

# Roll Over, Liszt

Frederic Rzewski

The Kitchen  
April 16-18

BY KYLE GANN

**T**hese last few years, I've been comparing Frederic Rzewski to Beethoven, and lo, it turns out that some other poor reportorial schmuck has been comparing him to Liszt. Well, who would you rather be likened to, Beethoven or Liszt? Exactly, yet it's the Liszt quote the Kitchen used in their PR pieces for Rzewski's 60th birthday retrospective. So I've got turf to defend, and I'm determined to make this Beethoven trope stick or my name isn't Frederic.

I mean, does Rzewski come off as (A) a scintillating virtuoso whose pyrotechnics in his light pianistic showpieces make women swoon, and who's known for his generosity toward fellow composers, or as (B) a brooding musical thinker with a gift for improvisation, a massive keyboard style, a penchant for theme and variations, and a reputation for a thorny personality? The answer is B, hands down. And B stands for Beethoven.



Rzewski at the Kitchen: "He has contributed more important works to the piano repertoire than any other late 20th century composer."

It's an enviable dilemma, having critics argue about which 19th-century genius you most resemble. At issue, of course, is Rzewski's combination of prodigious compositional technique and equally impressive prowess at the piano. In three evenings curated by pianist Anthony de Mare, the Kitchen honored Rzewski almost completely at the keyboard, with seven hours of his piano music (not all of it by any means) played by five artists—the maestro included, although he left the big fireworks displays to his younger colleagues. With vocal and chamber works absent, some interesting corners of his output went unnoticed, but the strategy drove home an appropriate point: The very least you can concede to Rzewski is that he has contributed more important works to the piano repertoire than any other late 20th century composer.

As such a concentrated dose revealed, the big works Rzewski's best known for, and one suspects will remain best known for—*The People United* and *Four North American Ballads*—were written before 1977, the year he went to Europe to teach at the Liège Conservatory. His music since then, though masterful, is far more abstract, less rousing or tuneful. Rzewski is not the first American to get Europa-fied; Elliott Carter and Roger Reynolds went to Darmstadt

and Paris, respectively, and came back writing in more opaque, convoluted styles. Likewise, a sharp division is apparent in Rzewski's output between his early American works—eclectic, bristling with Ivesian quotation and collage, tinged with folk song and minimalism—and his recent European works: enigmatic, dense in their motivic logic, often even 12-tone. Many a moment of the retrospective reminded me that Rzewski started out as a Stockhausen pianist. He's still got that sound in his ears.

That's not to say the music's ungratifying to listen to. His newest piece, of which he premiered the first two hours, is a mammoth three-and-a-half-hour "novel for piano" called *The Road*, and was possibly the most lucid music of all three evenings. The 32 movements we heard (out of a projected 64) darted angularly, driven by small, reiterated motives; they often lapsed into clusters and accompanying vocal sounds, but always with thoughtful calm rather than violence. Occasional programmatic moments (at one point, Rzewski blew a toy train whistle and rattled bells in a choo-choo rhythm) didn't do much to render the music's interval-based atonality less abstract. The work was supposed to evoke the experience of driving down a winding road; in reality, the movements (called "miles") suggested self-contained units, each with its own aphoristic logic.

So what's happened to the idiom that Rzewski calls "humanist realism"? The term suggests a desire to communicate ideas to the audience, and a willingness to use any stylistic means necessary—tonal, atonal, minimalist, structuralist, collage—to get his political points across. The only recent works to which the term seemed to apply were text-based and both played and spoken by de Mare: *De Profundis*, a devastatingly moving setting of Oscar Wilde's letter from Reading jail, and *Kreutzer Sonata*, based on the murder scene from Tolstoy's story based on Beethoven (*not* Liszt). Touchingly human, startlingly realist, these had a powerful impact, not least due to de Mare's astonishing ability to play complex textures while speaking dramatically.

In fact, Rzewski's music is a pianist's litmus test. Only de Mare could bring enough weight to the keyboard to make it sound the way Rzewski plays it himself, and by "weight" I partly mean sheer physical mass, attested to by the muscles bulging from de Mare's sport shirt. His powerhouse tremolo chords in Piece No. 4 achieved a transcendent fusion of man and machine. The other pianists, though excellent, were all skinny and sometimes lacked the requisite force. Aki Takahashi brought a piercing beauty to a more delicate work Rzewski wrote for her; Stephen Drury showed himself a capable, more conventionally virtuosic pianist in *The People United May Never Be Defeated*; Kathleen Supove (in little besides camouflage overalls, a costume memorable even by her standards) went to heroic lengths of endurance, and even a violent, composer-sanctioned improvised cadenza, in the *North American Ballads*. But after all, Beethoven was famous for breaking strings and hammers on the pianos he played, and Rzewski is highly reminiscent of, uh, yeah, Beethoven. Feel free to quote me. **V**

FREE

FREE  
ROLL  
NO  
the village

May 5, 1998