In the early 1970's, George Rochberg's Third String Quartet
caused a great stir in the music world, largely because this five
movement work, lasting almost fifty minutes in performance,
contained substantial sections written in the styles of Beethoven and
Mahler juxtaposed with sections of atonal music. In his subsequent
works, Rochberg has continued to combine tonal, atonal, and
sometimes quotation music within a single composition. Many people
think that Rochberg has merely renounced serialism and "returned"
to tonality; I believe, however, that such an interpretation is too
simplistic. I hope to show that although Rochberg's music especially
since 1972 has been characterized by an undisguised desire to think in
tonal terms, his fresh approach and new ideas have led to a highly
progressive music. Largely through examining revealing passages from
his Third String Quartet, we will see that the cumulative-historical
style of Rochberg helps enable him to write music of the greatest
expressive range, that his technical mastery allows him convincingly
to unite extremely diverse styles, and lastly (and most speculatively),
that Rochberg's evocations of specific repertoire pieces are intense
musical expressions involving a bold manipulation of the musical
psychology of the audience.

Because the effect of the range of Rochberg's musical expression
and the impact of his evocation of past musical experiences cannot be
described by standard analysis, his music, or at least his intentions,

have been to some extent misunderstood. If we analyze a Rochberg passage written in the style of the last movement of the Mahler Ninth Symphony with the usual methods employed in the local analysis of tonal music, we will explain only something of the style of Mahler, not Rochberg. As an understanding of Mahler involves going beyond the local analysis to examining the interrelationships of events in the large scale structure, so an understanding of Rochberg's style involves examining how we hear (and therefore experience) the musical expressions we associate with the Mahler Ninth in a new and larger context which embraces both tonality and atonality. It is through the awareness of Rochberg's very special reinterpretation and revitalization of musical elements, which we are accustomed to taking at only face value, that the scope of his accomplishment will begin to be revealed.

\*     \*     \*     \*     \*

I have always been aware of a friendly impatience on George Rochberg's part with the intellectual debate games played by musicians, critics, and philosophers of music. "Can one justify the use of a pitch series to generate a series of durations or dynamics?", "What is expression in music? Is it valid?", and so on. Although many people exhibit a "knowing" impatience when such issues are raised, I am willing to wager that most readers of this periodical have asked at least themselves these same questions. And in public pronouncements, few artists can claim to have investigated these vital issues and have acted on them so honestly and with such commitment as George Rochberg has. In his own struggle with such problems, Rochberg has seemed eventually to rely on intuition and straightforward thinking as the only true guides in creativity. And he seems to feel that the artist must first and above all obey an internal spring: the urge to express. This tremendous desire to express has led Rochberg, once one of the foremost serial composers, to re-embrace the tonal vocabulary in order to further exploit the extensive expressive resources available exclusively on the tonal palette.

In the twentieth century the desire to express has come under considerable fire for perhaps the first time in the history of music. The conscious abandoning of first the overtly expressive (by Stravinsky) and, eventually, the subtly expressive (by Boulez) seemed to reach its peak with Boulez's Second Sonata for Piano (1948), in the preface of which are the instructions "Eviter absolument surtout dans les tempos lents, ce que l'on convient d'appeler les 'nuances expressives'".[1] We can detect perhaps even a touch of snideness in the

phrase " . . . ce que l'on convient d'appeler . . . " (" . . . what have come to be called . . .", or " . . . what are customarily called . . ."), as if musical expression results from a sort of intoxication which reduces the artist's clarity of vision. (The phrase "Eviter le rubato . . ." would have served as well musically, but would have reflected a philosophically milder stand.)

The exclusion of expressive nuance by many serial composers seems to have been motivated by a desire to avoid melodrama. But the presence of rubato or expression no more signals melodrama than composition with a single series insures musical cohesion. Unlike the majority of post-war serialists, George Rochberg has refused to equate expression with melodrama. The strength and vitality of Rochberg's music seems to be largely the result of his lack of inhibition in writing primarily for the sake of expression. By 1972, after some 25 years of examining the progress and possibilities of serial music, Rochberg felt that serialism was " . . . a style which made it virtually impossible to express serenity, tranquility, grace, wit, energy . . . "[2] and perhaps most importantly, joy.[3] Such a style was simple unable to accommodate the vast range of expression Rochberg desired, and he felt that a vocabulary expanding the expressive possibilities of music was necessary. It is important to emphasize that Rochberg added tonal music to the existing atonal and serial gestures he had employed in the 'fifties and 'sixties. The move to reclaim tonality was not a dismissal of all aspects of atonality; rather it was a reaction against the ever-increasing limitations on expression in atonal music.

But how can we reconcile the serial Rochberg, who in 1960 was working with the newest language of the day, with the tonal Rochberg of today, and conclude that Rochberg is a progressive composer? We usually recognize Alban Berg as the great reconciler of dodecaphony and tonality, but except for a few passages in the Second Symphony (1955-56) and the Berg quotations in *Contra mortem et tempus* (1965), Rochberg has studiously avoided the Berg sound. Unlike Berg, Rochberg has tried to move away from the ultrachromaticism begun by Liszt and Wagner; by turning to tonality, Rochberg has shunned the inevitable panchromaticism of Stockhausen and Boulez and has moved into the nonstatic world of diatonicism. Although the twentieth century can claim to have produced the most intense music thus far, it has certainly not produced the most expressively varied. Diatonicism is an especially effective vehicle for expression because it provides clear stability against the instability of chromaticism; since the most vivid contrasts usually yield the greatest range of expression, it seems likely that diatonic/chromatic composition has a greater
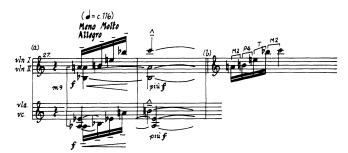
range of expressive potential than does panchromatic music in which, according to Schoenberg's dictum, each note truly has the same functional value as all of the others.

To begin to find out how Rochberg combines atonal and diatonic music convincingly to unite a large scale composition, let us examine the first hundred measures of the Third String Quartet. In the opening measure (Ex. 1a) we have what sounds like the "serial" Rochberg—a brash, violent gesture, rich with overlapping cellular constructions.

Example 1



The melodic interval content (Ex. 1a and b) is very similar to the vertical interval content (Ex. 1c). The only interval presented in one context and not in the other is the major 2nd whose role will emerge shortly. (Compare Ex. 1a and b with c.) The furious gesture of m. 1 is repeated with constant rhythmic displacement and motivic fragmentation for 25 measures. By this point in the work, it is not unreasonable to be anticipating a fairly rigorous serial piece. In m. 27, a highly contrasting statement is heard (Ex. 2a).

Example 2

The sixteenth-note figure (Ex. 2b) contains the exact interval content of Ex. 1b inverted. The first violin and the cello play this phrase in unison at the interval of a minor 9th; this interval is derived from the span of the initial melodic motive, (see Ex. 1b). The sixteenth-note figure continues by whole-step (the major 2nd of Ex. 1a and b) to the goal note of C. This music is less intense than the opening, and is repeated only once; the repeat (Ex. 3) contains another whole-step melodic expansion, C–D, (the first expansion being Bb–C of Ex. 2b).

Example 3



In mm. 40–63 we return to the opening motive and its rhythmically displaced motivic fragments. At m. 64 we again have the (transposed) melodic figure of Ex. 2a (1st violin), but this time stated as a solo by the 2nd violin and answered by a short whole-step figure in the 1st violin (Ex. 4). This whole-step answer was prepared in m. 35 (Ex. 3).
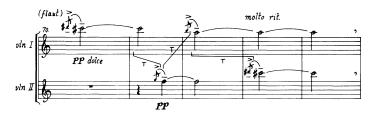
Example 4

This additional whole-step gives us three consecutive whole-tones, B–C♯–D♯. The music has, in fact, condensed into two clear components, each based on a whole tone scale (Ex. 5).

Example 5



At m. 70, the whole-tone figure is exchanged several times between the violins, always at the tritone (Ex. 6). These reiterations of a whole-step motive are a condensation of the opening figure (Ex. 1a) into its first and last notes.

Example 6



This music is based on whole-tone scale 2 (from Ex. 5), and consists of only the intervals of the tritone and the major 2nd (compare with Ex. 1b). The tonal harmonic implications at this point are twofold: both are dominant preparations of B minor/major (Ex. 7).

Example 7

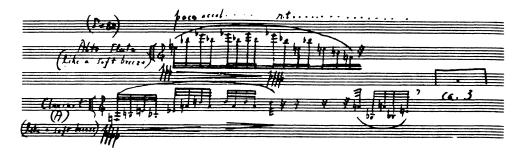At m. 75 (Ex. 8), the 1st violin melodically reiterates the French sixth while the 2nd violin plays the same intervals (in rhythmic unison) a major 7th below; this major 7th coupling is derived from the first measure of the piece (see Ex. 1c) in which alternate voices (i.e. 1st violin/viola, 2nd violin/cello) form a major 7th and its compound inversion, the minor 9th. The perfect 4ths of the viola and cello are also derived from the first measure (see Ex. 1c).

Example 8



This half-tonal, half-nontonal world bridges the opening atonal and tonal sections of this movement. Such music is reminiscent of the impressionistic ambience of Rochberg's *Tableaux* (1968) (Ex. 9).

Example 9. *Tableaux*, "Night Piece" (No. 10)

At m. 81 (not shown), we return to the whole-tone music of mm. 70–74 with its strong dominant preparation implications in B minor/ major. This section is followed by a chorale in B major with a most straightforward harmonic progression: I–I⁶–VI–II⁶–VII⁷/V–V. The texture of a chorale is most appropriate here since up to this point almost the entire piece has consisted of rhythmic unisons. Superimposed on this solid foundation are foreign notes; they are the music of Ex. 6, but where before they suggested a tonality (B minor/ major) emerging from atonality (i.e. the whole-tone scales of Ex. 5 seemed to "emerge" from the previous atonal music), they now weaken the tonality of B major (Ex. 10).

Example 10

Such techniques are used to unite the material of the piece throughout. What is perhaps more significant, however, is that the technique of motivic unification is used to unite the different "historical" styles as well: it is this latter phenomenon that brings the serial Rochberg and the tonal Rochberg together. The "modulation" from atonal to tonal is executed at mm. 70-74. (See Ex. 6.) Here we have a Beethovenian condensation of the atonal thematic material into a whole-step figure. This whole-step figure is then expanded to produce a whole-tone scale from which the tonality of B major is derived. Thus at the point where the atonal music is reduced to its most condensed state (the major 2nd), the whole-step becomes the germ which grows into the tonal music.
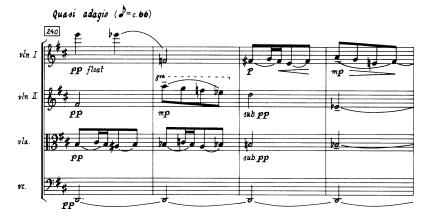
Having shown that Rochberg incorporated tonality to extend the possibilities of his musical expression, and having also demonstrated the extraordinary motivic and intervallic unity among stylistically diverse musics, I will now turn to another topic which has generated a fair amount of discussion: Rochberg's device of strongly suggesting specific passages of repertoire music without actually quoting them.

In discussing Rochberg's tonal music, we should distinguish between the tonal music which is entirely his own (i.e., original), and that which is suggestive of a specific moment in the literature. We tend to associate the musical vocabulary of a period with the composers of that period, and this clouds our sense of the term "originality". If we take, for instance, the B major chorale in the viola and cello (discussed above, see Ex. 10), we immediately recognize the vocabulary we associate with the 19th century. Rochberg, however, employs an unusual admixture of devices so that although some isolated components of the chorale are perhaps reminiscent of Beethoven (see Ex. 10, mm. 90-95, viola and cello), while other more chromatic elements are to be found in Bruckner and Mahler (e.g., the appoggiatura to the half-diminished 7th, m. 97, violin II) the chorale as a whole would likely not be confused with a piece by any specific composer of the last century. Nonetheless, since we associate the composers mentioned above with the musical language of the 19th century, we tend quickly to make the invalid conclusion that this chorale sounds like one of them. Because the evolved language of tonality is a collective heritage, it should not be confused with the specific style of any individual composer. When the whole-step figure in the two violins (Ex. 10) is superimposed on the chorale, we have a fusion of two very different kinds of music. The gesture of combining these particular components and then placing them alongside atonal

music clearly defines the period in which the piece (and therefore the chorale) was written. The expressive effect of these techniques is of the greatest importance: Rochberg has carefully selected musical elements with well-known expressive connotations (the low register Beethoven chorale, the impassioned Mahler appoggiatura, the impressionistic whole-tone scale), and has combined them to create an expressive palette that is of far greater range and intensity than the musical vocabulary of any single composer of earlier tonal music.

Rochberg's strongly suggesting specific passages of repertoire literature is a conscious play with the concrete psychological musical images of the listener. Let us compare a passage from the Finale of Rochberg's Third String Quartet (mm. 240–243) with one from the last movement of Mahler's Ninth Symphony (mm. 67–68), (Exx. 11a and 11b).

Example 11a. Rochberg: Third String Quartet, Finale



Example 11b. Mahler: Symphony #9, Adagio

The similarities here are obvious: the double changing note figure, the harmonic progression, the pedals, the mood, the dramatic leap of the minor 7th (two octaves in Rochberg's case), etc. All that said, it is equally clear that these passages are not identical—but they could, barring the difference in instrumentation, belong to the same work. If, as Rochberg claims, the past is indelibly printed in each of our psyches, and each of us is "...part of a vast physical-mental-spiritual web of previous lives, existences, modes of thought, behavior, and perception...of actions and feelings...",[4] then our past experiences of the Mahler Ninth are a part of that web. If Rochberg were merely to quote the Mahler, the overtness of the gesture would be distracting to his more urgent point which is to evoke the thoughts, perceptions, and feelings of Mahler's penultimate work. That Rochberg is evoking the total entity of the Mahler Ninth in this manner is further supported by the phrase which follows the passage in Ex. 11a. The similarity in style of this phrase to the opening of the 2nd movement of Mahler's Ninth Symphony is less obvious than the relationship shown in Ex. 11, but is still quite apparent (Exx. 12a and 12b).

Example 12a. Rochberg: Third String Quartet, Finale

Example 12b. Mahler: Symphony #9, II



In this section of the quartet, then, Rochberg does not merely write in the language of late Romanticism, or imitate the general style of Mahler, but rather he goes further, to create the specific ambience of the Mahler Ninth Symphony, which evokes, in a very Proustian sense, the listener's psychological experiences of this work. (Such a literary analogy is even more relevant in the context of a consideration of the involvement of writers and painters with the psychological play of style quotation, such as we find in Joyce's *Ulysses* and Picasso's quotation paintings based on Delacroix, Velasquez, and Manet.)

In some ways we are perhaps too close to many of our contemporaries to hear them either clearly or completely. Even the most consciously avant-garde of us listen with our ears in the past because the achievements of the past provide the only basis for comparing and evaluating new efforts. The conscious attempt to compose toward the future has often resulted in arresting but impotent gestures which have led nowhere and have quickly become dated. That George Rochberg's music directly involves the past — for the sake of reopening the entire question of what is expressively valid in a trans-historical sense — is what spurs the erroneous conclusion that his music is reactionary. A careful and sensitive listening to Rochberg's recent music will clearly reveal, however, his exceptional role in the progress of music in our time.

## NOTES

1.  Pierre Boulez, 2eme Sonate pour piano, "Remarques" (Heugel et Cie, Paris, 1950).
2.  George Rochberg, String Quartet No. 3, linear notes, (Nonesuch Records, New York, 1973).
3.  Personal conversation with the author, August, 1976.
4.  Rochberg, *ibid.*