

Recital: Tazaki Piano Does Rochberg Proud

By DONAL HENAHAN

THE PROBLEM of any artist is how to embrace tradition without being crushed to death by it. George Rochberg is a composer who has been snuggling up to the past with considerable success in the last decade, trying to avoid the romance that most of his contemporaries have been carrying on with doctrinaire Serialism and other styles that stress the break between this century and previous ones.

Mr. Rochberg's "Partita-Variations," a large-scale piano work that was given its New York premiere at Alice Tully Hall on Monday night by Etsuko Tazaki, continually risks its neck by playing with older musical styles but escapes alive. Mr. Rochberg's work is exceptionally pianistic as modern keyboard music goes, and Miss Tazaki carried it off marvelously and with special headlong excitement in the finale, a three-voiced fugue.

The 12 sections are aptly titled to suggest the work's links to other times: an Impromptu in a Scriabin vein, a Ballade that nodded more than casually at Chopin, and so on. There are no direct quotes, apparently, but such spirits as Schumann and Liszt hang over much of the score.

Mr. Rochberg can give a listener vertigo occasionally, by his way of slipping from century to century and

style to style. The Arabesque begins with a phrase that sharply recalls the slow movement of Mozart's final piano sonata, then takes a turn that could be a bit of embroidery out of Bellini or Chopin, and goes on to dwell on the turn in the manner that Mahler made a trademark. But there also is a Schoenbergian 12-tone Canon Nocturne and an angry Cortège in which the pedal is held down while harplike arpeggios are piled one on top the other in Henry Cowell's manner.

No musical style, in fact, is alien to Mr. Rochberg, which gives his work unusual interest, but can cause confusion in a modern audience. We are used to being shocked or bored, but not to being puzzled enjoyably by music that wants to be part of the Western tradition and is not afraid to show it.

Miss Tazaki, who commissioned the Rochberg work with a grant from the Bush Charitable Foundation, also displayed a rich, full tone and scrupulous musicianship in Beethoven's Sonata in D (Op. 10, No. 3), Ruth Crawford Seeger's Preludes Nos. 8 and 8 and Liszt's "Dante" Fantasia. She began the Beethoven a bit too fast and her impetuosity got her into passing troubles elsewhere. But, except in the Liszt, in which she handled the keyboard problems splendidly, but missed whatever poetry there is in this bombastic piece, Miss Tazaki played consistently well.