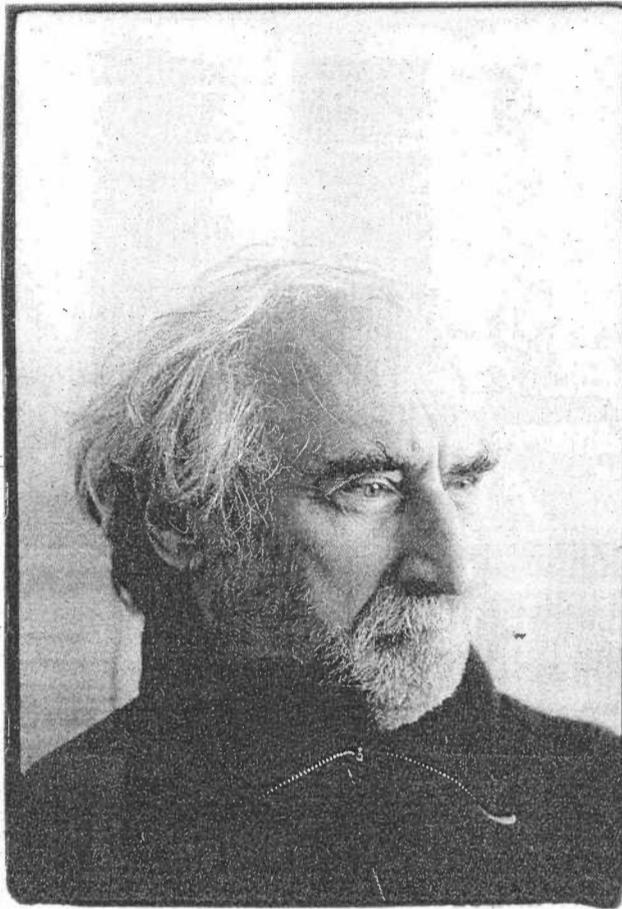


New Frederic Rzewski Discs Reveal a Thinking Person's Postmodern Music

NOT GIFT WRAPPED

BY KYLE GANN



SOMETHING OF A POSTMODERN CHARLES IVES

When Nonesuch released their 10-disc sets of Steve Reich and John Adams, I put 'em on the shelf and thought, "Well, those'll be nice to have around." By this point, after all, I think I could write my own Reich or Adams piece if I had to, their artistic trajectories have been so linear. Not so with Nonesuch's new Frederic Rzewski set, a seven-disc compilation of Rzewski's wide-ranging pianism. Write a piece in Rzewski's "style"? I wouldn't know where to start. Listening to one of his pieces, I can't even predict whether the music will be tonal or atonal, serially structured or improvised, quoting "Three Blind Mice" or roaring out revolutionary workers' songs, five measures from now. The guy darts all over the place. And I'm happy to follow.

Because no other living composer gives you such a strong impression that you're listening to him think. In that respect, as listening to these discs all in one glorious heap reveals, he's something of a postmodern-day Charles Ives. Like Ives's piano music, Rzewski's will charge through atonal abstractions, then suddenly enter the world of tonal counterpoint and play by its rules for a few measures, then calmly wander off, perhaps to bang fists on the keyboard a moment later. The music does not lack unity; the same musical motives can often be heard recurring as the kaleidoscope of styles swirls around them. There is always a thread to follow that seems strikingly analogous to a train of thought, now rushing, now hesitant, now interrupting itself to take apart what you've just heard and put it back together differently before trying yet a new direction.

Like Beethoven and Brahms, Rzewski has a flair for theme and variations, the classical genre which has historically treated style as a variable characteristic. His magnum

MICHAEL WILSON

opus in this respect, included here in a powerful new recording, is of course *The People United Will Never Be Defeated*—by now a standard of piano repertoire—but a smaller set on the politically charged folk song *Mayn Yingele* shows his skills in a subtler setting. Those already familiar with the *North American Ballads* and *The People United* will be most eager to become familiar with the first half of his great epic *The Road*, recorded here on two discs. (He's playing the entire thing live in New York in six installments, February 6 to 8 at the Kitchen, February 14 to 16 at West Park Presbyterian Church.) Truly a circuitous and winding experience, it is his most abstract music, yet playful and utterly devoid of the wispy gestures and scattered textures of academic atonalism.

Even more interesting is to hear so postmodern a mind tackle large, traditional forms like the fantasia and sonata.

Rzewski's *Fantasia* starts out in Beethovenian counterpoint before morphing into free pantonality, and the *Sonata*—nose-thumbingly, yet with a surprising sense of thematic power—revolves around the tunes "L'Homme Armé" and "Three Blind Mice." Cogent as these works are, they are dwarfed in effect next to *De Profundis*, his mercurial setting of Oscar Wilde's heart-wrenching words written from Reading Gaol. Here as elsewhere, Rzewski's wanderlust ranges beyond the piano keys to include beating on the instrument, slapping his body, and whistling. Never gimmicky in Rzewski's matter-of-fact usage, these techniques are rendered poignant by Wilde's self-searching lamentation.

Nevertheless, what distinguishes Rzewski most from Ives is his temperature; ultimately his music seems potent but chilly, and where Ives *feels*, Rzewski truly only *thinks*. Even *De Profundis* moves you via the contrast between Wilde's passion and Rzewski's clinical objectivity. There is never a pause to relish a sensuous moment, never a scintillating texture pursued to delight the listener. It is an intellectual's music, not in the knee-jerk way that term gets applied to 12-tone music, but in the sense that it can really be followed by the cognition, but not much reveled in by the senses. It is proudly independent, and not only of the listener. In these days in which composers are marketed, and become successful, by virtue of their trademark styles, it takes bullheaded courage to eschew consistency and write in whatever idiom the moment demands. Rzewski's refusal to package his wares recognizably is much of the reason his music seems so honest and thoughtful. By constantly changing course, it reminds you that he's not trying to sell you anything. ▮

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