



AMERICAN CLASSICS

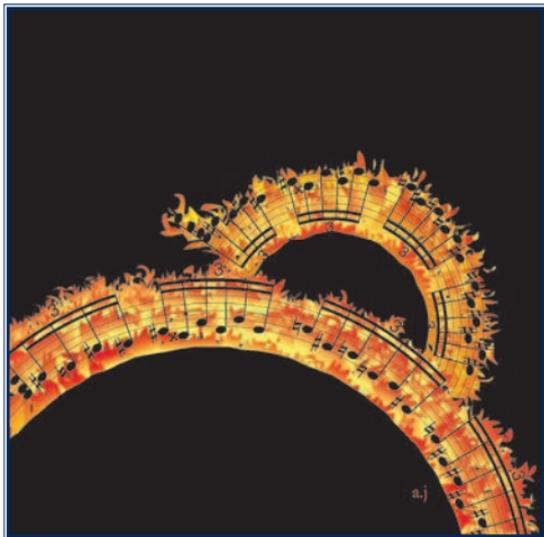


GEORGE ROCHBERG

Piano Music • 1

Circles of Fire

Hirsch-Pinkas Piano Duo



George
ROCHBERG
(1918-2005)

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Circles of Fire

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|-------------------------------------|--------------|
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| 2 II. Chiaroscuro (I) | 3:37 |
| 3 III. Canonic Variations | 3:08 |
| 4 IV. Gioco del fuoco | 7:15 |
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| 15 XV. Solemn Refrain (V) | 3:26 |

George Rochberg (1918-2005)

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Circles of Fire for two pianos (1996–97)

There is a fire in the brain, in the mind, which comes from the universal fire that makes solar systems and galaxies, asteroid belts and comets, huge orbiting spirals, circles, loops that bend back on themselves in giant symmetries and stream out across millions of miles in giant asymmetries.

What we humans call music is the perfect expression of this utterly fantastic image.

Music issues from the mental fire that drives our passions and produces our tensions. It shapes these into the polar opposites of symmetry and asymmetry.

This fire in the mind translates into a living imagination which, as William Butler Yeats says, 'divides us from mortality by the immortality of beauty... Passions, because most living, are most holy...'

What is beautiful knows no temporal boundaries, recognizes no cultural moment as more special than any other. In much the same spirit we can now think of the past as present, tonal music having no more special rights than atonal music – so long as both attain the condition of the beautiful.

It is the beautiful that is immortal, not ourselves. This epoch ending now is circling back on itself musically, building a new and different tension out of the tonal-atonal polarity whose energies will eventually release themselves in new streams of the unpredictable and the beautiful – so long as the fire in the mind does not rage out of control or burn out.

This pattern of circling back imaginatively, storing up all the energy possible in order to release it in some future time when conditions are ripe again and the pressure of expressive need is great enough again, this is the symmetry our passions take on to make of our internal fire what we need in order to translate our mortality into the immortality of the beautiful.

There's no reason beyond that – no utility, no social or political or psychological purpose. Making the world

a better place is not a project for the artist. His project is to express the fire in the mind – to make, as Robert Browning said, beautiful things that 'have lain burningly on the Divine Hand'.

George Rochberg

In the course of our existence as a piano duo, Sally Pinkas and I have had numerous opportunities to interact with composers while preparing premiere performances of their works. On each occasion we have found ourselves offered a window into a new way of looking at music, and this in turn has nurtured our own musical growth. The experience of working with George Rochberg in the gestation and interpretation of *Circles of Fire* has been particularly remarkable, owing to the intense emotional and musical demands of the work, as well as Rochberg's status as a great composer who has enjoyed a long career. It is Rochberg's long and illustrious life as a composer which seems to have developed in him the instinct and ability to plan a large-scale work on a primarily conceptual basis, all the while knowing that the ensuing hard work of filling out the form will be fruitful. I am fully convinced of the reality of this compositional method as it applies to the present work.

George Rochberg is clearly consumed with the interplay of evolution and recurrence in the history of music, and he uses the ample scope of *Circles of Fire* to explore these ideas. The work is concerned with contrasts: order and chaos, symmetry and asymmetry, development and repetition. We find in it extreme loudness (*Caprichos*) and quiet (*Nebulae*), great speed (*Gioco del fuoco*) and extreme patience (*Sognando*), broad melodic range (*Solemn Refrain I*) and narrow range (*Solemn Refrain V*), curt brevity (*Gargoyles*), and multi-section developmental breadth (*Caprichos*). For the musical philosophers among us, there are clear

moments of editorializing on the progress of music, as well as a final opinion of where it all ends up.

The overall organization of the fifteen movements is symmetrical, with five *Solemn Refrains* placed at balanced intervals from beginning to end. These brief movements are each composed of only one or two ideas, and limit themselves to clearly stated presentations. In the framing movements (I and XV), the two pianos have similar and symmetrical material: in the first it is presented as the initial discourse between the players, whereas in the last, the material is presented mostly simultaneously (a sort of final unity). The second and fourth (movements V and XI) are fundamentally inversions of each other, with the roles of each player defined as tune or supportive harmony (roles are reversed in the two instances). The third and central *Solemn Refrain* (movement VIII) is entirely non-symmetrical within each piano part, and the two parts insistently refuse to agree.

Symmetrically placed, again, movements II and XIV are entitled *Chiaroscuro* (darkness and light), as in the Renaissance style of painting, which was characterized by luminous colors emerging from dark backgrounds. These two movements are narrative in nature, and share much of their vocabulary, including stark juxtapositions of contrasting color and dynamics. The most distinctive difference between them is that *Chiaroscuro I* runs full-circle and concludes with its opening idea, while *Chiaroscuro II* trails off into infinity. Together with the *Solemn Refrains*, these movements provide clear structural anchors, between which the other movements are distributed in pairs.

The *Canonic Variations* (III) use a twelve-tone vocabulary which avoids the establishment of the harmonic center it would have if it were tonal. Thus 'liberated', it allows the music to concentrate on the expression of melodic shapes. The rôles of the two pianos are complementary to the extreme, presenting transposed imitation of each other. The means of variation is entirely melodic, and the theme is clearly recognizable in each of the five variations.

Gioco del fuoco (IV), one of the larger movements,

opens with an explosive section of massive pianistic sonority. In this first section, the two instruments begin by trading off expostulations, which overlap increasingly until they finally coalesce into some of the most powerful writing of the entire piece. Activity abruptly screeches to a halt, followed by two occurrences of soliloquy leading to chaos. These first chaotic sections find the two performers playing simultaneously, but without relation to each other. Another unresolved tantrum then takes us to the main body of the movement: a frenzied, Bartókian dance in 5/8 meter in which the two players are constantly reversing rôles, with frequent coordinated outbursts.

Gargoyles (VI) is a mockingly derisive twelve-tone *ronдино*, which displays the more perverse side of the chromatic vocabulary. In the first section, the two pianos have highly rhythmic but not-too-complimentary material, and their harmonic relations are mostly limited to dissonant intervals (primarily major and minor seconds). Following this we find ourselves reverting unexpectedly to Debussian lavishness, short-lived and ultimately upbraided by a manic splattering of nonsensical dissonance, careening to an abrupt end.

Nebulae (VII) provides much-needed relief from the energetic intensity of the previous few movements. It is notated without meter and note values, and the rhythmic duration of the notes is determined by the performers. Textures and sonorities are the result of free-form commentary passed on between the two pianos: through extensive use of the damper pedals, sound accumulates to form harmonies, with the intrinsic sustaining properties of the instruments determining the ebb and flow of colors. Like the preceding movement, this one approaches tonality only in its central section but, in this case, it does so through nebulous evolution, rather than shocking contrast.

Sognando (IX), with its slow and suspended dreamlike unfolding, extends the peaceful, quiet atmosphere of the preceding movement to create a haven of calm in the center of *Circles of Fire*. It pays homage to Johannes Brahms, superimposing music from the slow movement of his *Clarinet Sonata, Op. 120 No. 1*, on the

central, harmonic portion of the *Intermezzo, Op. 118 No. 4*. The material is transposed and presented simultaneously (and much more slowly than in the original) in the two instruments, creating a surreal, haunting scene and ending with a Mahler-like, drawn cadence.

The *Infinite Ricercar (X)* serves as something of an interlude between the lengthy movements which surround it. In keeping with Renaissance *ricercare* tradition, it begins with an exposition of four-voice counterpoint. Following a summary cadence, it launches into an imitative sequence which finds itself caught in an endless harmonic loop. The players are instructed to repeat the sequence 'as many times as desired'. Additionally, in the composer's words, '...it is suggested that before repetition reaches the saturation point where players and listeners lose interest simply fade out... trail off...'

The name *Caprichos (XII)* comes from the collection of drawings by Goya, which depicts the atrocities and perversities of human behavior. The longest of the movements in *Circles of Fire*, it portrays many of the darker aspects of human existence: anxiety, rage, chaos, confusion and madness. In its demand for sheer force it calls forth primitive, barbaric instincts: the outer sections culminate in vehement and brutal, tribal-like ferocity. Yet, unexpectedly, the middle section, with its long atonal melodic lines and military rhythms, comes from the Second Viennese world of brooding, pathetic sadness. In this movement, perhaps more than any other, the opposing forces of Rochberg's inspiration (Stravinsky and Schoenberg) meet each other.

The *Fuga a sei voci (XIII)* also uses borrowed material: this time the *Contrapunctus XIII* from *The Art of Fugue* by Johann Sebastian Bach. In this example Bach succeeded in writing a three-voice fugue which worked equally well in its original form (*rectus*) as upside-down (*inversus*). In *Fuga a sei voci* Rochberg takes symmetry to an extreme by superimposing Bach's *rectus* and *inversus* on each other. The pitches and rhythms are all Bach's (aside from some cadential

elaboration), but the tempo is quite fast, the dynamics are rather soft, and sparkling trills are liberally dispersed. These alterations conspire to blur the recognition of specific melodic artifacts, and to allow attention to dwell upon the contrary, symmetrical motion of the two versions, and the varying levels of chaos and reinforcement which are created as the piece moves through different keys. The result is a blurred effervescence based, perhaps, more on the simultaneous evolution of textures than on the melodic polyphony of the original material.

Circles of Fire poses a significant challenge not only to its performers but also to its audience. A seventy-minute work takes the listener on a journey throughout many landscapes, both emotional and intellectual. It is befitting that Rochberg, the composer who grappled with the issue of musical language all through his career, should be the one to offer this journey into the past and present of twentieth-century music, as the century came to a close. For the listener this is indeed more than just a 'piece': heard as a whole, *Circles of Fire* offers a window into the entire universe of Western art music, and into the darkest and lightest reaches of the human soul.

Evan Hirsch

Circles of Fire was co-commissioned for the Hirsch-Pinkas Piano Duo by the Hopkins Center at Dartmouth College, the Gammage Auditorium Series at Arizona State University Public Events, The George Bishop Lane Artist Series at the University of Vermont, the Duke University Department of Music's series, Encounters With the Music of Our Time (with support from the Duke University Institute of the Arts), and the Penn Contemporary Music at the University of Pennsylvania Department of Music (with support from the Musical Fund Society of Philadelphia).

Hirsch-Pinkas Piano Duo



Photo: Robert Eddy

Since its 1992 *début* the Hirsch-Pinkas Piano Duo has presented one- and two-piano recitals to enthusiastic audiences throughout the world. Sally Pinkas and Evan Hirsch, each an active soloist, bring to their collaborations virtuosity, enthusiasm, and striking warmth. Dedicated to the exploration of contemporary music, their repertoire includes rarely-heard works such as Messiaen's *Visions de l'amen* and Milhaud's *La création du monde*. Equally at ease with the standard repertoire, the Duo's offerings range from Byrd to Mozart and Rachmaninov, and include many works especially arranged by Hirsch. The Hirsch-Pinkas Duo's recordings of music by Daniel Pinkham, Peter Child and Thomas Oboe Lee are available on the Arsis and Albany labels. Their five-volume compilation of the complete piano works by George Rochberg (Naxos) is the culmination of their special friendship with the late composer, whose epic *Circles of Fire* for two pianos was commissioned for, and given its première by Pinkas and Hirsch.

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Playing
Time:
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Hirsch-Pinkas Piano Duo

Evan Hirsch and Sally Pinkas, Pianos

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This recording was made possible with generous support from the Hopkins Center, and the Dean of Faculty Office at Dartmouth College.

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