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MUSIC REVIEW

A Pioneer's Rear and Ranging Vision

By PAUL GRIFFITHS

The road is long and winding that has led the pianist and composer Frederic Rzewski to the Kitchen this weekend for three concerts marking his 60th birthday. In his 20's he was a pioneer performer of avant-garde European and American music. In his early 30's he turned to live electronic music, systematic minimalism and improvisation with a group based in Rome. After a few years he switched to a shockingly orthodox style of composition, closer in its manic piano virtuosity to Kaikhosru Sorabji than to Karlheinz Stockhausen. More recently his music has loosened up, so that it can reflect anything from his previous experience while traveling on.

"The Road," his major work of the moment, does both these things deliberately, the reflection and the traveling. It is to be a solo piece in eight large parts, of which he played the opening four in the first of these

An avant-gardist's latest creation dabbles in tradition, order and disorder.

Kitchen concerts, on Thursday. Each part so far lasts about half an hour, and each is divided into eight units or "miles."

Traditional virtuoso forms, those of variation and fugue, are everywhere. Part II is a set of variations on a railroad blues, and Part III is a group of marches and part marches based on an army song. As for fugue, Mr. Rzewski loves to run with a short idea: often one forgets to notice whether the music is tonal or atonal, because what

makes it connect is the high pressure of similar intervallic shapes chasing one another.

If this bespeaks an enthusiasm for order, Mr. Rzewski is also a devotee of its opposite. Several of the "miles" have the performer grunting, whistling, stamping, hitting the frame of the piano or using small hand-held instruments.

In the scary Part IV, much the most striking section of the journey, there is a piece where the player, like a confined jester, has to slowly play and whistle a tune at the same time, jingling bells after each phrase. Two other pieces in this part involve slow, heavy breathing to create an image of determination, one of the abiding qualities of Mr. Rzewski's music-making.

In the final concert, this evening he will be joined by other pianists in a program of pieces from throughout his career.