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Sam Feinstein, Group '55, and Midcentury Abstraction in Philadelphia
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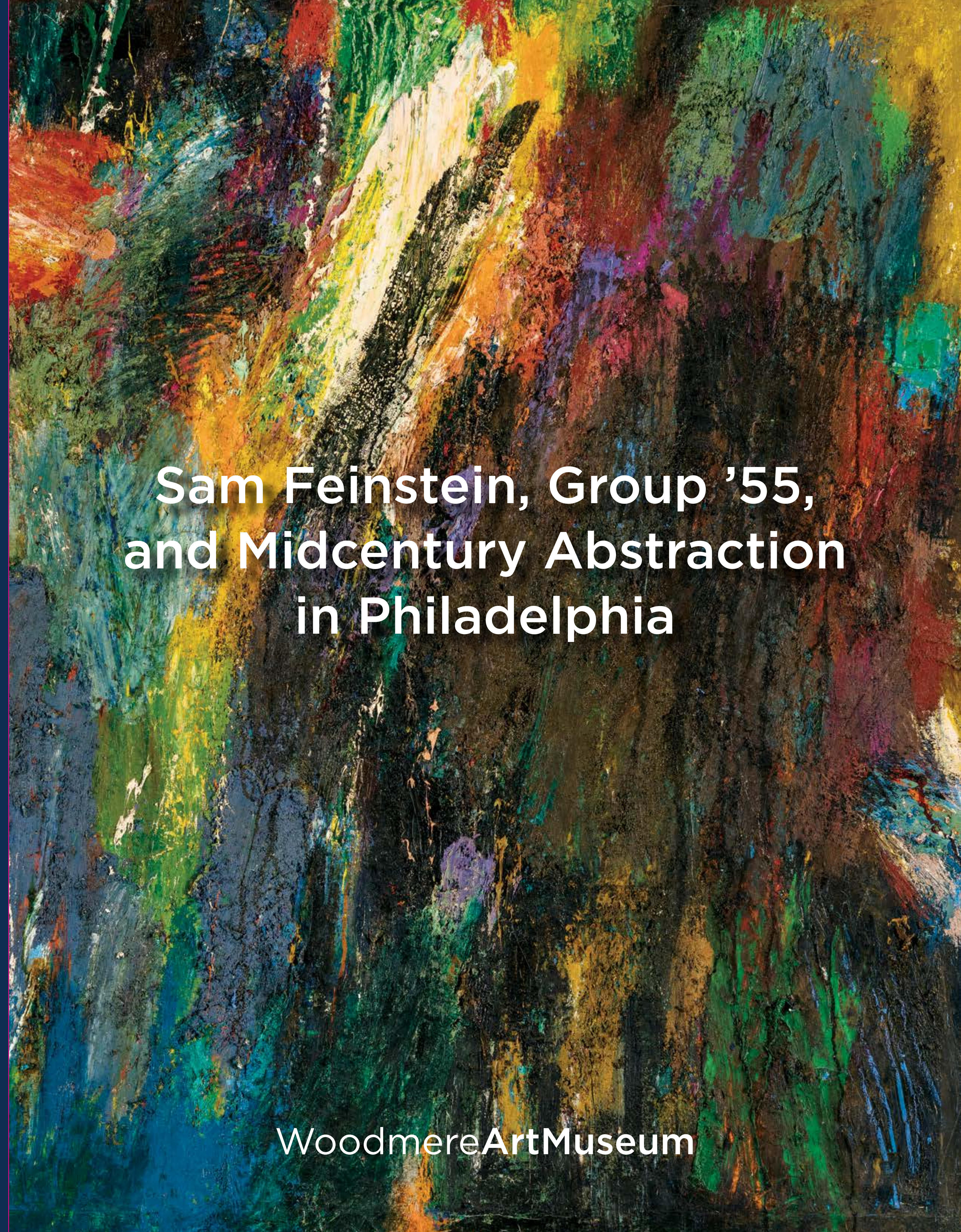

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Front cover: **Pieta I** (detail of Fig. 6), 1956, by Sam Feinstein (Samuel L. Feinstein Trust)

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EXHIBITIONS

Sam Feinstein: The Early Years

September 26, 2020–January 24, 2021
at Springside Chestnut Hill Academy

Group ’55 and Midcentury Abstraction in Philadelphia

September 26, 2020–January 24, 2021
at Woodmere Art Museum

Sam Feinstein: Immersive Abstraction

July 24, 2020–January 24, 2021
at Woodmere Art Museum

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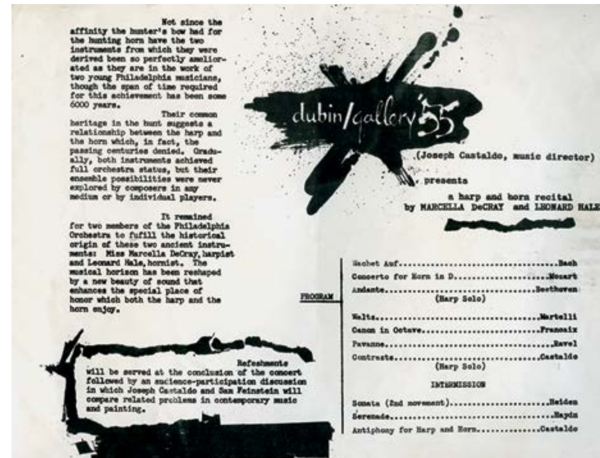
THE COMPOSERS OF GROUP ’55

THOMAS PATTESON

In music, as in other arts, the period after World War II was one of dizzying possibility. Musicians of all stripes shared the feeling, in the words of Italian philosopher Antonio Gramsci, that “the old is dying, and the new cannot be born.”[1] In these extreme conditions, the search for orientation was paramount, for the audiences encountering bewildering new art forms as well as the artists creating them.

Although Group ’55 was led by painters, three composers numbered among its members: Joseph Castaldo, George Rochberg, and Vincent Persichetti. For these men, the group offered a public platform to foster the understanding of contemporary music, seek common ground with artists working in other mediums, and grapple with the challenge of bringing music “up to date” with the modern age. And while they were young and relatively unknown in the 1950s, all went on to have significant careers not only as creative artists, but also as teachers, administrators, and public figures.

Born in New York to Italian immigrants, Castaldo moved to Philadelphia in the early 1950s to take a teaching position at the Philadelphia Musical Academy. Castaldo was deeply involved in Group ’55’s operations and served briefly as music director of Gallery ’55, where he curated performances of his own and others’ music. His work from this period can be heard in the 1956 composition *Contrasts*, a series of six short études for the harp based on Persichetti’s hymn “Purer Than Purest Pure,” which set to music a poem by e. e. Cummings. The piece gradually shifts from the shimmering Debussyesque harmonies of the earlier movements



Not since the affinity the hunter's bow had for the hunting horn have the two instruments from which they were derived been so perfectly amelior-ated as they are in the work of two young Philadelphia musicians, though the span of time required for this achievement has been some 6000 years.

Their common heritage in the hunt suggests a relationship between the harp and the horn which, in fact, the passing centuries denied. Gradu-ally, both instruments achieved full orchestra status, but their ensemble possibilities were never explored by composers in any medium or by individual players.

It remained for two members of the Philadelphia Orchestra to fufill the historical origin of these two ancient instru-ments: Miss Marcella DeCray, harpist and Leonard Hale, hornist. The musical horizon has been reshaped by a new beauty of sound that enhances the special place of honor which both the harp and the horn enjoy.

dubin/gallery ’55

(Joseph Castaldo, music director)

presents

a harp and horn recital
by MARCELLA DeCRAY and LEONARD HALE

PROGRAM

Wachet Auf..........Bach
Concerto for Horn in D..........Mozart
Andante..........Beethoven
(Harp Solo)

Waltz..........Martelli
Canon in Octave..........Francaix
Pavanne..........Ravel
Contrasts..........Castaldo
(Harp Solo)

INTERMISSION

Sonata (2nd movement)..........Heiden
Serenade..........Haydn
Antiphony for Harp and Horn..........Castaldo

Refreshments will be served at the conclusion of the concert followed by an audience-participation discussion in which Joseph Castaldo and Sam Feinstein will compare related problems in contemporary music and painting.

Figure 75. Program for Group ’55 Harp and Horn Recital (Samuel L. Feinstein Trust)

to the dissonant spareness of the end. Beyond describing a general feature of the music, its title is typical of modern composers’ avoidance of generic labels such as symphony or sonata and the overly descriptive titles of Romantic program music, which led to the midcentury proliferation of titles consisting of isolated nouns and adjectives.

Castaldo and Group ’55 founder Sam Feinstein shared an interest in aesthetics and engaged in an ongoing conversation about the implications of abstraction for painting and music. Feinstein, like many other visual artists of the time, believed that abstract art captured a higher, purely formal truth that transcended painting’s traditional function of representing the world as it appears to our everyday perception. Accordingly, the preeminence of abstraction—setting aside the many fractious debates about what the term could mean—was taken almost as an article of faith by modern artists. Among musicians, however, there was much less consensus about the way forward; no single approach possessed the talismanic power of abstraction, in part because music’s dominant paradigm—its counterpart to representation in the visual arts—was less clear. Since European Romanticism emerged in the early nineteenth century, artists and aestheticians had celebrated instrumental music as the abstract medium par excellence, one whose tenuous link to the empirical world gave free rein to the auditor’s imagination. (Indeed, in the early twentieth century, instrumental music was widely held up by painters such as Mondrian, Klee, and Kandinsky as a model for nonrepresentational art.) But many also ascribed to music a function that could be called “psychomimetic,” arguing that its proper aim was the imitation or “expression” not of outward appearances (as was the case for painting) but of inward states of being. Many twentieth-century composers rebelled against this idea; while few rejected the ideal of expression outright, they sought to escape the familiar orbit of emotional representation as it had been formalized in the aesthetic theory of the so-called common practice period (roughly 1650–1900).

Attempting to outline a unified notion of abstraction that could encompass modern painting and modern music, Castaldo argued that both must be seen as fundamentally presentational rather than representational. He pointed out that modern art should be called not “abstract” but “concrete,” because it sought to treat color, shape, tone, and timbre as objects of attention rather than signs or symbols of something else. Thus, from different directions, Feinstein and Castaldo each arrived at an aesthetic position that could be very loosely labeled “formalist.” Painters took as their model so-called absolute music (exemplified in particular by genres such as the symphony and string quartet), while composers pursued musical equivalents to the unfettered play of line and color found in modern visual art.[2] Ultimately, however, formalist art fled into the arms of that which it had hoped to escape. In eschewing representation and seeking a state of aesthetic self-sufficiency—in Castaldo’s words, “an independent reality, analogous to, rather than an imitation of, nature”—modern art ironically aspired to the condition of nature itself.[3]

While the relationship between music and painting loomed large for the composers of Group ’55, even more pressing was the need to reconnect with international currents in the wake of the Great Depression and World War II. This feeling was perhaps especially intense for composers in Philadelphia, who chafed at the city’s somewhat provincial artistic culture. Enthusiasts of modern music could point to Leopold Stokowski, conductor of the Philadelphia Orchestra from 1912 to 1940 who led the American premieres of works by modernist composers such as Schoenberg, Shostakovich, and Varèse, but by the 1950s they might reasonably have felt that the action was elsewhere.

The question of the state of the musical arts was addressed by Rochberg in the first Group ’55 forum, in January 1956. Born in Paterson, New Jersey, he attended the Mannes School of Music, in New York. After serving in the military during World War II, he moved to Philadelphia, where he studied at the Curtis Institute of Music and the University of Pennsylvania (Penn), and later taught at Curtis. Among the composers associated with Group ’55, Rochberg was uniquely well informed about recent developments in Europe, having traveled to Italy on

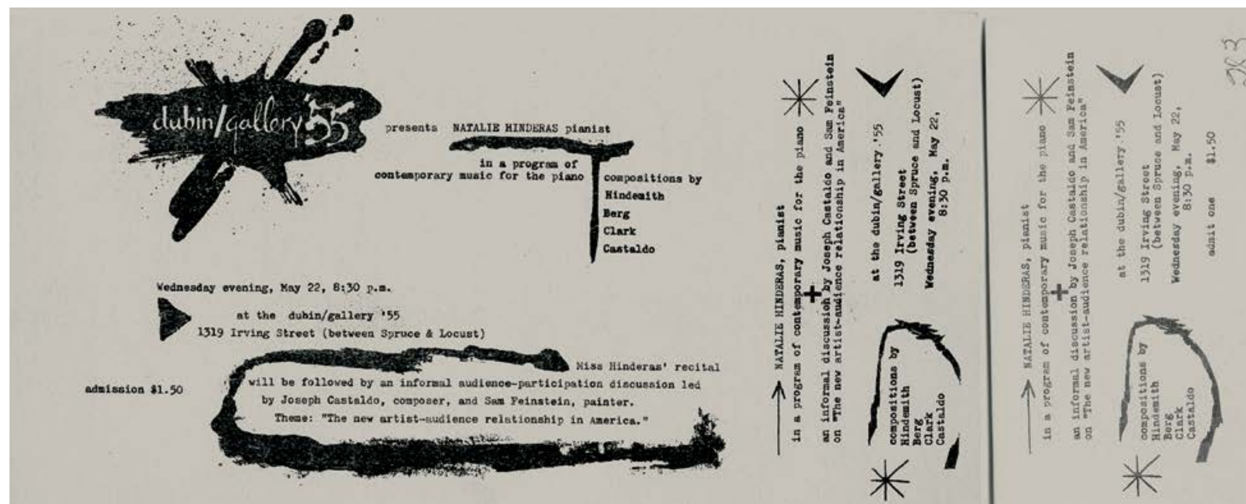


FIGURE 76. Flyer and ticket for Natalie Hinderas concert (Samuel L. Feinstein Trust)

a Fulbright scholarship in 1950, where he studied under composer Luigi Dallapiccola. His presentation at the 1956 forum was something of a crash course in musical developments since 1945 in which he sought to convey both the weight of the musical past—"the nineteenth century is still very much with us," he noted—and a typically modernist sense of unlimited possibility.

The dominant international style in music in the 1930s and 1940s had been neoclassicism, as composers such as Stravinsky, Hindemith, and Prokofiev, sought to temper the unruly energies unleashed at the turn of the century with the reintroduction of pre-Romantic forms such as the fugue, the sonata, and the concerto. (While neoclassicism in painting looks back to Greco-Roman antiquity, neoclassicism in music seeks its models in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.) Although neoclassical composers' invocations of the musical past were tinged with varying degrees of ironic distance, the movement was attacked by critics as a refutation of modernity. In line with this view, Rochberg's historical survey framed the first half of the twentieth century as a confrontation between neoclassical nostalgia and the progressive atonal movement led by Schoenberg. (This polemical opposition of "Schoenberg and progress" versus "Stravinsky and restoration" had been advanced by Theodor Adorno in his 1949 book *Philosophy of New Music*, whose argumentation Rochberg likely encountered in Europe.) Noting that Stravinsky himself had recently adopted the twelve-tone technique, Rochberg issued the verdict that "Schoenberg has won out," and, with the demise of neoclassicism presented as a fait accompli, he sketched three distinct yet closely related paths out of the postwar impasse.

For many composers in the 1950s, the way forward was serialism, a technique developed by Luigi Nono, Karlheinz Stockhausen, and Pierre Boulez in Europe and by Milton Babbitt in the United States. Serialism was an extension of the twelve-tone technique

FIGURE 77. Natalie Hinderas (left) and Joseph Castaldo (standing) with unidentified woman at piano, date unknown (Natalie Hinderas Collection, Charles L. Blockson Afro-American Collection, Temple University Libraries, Philadelphia) Photographer unknown

developed by Schoenberg in the 1920s, in which a composition was based on a twelve-tone row, or series—a pre-compositional ordering of the twelve pitches of the octave—that was manipulated to generate the melodic and harmonic structure of the piece. (Because the twelve-tone row requires all pitches to appear with equal frequency, twelve-tone music tends strongly toward atonality; however, the two terms are not synonymous.) The powerful allure of serialism after 1945 was twofold: it freed composers from what many felt to be the inescapable clichés of the major and minor scales of tonal music, and it seemed to guarantee structural coherence through the derivation of all the musical material from a single source, almost like a magic formula. Rochberg's music of the 1950s weds the chromatic richness of atonal music with a sweeping lyricism that the work of Schoenberg and his school rarely possessed. His Symphony No. 2 (1955–56), the first twelve-tone symphony by an American composer, is a bracing introduction to serial music in a broadly traditionalist idiom.

Another alternative was offered by John Cage and the younger composers in his circle in New York. Drawing on the teachings of Zen Buddhism, Cage used chance methods to remove his ego from the creative process and enjoined composers to "let sounds be themselves rather than vehicles for man-made theories or expressions of human sentiments."[4] With its luminous silences and radical discontinuities, the music of the so-called New York School has often been viewed as a parallel to the Abstract Expressionism that then dominated the visual arts. Although Cage's approach is often seen as the antithesis of serialism, the music that resulted from these two approaches was often startlingly similar. Both the serial composers and the Cage circle were entranced by the music of Schoenberg's pupil Anton Webern—the former by the tightness of its compositional logic, the latter by its spaciousness and unpredictability.

Finally, the new medium of electronic music, whose technological foundations were developed in the early twentieth century and became widely available after 1945, offered a way for composers to bypass conventional scores and instruments altogether and work directly with sound in a hands-on fashion. Rochberg's talk touched on the emergence of this new form in numerous centers around the world: the *elektronische Musik* of Stockhausen and Herbert Eimert in Cologne, the *musique concrète* of Pierre Schaeffer in Paris, and the manipulation of taped instrumental sounds by Otto Luening and Vladimir Ussachevsky at Columbia University in New York. While reactions

to this music tended toward the extremes of either adulation or disdain, Rochberg remained agnostic, stating flatly, "We don't know yet whether to call this music or not." Regarding changes in music technology, however, he presciently noted "indications that live music is suffering considerably from the impact of recording [and] the increased number of people who own private record collections, who prefer to stay home and listen to their own recordings rather than go to a concert and hear a recital or hear an orchestra."

Of the three composers associated with Group '55, Persichetti was the only native Philadelphian. He studied at Curtis, at the Juilliard School in New York, and at the Philadelphia Conservatory of Music, where he later taught. He appeared on a couple of discussion panels in the late 1950s but otherwise seems to have been less engaged with the group than Castaldo and Rochberg. Persichetti left the Philadelphia Conservatory upon its merger with the Philadelphia Musical Academy in 1962. The same year, he was appointed chair of the composition department at Juilliard, a post he held—commuting all the while from his native city—until his death, in 1987.[5] By virtue of his force of personality and his talent as a teacher, Persichetti was arguably the most influential of the three composers of Group '55. And while Rochberg and Castaldo explored the avant-garde extremes of midcentury music, Persichetti remained more firmly anchored in the American mainstream, as seen in compositions such as "Pageant for Wind Band" (1953), one of his many contributions to an ensemble that retains strong ties to vernacular musical styles.

After their involvement with Group '55, Rochberg and Castaldo took on significant leadership and administrative duties in addition to their creative work. Castaldo became the president of the Philadelphia Musical Academy in 1966 and used his position to invite a number of major composers to give guest lectures at the school, including Babbitt, Boulez, Cage, and Morton Feldman. While he built up Philadelphia's standing as a destination for avant-garde music, Castaldo cautioned against the tendency toward hyper-specialization and argued for a broadly humanistic approach to music education that integrated performance and composition.[6] As an administrator, he oversaw the expansion of the academy and its eventual metamorphosis into the Philadelphia College of the Performing Arts. A few years after Castaldo's retirement in 1983, a further merger created the University of the Arts, fulfilling his long-held dream of a unified arts college in the city.

Rochberg, like Persichetti and Castaldo, assumed an academic leadership role, serving for several years as chair of Penn's music department and developing its national profile by recruiting composer George Crumb and musicologist Leonard Meyer to join the faculty. He remained at Penn until 1983. As a composer, Rochberg became a figurehead in the postmodern turn of the 1970s, abandoning what he saw as the austerities of the avant-garde to embrace a broad spectrum of historical and expressive resonances, a project he dubbed *ars combinatoria*.[7] Rochberg's abandonment of modernism was all the more surprising given his earlier position as one of the most prominent twelve-tone composers in the United States.

In considering the stature and influence that these three composers would later attain in American musical life, it is remarkable that their paths should have converged during the fleeting existence of Group '55. They cannot in any sense be viewed as a unified school; they shared no collective mission on par with the championing of abstraction undertaken by Feinstein and the painters of the group. Their efforts to introduce new ideas and techniques into the conservative world of classical music would take decades to bear fruit. Still, their engagement on behalf of modern music in Philadelphia in the late 1950s is a testament to the shared vision that animated the members of Group '55, and Castaldo, Rochberg, and Persichetti carried the spirit of the group on throughout their diverse and distinguished careers.

NOTES

1 Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, ed. and trans. Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith (New York: International Publishers, 1971), 276.

2 In fact, the stance of visual arts theorists such as Clement Greenberg had been anticipated a century earlier by the Austrian music critic Eduard Hanslick, who famously argued that music fundamentally consists of nothing but "tonally moving forms." See Lee Rothfarb and Christoph Landerer, *Eduard Hanslick's "On the Musically Beautiful: A New Translation"* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018).

3 Castaldo's argument here is remarkably similar to the roughly contemporaneous statements of Pierre Schaeffer, with which he was likely not familiar. See Pierre Schaeffer, *In Search of a Concrete Music*, trans. Christine North and John Dack (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012).

4 John Cage, "Experimental Music" (1957), in *Silence* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1961), 10. Rochberg dryly noted in his 1956 talk, "This is the first time in the history of music that anyone has seriously considered leaving the progression of sounds up to chance."

5 For more on Persichetti's influential career, see Andrea Olmstead, *Vincent Persichetti: Grazioso, Grit, and Gold* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2018).

6 Joseph Castaldo, "Creativity Can End Our Musical Isolationism," *Music Educators Journal* 56, no. 3 (November 1969): 36–38.

7 A collection of Rochberg's writings can be found in *The Aesthetics of Survival: A Composer's View of Twentieth-Century Music*, rev. ed. (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2004).