



LIVE DATES

FREDERIC RZEWSKI The Kitchen/April 16

Politics and humor are tough sells in classical music; the politics can get so didactic that the music is squashed, and the humor can become so silly that the only level on which it can function is parody. In his solo piano performance at the Kitchen, Frederic Rzewski not only combined the two, but managed to wrangle an insanely beautiful and accessible work, *The Road: a novel for solo piano*, from them.

Rzewski has a three-decade track record of transforming fleeting political content into lasting works of art. In the early 60s, Rzewski, a virtuoso pianist, became known as an interpreter of Boulez, Stockhausen and Cage's works. By the late 60s, however, he moved to Rome, formed the loopy Musica Elettronica Viva and started writing political work inspired as much by Puerto Rican folk music as by the songs of Hanns Eisler. His *Attica* and *Coming Together*, both written in 1972 using political statements from Attica inmates, still sound good today; although the content of the work may be dated, the sheer invention and power of the music keep these works listenable. The same goes for his 1975 Salvador Allende-inspired opus *The People United Will Never Be Defeated!* While it's interesting to note that Rzewski was juiced by the formation of the Unidad Popular, the work doesn't end there. Instead, it knocks you out as a formal mathematical deconstruction/reconstruction of a simple Chilean folk song.

The Road, a work in progress, is a piano piece oddly constructed according to the nature of travel. There are four parts: *Turns*, *Tracks*, *Tramps* and *Stops*, each consisting of eight small movements. Each movement is termed a "mile." *Turns*, for example, consists of miles 1-8, *Tracks* miles 9-16 and so on. Every part is inspired by a popular song, which gets deconstructed and reinterpreted during that part: *Turns* is based on a nuclear protest song, *Tracks* is a set of variations on the railroad song "900 Miles," *Tramps* is a group of marches based on U.S. Army songs and *Stops* is inspired by the pianist's own breathing and Gogol's story "The Nose."

In the accompanying notes, Rzewski states, "I decided that I wanted to write about the idea of the road. When you turn onto a road, it's usually already there, and when you turn off it to go where you want to go, the road keeps going somewhere else. So the piece has to be long enough to virtually guarantee that nobody (except a few nuts) will listen to the whole thing...things happen for no reason at all, they're just there, like a Burma-Shave sign, or a wrecked car that appears for a moment." When this sort of nutty artistic whimsy mixes with political content, things get interesting. *The Road* quotes from just about every piano style from the past 100 years. On the European side, it's loaded with references to Debussy, Schoenberg, Satie and particularly to the free-floating chord clusters of Messiaen. On the American side, there's everything from straight blues to railroad sounds to jazz improv to marches. And it's very road-like: there are some long flat stretches, some colorful scenery, a few accidents and a traffic jam or two—you never know what's coming next. Pounding blues dissolve into modernist 12-tone rows; folk songs fracture, scramble and split only to be sewn back together again; rich, full runs up and down the length of the keyboard are suddenly displaced by sparse Feldman-like single notes.

But the real fun was Rzewski himself. Not only is he one of the most technically proficient pianists I've ever seen, but he scored a number of wild activities for the performer into *The Road*—blowing on whistles, stomping his feet, slapping his thighs, moaning, making animal sounds, breathing heavily, scratching the bottom of the piano with sheets of glass, preparing the inside of the piano and strumming the strings, humming along with the piano like Thelonious Monk, ringing bells, honking a raft of squeeze toys and reciting Gogol in Russian. What could have been a dull piano recital ended up a three-ring circus.

A few years ago I remember sitting through an eight-hour Morton Feldman marathon. The first hour or two were really tough, but somewhere along the line I adjusted my sense of time to Feldman's and the experience became transcendent. *The Road* isn't finished yet, but when it's completed it'll be close to four hours long. Judging from the excerpts I saw at the Kitchen, I'll be first on line to get tickets for the full performance.

KENNETH GOLDSMITH

