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COMING TOGETHER -- CELEBRATING 25 YEARS OF PIANO MUSIC. FREDERIC RZEWSKI: *The Road, a novel for solo piano.* Mr. Rzewski, soloist. The Kitchen, NYC, April 16.

[The following review first appeared in the July 1998 issue of *20th Century Music*. Some minor revisions have since been made.]

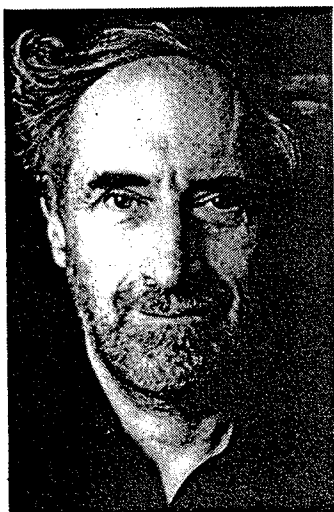
When there are powerful and often unorthodox musical figures on the scene like Frederic Rzewski, a fellow you would never expect to see in tie and tails at an elitist establishment, there's always The Kitchen to count on. Rzewski matches this venue's reputation for being outside the mainstream, so this celebration (also a 60th birthday salute) was welcome. One doesn't often get the opportunity to hear him perform live -- anywhere.

What he did for close to two hours was undeniably remarkable, yet perhaps not surprising. After our rumination about his putting all the onus on a "speaking" pianist for his *De Profundis* (at Miller Theatre last year), we then discover that he is in no way reticent to challenge himself. On this occasion, he played one-half of an in-progress eight-part composition that will run about 3½ hours when complete. There are probably only a handful of pianists who could learn this work to his satisfaction (judging by his reputation for exactitude). *The Road* requires stamina, as well as knowing how to use the many objects lying alongside, sort of like meaningless clues in an *Alice in Wonderland* treasure hunt.

Everything about this "work of art" appears unpretentious and occasionally overbearing, sometimes in an absurdist way. Rzewski's attitude toward the audience is, at best, ambivalent. He wrote to composer Arthur Jarvinen, "... the piece has to be long enough to virtually guarantee that nobody (except a few nuts) will

listen to the whole thing. I also wanted it to have an epic quality, in the sense that some things are constant (the piano, for instance), while others may appear just once, for no particular reason, and never again. . . It's also supposed to be a kind of novel, in the sense that it's really written not for an audience but for pianists . . . a novel that doesn't really begin anywhere and doesn't really end either. . ."

He also talks about *The Road's* structure, in which each of the eight parts is made up of eight "miles" (etudes). Parts I-IV, heard this evening, are



entitled "Turns," "Tracks," "Tramps" and "Stops." The first, dedicated to Max Cykiert, begins in the right hand with a simple ditty but eventually takes on fairly complex counterpoint, a bit fugal in texture. Study #4 is taken from Rzewski's choral piece *Stop the Testing!*, written on the 50th anniversary of Hiroshima.

Parts II and III are inspired by specific texts that typically relate to Rzewski's proletarian interests. The second is made up of 64 variations on the railroad blues "900 Miles," while the third is a set of marches, some of which are from a chant sung by Army draftees in the 60's.

The composer admits Part IV is "more difficult to describe," but it is perhaps the most intriguing of the lot. In two of the studies, tempo and duration follow the pianist's own breathing (thus posing the question as to what if the pianist is "out of breath" by that time). He also recited lines from Gogol's *The Nose* in both Russian and English. And there are those roadside tools -- sandpaper, a shaker, jingle bells, a whistle (suggesting the railroad), even a squeaky mouse toy. He often beat out rhythms on the floor and against the wood of the piano with his hands and

feet, clapped, sang, whistled, burped and made other occasional antisocial comments like "Nyah! . . . Nyah!"

But despite the many non-sequiturs, *The Road* is a serious musical happening, performed here by a deadly serious artist whose every fiber seems to bristle with attitude. We have read some of the interviews conducted with him and have come away with a sense that he looks upon the world rather warily. On this occasion, his dress (informal black shirt and trousers, almost suggestive of a prisoner's garb, for that matter), his total concentration on the music, his seeming disinterest in ovation, even his apparent startled annoyance at someone in the audience knocking over a brief case just as he was about to walk offstage before the intermission, may all serve as giveaways to this man's persona.

Perhaps *The Road* will become his magnum opus, perhaps not, but it serves at this point to put Rzewski into some kind of musical perspective -- that of a composer with abundant resources and a sense as to how to apply these to his consistently uncompromising outlook.

A footnote: Despite the turnout of over a hundred, it was a pleasure to sit through such a demanding long concert and not hear a single cough, testimony to the utter involvement (as well as healthy, non-smoking lung condition) of this young audience.

B.L.C.

**Rzewski: a
"consistently
uncompromising
outlook"**