scope with the manifold possibilities I saw inherent in the principles of the row. I loved the challenge of adhering as closely as imagination and technical control permitted to one or another configuration . . . while finding in the combinations . . . seemingly limitless ways to present such . . . memorable continuities.”

A similar sense of liberation surfaces in a less guarded moment from his interview with Guy Freedman: “I felt suddenly free. I thought I had found the means with which to actually compose music that I felt deeply. . . . I was interested in probing those areas of human experience which struck me as belonging legitimately to the twentieth century.”

Ultimately, it was Schoenberg’s music that inspired Rochberg’s new direction, an experience he would later describe as “feeling my way in the dark” toward revelation. In his autobiography, Rochberg reflects on his initial
experiences with Schoenberg’s music with a degree of revisionism, a fact that is not surprising given Rochberg’s complicated lifelong relationship with Schoenberg as both a composer and a historical figure. He describes listening habitually to the Fourth String Quartet, albeit with a “deep ambivalence of love-hate” that caused him to be “simultaneously repelled by and drawn to it.”

He continues: “[I] tried endless more times to make [the score] come to life at the piano . . . I still found that [Schoenberg’s] overwrought expressionist emotional palette, often combined with emotionally desiccated sensibilities, rubbed my nerves the wrong way. The music sounded ugly and unbeautiful to my ears.” Here, Rochberg’s metaphors are those he commonly levied against modernist music after his rejection of serialism in 1963. Schoenberg’s Fourth String Quartet has become lifeless, dehydrated, and psychologically unsound because of its hysterical neurosis.

And yet, entries in his journal from 1952—the year of his first serial composition—reveal the composer’s exuberant embrace of Schoenberg as a positive archetype for modernist artistry and humanistic art. “I know of no composer of the twentieth century,” he wrote admiringly, “who has the sense of [the living phrase] as Schoenberg had it. [It is] a complete musical unit that ‘breathes’ as music must breathe, that moves through a significant profile, [that is] fundamentally a ‘vocal’ concept.” In June 1952, having just heard Schoenberg’s String Trio (1946) for the first time, he raced back home to record his impressions: “How is it possible that such beauty and musical art still goes unrecognized except in obscure corners of this earth? . . . One wonders if this were written by a man or an angel. Such a work reminds us that music is still a human art . . . [not just] pitch and absolute time structures.”

Rochberg defended twelve-tone music further in a journal passage responding to Paul Hindemith’s autobiography, A Composer’s World (1952), which he had read the same year. “Hindemith argues against twelve-tone—calls it a stylistic bubble,” he complained in his journal. “He doesn’t realize that wherever significance . . . has arisen a mind and soul have always been at work . . . I myself am convinced that it is past the time for tonality. . . . I believe [in] chromaticism and [dodecaphony] as a road which must be gone over . . . We will see new visions.”

Rochberg explains that he was “driven to keep at Schoenberg’s ‘secrets’” so he could forge a “language with which to say, in terms of my own time and experience, those things I wanted and needed to say.” In one essay, Rochberg suggests that American composers were prompted to embrace Schoenberg’s aesthetics after their physical and emotional involvement “with the European cataclysm of World War II,” a comment that resonates with remarks he offered in two interviews about his serialist period. “One of the most powerful impulses toward twelve-tone [and] serialism . . . was my reaction to my war experience,” he shared with Richard Dufallo. “The darkness of that whole
experience . . . really had rooted itself. It didn’t show itself right away, but it started to make demands on me emotionally. And that’s what [pushed] me into a kind of atonal world. . . . It was very, very powerful.”

The topic resurfaces in a later interview with Robert Reilly, in which Rochberg explains his embrace of serialism as a way of confronting the devastating impact of modern war: “I needed to find a language with which I could say what I had experienced, but obviously in a way which was refractive, not brutalized by the nature of the experience itself. [I had] to make damn sure that whatever I composed . . . would be as beautiful as I could make it.”

Rochberg’s youthful reactions to dodecaphony thus allow one to understand how the composer could reconcile its language with a desire for postwar beauty; at that time he had considered it, to use his own words, the “counter to the horror” rather than an expression of that horror itself.

Rochberg developed his admiration of Schoenberg during his time in Italy—he had earned two fellowships, from the Fulbright commission (1950–51) and the American Academy in Rome (1950–51)—when he made the acquaintance of Luigi Dallapiccola, an Italian twelve-tone composer. “It was, for me, a sweet kind of relationship,” Rochberg would recall. “I thought he was a marvelous kind of human being.” Their deep humanistic connection allowed the elder composer to become something of an aspirational model for the young American. Both professed to be self-taught disciples of Schoenberg and claimed to have learned the twelve-tone technique not through treatises or articles but through the analysis of Schoenberg’s works themselves.

Both saw themselves as artistic victims of the war who believed that dodecaphony—a method Rochberg noted was judged as “an entirely alien attitude and [degenerate] aesthetic” in fascist cultures—could be reclaimed for humanistic intents and texts. Dallapiccola’s gracious encouragement of Rochberg’s talents buoyed the younger composer, who appreciated that the Italian was not overly dogmatic but aesthetically open-minded in his compositional approach. As Rochberg observed, Dallapiccola was known to have merged dodecaphony with more traditional elements in his compositions, and as the two discovered with delight, they shared a common love of Bach’s contrapuntal works.

In their postwar careers, both Schoenberg and Dallapiccola seized on texted works as a means to address the horrors and anti-humanism of the war—including works such as A Survivor from Warsaw (1947), Il Prigioniero (1948), and Job (1950)—but Rochberg rarely cites their overt political engagement as the basis for his admiration during this period. Rather, he adopts rhetoric from Carl Jung’s Modern Man in Search of a Soul, which he had read with great interest and excitement, to make a more abstract case for their artistic heroism. Jung averred that art must rise “above the realm of [one’s] personal life and speak from the spirit and heart of the poet as man to the spirit and heart of mankind.” In Rochberg’s mind, Jung’s romantic characterization of art
took it “out of time and space and [brought it] into contact with [a] fundamental spirit” that “would never exist in the phenomenal world for everyman to see and to feel.” He immediately connected Jung’s ideas to his conception of Beethoven, who reemerged as “an exemplar of a thoroughly ‘modern’ composer,” one whose works were “not . . . representative of his times” but “impersonal and yet deeply affecting because they reveal the depths . . . of his [humanity], his spirit, and his root being.” True artistic heroes such as Beethoven, Schoenberg, and Dallapiccola thus conveyed their artistic bravery through their aesthetic decisions to stand musically “on the threshold of the future and . . . [be] vilified, damned, persecuted, and destroyed” for their innovative extensions of musical tradition.

All three composers were certainly on Rochberg’s mind when he began his first twelve-tone composition, the *Twelve Bagatelles* for piano (1952), which he dedicated to Dallapiccola. Composed over the course of two months, the movements came fast and furiously to Rochberg in a fit of inspiration: “After long preparation and improvising daily on rows in progress, the first eight bagatelles burst forth, each in a single night. The last four were written more slowly and deliberately.” Such initial speed might be explained by the fact that Rochberg limited himself to just four permutations of his non-combinatorial row—\(P_1\), \(R_1\), \(I_8\), and \(RI_8\)—and worked with only one or two row forms in the first eight movements (table 2.1). Theorist Yoojin Kim hypothesizes that Rochberg may have chosen these rows to “exhibit a [more tonal] tonic-dominant relationship” between their initial pitches (C# and G#) and thus place the two musical systems in conversation with one another.

He attributes Rochberg’s tonal allusions to Dallapiccola’s influence, but Rochberg had already encountered (and admired) the practice in Schoenberg’s Fourth String Quartet, a score he had assiduously analyzed as part of his studies at Curtis. Schoenberg’s harmonic language also seems to have influenced the intervallic makeup of Rochberg’s guiding row; it is composed of three \{016\} trichords (colloquially referred to as the “Viennese trichord” because of its predominance in the music of the Second Viennese School) and one augmented \{048\} trichord, both of which Schoenberg favored in his writing (ex. 2.1).

Rochberg depicted the *Twelve Bagatelles* as a radically “seismic . . . tectonic shift” in his corpus, but one also senses personal retrospection in the second triptych of the work: Bagatelles nos. 4–6. The scene begins with Bagatelle no. 4, a short and humorous march Rochberg described as a “little toy march in a little toy world,” a playful quality that comes through in the movement’s treble registration and thin texture. The work gains a stronger and more recognizable military character only in its brief middle section (mm. 18–34), where the pulse becomes steadier and Rochberg employs the conventional topoi of a triplet upbeat leading to a quarter note (ex. 2.2). Rochberg had already employed this gesture in his jovial 1944 marching tune “Song of the Doughboy” and the
The move- 

tment does not seek to portray the war in realistic terms, however; as Rochberg 

asserted, its language was that of artistic parody: “It’s make-believe. It’s not real. 

It’s an antidote to the horrors of the world.”

Those horrors surface in Bagatelle no. 5—the most dramatic movement in 

the series—which Rochberg characterized as a painful narrative about hurtful 

aggression. The work begins as an *arioso* featuring a tender cantabile line 
singing above slowly accumulating harmonic dissonance. This gentleness is 

abruptly curtailed with the arrival of the middle section (mm. 10–14), in which 
an increasingly agitated motive escalates in pitch, volume, tempo and articula-
tion markings, and sheer harmonic density (ex. 2.3). It first appears in mea-

sure 10 as a minor third that repeats four times before cutting abruptly to a 
rhythmic dyad in the lower register. In its second iteration, the motive expands 

its harmonic content to a wide voicing of the {016} trichord, thus cultivating 
increased dissonance. In measure 12, Rochberg extends the rhythmic motive 

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Table 2.1. Serial organization of the *Twelve Bagatelles* (1952)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Bagatelle</th>
<th>Row forms utilized</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>No. 1</td>
<td>$P_1$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No. 2</td>
<td>$I_8$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No. 3</td>
<td>$P_1, I_8$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No. 4</td>
<td>$R_1$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No. 5</td>
<td>$RI_8$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No. 6</td>
<td>$R_1, RI_8$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No. 7</td>
<td>$P_1, R_1$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No. 8</td>
<td>$RI_8, I_8$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No. 9</td>
<td>$R_1, I_8$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No. 10</td>
<td>$RI_8, P_1$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No. 11</td>
<td>$P_1, I_8, R_1, RI_8$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No. 12</td>
<td>$P_1, I_8, R_1, RI_8$</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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Example 2.1. Prime form of the twelve-tone row for the *Twelve Bagatelles* (1952).
in the lower register, creating an even alternation between the two hands that forcefully accelerates as it circles through the entire twelve-tone series.

Although the composer never revealed the specific inspiration for this movement, its direct prefacing by the march again suggests the war as a possible subtext for the scene. But there is another potential subject rhythmically embedded into the apex of Bagatelle no. 5: the first movement of Beethoven’s Fifth Symphony, a work Rochberg had long associated with “psychic intensity” and forceful immediacy. In addition to sharing a rhythmic affinity with Beethoven’s opening motto, the passage just described unfolds in a manner similar to the measures preceding the recapitulation in Beethoven’s first movement—a moment Rochberg associated with unremitting power and violent persecution. Both alternate sequentially between registers and share a similar design plan, with each adamantly reasserting its entrance against a more static field and then multiplying its statements in an inevitable trajectory toward weighty arrival. Rochberg makes the connection between his bagatelles and the Fifth Symphony more explicit in the following movement—Bagatelle no. 6—in which the final measures make a clear rhythmic allusion to the Fifth, thus cementing a connection between the two works (ex. 2.4).

Rochberg described Bagatelle no. 6 as “a satire or ridicule of another . . . person, piece, or event,” and although he left the satirical target unspecified, its position at the end of the triptych offers some interpretive possibilities.
Jeffrey Shumway’s reading of Bagatelle no. 6 as a satire of either the German composer or his symphony is possible, but given Rochberg’s characterization of Beethoven as the archetypal model for humanist composition, it seems unlikely that he would choose him or his works for abject ridicule. Rather, Rochberg seems to have appropriated Beethoven’s opening *Klang*—a motive he once directly associated with “heightened, intensely personalized modernist projections of angst and forebodings of terror”—as a symbol still relevant in the postwar period. Read this way, Bagatelles nos. 4–6 might be interpreted as an abstract and distanced portrait of warfare from a postwar perspective, a reading that resonates well with the composer’s postwar description of the twentieth century as consisting of two emotional extremes—the “inner pain...
and terror” of the war followed by the “distancing . . . [of] the self from the pain of direct emotional involvement.”76

These allusions to both of his positive artistic archetypes—Beethoven and Schoenberg—also reveal the composer consciously looking to history as he cultivated his own postwar voice, and he was not displeased with the results.77 In his journal, he described the Twelve Bagatelles as a conquering triumph for his career: “I have found my voice in my Twelve Bagatelles. . . . My new power, my new direction. I feel like a general who has made the first major breach in the enemy’s defenses. . . . This will be my world.”78 While he might not have anticipated it at the time, the Twelve Bagatelles exhibited what would later become a defining aspect of ars combinatoria: the stylistic and emotional connection of his works with the musical past. In the serial works that followed, Rochberg experimented further with direct quotation, always drawing his examples from composers he identified as strong artistic role models. In his Chamber Symphony for Nine Instruments (1953)—Rochberg’s first composition to consciously use direct quotation—he interwove an intimate homage to Dallapiccola by citing the “fratello” motive from Il Prigionero, thus suggesting a shared brotherhood between the two composers.79 The Sonata-Fantasia (1956) was bolder in its borrowings and incorporated several full measures of Schoenberg’s Five Piano Pieces, op. 23, no. 1 into its soundscape, a practice that landed Rochberg in the middle of heated discussions with the Danish publisher Hansen, which held the copyright to Schoenberg’s original.80 Some allusions were less literal and more atmospheric in nature, including a passage in his Cheltenham Concerto for Small Orchestra (1958) in which an inversion of his row produced “a passage which evoked [for him] the sense of . . . Beethoven’s Seventh Symphony,” a moment that “behaved for [Rochberg] like an ‘interjection’ [and represented his] first conscious correspondence with old music.”81 In this regard, Rochberg’s serial period was never as ancillary to his postmodern period as the composer later

Example 2.4. Rochberg, Twelve Bagatelles (1952), Bagatelle no. 6, closing measures. © 1955 by Presser Music Company. Reproduced by permission.
suggested; rather, it was a compositional bridge that led him from the war in a new musical direction.

If Schoenberg and Dallapiccola represented “Beethovenian” models for what Rochberg viewed as an inclusive brand of modernism—one that embraced an expanded harmonic language and yet still retained a connection with certain traditional relationships—it was his American counterparts who ultimately presented him with his “Wagnerian” antithesis. In 1954, as the result of an analysis of the String Trio (1946), Rochberg came to realize that Schoenberg often completed prime rows with what Rochberg called “mirror inversions,” now widely understood as the practice of hexachordal combinatoriality. His excitement for the “discovery” was palpable, as he described to Plush: “When I hit on the secret of the hexachord . . . I was immediately obsessed with the idea of putting [all of the information] in some kind of order and publishing it.”

In January 1954, he wrote to the editors of Music Survey about his observations, noting that he found them valuable not only because they lent insight into Schoenberg’s compositional practices but also because the two rows seemed to “define an interesting relationship [that] may lend heart to those who believe that Schoenberg had not thrown out tonality [but instead] formed a new and more subtle way of working with it.” The intent of this letter was to ask for scholarly guidance: Did his ideas stand up to the publisher’s further scrutiny? Was there relevant literature that he was overlooking? Having received only a cursory reply that the publisher found his ideas “interesting,” Rochberg excitedly began work on preparing a short volume to explain hexachordal mirrors and secured a contract from his current employer, the Theodore Presser Company.

As Rochberg was preparing the manuscript, he simultaneously incorporated his newfound knowledge into the compositional sketches for his Symphony no. 2. It was a deeply satisfying experience, both for the opportunity to return to the symphonic genre and to promote that which he most valued in Schoenberg’s modernism: the ability to develop new sounds without entirely rejecting past conventions. As he described in his autobiography: “I found ways of organizing the row based on hexachords in such fashion that its transpositions through inversion could take on an analogical relation to tonal centers through *locus*, so that different ideas and gestures embodying events had a relationship to a scheme of tonal *loci*—that is, they had the status of ‘keys’ in the old tonal sense.” A composer’s sensibility is discernible in the manuscript, in which he identifies not as a theorist but as a creative artist who needed “to clarify [technical] problems which concerned me.” The preface begins not with academic speak or analytical reasoning but with a more poetic explanation of how such intricate musical designs arise: “When the imagination of [a composer] seize[s] on sound in order to produce music, intuitive and rational forces come into play which create artistically integrated structures whose forms are
as logical as geometry. . . Such a device is mirror inversion.”

For Rochberg, the breakthrough was an expansion of his musical world, with mirror inversions representing not only the subject of his first foray into academic writing but also a more complex form of serial composition, one in which mirror hexachords exhibit a “genetic capacity [to] multiply” and thus create a musical space of greater depth.

The Hexachord and Its Relation to the 12-Tone Row was finished in 1955 and was lovingly dedicated to “the memory of Arnold Schoenberg.” It contained no literature review and concerned itself primarily with examples drawn from the twelve-tone works of Schoenberg. Rochberg’s pride in the original “discovery” was easily detectable throughout the prose:

As far as I know, the only specific reference (and not a detailed one at that) . . . was in a letter [from Schoenberg] to Josef Rufer. . . Since Schoenberg left all too few clues, I feel perfectly justified in presenting my results without fear that I will repeat or borrow from others. It is without trepidation, then, that I offer this study to those who may find it not only stimulating but also useful.

Before the manuscript was ready to go to press, however, it came to Rochberg’s attention that two American composers, Milton Babbitt and George Perle, had also been working on the topic for quite some time. Instead of delaying publication, Rochberg decided that “whether or not there was agreement in principle between the solutions (assuming [Perle] or Babbitt had one) . . . the opportunity to have something brought out on this question was too important to delay.”

With no revisions to the text, Presser published the volume. Its reception was less enthusiastic than expected, with friends and commentators politely pointing out that Rochberg had neglected a wide range of available sources by Babbitt as well as Schoenberg’s essays in the 1950 edition of Style and Idea. Acutely embarrassed, Rochberg wrote to Babbitt to explain that he had not been concerned with abstract theories or mathematical equations but with deeper “metaphysical” questions surrounding compositional creativity; in his mind, such studies were only valuable if they “guide[d] the reader back to music—either to his own or to someone else’s, with fresher insight and clearer perception.”

Rochberg recalled that he received a “stiff-arm” reply from Babbitt, “as though I had invaded some sacred precinct” of his, but the letter from Babbitt is gracious in tone. Babbitt characterized their dissimilar approaches as resulting from two different research goals: “Your primary concern, as I infer it, is primarily an analytical one, whereas I took the empirical material as a jumping off point, my concern being the characterization of the system as system.” To Rochberg’s pointed insinuations that Babbitt’s mathematical reasoning was not reflective of the more spiritual essence of creation, Babbitt responded with polite firmness. “I can easily understand your
demurrer at my method,” he wrote, “so allow me, then, to enter a mild one at your ‘polemical’ tone; I admit a particular allergy in this regard. But, I feel, this only serves to make a bad situation worse, and this, remember, in the light of the fact that I agree essentially with your position.”

In 1956, Rochberg experienced even more pointed accusations in a series of exchanges with the composer-theorist George Perle, whose assessment of the Hexachord manuscript was far more tense and territorial. “I feel that the implication given [in the Hexachord] . . . that [the topic] has been entirely ignored is unfortunate and unfair,” Perle wrote before providing a laundry list of every available source Rochberg had failed to cite: Schoenberg, Babbitt, René Leibowitz, Roberto Gerhard, Ernst Krenek, Herbert Eimert, and Perle’s article, “Schonberg’s Late Style,” in the November 1952 edition of Music Review. “Even people who understand nothing about it have at least mentioned [Babbitt],” he objected. “I feel that it is a disservice to the interested student to convey the impression that there is nothing he can turn to for enlightenment concerning these matters outside of your book, and also because I think your own presentation would have benefitted had you been aware of the studies [already made] in this field.”

In his reply, Rochberg admitted that “there is no question of priority here for I am perfectly willing to concede that to Babbitt considering that he wrote his manuscript in 1946, [when] I was in my second year at Curtis and very remote from all of these questions involving twelve-tone music.” He offered to correct the bibliography should Presser issue a second edition of the Hexachord and eagerly shared with Perle his most recent essay, “Tradition and Twelve-Tone Music,” in which Rochberg sought to rehabilitate Schoenberg’s reputation in light of the rise of the neo-Webernists within the Darmstadt School as well as Pierre Boulez’s manifesto, “Schoenberg Is Dead,” published in The Score in 1952. “Webern’s music leaves his followers no new, unexplored territory,” he contended. “He completely exhausted one side of the spectrum of twelve-tone possibilities.” But as he presented to Perle, Schoenberg’s music “left much to be done” and “opened a vast unexplored area in which creative personalities can yet stake their claim. It is still an uncharted, virgin territory.” This final comment brought Rochberg to what he considered the heart of the compositional matter. “Until there is a large body of music employing these [combinatorial] structures, the theory will mean very little to the ‘outside world.’ Knowing that both you and Babbitt are composers,” he wrote to Perle, “I am genuinely curious to know whether you have produced works [with] mirror structures (or ‘combinatoriality’ as you may prefer).”

Perle responded with a second round of brute criticism, this time about Rochberg’s naive idolization of Schoenberg and his relative lack of understanding about postwar modernist trends. In the spirit of Boulez and Theodor.
Adorno’s recently published “The Aging of the New Music,” Perle contended that Schoenberg’s music had lost its modernist edge since his death:

Once the initial excitement created by his fantastic textures and colors and the marvelous sweep of the melodic lines wears off, the music begins to sound all wrong to me. It reminds me of a cartoon I saw . . . in The New Yorker, of a group of French peasants admiring a brand-new wine-press consisting of a very complicated system of gears and levers . . . [which is nothing more than] a pair of dummy feet stamping the grapes in the old-fashioned way.\(^{100}\)

The broader insinuation was that Rochberg’s insights—nearly all of them—were outmoded (if not provincial), given the advances being made in postwar music. Perle closed the letter with a further personal insult, averring that “the big thing about Babbitt is not so much the solutions he has found, but the questions he has thought of asking.”\(^{101}\) Rochberg’s mind, he implied, lacked the imagination to invent more abstract and wide-ranging theoretical applications.

At the close of his letter, Perle admitted that he had only composed one short piano work based on combinatoriality, as his interests had moved on to twelve-tone modalities.\(^{102}\) Perhaps sensing an opportunity to connect on a compositional level, Rochberg sent Perle his latest work, the *Duo Concertante* for violin and cello (1955, rev. 1959), which was based on two mirror inversions. Four months later, Perle’s response finally arrived.

I gather that [the *Duo Concertante*] is based on an unordered hexachord and a transposition of the latter. . . . The basic technical procedure reminds me somewhat of that used by Schoenberg in the *Ode to Napoleon* (1942). . . . I was surprised to find that Schoenberg used this technique as early as 1923, in portions of the *Tanzscene* from the *Serenade*, so it appears that this concept is as old as the twelve-tone system itself.\(^{103}\)

The assessment was clear in its harsh chronology. Rochberg’s modernist music was not just aging; it was dead on arrival.

Two years after the publication of *Hexachord*, Perle published a damning book review of it in the *Journal of the American Musicological Society*. Reiterating many of his previous concerns, Perle presented Rochberg’s study as a cautionary tale to those who would venture into post-Schoenbergian theory: “The author appears to be unfamiliar with many published . . . contributions that others have made in the precise area of his investigation. His own contribution should serve as a warning that . . . some experience in research and an appreciation of its co-operative character are necessary.” Noting that Rochberg’s *Hexachord* was concerned with a relatively “simple [compositional] procedure,” Perle criticized his overwrought analysis: “Mr. Rochberg’s complicated charts and tables [are] superfluous. . . . One simply constructs the
prime and inversion simultaneously, avoiding the octave and taking care not to continue the construction of the initial hexachord with any note that has previously appeared in the inversion. . . . Mr. Rochberg’s elaborate presentation . . . remains an obfuscation, regardless of what purpose we may assume it to have.”

To demonstrate his point, Perle distilled into a single slender page the entire premise of Rochberg’s forty-page volume using Rochberg’s favorite composition—Schoenberg’s Fourth String Quartet—as the object of the theoretical dismantling.

For Rochberg, the public shaming of his work became one of the key turning points in his aesthetic journey. The transfer of Perle’s critiques into the public realm escalated the power and humiliation of the criticism, ultimately affecting Rochberg’s confidence as a young composer and modernist. Rochberg had already been harboring doubts about his current musical course, writing in his journal in 1956 of a “growing dissatisfaction” with his recently completed Symphony no. 2:

I know in my heart of hearts that it’s far . . . from being the kind of music I want to write. . . . I have technique in abundance; but still have not more than hinted at the [lyricism] I wish to achieve—the very [lyricism] I find in Schoenberg or the work of Stefan Wolpe. And perhaps this is the worst agony of all. Am I doomed always to find that my goal has already been achieved by someone else and far better than I can do it presently?

The feeling that he was always playing catch-up—a sensation created by the interruption of his studies by World War II—had caused the composer great personal anxiety throughout his serial period. But the perception of being excluded and derided by the very modernist community to which he aspired to contribute transformed that self-doubt into a more polemical cynicism about serialism and its proponents. That community gradually became his negative archetype for modernist music, an anti-humanistic repertory that shunned the past, doggedly protected its own self-interests, and had turned the composition of music into an analytical ritual rather than a creative act. “I want my music to be eloquent, warm, singing,” he wrote a week after the final letter from Perle. “It’s in these moments I begin again to wonder whether I am really a creative artist or simply one of the many who are trying to be.”

Rochberg received some necessary encouragement from William Schuman shortly after Perle’s article appeared in print. After informing Rochberg that the Koussevitzky Foundation planned to commission a new work from him—the Dialogues for clarinet and piano (1957–58)—he offered a friendly opinion about Rochberg’s continued dedication to dodecaphony: “[I hope] that you do not write your next piece in any ‘system,’” he wrote somewhat cautiously. “Please understand that I do not refer to the technical procedures of composition . . . rather to the inadvisability of a man of your talents limiting himself by
attempting always to fulfill pre-determined procedures. Don’t do it, George. You don’t have to.” Rochberg responded that his current mode of expression felt right to him, despite its apparent restrictions:

Emotionally and psychologically . . . I was not able to function freely and with that sense of “rightness” until I had entered into chromaticism and found a means of external organization in the twelve-tone. I am really trying to say that twelve-tone as a way of thinking and feeling is right for me [now] . . . . You must know how strongly I want to write a music which is emotionally free and full of life.110

Later, Rochberg would share his ambitions for the Symphony no. 2, which he hoped would achieve a convincing and “unique harmonic life” comparable to the best works of Schoenberg and Mozart.111 After its New York premiere, Schuman wrote to offer his distinct praise for the work’s musical and moral courage: “I salute your high purpose. Isn’t it ridiculous to have to salute a composer for this? But in our day there are not too many whose sole concern is a bold and sweeping statement regardless of popular appeal.”112

At the end of the decade, audiences might have assumed that Rochberg had firmly moved into the modernist camp. His Symphony no. 2 (1956), based on multi-combinatorial mirror inversions, met with great critical acclaim after its 1959 premiere by the Cleveland Orchestra under the direction of George Szell and received the Naumburg Recording Award in 1961.113 In his private writings and correspondence, however, the composer began to develop the rhetoric that would later define his more public and polemical rejection of mid-century modernism. Crucial to this reconfiguration was the perception that modernist music lacked life and energy, that its sounds were always either dying or suspended in time. Such ideas first surfaced in his commentaries about Anton Webern and became increasingly cynical with the passage of time. In 1958 he wrote with some concern about Webern’s music, arguing that its spatial dispersion of the row had ultimately constricted music’s expressivity and set a dangerous example for current modernists. “As narrow as Webern’s emotional range seems,” he remarked, “that’s how much narrower Stockhausen’s range seems.”114

In Rochberg’s writings, spatialization increasingly became a metaphor for the modern condition, reflective of its spiritual paralysis and anti-humanistic tendencies. Such psychological abstractions were justified in Rochberg’s opinion, for he believed serial music had “deep roots in the organization of the human mind [as it] corresponds to the phenomenal realm.”115 To him, the stasis inherent in Webern’s music, which Rochberg understood as resulting from the composer’s reliance on a highly self-referential harmonic system, became prescient of the traumatized state of the postwar world—its emotional withdrawal, its sense of increasing claustrophobia, its tightly constructed spaces,
and its limitation of “flexibility, extension, [and] variety.”\textsuperscript{116} The “neo-Webernicks”—as he referred to composers such as Boulez, Stockhausen, and Luigi Nono—seized on these tendencies in the music, thus propagating a “psychological state of suspension” in which “the sound is static; it doesn’t seem to move; it’s hanging there in the air.”\textsuperscript{117} The result, as he wrote to Roger Sessions, was “a thin world of music, monotonous in its extremely limited images and gestures,” that left the listener not just dissatisfied but numb.\textsuperscript{118}

While the impact on the listener was one of disengagement, the effect on the music itself was acoustically lethal in his mind. Recalling a rehearsal of his Symphony no. 1, Rochberg described the sensation of hearing his music “lift off the stage and project across the proscenium,” an acoustical mobility that connected the work to the sonic life of Haydn, Mozart, and Beethoven, whose music “never fails to fill a live hall with fullness and total presence.”\textsuperscript{119} Contrastingly, he experienced certain modernist works as lacking “life or intensity,” whether because of spatialization or a high level of differentiation that results in “acoustical gridlock.”\textsuperscript{120} One example was a live performance of Krzysztof Penderecki’s \textit{Threnody for the Victims of Hiroshima} (1960) that the composer had attended. “I heard [it] for the first time when [Penderecki] came to Penn in the 1960s to talk to my composition seminar and played a recording of it,” he remembered. “I remember its strong visceral impact, its impressive sense of presence in the room with the record player’s volume turned full up. The penetrating intensity of the massed string orchestra all contributed to its undeniable power as sound design. . . . [At the live performance], what I heard then sounded shockingly small, weak, puny. The work simply died right there on stage, literally lost the power of resonating sound.”\textsuperscript{121} As Rochberg noted, the \textit{Threnody} had ironically assumed the vulnerable position of the victims it sought to memorialize—it had ceased to have presence and voice in the soundscape.

Rochberg’s concern about the lifelessness in postwar modern music soon transferred from compositional worries to anxiety for the acutely human realm of performance. In an exchange with Leonard Stein, the two shared their apprehension about the impact of total serialism on the performer’s “physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual” well-being. Together, they worried that the call to perform a totally organized work would cause the performer to be “likewise organized in the same calculated way,” thus stripping him of his expressive individuality in the pursuit of the “technical perfection” suggested by the prominent postwar interest in electro-acoustic music.\textsuperscript{122} The stakes were high, as Rochberg later argued in an interview that stressed the postwar context for his thoughts. “[It] fits the analogy of the totalitarian political system,” he contended, “because if you repress, if you suppress, if you oppress human beings, eventually what you get is a dead society. What happens to music if you do that? [It might be simplistic to suggest that] you get a dead music, but it’s always possible.”\textsuperscript{123}
More dire assessments surfaced in his personal letters to Alexander Ringer. In 1959, their correspondence turned almost entirely to a spiritual-political assessment of modernism, with Rochberg leading the charge in vividly postwar terms. In a series of letters from April 1959, Rochberg provided justification for why he believed the serialists were unable to “probe life” in their works: “Where will they get the motivation? What will be their spiritual fuel? Music is art, not just composition; and this is what is so wrong today. [Only] a few know this; the rest, who ought to, don’t. And their work shows the pitiful result.”

In response, Ringer shared ideas from his most recent lecture, which cast the questions in a more sympathetic tone: “I tried to say that the refusal to accept [the new music] fully... was [the result of] our refusal to identify ourselves with that which the best of this music attempts to communicate: reality. ... The new music... fights myths [and propaganda] through abstraction. ... [It] is a changeover in the concept of beauty. ... The new music identifies beauty with truth.” Ringer defended electronic music on the grounds that it spoke of modern realities, contending that although it might strike one as “a perfect instance of ‘dehumanizaton,’... [electronic] music becomes at once a... [path] leading toward the restoration of human values in music.”

Rochberg agreed that the new music was essentially “dis-illusionist” in that it showed the ugly underbelly of the twentieth century through its compositional procedures and musical soundscapes. But he argued that the composer must not simply be a mirror for his times, for he was ultimately “one of the few moral creatures left in society” “The twentieth century is a nodal point in this right, in this striving for reality and, as you say, the best of the new music symbolizes this. We are being tranquillized to death in America. ... Only the individual can know reality and music is a direct route. ... [But] people don’t like to be stripped of their illusions.” He worried that the new music, in its embrace of modernist reality, had ultimately succumbed to its powerful and dark forces, perhaps even unconsciously, and thus lost its power to confront the twentieth century. “The more we have advanced into technology,” he contended, “the more removed we have become from reality. ... Automation will carry this further and man stands in danger of separating himself completely from the last vestiges of reality.”

The only path for a humanist composer, in his mind, was to “get beyond the method phase.” “All this ‘organizing’ is so much ‘note-counting,’” he lamented, “and I want to leave this behind. The creative process demands it.”

In 1960, he would begin his in-depth studies of music as “experienced time,” sharing with Stein that he had developed “some notions [about] time in music as a dialectic of the subjective experience of duration.” Rochberg’s goal was to break free from formal temporal constraints in his music in order to foster musical forms that might express one’s existential position in the universe with greater freedom. Rochberg had seized on the idea after reading
Studies in Human Time (1956) by Georges Poulet, in which the Belgian literary critic explores how readers experience time—both as a theoretical concept and as a syntactical element—in novels and poems. As Poulet comments, time was “perpetually experienced not only as a thought, but as the very essence of our being. We are not only living in time; we are living time; we are time.” He then proceeds to detail how writers have attempted to represent various tenses in human experience, from the use of allusion and repetition in Romantic poetry to create a “break in the dividing line between past and present” to the modernist novelist’s “total exclusion of the past . . . [which creates] a perfect absorption in the present.”

Rochberg responded to Studies in Human Time in part because Poulet had hypothesized that “of all our senses, [that in] which the associative power is strongest seem[s] to be, above all, hearing,” a pronouncement that animated the composer. Rochberg immediately wrote to Ringer about his findings and ideas:

I already have some ideas for an article, ideas relating to the possibility that in tonal music, time is future time in the sense that the goal sought for, the final cadence, is always ahead; therefore each present happening relates to its future, not itself. But in the new music time is of another [idea] . . . There is no goal in the sense of a future tonic. . . . Each [moment] is an [affirmation] of the present tense of time.

A musical sense of duration was thus “intrinsic to the psyche and not inherent in sound per se,” a realization that excited Rochberg in that it allowed all forms of music—from the tonal to the twelve-tone—to become available resources in the expression of more philosophical or existential meditations on time and being. As he explained to Ringer, “Serialism is merely the means by which to help a composer establish a new syntax [of time]; it is not an end in itself.”

The scholarly result was “Duration in Music” (1960), in which Rochberg posited his own theories on how music might reflect existential and experienced time concepts. As he argued, one lives “between memory and anticipation, between the past and the future, treading the bridge of the present that, we hope, will carry us across the inexorable passage of time. . . . We live in time and through time. We are both of it and immersed in it.” He wrote of the importance of the past, which is how a “human being can come to know himself. Without memory he has no history, his life no form. His existence would be lost in the meaninglessness of each sensation.” Importantly, memory and its recollection in the present context were “the substance of our life,” and modernist theories that understood repetition only as a means to create structural unity were, in Rochberg’s mind, spiritually simplistic and too focused on technique. “The power of return in music serves much more than a purely formal function,” he stated firmly. Theory could not account experientially for
the “sheer power of return, the force of the past suddenly illuminating the felt present as a real element in the present.” He also took aim at serialism’s practice of controlling “lengths of micro-cosmic time,” describing such efforts as artificial and antithetical to lived human experience: “These [time] lengths were never intended as objective, discrete elements but rather as symbols created for the purpose of guiding the flow of musical time in a meaningful way.” The objectification of duration in total serialism thus deprived music of its “dynamic power to accumulate itself in motion and movement and culminate in perceptible form.”

Rochberg’s ideas about duration would ultimately inspire his *Time-Span for Orchestra* (1960), which he would later withdraw, revise, and complete as *Time-Span II* in 1962. As in the first version, *Time-Span II* consists of a series of sustained pitches whose entrances, unregulated by a constantly shifting meter, combine to create undulating pockets of density that slowly accumulate and then recede. The chromatic series again serves to organize the piece, but Rochberg departs from the traditional procedures of inversion, retrograde, and combinatoriality; instead, he creates “essentially slow, continuously evolving arc[s]” by stacking semitone clusters to capitalize on the vibration between close pitches. Phrase structures do not align exactly with the completion of the twelve-tone row, and the overlaps creates a sense of temporal fluidity and expansion that Rochberg hoped would give the music a “sense of expanding duration” and lift “the music out of the [physical] realm.” The sense of rippling expanse is furthered by Rochberg’s preference for vibrating timbres—flutter-tongued flutes, muted brass, resonant percussion (tubular bells, deep gong, vibraphone, celesta), wavering vibrato in the strings—all of which focus the listener’s mind on gestures of aural extension and decay. “It is a music of presence,” Rochberg would explain. “It defines, as only music can, a state of being. There is no climax in the usual sense . . . [I used] the language of [my] time but transformed it into music which is once again human” in its existential conceit.

*Time-Span II* was premiered in Buffalo in 1964, but it never gained traction within the composer’s corpus, perhaps because of the lack of a formal recording. But the essay that inspired it should be interpreted as a crucial text in Rochberg’s aesthetic development, with its fluid conceptions of musical time and openness to various musical syntaxes laying the foundation for the more helical view of time put forth in “No Center.” To represent all concepts of time and tense—past, present, and future—Rochberg would ultimately come to borrow freely from the full repertory of classical music. Tonal music, with its emphasis on the future cadence, would again become a viable means of expressing human existence. Quotations would become “affective, mental” reflections that “the listener must recreate . . . in his own mind in order to grasp” his or her historical position in the world, not uncreative and
uninspired acts of plagiarism.¹³⁸ Even atonality and the twelve-tone technique would find their embrace within Rochberg’s new philosophy, allowing for a sense of immediacy and presence within the musical landscape. The aesthetic vision was Rochberg’s own manifestation of the positive archetypes he had cultivated since 1944—an all-embracing, connective, and boundless art of human expression—and it proved exciting to the composer on these grounds. Time had set him free; musical duration as an experiential process and metaphor for human existence had become for him “an unmeasurable flow insusceptible to limits or demarcation.”¹³⁹

Rochberg would write one final serial work after his completion of *Time-Span II*—the Piano Trio for Violin, Cello, and Piano (1963)—but aesthetically and intellectually he had left the movement behind. His break would be captured in interactions with two of the modernist figures noted previously: Perle and Dallapiccola. In a potentially retaliatory review of Perle’s *Serial Composition and Atonality*—also published in the *Journal of the American Musicological Society*—Rochberg stressed what he considered the fundamental difference between music spawned from external logic and procedure and that created from more subconscious impulses: “What disturbs me profoundly is the persistent notion throughout the book that any deviations from rationally apprehensible operations are faults at worst, ambiguities at best. . . . One senses [Perle’s] frustration when details of construction escape rational detection.” A synthetic and subjective approach to composition that seized upon personal impulses and intuitions was more valuable in his mind.¹⁴⁰ He raised similar thoughts at a conference about “Music in the East and West” in Jerusalem, where he delighted in reuniting with Dallapiccola for what would ultimately be the last time. Over dinner, the conversation soon turned to the state of modern music, with Rochberg asking his friend what he saw on the horizon after serialism. “It was not just a musical question,” Rochberg recalled, “it was a cultural question. . . . And [it] surprised [Dallapiccola], shocked him. He said, ‘I don’t know why you say after. . . . This is our language. We are here.’”¹⁴¹ As Rochberg has acknowledged, the moment was strangely poetic—two friends in a contested space, at a conference about musical borders, standing at the threshold of their final parting on multiple levels.