

He writes music to play himself

BY ROBERT HICKS

Frederic Rzewski has spent a lifetime devoting himself to change. That's evident in his life as an American expatriate composer and pianist living in Belgium, pushing the juncture between art and politics to new dimensions. It's present in his combinations of speech and music, in his expansion of twelve-tone techniques, in his use of graphics notation and in his exploration of improvisation in classical music.

Strongly influenced by John Cage and David Tudor in the 1960s, Rzewski founded the legendary new music collective, Musica Electronica Viva, in Rome, pioneering electronic improvised music. And his complex and emotionally charged music in the 1970s landed him a position as a professor of composition at the Conservatoire Royal de Musique in Liege, Belgium, where he still lives. Nevertheless, Rzewski has remained a practical man at heart, one devoted to preserving tradition even amid the changes.

"I've found that the best way for a musician to make a living is by playing music, so I write for myself as a pianist, also because it's the best way of getting my music around by playing it myself," he says from his home in Belgium.

Many have labeled Rzewski as a political composer, citing his "Coming Together" and "Attica" as leftist responses to the 1971 uprising at the New York State prison at Attica. His best-known work, "The People United Will Never Be Defeated," is based on a Chilean protest song written in 1975 for pianist Ursula Oppens to bring the political unrest in Latin America to the attention of the masses.

"Politics plays a role in some, but not all of my work - usually in pieces written for specific occasions, or as reactions to specific events... It is because those ideas or those events have triggered the music act as a source of musical inspiration, through the emotions," he says.

Now at age 60, Rzewski is the subject of a birthday tribute, "Coming Together," celebrating 25 years of his piano music, at The Kitchen April 16-18. Curated by pianist Anthony de Mare, the event will feature performances by Rzewski himself as well as by many pianists who have recorded and championed his music in the past, including de Mare, Stephen Drury, Kathleen Supove and Aki Takahashi.

On Thur., April 16, Rzewski will perform the U.S. premiere of his most recent work, "The Road," consisting of four parts, including a choral piece protesting the French nuclear tests in the South Pacific, a set of 64 variations on the railroad song "900 Miles," a set of marches based on chants sung by U.S. Army draftees, and texts from Gogol's story, "The Nose."

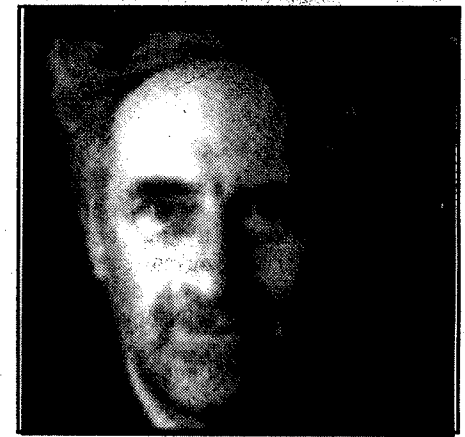
Friday night's performance will feature Stephen Drury in "The People United Will Never Be Defeated," a mammoth set of variations dealing with the Chilean dictatorship of the 1970s. Anthony de Mare will perform "Piano Piece No. 4" and "De Profundis," the latter an emotional setting of Oscar Wilde's letter written during his incarceration at Reading jail.

Saturday will focus on shorter works, including "Chain of Thought," "Kreutzer Sonata," "Agitato" from his Sonata for Piano, "Lost and Found," "A Life, Piano Piece No. 3," "Four North American

Ballads," and "The Turtle and The Crane," among others.

Rzewski has written much music for piano during his career and relatively little for orchestra, despite the acclaim he received in New York last year for his Carnegie Hall performance with the American Composers Orchestra of his piano concerto, "A Long Time Man," which used a series of variations based on a Texas chain-gang song. Theme-and-variation as explored in "The People United Will Never Be Defeated" has been a constant of clarity and advancement for him.

"I love writing for orchestra, but I am a practical man.... In the case of my music, I have come to realize that I am not writing merely for myself, but for all the piano players who might enjoy it, and who might play it better than I myself can. One of the things that attracts me to writing is the challenge of expressing ideas in a very precise way, but which also allows for a multiplicity of individual interpretations, all of which may be equally interesting and which evolve over time, thus giving the music a life of its own. Beethoven



Frederic Rzewski

understood this very well," he says.

"Variation technique is perhaps the most basic of classical compositional procedures," he adds, "and especially so in the case of keyboard music. It is also a bridge between writing and improvising, two things that interest me equally."

"Frederic Rzewski: Coming Together, A 60th Birthday Tribute celebrating 25 Years of Piano Music," at The Kitchen, 512 W. 19th St.; April 16-18, 8 p.m.; \$15, each concert, or \$25 for all three concerts. 255-5793.

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