



AMERICAN CLASSICS



GEORGE ROCHBERG

Piano Music • 2

Twelve Bagatelles • Three Elegiac Pieces • Sonata Seria

Evan Hirsch, Piano



George
ROCHBERG
(1918-2005)

Piano Music • 2

Twelve Bagatelles (1952) 14:34

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| ① No. 1. Drammaticamente e con un tempo libero | 1:10 |
| ② No. 2. Scherzoso e tempo giusto | 0:30 |
| ③ No. 3. Con brio | 0:38 |
| ④ No. 4. Tempo di Marcia | 0:54 |
| ⑤ No. 5. Quasi parlando | 2:14 |
| ⑥ No. 6. Satirico | 0:54 |
| ⑦ No. 7. Teneramente e liricamente | 2:20 |
| ⑧ No. 8. Giocosso | 0:41 |
| ⑨ No. 9. Intenso, con un sentimento di destino | 2:00 |
| ⑩ No. 10. — | 1:05 |
| ⑪ No. 11. Con moto, passionamente | 0:51 |
| ⑫ No. 12. Burlesca | 1:16 |

Three Elegiac Pieces (1945-98) 22:24

- | | |
|---|------|
| ⑬ No. 1. Molto cantabile e flessibile (1947, rev. 1998) | 8:42 |
| ⑭ No. 2. Poco adagio (1945, rev. 1998) | 5:26 |
| ⑮ No. 3. Adagio – Grave – Sorrowing (1998) | 8:16 |

Sonata Seria (1948-98) 19:16

- | | |
|---|------|
| ⑯ I. Vigoroso | 6:34 |
| ⑰ II. Poco andante con espressione e flessibilità | 6:44 |
| ⑱ III. Giocosso ma non troppo | 5:58 |

George Rochberg (1918-2005)

Piano Music • 2

Twelve Bagatelles (1952)

Three Elegiac Pieces (1945-98)

Sonata Seria (1948-98)

Throughout George Rochberg's long career, piano compositions have held a prominent position. They figure among his earliest published works (*Variations on an Original Theme* for piano solo, 1941) and his latest (*Circles of Fire* for two pianos, 1996-97). With this release, we visit both extremes: the *Sonata Seria* and the first two *Elegiac Pieces* were begun in the 1940s and revised in 1998. The last of the elegies was composed in 1998, making it the last piano work which George Rochberg wrote.

As with his music in general, these works run the gamut of vocabulary and expression. The *Bagatelles* are purely twelve-tone pieces, and the *Sonata Seria* is, as the composer described, 'on the very fringe of tonality'. The *Three Elegiac Pieces* progress from mid-Romantic harmony in the first, through colorful, jazz-like progressions in the second, to a near-abandonment of organized tonality in the third.

Once, in a discussion with George Rochberg, I drew a parallel between the *Twelve Bagatelles* and Arnold Schoenberg's *Sechs kleine Klavierstücke*, Op. 19. In short order, I met with strong objection, with the younger composer contending that his works were *lyric* pieces, whereas Schoenberg's were *color* pieces. Notwithstanding the languid lyricism in Op. 19, I have come to see how this is so: despite their brevity (only four of them exceed one minute in duration), each bagatelle is a complete and fully evolved story.

The task of writing beautiful and compelling serial music is one which has challenged and frustrated many twentieth-century composers. The blandness of palette, which results from equal representation of all twelve chromatic pitches, can conspire with the rigid ordering of the tone-row to produce music which gives listeners little to grasp. As a means of building palpability into

his melodic writing ('presence', as he called it), Rochberg structures his rows very carefully, giving obvious thought to the sequence of intervals which is presented with each row. He then exercises considerable control over the degree to which the row is exhibited, with the emotional nature of the particular piece being, perhaps, the most important factor in that determination.

The titles are poignantly descriptive, but a little added information is of use. The first three are expostulatory, with ascending intervals marking the bold opening of each. Next is a humorous march (which came fully to light when, in a rehearsal session, the composer leaned over and sang in my ear: 'You're in the army now...'). Numbers five and seven are both soliloquies, the former a bit more troubled than the latter. The sixth is a perversely facetious blustering, pointing out the angular dissonance which can be produced in a twelve-tone world. Number eight, the shortest, is a brief waltz, bringing back the ascending idea of the first few pieces. The ninth is the Word of God or, at least, of an authoritarian sort of person. Ten, which bears no title, is a waltz as well. Eleven is a desperately troubled narrative, accompanied by a chaotically frantic left hand. The last is a cha-cha-cha, winking farewell.

Though they are discrete works, begun at different times, the *Three Elegiac Pieces* form a distinct set, with a clear emotional progression. In the score, each is preceded by a quotation which is of assistance in appreciating the emotional context of the piece.

The first is in strict A – B – A – B form (or, more correctly, A – B – A' – B'), as repeats are ornamented). The text is as follows:

C'era una volta
Un re e una regina
La regina morì
E la storia finì

*(Once upon a time
There was a king and queen
The queen died
And the story ended)*

With its rich figuration and *legato* melody, the opening section projects, in a way, the calm and simple beauty of the aforementioned queen. The alternate section is a regal and stately funeral march which, while doing its best to maintain control, cannot help but erupt in paroxysms of anguish.

The second is an elegy for a young person and is, in fact, preceded by a verse written by the composer's son, who died in his early twenties:

The clock turns
and casts up the minutes of life

I breathe and deny
for now

The fate that is no end
But circular.

Paul Rochberg

Inevitable renewal, implied in the text, is exemplified in the use of whole-tone progressions (which divide the twelve chromatic pitches into equal sections) and circle-of-fifth progressions (which do the same, albeit in a different order): there is no overriding tonal center and, guided by abundant sequences, the focus constantly and elusively shifts – reborn in various keys, and ending elsewhere than whence it began.

Unlike the previous two, which had their beginnings in the 1940s, the third *Elegiac Piece* was completed at the very end of the century. In both spirit and actuality, it is the work of an older man: deliberate, brooding, and fearsome. Its vocabulary is irrespective of pre-established tonal relationships. Anguish is constant, in keeping with the text:

...but I am bound
Upon a wheel of fire, that mine own tears
Do scald like molten lead.

Shakespeare: *King Lear*

As with the second elegy, there is an inevitable circularity but, in this case, it is without hope.

The *Sonata Seria* was originally written in 1948. In the mid-1950s it was heavily revised and, in 1998, finally published, having been largely restored to its original form. It is a compositional *tour de force*, employing an extremely dense chromatic vocabulary and clearly presented traditional forms. As the name implies, it is a grave and serious work, overpowering in its intensity, and leaving very little room for arbitration.

The first movement is in sonata form. It is clearly in C (neither major nor minor), moves to G (more diminished than anything), and returns firmly to the home key by the end, having spent substantial time visiting D, the secondary dominant. It is thematically clear, in a traditional way, with harmonic and thematic structural elements closely allied. To my perception, it resembles Beethoven's early works in its overall structure and proportion as well as in its rigid motivic fidelity.

The second movement is a freely flowing two-voice canon. It lies in strong contrast to the outer movements both in its lack of angularity and in its constant two-voice texture. According to the composer, the first revision integrated additional harmonizing voices in an effort to thicken the texture. This final version returns to the barer simplicity of the pure counterpoint.

The final movement is a furious three-voice fugue. The subject baldly and insistently presents minor thirds: intervals which were largely unadvertised in the motivic material of the previous two movements. The two large outer sections are of roughly equal size, and are divided by sixteen bars of slow and brooding material which offer – but only slightly – a bit of elaboration upon the original minor-third motif.

Evan Hirsch

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Evan Hirsch performs internationally as both recitalist and chamber player. Although his repertoire ranges from Baroque to Contemporary, he is especially committed to the performance of the music of our time. He has premiered and recorded works of George Rochberg, Peter Child, Thomas Oboe Lee, Daniel Pinkham, and Martin Pearlman, to name a few. His recordings can be found on the New Albion, Arsis and Gasparo labels. Mr. Hirsch travels widely as part of the Hirsch-Pinkas piano duo (with his wife, Sally Pinkas). Highlights of their recent seasons included tours of Italy, Bulgaria, France and China. He holds a Bachelor of Fine Arts from SUNY Purchase and a Master of Music from New England Conservatory. In addition to teaching piano and chamber music at Brandeis University, he has been on the Adult Education faculty at the New England Conservatory, and taught at Dartmouth College as a Visiting Professor on several occasions, most recently in 2007.

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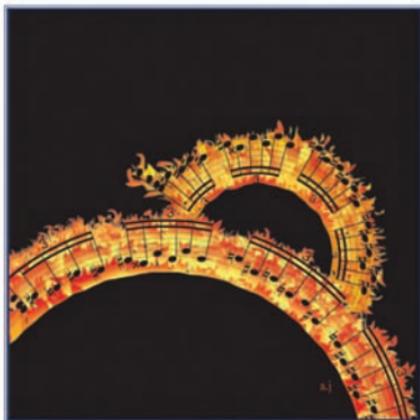
AMERICAN CLASSICS



GEORGE ROCHBERG

Piano Music • 1
Circles of Fire

Hirsch-Pinkas Piano Duo



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Playing
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1-12 **Twelve Bagatelles**
(1952) **14:34**

13-15 **Three Elegiac Pieces**
(1945-98) **22:24**

16-18 **Sonata Seria**
(1948-98) **19:16**

Evan Hirsch, Piano

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Producer and engineer: Joel Gordon

Assistant producer and engineer: Toby Mountain

Piano technician: Daniel Dover

Booklet notes: Evan Hirsch

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Compositions for piano have held a prominent position throughout George Rochberg's long career. The earliest works on this recording, the *Twelve Bagatelles*, are fully-formed lyrical pieces each of which, despite its brevity, is a complete and fully evolved story. His *Three Elegiac Pieces* comprise a distinct set with a clear emotional progression. *Sonata Seria* (composed in 1948, revised during the mid-1950s and published in 1998) is an overpoweringly intense *tour de force*. Rochberg's *Circles of Fire* can be heard on Naxos 8.559631.

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