George Rochberg, American Composer

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Published by University of Rochester Press

Wlodarski, Amy Lynn.
George Rochberg, American Composer: Personal Trauma and Artistic Creativity.
University of Rochester Press, 2019.
Project MUSE. muse.jhu.edu/book/73402.
Chapter Five


A few years ago . . . I was struck by something Beckett said about Joyce: . . . “Joyce became an ethical ideal . . . he had a moral effect on me, he made me realize artistic integrity.” When I read that, I saw an eloquent description of how we fledgling composers felt who worked with Rochberg at Penn.

—Martin Herman (1988)

In a mood perhaps influenced by a dull and overcast day—or by aggravated back pain brought on by a particularly uncomfortable hotel bed—Rochberg picked up his journal for the first time in a while. It was the spring of 1999, and he had been invited by Lincoln Center to participate in a public interview with the composer Bruce Adolphe on the subject “Breaking with Modernism,” a title the composer had suggested himself. “I feel like a fraud,” he admitted freely, “I basically don’t know anything but feel a great deal about the twentieth century which I’ve lived in my own way—which I know is only a sliver of human experience; how could it be otherwise?” In many ways, the engagement had made him feel his age (on the cusp of eighty-one) and his senior status in the field (as one of the “elder statesmen of composers”), but even more he felt increasingly irrelevant to the active compositional world. Lincoln Center had invited him as a “historical figure” to discuss his role in American music over the past fifty years, but the event limited itself primarily to his confrontation with modernism in the 1960s and 1970s. His receipt of the ASCAP Foundation Lifetime Achievement Award that year only cemented the feeling that he was nearing the end of his relevance. “What am I doing still living at eighty-one,” he wrote, when “my music died at [age] sixty-one [in 1979]? Often I have thought how much better it would have been if I’d died in the war.”
In many ways, 1999 was another turning point in his life. He had retired from the University of Pennsylvania in 1983, hoping that the release from service and teaching would renew his creative energies, which it ultimately did. Over the next fifteen years he completed twenty-three musical works—among them his final two symphonies, myriad chamber works, and some repurposed versions of earlier compositions—but he sensed an increasingly tired quality in his music, as illustrated by a self-assessment of his piano duo *Circles of Fire* (1997): “As I’ve worked on it . . . I begin to hear the faintest echoes of earlier work of mine. I find that bothersome. But it couldn’t be otherwise. Not only at this stage can’t you *start* over again, you are bound to have marked out the perimeters of your vocabulary.”

4 As Gene noted, it was around this time that he had begun to experience “diminishing energies and the inability to sustain a composing schedule”; thus, he “turned exclusively to writing about music and musicians” of the twentieth century.

5 Although many topics captured Rochberg’s curious mind, one central question surfaced regularly throughout his writings from the 1990s: what would be his legacy within the context of twentieth-century music, a topic that had dogged the composer throughout his lifetime. Gene once remarked that her husband had always been “intensely mindful of the legacy left by the greatest composers of the past.”

6 Privately, Rochberg worried about whether his compositions would outlive him and attain the monumental status he would later have engraved on his tombstone: *Contra Mortem et Tempus*. While composing *Circles of Fire*, he confessed to feeling “depleted” and creatively disoriented, and so he sought to distract himself by assessing his corpus. He concluded that five works had the potential for longevity because of their unique voice and solid craftsmanship: *Music for the Magic Theater*, the *Contra*, the Third String Quartet, *Imago Mundi*, and *Ukiyo-E II (Slow Fires of Autumn).* He further identified *ars combinatoria* as his central contribution to twentieth-century humanism and hoped his ultimate achievement would be a legacy of beauty and courage.

7 The composer remained slightly optimistic despite the signs of cultural degradation he saw in late modernism: “For all that we place such naïve trust in what we call ‘history’ . . . [no one] could have predicted a Beethoven, nor could anyone in the generation of Wagner and Brahms have predicted a Schoenberg.”

8 In the final decade of his life, he drew additional encouragement from members of the next generation of composers he privately mentored at his home in Newtown Square, Pennsylvania. In many ways, the last years of his life were less notable for their musical and intellectual accomplishments than for the meaningful and impactful relationships he fostered with maturing composers, on whom he “left an indelible mark . . . regarding the direction [music] should take” in the next century. “I and my work have come in for their share of temporary, localized attention,” he openly acknowledged,
“but one must always step aside, relinquish the stage to the others pressing forward around us.”

In one of his final published essays, the composer cast the situation in biblical terms: “My generation . . . is past its prime. Moses guided the people of Israel to the threshold of the land of Canaan. [But] it was Joshua who led them into Canaan. . . . My generation . . . has completed the first phase. The younger generation of artistic Joshuas will have to find and live the answers, however they turn out, to the questions I’ve posed.”

One of the least explored aspects and yet most important legacies of Rochberg’s career is his role as an educator and mentor to at least three generations of working postwar composers. The biographical omission is understandable. Rochberg was famously ambivalent about his teaching career at the University of Pennsylvania, in part because he remained skeptical that academia was the best setting for both established and developing composers. In essays and talks, he railed against the constrictions and distractions a teaching career placed on creative work, often extending his critique to take aim at American culture writ large, which he blamed for devaluing and defunding serious compositional efforts. And yet, the university was an important and influential context for developing and disseminating his aesthetic ideas, with Rochberg deriving ideas from contemporary curricular debates and the intimate pedagogical interactions he shared with his students. These institutional and interpersonal influences ultimately shaped the direction of his most provocative aesthetic ideas about humanism, neo-tonality, and creative authenticity.

Rochberg began his teaching career after completing his bachelor’s degree at the Curtis Institute of Music while concurrently pursuing his master’s degree at the University of Pennsylvania. In 1948, Curtis hired him as a faculty member to teach a wide range of subjects—introduction to music composition, music history surveys, beginning theory classes—a challenge he ultimately enjoyed because it satisfied his intellectual curiosity. But teaching also forced him to spend a copious amount of time prepping his lectures, which placed considerable time constraints on his creative work. To maintain balance, he successfully negotiated an arrangement with the University of Pennsylvania that allowed him to be absent from his required academic courses as long as he completed all of the required written work. His rationale was that his teaching duties at Curtis were providing the same educational foundation, and it seemed foolish, if not redundant, to repeat the literature reviews. It was a rigorous two years, but his excitement about pursuing his life’s dream after the war propelled him forward: “I was young and I had lots of physical and nervous energy, and so I could manage [it] all.”

His receipt of a Fulbright fellowship to Rome provided him with a yearlong leave of absence (1950–51), during which he began work on his First String Quartet. After he returned to America, however, external pressures began
to mount. Gene was pregnant with their second child, Francesca, and the Rochbergs had begun to worry about the family’s finances. “We were sort of hanging by our toenails because there wasn’t very much money,” he recalled; “the job at Curtis didn’t pay very much . . . certainly not enough to live on.”

To compensate, Rochberg took a position at the Theodore Presser Company, where he ultimately rose to the position of chief music editor and director of publications. As he remarked in his memoirs, he initially had reservations about working at Presser, given its commercial approach to music publishing: “[The] president of the board of directors told me when I began working there in 1951, with great booster pride, ‘Presser is the Woolworth of the music business.’ I received this news with the shock of the totally unprepared . . . What jarred me was his casual joining of what I loved passionately, ‘music,’ with what I loved least of all things possible in this world, ‘business.’”

The relationship with Presser was highly beneficial to Rochberg, both financially and professionally. He joined the company’s growing roster of international composers, and as Presser moved away from what he considered the bread-and-butter side of the publication business—“two-page piano pieces for beginners and Etude magazine”—he increasingly recruited his friends to become Presser composers.

During that time, Rochberg expanded Presser’s contemporary catalog, arguing that the promotion of art music could be mutually beneficial for both publishers and educators. He promoted this position in one of his first public lectures, a talk for the Society of Music in the Liberal Arts Colleges, in which he argued that America was “in the midst of a commercially stimulated and sustained populist culture [whose] values or lack of values . . . are in direct conflict with [the] traditional values among which we must certainly place the art of music, whether in the concert hall or in the college or high school.”

He decried the notion that music should be “fun” and instead placed the onus on publishers to provide quality content that would combat the “group-determined, populist thinking” that had infiltrated music education. It was an early theme to which he would return throughout his life, especially as he encountered what he considered the increasing cultural dilettantism of younger generations.

Still, he missed the intellectual rigor and joy of teaching, and therefore he managed to arrange Friday afternoons off to teach a class at Curtis. This structure aided his composing immensely, as he was able to transition away from Presser at the end of the week and assume more creative activities over the extended weekend. The schedule soon became untenable because of his promotion at Presser and increasing financial stress; in 1954, he gave up teaching at Curtis and returned to full-time work at Presser. The decision left him burning the candle at both ends: “I worked a full day, came home, had supper, spent some time with the kids. . . . And about seven o’clock in the evening I
would go to my room and I would work until [after midnight]. Every night. I worked all weekend. That went on for nine years.”

In 1960, he accepted a full-time position as chairman of the music department at the University of Pennsylvania, but the administrative work was just as demanding as teaching and came at a trying time: “These were the years when our son was first diagnosed with cancer and, from 1961, [his illness] paralleled my efforts to build a new department of music with a new faculty and curriculum. . . . Those early years at Penn appear to me now as surreal, the rebuilding of the music department disconnected, light-years apart from what our family suffered.”

As he admitted in his diary in 1960, he remained in the position only for financial security. Later in life, Rochberg retrospectively admitted that he “loved building” the curriculum and was “damn good” at chairing the department, but he firmly maintained that he never derived “any eternal satisfaction” from the position. As he once explained to Edward T. Cone, then a music professor at Princeton: “I’m on the faculty of the University of Pennsylvania because I need to earn a living. That’s how I’m earning my livelihood. I don’t have any identification of either a personal or spiritual nature with the university.”

But such comments are not entirely accurate. Committee work forced Rochberg to forge relationships with a variety of intellectuals from other divisions, interactions that inherently enriched the interdisciplinary nature of his aesthetic writings. As chair of the department and later as a member of the all-college curriculum committee at Penn, Rochberg was actively involved in the curriculum debates of the 1960s, many of which mirror prominent intellectual themes that appeared in his publications from the time. In the 1950s, with the advent of the Cold War and the competitive tenor of the “race to space,” a general criticism of higher education emerged that accused universities of failing to achieve appropriate rigor, most notably in the natural and physical sciences. Consequently, curriculum debates became dominated by “an immediate and enduring obsession with science and technology,” a development faculty in the arts and humanities perceived as a direct threat. As a countermeasure, humanities programs began hiring “disciplinary specialists” like Rochberg to create curricular structures that would return degree programs to the “traditional task of formal education in Western civilization: transmission of cultural heritage and preparation for life through rigorous intellectual training of young minds to think clearly, logically, and independently.” The programs that resulted were often “twentieth-century version[s] of the nineteenth-century classical curriculum” and focused on teaching the so-called classics of Western civilization.

In the following decade, rationalist language drew concern from humanists, who worried that the curricular priorities of the 1950s tended to be “tied to ‘technique’ and not linked to the human spirit.” As historian John Brubacher
explains, humanists “saw this variant of liberal education as a holdover from the scientism of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment. The empiricists then and the pragmatists [now] seemed to be saying that the world is out of joint. It can only be set right by science. What science did for solving the enigmas of nature it can also do for the study of man and society.”

In response, prominent theorists such as Dwayne Huebner argued that the field of higher education was suffering from “an overdependence upon values conceived as goals or objectives”; thus, the time was ripe to assert a new humanistic discourse that would liberate students from the spiritual constraints of a taxonomic education.

As he remarked, the educational environment and activity were “symbolic of what man is today and what he wants to be tomorrow. The design of these symbols is a great art. The study of curriculum should be a preparation for this artistry.”

In the arts specifically, administrators argued that the “affective domain” was less predisposed to a taxonomic curriculum than the “cognitive domain” and therefore called for a new humanistic orientation that would foster values such as “perceiving, communicating, loving, knowing, decision-making, patterning, creating, and valuing.” Influenced by the work of the American psychologist Abraham Maslow, these educators advocated for a “humanistic individual-oriented conception of education” that would lead to “full and equal opportunity for all persons to lead self-actualizing lives.”

In 1967, James B. Macdonald, a leading visionary of curricular humanism, boldly sounded the call for a person-oriented curriculum in defense against dehumanization: “We will create our own image of ourselves through the ways we structure and relate to our own world. This image is in dire peril of becoming characterized by a partially ordered and conditioned set of regimented performances in the modern age. What we must strive for is to make men what they ought to be—complete human beings.”

Central to Macdonald’s platform was the deep-seated belief that studying the arts could “help students confront meaninglessness, especially that meaninglessness associated with the triumph of science and the decline of religion.”

Rochberg’s curricular reforms at Penn were an amalgam drawn from both sides of these lively debates, with the composer embracing elements of both “traditionalist” and “reconceptualist” arguments to advance his own vision for a rigorous and relevant compositional program. In his mind, educators, like artists, should have the freedom to borrow from a variety of methods and models in an effort to renew and revitalize their fields—a sort of *ars combinatorial* vision for university curricula. In this general outlook, he was decidedly ahead of his time, with the pioneering educational theorist William Pinar advocating a similar approach only in 1977: “We must strive for synthesis, or a series of perspectives on curriculum that are at once interpretative, critical, emancipatory. . . . One may remain a traditionalist while sympathetically
studying the work of a reconceptualist. . . . Further, an intellectual climate may become established in which one could develop syntheses of current perspectives, regenerating the field, and making [it] more likely that its contribution to American [culture] be an important one.”

Rochberg’s developing vision for the composition program at Penn was similarly inclusive, in that it merged ideas about the affective language of music with the somewhat outmoded idea that the traditional canon “should be a central focus for aspiring composers”—a notion composer Jim Primosch described to me as “so conservative it was progressive at the time.” To support his initiatives, Rochberg also oversaw the hiring of composers he felt were sympathetic to his synthetical vision, including George Crumb (1965) and Richard Wernick (1968).

In 1960, the first action Rochberg took as chair was an environmental scan of the department and the drafting of a prospectus for the dean that would chart specific recommendations for moving forward. Although the document contained several concrete suggestions—including assembling a world-class faculty and proposing a series of courses designed to maximize interdisciplinarity—the bulk of the prospectus reads like a treatise on metaphysics. Rochberg goes to great lengths to explain the challenge of situating, if not justifying, the study of music in an academic setting. He sought to distinguish music from philosophy, which he saw as its natural counterpart within the traditional humanities, by contending that “music is a human reality in itself which we experience and try to apprehend,” while philosophy was not “concerned with itself per se but with its subject matter, which is [also] the range of life and the means by which we come to know it.” One could, he observed, teach music as a form of aesthetic philosophy, but he worried that it would only reinforce the “traditional and still prevalent notion that academic study is centered on rational ideas . . . and that consequently music, as an art of expression, can only exist on the periphery.” The result would reduce music to the indiscriminate realm of human leisure or to the status of a second-class citizen in the university, therefore impacting morale and enrollment. Instead, he implored the administration to “understand and accept that music is experience of the deepest forces in man” while also recognizing that its modes of expression could be concurrently rational and irrational.

Of greatest concern to Rochberg was how to structure and evaluate the department’s composition program. “Are composers made or born?” he queried in his initial prospectus for the redesigned department: “The irrepressible urge to write notes on paper is far more often a passionate act involving the total human being [rather] than a calmly deliberated intellectual act, although the powers of intellect are completely engaged. This is perhaps the hardest question of all to answer satisfactorily because too much of what goes into becoming a composer cannot be related to academic study per se.” His proposed solution consisted of a merger between intellectual and composition work, in
which students in the first year of the program would engage in more analytical coursework that would form a practical basis for their creative work. To this end, he proposed instruction in the twelve-tone method, an introductory tutorial to electronic music and the use of its technologies, an analytical seminar on contemporary music, and a collective composition seminar. The second year would fold private study—the realm of guided self-expression—into the curriculum while students continued their coursework at the advanced level. Of great importance to Rochberg was the notion that contemporary music be taught by the composition faculty and not by his fellow musicologists, whom he felt could not “rear an academic generation of composers” when their “technical equipment does not reach beyond [Anton] Bruckner.” To this end, he requested increased funding to invite living composers to share their work-in-progress, an impressive program that hosted figures such as Roger Sessions, Ralph Shapey, and Karlheinz Stockhausen—just to name one alphabetical series—for intimate conversations with Rochberg’s students.

Rochberg also used his seminars as a laboratory for his own aesthetic and compositional interests, developing topics that reflected what he was writing on at the time. In a seminar titled “The Elaboration of the Essential,” taught during the 1964–65 academic year, he prefaced the course material with this learning objective: “The world of nature is an elaboration of what is essential in it. The world of art is an elaboration of what is essential in it. What is essential is often hidden, hard to uncover to one’s understanding and comprehension. This is our task.” The accompanying (and extensive) bibliography reflects a wide range of non-musical texts, among them Wassily Kandinsky’s Concerning the Spiritual in Art, John von Neumann’s The Computer and the Brain, Erich Heller’s The Disinherited Mind, and Hermann Hesse’s Siddhartha. While some of these texts had already appeared in Rochberg’s published essays—“Indeterminacy in the New Music” (1959), “The New Image of Music” (1963), and “Concepts of Musical Time and Space” (1963)—others would find their way into later intellectual projects, such as “The Avant-Garde and the Aesthetics of Survival” (1969) and “Reflections on Schoenberg” (1972).

In 1966, Rochberg also taught a course titled “Harmonic Series” in which the final assignment was to identify and describe the theoretical basis for a musical correspondence between various works by different composers—arguably the compositional premise behind Contra Mortem et Tempus. As one student’s notes summarize, Rochberg explained that these correspondences could be either superficial, “as when a similar or identical melody or harmony reappears in a different context,” or profound, “as when the underlying musical substance is a true reincarnation of the musical essence of a different period.” Rochberg’s comments on one graded prospectus, in which the student vaguely notes that he wants to write about how contemporary composers use correspondences, belie the composer’s own compositional and existential
preoccupations at the time. Its margins are littered with bold and provocative questions that speak more to Rochberg’s mind-set than to his ambitions for his student: “What is transitory? What is constant? Is musical history real? Is it abstract? Is the musical mind individual or universal? Are these real questions, i.e., can they be answered?”

After he resigned as chair in 1968, Rochberg set about disseminating all of these ideas in a variety of public formats, including presentations about the threat the US educational system posed to humanism. In an unpublished talk, “The Study of Music as an Aspect of Liberal Arts Education,” he warned that because America was so “technologically [and] business oriented, we stand in danger of starving out our sensual and emotional life.” He proposed that universities should focus on providing an education that stimulated both the mind and the spirit and could stand as a “deeply human bulwark against doubts, uncertainties, and misgivings.” A college degree, he averred, should not be understood as an educational terminus but rather as a “sign that the [humanistic] process was underway,” a formal reminder to graduates that they should “live intensely in mind and spirit.”

Rochberg had always been wary of the supposed value of an institutional degree, but he reserved his most vehement objections for doctoral programs in music composition. In a terse article written for *College Music Symposium*, he outlined his objections on both practical and ethical grounds. Rochberg worried that young composers would ultimately have to “make [their] way in society rather than in the university” and questioned whether the academic environment prepared students for creating and promoting their work outside of university settings. In some ways, he was reflecting on his own experience; although Rochberg had never pursued a doctorate, he had found academia detrimental to his own creativity. Part of the issue was the scheduled nature of teaching, which took the composer away from composing (often at inopportune times) and made “basic demands on his time and energy.” More problematical, he had observed that doctoral programs at other institutions encouraged young composers to align their artistic goals with those expected in other disciplines: “They feel they must justify their existence, not as artists, but as masters of logical procedures, demonstrable, observable, and (last but not least) teachable.” Instead of obtaining a doctorate, Rochberg argued that developing composers should “find the strength to build an intensely private world while maintaining a fluid and open contact with the external world in which [one] must function.” In keeping with this stance, he insisted that Penn offer only undergraduate degrees and a terminal master’s degree during his tenure. His objection was so adamant that he would offer to write letters of recommendation “in regard to anything [a student] might want to do—job applications, grants—but not for applications to PhD programs” in composition.
pursue a degree or university teaching position and manage to succeed, he remarked, it would be “a miracle.”

In the early 1970s, Rochberg embraced a more radical strand of curriculum developed by James B. Macdonald, a “transcendental ideology of education” that spoke to Rochberg’s contemporaneous interest in mysticism, inward seeing, and creative expression. “Today’s technology is yesterday’s magic,” Macdonald wrote in 1974: “Humanity will eventually transcend technology by turning inward, the only viable alternative that allows a human being to continue to experience oneself in the world as a creative and vital element. Out of this will come the rediscovery of human potential.” Rochberg became a fervent advocate for these ideas while serving on the curriculum committee of Penn’s College of Arts and Sciences, where he tested early versions of his theories among his colleagues. “I took every occasion to speak for the necessity of recognizing the world of the nonverbal as a world of images and imagination whose ‘language’ employed configurations equal in power and force . . . to logical formulation,” he recounted, noting with glee that his contrarian stance regularly exasperated the dean of the college.

The experiences also helped him develop a powerful sense of the “difference between the seemingly clear aims of scientific study and . . . the far less clear purposes of art.” In many ways, his debates within the broader context of curriculum reform had helped clarify the root of the postwar musical problem for himself.

Rochberg’s students at Penn were not shielded from such strong opinions; in fact, his critical honesty and passionate method of debate was one of the guiding reasons they chose to study with him in the 1960s. As Rochberg himself confessed, he found it difficult to feign interest in “lazy” or “self-aggrandizing” composition students who lacked conviction, craft, and a sense of historical awareness. Even long after his retirement, the memory of certain lackluster students would inspire a degree of professorial irascibility: “All these untalented ones drag down standards. . . . They want to be ‘successful.’ This is America . . . and the young must be allowed to go their own way. But I refuse to encourage people to go into art who lack the mental [or] psychic makeup.” In his advanced seminars, he often lapsed into “mildly berating diatribes” against what he considered their blind acceptance of “bland, routinized academic” approaches to musical organization and logic; true composers, he implored, should instead develop and maintain an outward “skeptical eye” and endeavor to create music that “reverberates first in [their] own souls, then in others.”

Among his earliest recruits was the composer Stephen Albert, who credited Rochberg with steering him back to composition during a particularly pessimistic period of his life. Albert had encountered what he described as an “atmosphere of terrorism” during his earlier studies that had caused him to feel like an outcast: “I remember very much the sense I had that serial music was the music of the future. . . . [But] it was not music that moved my
emotions. It was not music that made sense. It was not music I felt any kind of emotional commitment to.” Experimental music also held little appeal for Albert—“there was no aspect of it that I found musical in the way I felt about music”—who increasingly felt marginalized among his teachers and peers. “All I cared about was finding music which I could believe in and which, in a sense, could be inspiring to me,” he recalled, noting that there was a sense in the current academic environment that if you did “not believe in [serialism or twelve-tone music], that you were wrong, that you were morally culpable. There were no two sides to the issue.”

In his preliminary audition at the University of Pennsylvania, one interviewer chastised Albert’s composition portfolio for its traditional craftsmanship, a comment that nearly drove the frustrated composer to go to law school. Shortly thereafter, Rochberg personally invited Albert to join the program, an appeal that came as a surprise given the elder composer’s reputation as a staunch serialist: “When I first came to him, [Rochberg was] very devoted to the twelve-tone practice. [But he] was beginning to listen to other kinds of things, and he was very encouraging to me.” During Albert’s year at Penn, he and Rochberg met weekly over lunch to discuss the state of American music, a welcome distraction as were both suffering personal hardships at the time. Albert found Rochberg to be an open-minded instructor, which initially surprised him given Rochberg’s most recent projects:

We [would] talk extensively about what was wrong with music, what the problems in music were during this time. And in many ways he was a representative of the American school of twelve-tone serial composition. . . . But there was something else going on in his mind, a lot of questioning. I said to him in no uncertain terms that I thought . . . the momentum of all that had happened in the first fifty years was breaking down. And that what we were left with [were] the gestures and the rhetoric without the actual masterpieces.

Slowly, it became clear to his most trusted students that Rochberg’s compositional voice was veering in a radically different direction. In a letter from 1964, Albert inquired with disbelief about Rochberg’s plans for the “Passions According to the Twentieth Century”: “Bob Suderburg told me it wasn’t ‘twelve-tone.’ Did I misunderstand him?” Albert’s stories confirm that Rochberg did not initiate his postmodern turn in a creative vacuum but instead within specific academic sub-communities. At Penn, he gained insight and encouragement from a younger generation of composers who were both his students and his contemporaries (figure 5.1). As he was increasingly realizing, the future of music might also belong to serious composers like Albert, whose “passionately intense obsession with personal and musical honesty” led them to question “how one could be a composer in the twentieth century and say human things against the clear knowledge
that [humans] have behaved appallingly throughout.” His interest in musical quotation also found confirmation in the emerging compositional ideas of his colleague George Crumb, who has remarked that he and Rochberg “both had the idea that music made big arcs back into the past, that maybe all past time, in a sense, was contemporaneous.”

In 1965, Rochberg premiered *Contra Mortem et Tempus* at the Bowdoin College Summer Music Festival. In his next-day review, professional music critic Michael Steinberg of the *Boston Globe* struggled to make sense of the work, describing it abstractly as a “whole tissue of musical quotations [that] are dissolved by Rochberg into a kind of continuous, almost dreamlike suspended musical continuum.” Elliot Schwartz, who had the benefit of repeated hearings and a review score, provided a more robust review for the *Musical Quarterly*: “The immediate impression . . . is that this is a music dominated by bits of other people’s music . . . [but it] projects an undeniable sense of originality; through some transformation of contexts, every note in the piece
becomes Rochberg’s. . . . The fabric of the entire work becomes not a series of isolated quotations but a continuous interplay of associations and fleeting images.” Schwartz also noted astutely that the college’s summer festival was a safe harbor for such compositional risk taking, partly because of the festival’s physical and ideological remove—outside of the major metropolitan cultural centers and the academic calendar year. Because “total serialization and aggressive indeterminacy were both absent from the Bowdoin scene,” he remarked, the new works were free to display an “undogmatic approach to musical materials and [a] highly personal language.” As he concluded, “While new buildings for the performing arts continue to spring up in American cities, quiet revolutions have been brewing on the campuses . . . The Bowdoin festival may thus be representative of the new role to be assumed by colleges in the furtherance of contemporary music. This is an encouraging sign for the future.”

Rochberg seemed to concur, for in the time period between the Contra and the Third String Quartet, he premiered nearly all of his combinatorial works in either educational or nontraditional settings. During this time, Rochberg dedicated a great deal of his professional efforts to traveling throughout the United States to attend concerts of his new works, often offering composition residencies or public lectures at the sponsoring colleges, conservatories, and universities. The lectures often presented the course of his musical development—with specific attention to his latest stylistic phase—and laid out his new philosophical and aesthetic ideas for the fresh minds of the next generation; his talks were, in effect, working drafts of the polemical essays he would later publish: “Aural Fact or Fiction” (1965), “No Center” (1969), “Humanism versus Science” (1970), and “The Fantastic and the Logical” (1973). Rochberg’s time on the lecture circuit expanded his aesthetic reach beyond Penn, with both former students and new devotees following his career with great interest.

One of these admirers was William Bolcom, who met the composer at a lecture at the University of Washington in Seattle in 1965. “I heard his lecture, and I heard his Music for the Magic Theater and [the Contra],” he recalled, “and I felt . . . here’s a man who’s been able to find some kind of connection between the past [and] present, between atonal [and] tonal styles.” The encounter encouraged Bolcom to explore his interest in integrated eclecticism in Black Host (1967), a work for organ and electronic tape premiered by William Albright at the University of Michigan. In it, Bolcom interpolated diverse musical references—jazz, pop, Baroque counterpoint, and atonality—and, similar to Rochberg, used a common modal orientation to interweave references to two discrete religious melodies: the hymn “Donne Secours” and the Dies Irae. As Lois Burney notes, such heterogeneity reflected the influence of Bolcom’s formal teachers—George Fredrick McKay, John Verrall, Darius Milhaud, Olivier Messiaen—but as Bolcom attests, it was Rochberg’s example
that further emboldened him to use “all the resources from his musically
diverse past . . . [to] happily draw from any musical genre that [suited] his
expressive needs.”\textsuperscript{82} In the case of \textit{Black Host}, the composer turned to a key-
board repertory he had long admired—ragtime—and included it in the work,
signifying his first foray into what would later become a central genre in his
corpus.\textsuperscript{83} As the preface to the work states, \textit{Black Host} was about letting go of
the fear of judgment and embracing the “joy that one might create in one’s
own life and in the lives with which one comes in contact.”\textsuperscript{84}

And yet, as Rochberg might have warned him, such combinatorial experi-
ments were not always joyfully received in more modernist settings. Bolcom’s
next piece, \textit{Session IV} (1967) for instrumental nonet, was dedicated to
Rochberg and contained an adventurous amalgam of stylistic references: Scott
Joplinesque rags, direct quotations of Beethoven and Schubert, elements from
late eighteenth-century chamber music, atonal pitch clusters, and a simple
folk-like tune in A-flat major.\textsuperscript{85} As Bolcom describes it, the work was somewhat
unruly but ultimately original: “I quoted the \textit{Eroica} variations of Beethoven
but mostly did not quote [others literally]. I made up my own odd styles here
and there. But it was a shock to people . . . to have brought in not only quo-
tations but tonal things.” At its premiere at the Festival International d’Art
Contemporain (Royan, France) under the baton of Dennis Russell Davies,
\textit{Session IV} was met with open hostility and rioting during the performance:
“It was a big scandal. It was terrible. [Davies] had to start over three [or] four
different times. People came up on the stage, and somebody tried to kick in
the bass drum. [There was] hooting and hollering and fighting out in the audi-
ence because of the fact that I had thrown in not only some quotational things,
but also some ragtime.”\textsuperscript{86} At its 1973 New York premiere at Alice Tully Hall, in
a performance by The Ensemble and Davies, critical response to the work was
more tepid but equally dismissive. While the other works on the program—
Leon Kirchner’s \textit{Lily}, Garrett List’s \textit{Songs}, and Tona Scherchen’s \textit{Bien}—all
received lengthy descriptions in the \textit{New York Times}, Donal Henahan devoted
only a single sentence to Bolcom’s work: “It quoted and parodied older music,
including ragtime, to no point that could be determined at a first hearing.” His
uncharacteristic brevity suggested to the reader that a second hearing was not
recommended.\textsuperscript{87}

Such dismissive reviews could sting, as Rochberg acknowledged throughout
his life, but the elder composer saw them as an external test of one’s artistic
integrity: “We all suffer in myriad ways. Sensing lack of appreciation, of accep-
tance, of approval is surely one of the ways humans in any area of endeavor
suffer. . . . But if you understand this . . . then you do not have to suffer. Just go
your way. There is no other way. . . . One must be a spiritual warrior, nothing
less.”\textsuperscript{88} For his earliest protégés, Rochberg’s persistence in the face of criticism
that ranged from enthusiastic to brutally dismissive provided them with the
resolve to find their own path. As Bolcom once admitted in a letter: “I have mistaken ‘relevance’ for clarity. And clarity is simply the truth of why you write and what you have to say. It can even be muddy clarity . . . but it must be true to what you are or [the music] can be.”

The premiere of Rochberg’s String Quartet no. 3 (1972) by the Concord String Quartet at Alice Tully Hall seems to have underscored Bolcom’s point, with critics moving beyond their usual discussions of source material to more substantive debates about compositional originality and Rochberg’s impact on American postmodernism. Henahan, stunned by the performance he had witnessed two evenings earlier, filed the first review for the *New York Times*: “[The piece] goes ahead while facing backward, and some people will despise it for that . . . The appeal of this work lies not in any literary stance [such as irony] but in its unfailing formal rigor and old-fashioned musicality. Mr. Rochberg’s quartet is—how did we used to put it?—beautiful. It is one of the rare new works that go past collage and quotation into another, fairer land.”

Two weeks later, still entranced, he posted a second report in which he optimistically posited the work as the basis for a new school of American postmodernism. “Since World War II,” he wrote, “we have seen several violent swings of the [musical] pendulum, [but one] thread of influence can be detected in American music, and it is likely to be increasingly important: the systematic re-use of the past”:

> Only the other day, George Rochberg’s brand-new String Quartet No. 3 illustrated the tendency in full flower. . . . The idea of shifting in the course of one piece from style to style was striking, and indicated a love affair with tradition that the composer’s more recent works have borne out. . . . It may be that Rochberg, like Mahler and other great allusionists, has found a way to connect us with our common and not entirely despicable past.

Alan Kriegsman of the *Washington Post* listed the quartet as the signature musical achievement of the year, heralding that Rochberg had ushered in a “new phase in which allusion to the past is no longer a device or a conceit, but a primary aesthetic axiom.” He openly mused, as did Henahan, as to whether an “air of retrenchment seems to be gathering, a retreat to the known and the safe and the familiar” that might appeal to a generation of young composers who had grown weary of the Vietnam War and their “theorizing elders.”

As James Wierzbicki has noted, musicologists have often promoted a similar narrative, effectively recognizing the Third String Quartet as either the “beginning” of the neo-tonal postmodern story or the “vital factor in the emergence of a genre of [new-Romantic] music.” While such assertions hold some truth, they inadvertently lead to a perception of Rochberg as a musical vanguard leading the way for others to emulate, as one headline—“Follow This [Quartet] for Direction in Contemporary Composition”—suggested. But for many of his
former students, Rochberg was less a Moses figure than a fellow Joshua trying to reach the Promised Land. As composers like Albert and Bolcom asserted in interviews and other published sources, they did not view themselves as the genealogical descendants of a “Rochberg school,” in part because they had come to the same philosophical and aesthetic orientation alongside him, if not slightly in advance. They were not following his lead but simultaneously cultivating what Kyle Gann has described as the musical “midtown,” an aesthetic space in which composers sought to write “orchestral and chamber music in intuitive, nonsystematic idioms comparable in form and feeling, if not always in musical materials or style, to European works of the nineteenth century.”

In their minds, the neighborhood was both multi-generational and large enough to encompass a fifty-three-year-old convert like Rochberg as well as newcomers like Albert and Bolcom, who were only in their early thirties.

Certain examples demonstrate that the sphere of influence and guidance was neither unilateral nor top-down—from teacher to student—but rather reciprocal. Throughout the 1970s, Albert and Rochberg sustained a vibrant and lively correspondence among equals, even trading book recommendations that ultimately led to common extra-musical influences on their compositions. For example, in the mid-1960s both composers read and discussed Immanuel Velikovsky as they worked on two of their most “dissonant and cataclysmic works”: Rochberg’s war-inspired Third Symphony (1969) and Albert’s Wolf Time (1968–69), a musical meditation on “political assassinations, [the] Vietnam War, and other grim realities of American life.”

While Rochberg was writing his String Quartet no. 3, Albert was concurrently composing his Cathedral Music (1971–72) for electronic and traditional instruments, a work inspired by a film of Pablo Casals performing Bach cello suites in a looming cathedral. As Albert describes, his use of electro-acoustic amplification was intended not only to re-create the spaciousness of the sanctuary but also to produce an echo chamber he then filled with myriad historical reverberations, including references to Stravinsky’s Octet (itself built on neoclassical allusions), which Albert prized for its “complexity of texture” and “surface accessibility.” He sought not to re-encounter the past “nostalgically”—a crucial point that Rochberg also asserted in response to criticism of the Third String Quartet—but to “move across it . . . so [that] the materials harken back to an earlier type of music . . . and carry its architecture forward.” The two composers’ language of justification can appear almost interchangeable, a synonymy varied by their unique tones and temperaments.

But whereas Albert did not wish to become ensnared by a “very dangerous spider web of tradition,” Bolcom appears to have gleefully jumped directly into its sticky netting. The allusions in his String Quartet no. 9 (1972), commissioned by the Concord String Quartet in the same year as Rochberg’s quartet, are easy to detect, if not intentional: nods to eighteenth-century fugal
counterpoint, the opening of Bartók’s String Quartet no. 5, gestures from Crumb’s *Black Angels*, and fragments from the Tin Pan Alley melody “By the Light of the Silvery Moon.” Together, they suggest an altogether contemporary yet non-synchronistic cast of characters that both baffled and delighted *Times* critic Raymond Ericson. Bolcom, he wrote, had “turned out a kind of Ivesian piece. . . . Old-fashioned salon dances are filtered through the distortions of our time [in what] might be described as a long sentimental threnody . . . [that] is poignant and appealing.” Thus it comes as no surprise that by the time of the Third String Quartet, Rochberg did not view either composer as a young ingenue. Rather, he saw them as trusted and sympathetic colleagues with whom he could vigorously debate ideas and share his latest experiments and frustrations.

The Third String Quartet is a case in point; in search of an early appraisal, Rochberg asked both Albert and Bolcom to review the score before its first performance. Generally, their evaluations were encouraging and positive, with Albert writing that he found it a “full and graceful work”: “No straining for affectation or effect, just a rich flow of dramatic and lyrical ideas. . . . [It] seems to make its own rules concerning form and style. I like especially the content of its juxtaposed sections and the diversity of its moods. I don’t think it will disappoint you in the end.” Bolcom was equally effusive, remarking to Rochberg that upon reading the first few pages, “[I found] my eyes suddenly full of tears, of all things. You’ve come out the other side of something, left the Geschrei behind, and that must be what got me.” Both composers helped Rochberg weather the critical reception of his work, including negative reviews that cast Rochberg as an imitator and the quartet’s materials as superficial knock-offs of the originals. Albert wrote encouragingly after one such review, assuring Rochberg that he still found the work “a complete musical experience” whose “uniqueness and deeper worth lies in its inimitability and freedom from easy aesthetic solutions.” But Bolcom used the opportunity to raise serious concerns that Rochberg might be “paint[ing] himself into a corner,” which could jeopardize the authenticity and integrity of his compositional voice: “We [have] discover[ed] that we can’t live without the past. We lose intelligibility. . . . But I won’t let it take over [as you have]. It is part of me . . . but it is not all.” After a vigorous back and forth, Bolcom closed the conversation with his observation that “we all (still!) want to be Beethoven, when I don’t think even Beethoven wanted to be Beethoven. So we deny the truth of our own experience in search of GREATNESS. [But] the only greatness is in absolute truthfulness.”

Ultimately, the Third String Quartet did raise Rochberg’s postmodern profile among North American composers born after 1950, many of whom enrolled at Penn to study with him. Robert Carl specifically identifies the quartet as the reason he chose Penn for graduate studies: “[It] bowled me over when I heard it [in college]. . . . The mix of historical styles in the piece spoke
very directly to me. . . . I thought it was a magnificent testament to the ideal of revering tradition and reworking it fearlessly." Conversely, Stephen Hartke admired the “gently dissonated lyricism” of Rochberg’s serial works, specifically the Second Symphony and Serenata d’Estate. “My music at that time was exploring the juxtaposition of tonal and atonal elements,” he recalled, “and it was clear to me that George was one of the few teachers out there . . . who would be okay with my continuing on that path.” For Stephen Jaffe, it was that wide musical palette that attracted him to Penn, where he hoped to learn how to “absorb other influences into a post-serial style.” He described being enamored with the Second Symphony (“one of the best twelve-tone symphonies of that period”) but noted that the “excitement of the Third Quartet, and all it indicated for music’s future, was palpable.”

For all of his students, Rochberg’s reengagement of the past had broadened compositional possibilities and suggested new ways of thinking about what comprised a unique or original postwar voice. As Albert noted, the challenge for the listener was to move beyond a simplistic catalog of citations to seize upon the composer’s singular creative vision. “Some of us are given to just readopt [past techniques] and not create anything really new,” he mused, but “we create new and different ways though. We create new because our voices are new. The way in which we bring these old, old friends together, the new context, is what gives us a new voice. . . . Originality does not lie in innovation by itself.”

One therefore had to develop a different way of listening—an ear attuned more to idea than to style, to put it in Schoenbergian terms—to understand the value of his corpus. For some, that value was the needed voice of a moralist, one whose music acknowledged that “we owe debts to other human beings” and who saw this as “a necessary step to finding our own human essence [in that] it admits that we are truly fed by each other.” For others, it was the courage to be authentic and vulnerable, wholly committed to one’s own aesthetic and vision.

Cultivation of an individual voice was the crucial lesson Rochberg imparted to his students, but it came at some expense. As many former students noted, he was less concerned with teaching them the nitty-gritty aspects of technique despite his analytical chops and expert knowledge of the subtle workings of expanded tonal practice. As Michael Alec Rose described, he would address the seminar room with “his head wreathed in cigarette smoke” and “sit on his horde of musical gold—the entire repertory of classical music and American popular song—and toss coins at us, not even caring if we could catch them.” Despite the value of these lasting pearls of wisdom—“great composers really get going in codas, where they write entire mini-pieces” or “the test of any work for its [cultural] endurance is whether it leaves a residue”—some students admitted that they “might have felt a little cheated” if they had not also had additional training from other teachers, at Penn or elsewhere. But his greatest
pedagogical strength was his “influence as an artistic model.” He forced his students to look in the mirror and question who they were and what their identity as an artist would be. In one conversation, Carl offered a heartfelt and grateful assessment of his time at Penn: “I was blessed to have encountered his passion and drive to make work of substance, to not kid oneself. That’s the great positive I retain.”

Carl and others described the seminars of the 1970s as a “constant conversation about aesthetics and sociopolitical issues” that could be described as a “moral education” in music, comments that resonate with arguments Rochberg was cultivating in his intellectual work. In seminars like “The Renewal of New Music,” Rochberg consciously drew from his published essays and presented their material as compositional and ethical guidance for the future. Questioning why twentieth-century composers had given up harmony, melody, and counterpoint in favor of more static soundscapes, Rochberg implored his students to rebuild in their own work the liberated gestural repertory of human expression—to open themselves up to the “precious sense of the magic and mystery of existence” that inspired people to sing (rather than to speak) and to dance (rather than to deny music’s kinetic energy).

Even in more technical composition courses such as Orchestration, Rochberg pointedly addressed the moral implications of creating music. In that class, Hartke remembers him describing “intricately worked orchestral colors and textures as unnecessary blandishment [that] border[ed] on the immoral,” even referring once to Alexander Scriabin’s music as “pretty poison.” Students received these moral musings in a variety of ways, with some absorbing them as musical guidance that sparked personal interests in affect theory or rhythmic energy; others read them explicitly as ethical warnings against scientific hubris and the dehumanization of music.

But for all his talk about humanistic connection and aesthetic integrity, Rochberg could also be famously insecure and, as his journals reveal, prone to rash outbursts when he felt dismissed or threatened by those he considered rivals. Every former student with whom I spoke cited the “ups and downs” of his moods or the crushing impact of his “withering criticism” to various degrees. “He wanted affirmation,” one former student explained, “but this was difficult when he kept getting on his high horse to announce a moral position about music; the discourses were often about rejecting all other alternatives because his was just about the only way forward.” Such staunch positions also soured his relationships with Crumb and Wernick, and sometimes Rochberg momentarily directed his professional anger at their shared graduate students. Carl recalls one semester when he registered for composition lessons with Crumb to gain a “diversity of viewpoints” on his work: “I didn’t realize this was a big mistake. When I showed [Rochberg] a new piece outside of normal channels, he really tore into it. And while it did
have ‘Feldmanesque’ aspects, I couldn’t help but feel much of his reaction was because he felt I’d rejected him.”  

Regardless of their personal experiences with Rochberg, every student with whom I corresponded unequivocally cited him as a twentieth-century model for “artistic integrity and thoroughgoing musicianship” and described their studies with him as “deeply expansive and meaningful,” if not an outright “privilege.” And yet, true to the moral education they had received, none of them were entirely sycophantic in their assessments of his ideas or works. In their dealings with Rochberg, they experienced impassioned disagreements over many central debates of the late twentieth century. Still, they continued to keep in touch with him well beyond their graduate years, seeking his guidance and confirmation but also holding him at arms’-length to develop their own individual voices. One letter from Carl, about an electronic piece Rochberg refused to comment on because of its “robotic” voice, clearly illustrates the tension: “Whether I agree with everything you say is immaterial. What is important to me is your unflinching honesty in your evaluation of things, your willingness to make commitments, and the sense that [the] values by which you both create and judge other creation comes from the highest motives.”

At age sixty-five, Rochberg retired from Penn as Emeritus Annenberg Professor of the Humanities, having earned a host of public accolades for his two decades of work while at the university: two Naumburg Recording Awards (Symphony no. 2 and String Quartet no. 3), a National Institute of Arts and Letters Recording Award (String Quartet no. 2, with the Philadelphia String Quartet and Janice Harasanyi), a second Guggenheim fellowship (“Passions According to the Twentieth Century”), two grants from the National Endowment for the Arts (Imago Mundi, Ukiyo-E, Phaedra), the Kennedy Center Friedheim Award (String Quartet no. 4), two Grammy nominations (String Quartet nos. 3 and 7, with the Concord String Quartet and Leslie Guinn), and three honorary doctorates. The one obvious prestigious award that eluded him was the Pulitzer Prize for music, which, much to his chagrin, his colleagues Crumb and Wernick had received in 1968 and 1977, respectively. “[He] should have won a Pulitzer,” Bolcom has complained, contending that politics played a role in the committee’s apparent oversight: “He was so reviled by all of the academic community, who thought he had sold out on them. . . . In his case, it did make him angry, because he certainly was deserving.” In 1986, when the committee did name him a finalist for his Symphony no. 5 (1985), he ultimately lost to George Perle’s Wind Quintet IV, a near miss to an old nemesis that stung bitterly. But reviews of the Fifth Symphony were less than enthusiastic, which may have also influenced the committee’s decision. Writing for the Chicago Tribune, John von Rhein described the premiere as “welcome but disappointing” because of the “drabness” of its invention and the way the “music limps and lurches from one short-breathed, unmemorable
idea to the next." Daniel Webster of the Philadelphia Inquirer concurred, noting that the symphony’s “central theme suggested growth that never materialized”; thus, Rochberg “did not make the music seem fully developed or its possibilities completely explored.”

Such snubs lingered in the decades that followed, with Rochberg growing increasingly frustrated with the late-century musical landscape as it unfolded around him: the ascendency of minimalism and pop-art, the continued prominence of serialism in the university curriculum, the lack of vigor in many contemporary compositions. As he admitted in one interview: “When I think of contemporary music, I’m not overly optimistic, for a lot of reasons. One is purely external: there is less and less contemporary music being programmed by performers outside the university circuit these days. . . . But something still more serious disturbs me: young composers don’t seem to have any vitality of mind or psyche. Still, I don’t want to make this a total indictment.” He hoped his nearly five decades of work might open up new possibilities for a generation who would come of age in the twenty-first century; in his mind, the collective range of his corpus demonstrated that “composers now possess an extraordinarily wide range of possible devices and means” and that “tonal and atonal music are forms of musical thinking that are not necessarily mutually exclusive but are, in fact, large-scale transformations of the same forces at work in both.” On this basis, he predicted that American art music would “very likely see an increasing tendency toward an enlarged and newly stabilized tonality . . . with greater flexibility and range in melodic, harmonic and structural possibilities.” As he recorded in his journal, “I think we’re in a new stage of making it come out right again after a full century of struggling and new uses of old syntaxes. And only the few who know it’s there to be done [and who are] willing and able to work hard enough to try [will] bring this next stage to . . . fruition and mature realization. Who will that be?”

After 1983, as he shared with Anhalt, his life was “far from retired.” In 1984 he published the first edition of The Aesthetics of Survival—a collection of provocative essays on aesthetics, culture, morality, and music—and sought opportunities to work with “serious young composers,” a form of “teaching preferable at this time of my life to the teaching in classrooms I’ve done for so long.” To this end, he generously accepted academic residencies and invitations for speeches, despite the fact that the travel increasingly left him physically exhausted for several days afterward. His lessons and lectures often reiterated the central tenets of his writings, which remained for him an immutable moral truth. “Music is the only art I know which directly binds together the individual and society and in the process produces an experience which brings self-fulfillment and self-realization to [both] those who make it [and] those who receive it,” he professed at one commencement speech, imploring
the undergraduates before him to aspire to “something larger and greater than your individual selves” by “putting your ego—its energies; its desires; its ambitions—at the service of music.” Such efforts were “hard, unrelenting work,” he averred, but “there is no other way to educate your heart and your spirit, your mind and your emotions, as a human being.”141

But by the end of the century, Rochberg had grown increasingly skeptical about the upcoming generation. In 1997 he traveled to the Longy School of Music for one of his final public appearances, during which he received the conservatory’s Distinguished Achievement Award and gave the commencement address. The visit also included a concert of Rochberg’s works for keyboard by the faculty pianist Sally Pinkas, who had premiered his Circles of Fire with Evan Hirsch earlier that year. The speech was derived from his 1986 essay “Fiddlers and Fribbles,” in which he gave a condensed lesson on metaphysics. In the conclusion, he attacked solipsism and implored the students to resist the “glitz and glamour” of entertainment and the “gray, soulless mundane of the business of life-form” to make art that is “real [and] survives us [so] we leave something good behind.”142 The graduates’ blank reaction left him feeling depressed and defeated, with one of the faculty members confirming that only a few had understood the urgency of his message. The experience seemed to confirm his worst nightmares: “The barbarians are not at the gates. . . . They are us, in our own castles.”143

One final ray of light presented itself at the International Center for American Music at the University of Wisconsin, Madison, where he spent one week as composer-in-residence in 1995.144 The program took place over three weeks, with John Corigliano and John Harbison hosting the first two weeks, and it was organized around a daily lecture session.145 In addition, each student received two group lessons—with two to three students assembled—every week, ensuring some level of individual feedback. Rochberg had nothing but praise for the students he encountered in Madison. “The fourteen young men were bright and talented,” he recorded in his journal. “An amazing group of youngsters [in their] early and middle 20s.”146 Unlike the other composers, Rochberg had not written a composition since the Sonata-Aria for cello (1992), and his Clarinet Concerto (1995) was still in progress. While he did share some of his earlier work, including Music for the Magic Theater, he ultimately opted for a more historical approach to his plenary sessions: he lectured about Beethoven op. 130 for the entire week.147 The choice was anything but arbitrary, for Rochberg had long equated Beethoven’s works with a deep sense of moral and aesthetic conviction.148

It was a moment that “changed everything” for Greg Wilder, a composer and computer programmer who admits that he had been eager to learn from Corigliano and Harbison but had not given Rochberg, who “seemed a generation too far away,” much thought.149
While the other composers [sat] down and played their own music . . . George play[ed] Beethoven’s op. 130. . . . Then he turns to the group and he says, “What’s the form of this piece?” Which is really an impossible question! And we discussed the form for probably forty-five minutes. . . . His point was to tell us, “Look, you’ve got to put away the things that you’ve been learning in school. . . . If you are serious about getting to the bottom of the questions and challenges you [will] have to face, [then] you need to find your own answer to questions like this, to figure out what it means to you, individually as a composer.”

Jeremy Gill, who also attended the conference, recalls how the shift in orientation opened up a discursive space that invited conversation: “I was just discovering the late quartets for myself. . . . He made me feel like my opinion mattered and, more importantly, that the way one thought about this work mattered . . . that it was worth discussing [in 1995] because we might learn something new about a masterwork.”

Gill’s final comment reflects Rochberg’s long-standing belief that the past should be part of a living tradition and that its best examples—in this case, Beethoven—could reveal a set of universal concerns common to humanistic endeavors in composition. In the essay “Polarity in Music,” written the same year as the conference, he argued that “from its inception, Western music has been a great communal effort on the part of an unbroken chain of generations of composers, a still ongoing human project whose end must remain opaque to us.” With a broader range of musical techniques available to the composer, younger composers required not only a technical education but a moral one; they had to be taught how to “exercise taste, judgment, and serious criteria in working toward new vocabularies, [as] great care [was] needed in using the potentialities of such a double-tracked *ars combinatoria.*”

Rochberg’s presentation of the Beethoven might be read in this vein, not merely as an analytical exercise but as encouraging the students to align the “true norths” of their musical-moral compasses with his own. In their daily discussions of the Sonata op. 130, he intentionally stressed those aspects of the work that correlated with aesthetic positions he had championed over his fifty-year career: “the role of memory and identity, the mastery of influence, the importance of repetability, the relationship of clock time and perceptual time, and the importance of writing music for performers.” As Jon Forshee remarked, “Underneath the intellection and discourse was a constant musician’s concern: write music that is playable. I remember him saying that [we] needed to give the musician ‘something to play.’ This injunction has become a guideline for me in my work ever since.” Rochberg offered that if the students tackled these problems in their own individualized language, they would then become members of a formidable and lasting genealogy—bringing music “to the highest levels of maturation.”
As several participants reported, his approach was spell-binding, if not socratically seductive; he appealed to them as fellow composers rather than neophytes and told them that “the twenty-first century was theirs, provided they worked very hard to make it theirs, that through them things will begin to return to a better level of the human condition.” Rochberg’s concluding statement resonated deeply with Gill, who felt compelled to respond publicly to the charge:

I wound up making a statement to the effect that we, as composers, had a responsibility to our listeners and to the musicians we composed for when we wrote music—that what we said and how we said it had consequences, and that we had to be careful that we were always honoring our tradition and aspiring to the highest potentials of our craft. Rochberg reminded me of that speech [later in life]. “People get uncomfortable when they encounter serious truths,” he said.

Of the fourteen participants, three wrote to Rochberg afterward to inquire about private lessons. “I am disgusted with the politics of many schools,” shared Gill in his initial appeal, “and I want, above all things, to be a composer of music which speaks to humankind. I wish to be thoughtful, responsible, and completely committed to the music which I write.”

Rochberg accepted the students into his life, often intimately so, and their visits with him over the next ten years became a beautiful entanglement of life and work. Tutorials would begin with a “light chat” about the state of affairs in the world—often with Gene serving tea and joining them for the conversation—and would then move into Rochberg’s study, where everyone would pull out scores and engage in critiques that Wilder described as “intense, but always very fair.” At times, the feedback was “general and kind of meta,” and at other times it swung to the “hyper-specific,” with Rochberg seizing upon the smallest details in an expansive work. As Wilder related:

I remember Jeremy Gill [once] brought in a cello concerto. . . . George thumbed through the score for a long time in silence, which was a little nerve-wracking. And he got to the cadenza—not a main idea at all—and he circled a couple [of] measures with his fingers and said, “This. This was a good idea. And you missed it. This is what this piece should have been about.” What a tough thing to hear. It’s a wonderful and tough thing to hear someone say something that critical.

Gill had a different memory of the critique, recalling not the technical evaluation but the moral instruction attached to it:

The piece began cacophonously, and I told George that I imagined the relationship between the soloist and orchestra as pursued and pursuer, victim
and oppressor. George said that art shouldn’t imitate life in this way, that there was enough pain and victimization in the real world, and that art deserved other considerations. I had never had a teacher question the fundamental concept of a work of mine. . . . George was rejecting my premise but simultaneously holding me to a higher standard, to what I had said in Madison. It was crushing on one level (he was essentially dismissing my most ambitious work to date) but invigorating on another. He was pointing me in a truer direction. 

Rochberg himself commented that his lessons were intended more as moral training than as formal instruction. “In the realm of [their] art and mental work,” he wrote, “[I explained that] there is no ‘ought,’ no ‘should,’ no ‘right,’ no ‘wrong.’ . . . Only love opens the windows of the imagination and lets the juices flow according to the nature and experience of the imaginer. As far as I can tell there are no known limits.” The integrity of his message was not lost on his students. “Privately, he emphasized composing the music that mattered most to me, regardless of style or popularity,” Forshee recalled fondly. “His personal advice and feedback have all become a part of my musical world and creative thinking. Most of all, his dedication, as I perceived it, to musical individualism and freedom has remained a motivation, and a check, in my own musical life.”

At the time of his death in 2005, Rochberg left several projects incomplete, including a massive theoretical study on chromaticism that was later edited by Gill and published as *A Dance of Polar Opposites*. The book is in many ways reflective of technical analyses Rochberg first developed for his composition seminars, including concepts such as the “harmonic envelope” and “tonal field” that directly influenced his students’ thinking beyond their years at Penn. But it also illustrates his deep belief that an aesthetic education must necessarily also address moral dimensions. In the published afterword, Rochberg returned to the issue that had consumed him throughout his lifetime: how to evaluate the moral dimension of those polar opposites he had identified in Western art music and whether an opportunity might exist for their reconciliation. As he noted, theoretical analyses often lost sight of the fact that music is “as real as the human beings who make it” and therefore “as crucial and serious as any other reality within the broad range of human experience”: “It [is] a direct expression, an uncompromised projection of the states of the human heart and soul. . . . There has to be . . . an appropriateness of fit between the musical language at [a composer’s] disposal and how he uses it. But the means, the language used, does not determine the spiritual outcome. It is the essence of the composer that leaves its imprint.” He still worried periodically about the consequences of modernism, but as he neared the twenty-first century he became increasingly concerned for those who might be seduced by electro-acoustic music, a genre he had begun to call “aesthetic engineering” to call
attention to its ethical concerns: “We must rid [ourselves] of the confusion of calling [it] music when it is absolutely the reverse, the very opposite of music. Music issues from inside; technology deals with the surface of externals. Music projects the natural fire and heat of the human heart and soul. Technology is cold, outside, at best titillates and makes interesting or fascinating ‘sounds,’ but never enters the inside.”  

But as any educator will attest, one can never anticipate what impact his or her teachings or writings may have on the next generation. In the case of Wilder, the education he received led directly to his work in the genre Rochberg considered the polar opposite of music: computational creativity and the use of artificial intelligence to compose music. The topic was a perennial source of disagreement between the two:

George was a non-believer. He clearly saw music as a “religious” experience. But I would say that . . . the stories and myths that humans used to look to in order to understand the world have been largely replaced, in the western world, by scientific observation. If a person wants to believe that magic is the only option to understanding why the stars show up every night, that’s their prerogative. But I feel very similarly about the role of artificial intelligence and computers in aesthetic matters. I have a lot of faith in it.

Wilder took Rochberg’s pedagogical instruction seriously—the ability to distill a musical motive and discover its identity, the need to master past influences to define your own voice, the desire to create an intimate and powerful bond between music and listener—and adapted them to the context of machine listening and learning, ostensibly teaching Rochberg’s humanistic lessons to a suite of artificial intelligence programs. His goal is a sophisticated transformation of computer-influenced music—what he calls the Isomer Project—into software capable of learning by looking agnostically at what we, as humans, create and call music.

And yet, Wilder is not advocating for the end of humanistic music; what he envisions is a “productive partnership” in which the computer “takes on the role of managing compositional systems and patterns—the tedious tasks—so that I can focus on the aesthetic sculpting that I like to do. [In the end], I am the composer, so I get the privilege of selecting [from what Isomer identifies] what I think is best or novel, what’s worth hearing and what’s worth keeping.” Wilder’s description of the software’s potential also recalls language from Rochberg’s belief in a mystical cosmic fabric that binds all of humanity together: “Isomer has the power to validate and uncover potential universal connections in musical language in ways that people can hear and feel and connect with. . . . If the result is something that we generally value as music, I’m not so sure that the source of that music, in terms of its creator or composer, is so relevant or important.”
Wilder views his work as a potential path for the twenty-first century born of Rochberg’s philosophies, a post-dialectical solution in which humanism and science function not as adversaries locked in moral conflict but as creative companions that, by working in concert with one another, might attain a unity of purpose that improves aesthetic pleasure and recaptures the ancient connection between music and life. The result would be what Rochberg once described as a “grand, morphological pas de deux”—a dance of polar opposites in which seemingly antithetical “qualities are brought into purposeful conflict, expressive friction and tension” through the compositional process. Such a merger, as he once acknowledged, would be morally preferable to the domination of one side over the other, for “where one or the other of contraries wins out, no unity of [polar] opposites is possible. Though the war has ceased, it cannot be said that peace has been established—unless we mean the false peace of tyranny and oppression.”

And yet, I cannot help but hear Rochberg’s skeptical professorial voice challenging Wilder, and us, from somewhere beyond. With the stale smell of tobacco filling the room, perhaps we might imagine him placing a copy of Rilke’s *Letters to a Young Poet* in Wilder’s hands so they might comb through its pages searching for Rochberg’s favorite passage: “Cherish the questions. Live everything. Live the questions. Live right into the answer.” In response to Wilder’s answers, might Rochberg “tilt his head back listening or thinking, and then laugh” as he prepared to give his own critical response? Or would he lean forward, hazel eyes rapt with intense concentration, and pose a final series of serious questions in his deep, rich, and expressive baritone voice?

**Rochberg:** The artistic problem, as I see it, lies not only in the reality of accepting the confrontation between two opposing impulses and tendencies, but also in the reality of asking oneself whether these opposites can be or even should be resolved!

**Wilder:** George, I remember an afternoon with you on the back porch when you suddenly wondered aloud, ‘If aliens exist, what sort of music might they create?’ Such an incredible thought! Is that a question worth asking? Absolutely! So why, then, should the source of artistic expression be limited only to human experience? Has anyone proven that art must be a function of biology? If not, then exploring other sources is worthwhile, although admittedly, it’s a task that must be handled with great care.

**Rochberg:** Art wants neither to prove anything nor to manipulate anything. Art wants to project an endless stream of individual, subjective experience by expressing that infinite, ever-changing variety of experience purely in qualitative terms. Art is not interested in proof or demonstration. [So, what are you trying to do—prove something or make art?]
Wilder: The goal of Isomer is to *create* works of artistic value, full stop. Artificial Intelligence is developing at an unprecedented rate—evolution at a pace and scale the earth has never witnessed. My goal for AI as a source of artistic expression is not simply for it to produce novel sounds, but ultimately, for the machine to *feel* unsatisfied with the current state of things. Once that happens, the *desire* to change, comment on, or extend what has come before will *drive* machines to create. And isn’t that the true source of artistic creation?