

The Reconstruction of George Rochberg's Violin Concerto

by Christopher Lyndon-Gee

Rochberg's Violin Concerto, premiered on April 4, 5 and 6, 1975¹, has been one of his most frequently performed works. It is also a representative example of the synthesis of his free atonal style that he characterizes as "hard romanticism," with a more lyrical, elegiac, "tonal" manner; indeed, it is this opposition that primarily articulates the dramatic structure of this powerful work. The Concerto was commissioned in 1974 by the Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra at the instigation of the violinist Isaac Stern, and is inscribed in memory of Donald Steinfirst, a well-known critic for the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, the newspaper that provided the bulk of the commissioning funds. In the two years following its premiere season, it received some forty-seven performances, all with Stern as soloist, that were almost universally received with considerable enthusiasm by contemporary critics.²

Stern performed the score uncut at least seven times in 1975, but it was subsequent to the sold-out Carnegie Hall performance of April 14, 1975, (ten days after its premiere in Pittsburgh) that he progressively requested a series of changes that resulted in the "established" version of the work that we shall refer to as the "1976 Final Revision." Stern's assertion – which Rochberg characterizes as having been "tactful" and "diplomatic" – was that, at fifty-plus minutes, the work was "too long and taxing, both for the violinist and for the audience."³ In 1977, an extensively cut version of the work was recorded by Stern and the Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra under André Previn⁴, establishing a "definitive" public form for the work that went unchallenged for twenty-five years.⁵

In late 2000, I contracted with HNH International to record the composer's complete orchestral music for the Naxos compact disc label.⁶ Naturally, for such an enterprise, it was a priority to establish the best possible texts for the works. I had long been aware that the Violin Concerto had been subject to a series of revisions, largely at Isaac Stern's instigation. Indeed, the composer Stephen Jaffe, who had been a student of Rochberg's at the time of the composition and early performances of the Violin Concerto, confided that these constant changes had been a source of anguish to the composer, and that the latter felt them to constitute a "dismemberment" of his work.⁷ Rochberg is now reluctant to discuss the detail of the

circumstances behind this lengthy sequence of revisions; but it is clear that the opinions of the influential soloist, Isaac Stern, rather than compositional conviction, lay behind the majority of the changes.

Indeed, when in November 2000 I first proposed to Rochberg the possibility of undertaking a reconstruction of the Concerto, his reaction was one of great pleasure and excitement, consistent with the implications of Jaffe's report. It was clear that the composer had never been content with the truncated score, and welcomed an opportunity to re-establish the work as he had first conceived it.

Locating an original score required only a small amount of detective work, but it was nevertheless with surprise that I later concluded that only a single copy of the complete work apparently survives.⁸ The transparencies from which this dyeline print was made have never been found, though transparencies of the copyist's orchestral parts of the cut sections are among the materials deposited in New York⁹, having been removed from the publisher's archives in 1976. Additionally, an "intermediate" version of the score was found on the publisher's shelves, marked on its cover label "not to be used for performance," and this provided some guidance as to the processes of revision and incremental change that had taken place.

When I first saw the New York copy of the "1976 Final Revision," my eye went straight to one of its most striking features: the sequence of corrected and crossed-out dates written horizontally at the final double-bar¹⁰, which reads

[in black:] Dec.6, 1974; Newtown Square, PA.; revised April, 1975 *[in red:]* and May 1975; final revision Feb.1976 *[in indigo:]* – April 1976 [*April* crossed out in pencil, and under it "June" inserted, also in pencil].

Such a drawn-out process of revision is rare, and betrays fatigue and frustration on the part of the composer. In comparison to the 202 pages of this revised version, the "Ur-Fassung" score is 221 pages long. My first step in April 2001, therefore, was to make a rough pencil copy in short score of all the cut sections, which I promptly mailed to Rochberg. His response was immediate and unequivocal: "Put it all back!"¹¹

However, restoration of the "original" version of the score was by no means a straightforward matter of simply reverting wholesale to the work in its earliest extant form. Certain of the changes introduced belong to the category of a composer's normal rethinkings subsequent to a first, or first series of performances, comparable to Mahler's well-known adjustments – even on scores already engraved – following the premieres of his symphonies.

This category of revisions includes, for instance, the addition to the final two measures of the first movement of the artificial harmonic *b*⁵ in the solo violin part (*Example 1*). Such an alteration (which the manuscript shows twice rethought before reaching its final form) constitutes so clear a strengthening of the concluding cadence of the phrase that it barely required consultation with the composer to justify its retention.

Handwritten musical score for George Rochberg's Violin Concerto, page 31. The score is written on multiple staves for various instruments including Flutes (Fl.), Clarinets (Cl.), Bassoon (Bass.), Horns (Hr.), Trumpets (Tp.), Violins (V.1, V.2), Violas (Va.), Cellos (C.), and Double Basses (B.). The score includes dynamic markings such as *pp*, *pp, chiaro*, and *niente*, and performance instructions like *Lunga* and *Take Cl. 30*. There are several handwritten annotations and circled areas. One large circle encloses the Violin I and II staves with the word *Sord.* written inside. Another circle encloses a section of the Violin I staff with the text *- Artificial harmon.* and a diagram of a violin's fingerboard showing the placement of the left hand fingers. The bottom left corner features the logo for *AL ROTE FILADELPHIA, PENNA.* and the bottom right corner has a small number *31*.

Example 1: George Rochberg, Violin Concerto (1974, rev. 1975–76, rev. 2001), “1976 Final Revision,” p. 31 (Music Division, The New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, Astor, Lenox and Tilden Foundations).

Other changes introduced in the “1976 Final Revision” fell into four main categories, instances of which follow:

1. Outright cuts.
2. Transfer of original solo violin material to the orchestra.
3. Transfer of orchestral material to the soloist.
4. Reduction of quadruple or triple stops.

1. The most important single restoration of a vicious cut concerned an initial seventy-two measures of slow introduction to the fifth movement Finale, whose structural integrity had been seriously dislocated by this excision. The thematic material removed appears in this form in only one other place in the work: some forty minutes earlier, at the mid-point of the first movement (in fact, this theme is simply a well-disguised augmentation

The image displays a handwritten musical score for George Rochberg's Violin Concerto. It is divided into two main sections, likely representing different revisions of the work. The top section features a woodwind and brass ensemble, with parts for Trumpet (Trp), Trumpet (Trpt), and Tuba. The bottom section features string parts, including a Solo Violin (Vln Solo), Violin (Vln), Viola (Vla), and Cello/Double Bass (C). The score is written in a complex, multi-measure rest system, with various dynamics and articulations. The top section includes markings such as 'f ma leggiero' and 'f'. The bottom section includes markings such as 'Pizz.' and 'ff'. The score is handwritten and shows signs of being a working draft or a specific revision.

Example 2: George Rochberg, Violin Concerto (1974, rev. 1975–76, rev. 2001), “Original Version,” p. 169, detail (Music Division, The New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, Astor, Lenox and Tilden Foundations).

of the opening motif). Stern preferred to begin the Finale with the arching solo violin gesture that dramatically opens the entire work, rather than allowing the long-delayed return of this motif to grow out of the harmonically restless *tutti* orchestral material. The Brucknerian “reversed recapitulation” thus lost caused a fundamental change in the nature of the Finale, which resulted not merely ill-proportioned for lack of the counterbalance of this long introduction, but also failed to prepare the way for the completely new, musing triplet material in the solo violin that ends the work, drawing together its diverse thematic strands.

Other restored cut passages were of lesser dimensions, ranging between three and eighteen measures, but scarcely less important to matters of balance and structural proportion. In two cases, these involved the three-fold repetition of an imitative phrase, reduced to a prosaic two-fold repetition untypical of Rochberg’s syntax.

2. *Example 2* shows the “Original Version” score of a passage from the central section of the fourth movement, Intermezzo B. In *Example 3*, the same passage (together with subsequent cut marks) from the “1976 Final



Example 3: George Rochberg, Violin Concerto (1974, rev. 1975–76, rev. 2001), “1976 Final Revision,” p. 165, detail (Music Division, The New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, Astor, Lenox and Tilden Foundations).

Revision" shows the solo violin's thirty-second notes reallocated to the second violins of the orchestra, *divisi* and in octaves, and the Tchaikovskian unison of the *tutti* strings thinned with the violas reallocated an octave higher. There are two possible explanations for this 1975/76 rewriting: balance/audibility of the solo violin's running notes; and the possibility of the soloist having to "scramble" to retake the sixteenth-note phrase in the last bar of this example. The 2002 concert and recording, which restored the thirty-second notes to the solo violin, revealed that neither concern posed any problem in performance.

3. The "1976 Final Revision" shows a number of instances in which the opposite procedure was adopted, reassigning the orchestral first violin part to the soloist – page 169 of the 1976 score is one such instance. Generally, this was done for reasons of clarity of thematic resolution, usually at cadential moments. Several changes of this nature were retained.

4. Finally, Isaac Stern had remarked to George Rochberg early in the rehearsal process that he did "not like all these broken chords," to which Rochberg retorted, "but you love Bach!" Many of the quadruple stops in the lengthy cadenza passages show deletion of one, sometimes two notes in the 1976 score. The superb British violinist Peter Sheppard Skærved demonstrated, in the 2002 performance, that this writing was not merely playable, but essential to the polyphonic nature of the complex thematic argument of the work.

Thus, the "Definitive 2002" version of the Concerto for Violin and Orchestra represents a conflation of the "Ur-Fassung," and the "1976 Final Revision." Extensive collaboration with the composer and that risky musicological enterprise, judgement, were also necessary to arrive at a score that fulfils the composer's wishes without compromise. The initial result was a concert performance in the presence of the composer, by Peter Sheppard Skærved with the Radio Symphony Orchestra, Saarbrücken, conducted by the present writer, on March 17, 2002, broadcast live by German radio. This was followed by a studio recording for compact disc made between 16 and 18 April, 2002.¹²

George Rochberg has unreservedly stated that the restored full-length version of his Concerto is the only version that he now wishes to be performed, and that he is "joyous and totally convinced" by the restoration.¹³ The "1976 Final Revision" is now withdrawn¹⁴, and his publishers have new performance materials, full score and piano reduction in preparation, drawn from the conductor's materials used in the March–April 2002 performance and recording.

¹ By the Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra with Isaac Stern, solo violin, and Donald Johanos, conductor.

² A listing of the majority of the contemporary reviews and feature articles can be found in Joan DeVee Dixon, *George Rochberg: A Bio-Bibliographic Guide to his Life and Works*, Stuyvesant, N.Y.: Pendragon Press, 1992, pp. 486–99.

³ George Rochberg, private communication to the author, November 14, 2000.

⁴ Released by Columbia Masterworks in 1979, as a 12-inch, 33-1/3 rpm LP, catalogue number M-35149; later reissued on CD by Sony Classical ("Isaac Stern: A Life in Music," vol. 12, SMK 64 505, 1995). In this form, the work's duration is 37'43".

⁵ A piano reduction by Stephen Hartke conforming to this version was published by Theodore Presser Company (Bryn Mawr, 1977; No. 414-41111). The performing materials available for rental were likewise adjusted and earlier copies destroyed.

⁶ Four discs of a planned series of eleven have been completed at the date of writing.

⁷ Stephen Jaffe, conversation with the author, November 10, 2000.

⁸ NYPL, JPB 86-18 No. 72, 221 loose pages of holograph score in the composer's hand, printed as publisher's dyeline from transparency masters. This score is part of a group of documents on Rochberg housed at the New York Public Library which, together with a small early archive held at the Library of Congress valuably complements the George Rochberg Collection at the Paul Sacher Foundation. I wish to express my thanks to George Boziwick, Curator of American Music Manuscripts, New York Public Library, for his generous assistance.

⁹ NYPL, JPB 86-18 No. 74.

¹⁰ Page 202 of the "1976 Final Revision" holograph; dyeline copy, 202 loose pages, NYPL JPB 82-58.

¹¹ George Rochberg, letter to the author, April 2001. Due to the theft of a briefcase on November 14, 2001, this letter is unfortunately lost, and no photocopy was ever made. Without hesitation, in conversation as recently as November 29, 2003, the composer concurred in this recollection of his precise words on that occasion.

¹² The recording is scheduled for commercial release in March 2004 (Naxos American Classics 8.225129). In its restored, complete form, and at tempi that met with the approval of the composer, in whose presence final rehearsals took place, the work's duration is 51'41", i.e. fourteen minutes longer than the 1977 recording.

¹³ George Rochberg, private communication to the author, February 7, 2003.

¹⁴ In a telephone conversation of April 23, 2003 with the author, Rochberg stated, "under no circumstances can the Stern version ever be performed again."