George Rochberg, American Composer

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George Rochberg, American Composer, is the first comprehensive study devoted to tracing and putting into a rich cultural context the career of George Rochberg, widely acknowledged as one of the most prominent musical postmodernists. Drawing from unpublished materials including diaries, letters, sketches, and personal papers, the book traces the impact of two specific personal traumas—Rochberg’s service as an infantryman in World War II and the premature death of his son—on his work as a leading composer, college educator, and public intellectual.

The book significantly expands our understanding of Rochberg’s creative work by reconstructing and examining the earliest seeds of his aesthetic thinking—which took root while he served in Patton’s Third Army—and following their development through his mature compositional period into the final stages of his long career. It argues that Rochberg’s military service was a transformative life experience for the young humanist, one that crucially shaped his worldview and influenced his artistic creativity for the next sixty years. As such it reveals personal trauma and aesthetic recovery to be the basis of Rochberg’s postwar ideas about humanism, musical quotation, and neotonality.

“A biographical assessment of the life of George Rochberg, one of the most important American composers of the twentieth century, is long overdue. It is enlightening to read about the composer’s wartime experiences, and to be granted a fresh perspective on his ars combinatoria, created out of the ruins of his son’s death. Amy Wlodarski elegantly balances biographical writing and musical analysis, providing excellent context for Rochberg’s development and ideas.”

—Jeremy Gill, editor of Rochberg’s A Dance of Polar Opposites: The Continuing Transformation of Our Musical Language

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