



Frederic Rzewski

by Kyle Gann

American music offers no more sharply drawn enigma than Frederic Rzewski. A student of Sessions and Babbitt and a powerful virtuoso pianist, he started out as a high-profile performer of Stockhausen. Then, in 1972, he released his first disc, featuring three minimalist works: *Coming Together*, *Attica*, and *Les Moutons des Panurge*. Well, no big surprise there; a lot of composers of that generation started out serialists and made the apostasy to minimalism. But in 1975,

Rzewski veered just as severely away from minimalism in *The People United Will Never Be Defeated*, a set of variations on a Chilean political song and as wide-ranging and dazzlingly inventive as the variations bearing the names Diabelli or Goldberg. Almost instantly, the piece entered the standard piano repertoire; and ever since Rzewski has earned comparisons to Beethoven and Liszt as a volcanic pianist-composer. And also improviser: Rzewski has scandalized audiences by improvising in the middle of

Beethoven's *Hammerklavier*, which Beethoven surely would have done as well.

Coming Together was a piece with a political text; *The People United* was based on a political song. The latter even quoted, in one variation, "The Internationale." Rzewski started talking about an aesthetic he called "humanist realism," by which he denoted "a conscious employment of techniques...designed to establish communication, rather than to alienate an audience." This definition is seductively vague; but combine it with the composer's subsequent *North American Ballads* and *De Profundis*, and you start to get the idea. The first incorporated songs of the labor movement; the latter, for speaking pianist, took all the best paragraphs from Oscar Wilde's anguished text written from Reading Gaol and intertwined them with avant-garde and theatrical textures and gestures, including having the pianist make sounds on the outside of the piano and his/her own body. The piece is a dynamite anti-homophobe manifesto, incredibly moving. It inspired me to read Wilde's "De Profundis," only to find that the rest of Wilde's rant is fairly self-pitying; Rzewski had extracted all the best lines.

In the '90s I kept trying to piece together what humanist realism meant to Rzewski. It seemed to be a willingness to employ any conceivable style or medium, within a generally avant-garde continuity, to get a political message across. But Rzewski wouldn't stay still. He started teaching in Liège in 1977, and in the European context his music became more abstract. His 1991 Piano Sonata quoted a random array of songs: "Ring Around the Rosy," "Three Blind Mice," "Give Peace a Chance," "L'homme armé," "Santa Claus Is Coming to Town." Other works seemed inscrutable, such as a set of short, atonal piano pieces called *Fogues*. More recently, he began concertizing with a massive, five-hour "piano novel" called *The Road*, in a style almost impossible to characterize in general. It's

sometimes tonal, sometimes atonal, sometimes lyrical, sometimes noisy, sometimes studded with sound effects like whistling and extraneous percussion, sometimes transparent in its meaning, sometimes utterly elusive.

Conclusions about Rzewski's musical output apply to his personality: he is determined to be unpigeonholeable. Expect him to do something, and it is guaranteed that he'll do anything but that. I once saw him give a lecture about how recordings are worthless and the only thing that matters is live performance—and then play a recording. I also heard him speak at a conference in Berlin devoted to Charles Ives. His friend Christian Wolff gave a very nice paper on his impressions of Ives's music, after which Rzewski took the podium and began, "I don't know why they invited me to this conference. I've never liked Charles Ives's music." I spent some enjoyable time with Rzewski at that conference, convincing him that I knew his output well, and was soon afterward invited to interview him onstage before a profile concert at New York's Miller Theatre. As I feared, he flatly dismissed the premise of every question I asked, with the result that I went through my 45 minutes' worth of questions in five minutes and was forced to improvise in visible discomfort. (Some sympathy was expressed for me in subsequent blog entries by people who were present.)

No harm done. It's not so much aggravating as astonishing to spend one's life as a critic, trying to hit someone who is so determined to remain a moving target. Rzewski is such a fabulous composer, with such a good ear and so many techniques at his disposal, that almost any piece is easy to characterize afterward. About his output in general, however, it is nearly impossible to say anything coherent. Composers often aver that they could write their own "Steve Reich piece" or "Philip Glass piece." But how to write a Rzewski piece? It could be almost anything. Out of

context, his movements can sound quite conservative or quite radical, in any composer's definitions of those terms. Somehow, though, the force of his personality turns them all into "Rzewski pieces."

This is particularly true of his mammoth output for piano, which may sound characteristic because of his muscular performance style rather than any musical similarities. Luckily, a few ensembles, notably *Zeitgeist* and eighth blackbird, have had the courage to commission chamber works from him, and his chamber style is a touch more consistent. Tricky, fast-moving lines in ensemble unison are common, perhaps a remaining heritage from *Les Moutons*. He orchestrates linearly and even symphonically, rather than with the saturated modernist detail, so that foreground and background are clearly drawn. *The Lost Melody* (1989) turns *Zeitgeist* in a klezmer direction, based as it is on a Yiddish song from a Pete Seeger collection. *Crusoe* (1993) has the ensemble members chant and sing a text about Robinson Crusoe amid pointillist musical fragments. Rzewski's *Pocket Symphony* (2000) for eighth blackbird is in six movements, each giving a member of the group the chance—or the obligation—to improvise. As Rzewski says in the liner-note interview,

[I]mprovisation is very important part of classical music that's something they don't teach you in school.... They call it interpretation. You know, classical musicians actually do improvise all the time, it's just that they are reading the music.... in their own way, and that's what improvisation is.

Well: there's Rzewski being contrary again. By now, what else do we expect?

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