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Frederic Rzewski and Spontaneous Political Music

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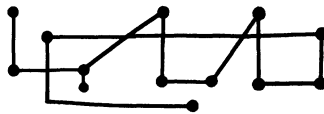
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FREDERIC RZEWSKI
AND
SPONTANEOUS POLITICAL MUSIC



CHRISTIAN ASPLUND

INTRODUCTION

I AM INTRIGUED BY Frederic Rzewski's ability, in his pieces from the 1960s and 70s, to model socio-political phenomena and to teach specific lessons about these phenomena on both intuitive and intellectual levels to both performers and listeners. Performers in particular will literally experience these socio-political phenomena in the course of performing these pieces. Rzewski seems to have achieved Brecht's ideal of a *gestic* music without dryness or lack of credibility.

PIECES

*COMING TOGETHER*¹

This is a piece for speaker and bass instrument plus any other instruments. The score consists of a single bass line in sixteenth notes throughout in 4/4 time. Its pitch-class content is restricted to the pentatonic scale, G–B \flat –C–D–F. Above the beginning of each measure is a short phrase of text containing between one and six words. These phrases are taken from a letter written by Sam Melville, a left-wing activist who was incarcerated in Attica for political crimes and was a leader in the Attica uprising of 1971. He was one of forty-three prisoners killed when the National Guard moved in after the Attica uprising.² Rzewski stated that the Attica incident was an “atrociousness that demanded of every responsible person that had any power to cry out, that he cry out.”³

The complete text is as follows:

- 0 I think
the combination
of age
and a greater coming together
is responsible
for the speed
of the passing time.
- 1 It's six months now
and I can tell you
truthfully
few periods
in my life
have passed
so quickly.
- 2 I
am
in
excellent
physical
and emotional
health.

- 3 There are doubtless
subtle
surprises
ahead
but I feel
secure
and ready.
- 4 As lovers
will contrast
their emotions
in times
of crisis,
so am I dealing
with my environment.
- 5 In the indifferent brutality,
the incessant noise,
the experimental chemistry of food,
the ravings of lost hysterical men
I can act
with clarity
and meaning.
- 6 I am deliberate—
sometimes calculating—
seldom
employing histrionics
except as a test
of the reactions
of others.
- 7 I read much,
exercise,
talk to guards and inmates,
feeling for
the inevitable
direction
of my life.

Each sentence is divided into seven segments, each of which appears above a measure of music. Rzewski unfolds the text strictly. Each of the eight sentences appears only in complete form and each measure has one and only one phrase of text. The sentence order is as follows:

0 01 012 0123 01234 012345 0123456 1234567 234567 34567 4567 567 67 7

Additive and subtractive processes are also used in the bass line but with less rigor and without any temporal correspondence to the periodicity of the text that I can discern.

In a letter to Peter Garland printed as part of the introduction to the score, Rzewski also gives some performance notes for *Coming Together*, Part I. Rzewski suggests that there are numerous ways this piece could be performed, the most simple being for a soloist to both play and speak the piece, something that he had done on several occasions at the piano. The preferable or “ideal” situation would be to have a separate reciter and an ensemble of accompanying musicians. At least one of these instrumentalists, preferably an electric bass or a piano, must play the bass line, as written, throughout. The other instruments, preferably sustaining instruments, should be tacet at the beginning and gradually enter on long notes doubling (in any octave) notes in the bass line and coordinating the attacks of these long tones with the attack of the same pitch class in the bass line. These long notes have similarly long rests in between. The long notes and the rests in between gradually get shorter until, from around rehearsal letter *H* to the end everybody is actually playing in unison or octaves with the bass line. Rzewski states:

In addition, however, the musicians should try to interpolate freely improvised passages that depart from this rule, with the condition that they do not get lost. *It is very hard not to get lost, so that to be free in this situation really requires a struggle.* [Italics mine.]⁴

The experience of performing this piece is a strange and beautiful mixture of anarchy and linearity; a highly constrained gesture that is governed not by an individual nor even so much by law but by an awareness of and adherence to the progression of the line, the text, and time in all the performers.

What happens is this, that a number of melodies arises, as many as there are players, the sum of which however is as it were a freely articulated orchestration of the principal melody.⁵

Each player makes a contribution (a “melody”) that is unique and spontaneous while the sum of these melodies is absolutely unified, though multifaceted, not according to a grid or any exterior superimposed structure be it metrical, harmonic, or serial, but around a line that *is* the piece. Rzewski thus models the very important concept of the inevitability of

the course of history and the ability of the proletariat to be coordinated in their actions without the imposition of power structures characteristic of bourgeois institutions. However, this coordinated effort requires vigilance, struggle and constant awareness of where history is in its progression.

ATTICA

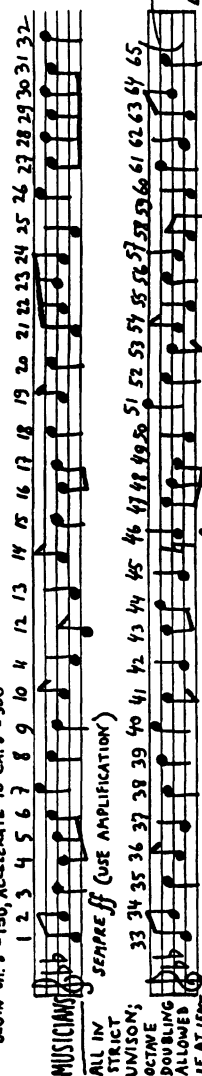
Attica is Part II of *Coming Together*. It is meant to be performed with Part I and can use the same instrumentation. The text is taken from the statement of one of Melville's fellow inmates, also a leader in the uprising, Richard X. Clark, who made it through the Attica affair. After being released from the prison in February 1972, he was asked as the car he was in left the village of Attica how it felt to put Attica behind him. His answer was, "Attica is in front of me." Rzewski again presents the text in additive fashion: "Attica . . . Attica is . . . Attica is in . . ." and so on.⁶ This text is sung or intoned on G below middle C throughout while the band plays a continuous C major chord with the piano and other instruments playing an additive pattern in sixths. It sounds tranquil, almost nirvanic. "What could be meant by such a setting?" I asked myself when I first heard this piece. Clark's statement suggests several things: that the memory of Attica is so vivid that it will always be before him; that the society he is reentering is in some way the same as Attica; that the struggle he undertook in Attica was the same one he would undertake outside of prison. Each of these possibilities has a positive and a negative side. The strangely dualistic statements of Sam Melville suggest such a possibility. He spoke of ugly things, "the indifferent brutality, the incessant noise, the experimental chemistry of food, the ravings of lost hysterical men" as incidental, small distractions to the speedy passage of time that accompanies clarity of thought, the synthesis of his experience, his reading, talking with guards and fellow prisoners, exercise, and deliberate, experimental action. Attica, seen in this light has been a laboratory, a monastery and a school; a preparing ground for a greater struggle in the world outside Attica. Seen in this light, the tranquil, even celestial gest of "Attica" can make sense.

LES MOUTONS DE PANURGE

Example 1 is the score of *Les Moutons* in its entirety. Anyone who has performed it (without transcribing it) finds that the process is quite

FREDERIC RZEWSKI, LES MOUTONS DE PANURGE FOR ANY NUMBER OF MUSICIANS PLAYING MELODY INSTRUMENTS
 + ANY NUMBER OF NONMUSICIANS PLAYING ANYTHING

BEGIN CA. $f = 150$, ACCELERATE TO CA. $f = 300$

MUSICIANS: 

ALL IN STRICT UNISON; *sempre ff* (USE AMPLIFICATION)

DOUBLE OCTAVE ALLOWED IF AT LEAST 2 INSTRUMENTS IN EACH OCTAVE.

33 34 35 36 37 38 39 40 41 42 43 44 45 46 47 48 49 50 51 52 53 54 55 56 57 58 59 60 61 62 63 64 65

LAST NOTE ONLY

INSTRUCTIONS: READ FROM LEFT TO RIGHT, PLAYING THE NOTES AS FOLLOWS: 1)-2, 1-2-3, 1-3-3-4, ETC. WHEN YOU HAVE REACHED NOTE 65, PLAY THE WHOLE MELODY ONCE AGAIN, AND THEN BEGIN SUBTRACTING NOTES FROM THE BEGINNING: 2-65, 3-65, 4-65, 5-65, 6-65, 7-65, 8-65, 9-65, 10-65, 11-65, 12-65, 13-65, 14-65, 15-65, 16-65, 17-65, 18-65, 19-65, 20-65, 21-65, 22-65, 23-65, 24-65, 25-65, 26-65, 27-65, 28-65, 29-65, 30-65, 31-65, 32-65, 33-65, 34-65, 35-65, 36-65, 37-65, 38-65, 39-65, 40-65, 41-65, 42-65, 43-65, 44-65, 45-65, 46-65, 47-65, 48-65, 49-65, 50-65, 51-65, 52-65, 53-65, 54-65, 55-65, 56-65, 57-65, 58-65, 59-65, 60-65, 61-65, 62-65, 63-65, 64-65, 65-65. HOLD THE LAST NOTE UNTIL EVERYBODY HAS REACHED IT; THEN BEGIN AN IMPROVISATION; USING ANY INSTRUMENTS.

MUSICIANS: ALWAYS PLAY LOUD, NEVER STOP OR FAITER. STAY TOGETHER AS LONG AS YOU CAN, BUT IF YOU GET LOST, STAY LOST. DO NOT TRY TO FIND YOUR WAY BACK INTO THE FOLD. CONTINUE TO FOLLOW THE RULES STRICTLY.

NONMUSICIANS: ARE INVITED TO MAKE SOUND, ANY SOUND, PREFERABLY VERY LOUD, AND IF POSSIBLE ARE PROVIDED WITH PERCUSSIVE OR OTHER INSTRUMENTS.

THE NONMUSICIANS HAVE A LEADER, WHOM THEY MAY FOLLOW OR NOT, AND WHO BEGINS THE MUSIC. THUS: (f=150)  ETC.

AS SOON AS THIS PULSE HAS BEEN ESTABLISHED ANY VARIATIONS ARE POSSIBLE. SUGGESTED THEME FOR NONMUSICIANS: "THE LEFT HAND DOESN'T KNOW WHAT THE RIGHT IS DOING".

FOR FRANK BRÜGGEN
 MARCH 1969

EXAMPLE 1

time-consuming and tricky, even tedious for all performers. Even with the most careful concentration it is impossible for an ensemble to stay absolutely together throughout the course of such a structure. This property is built into the piece for Rzewski says in the score:

Never stop or falter, always play loud. Stay together as long as you can, but if you get lost, stay lost. Do not try to find your way back into the fold.⁷

The musicians must continue to follow the rules strictly, however and maintain the common eighth note pulse. By the end of the piece no two musicians are in the same spot, particularly if there are wind players involved since there are absolutely no rests. Therefore, when you reach the last note for the last time you hold it until the whole ensemble has reached the same note. After that the ensemble may begin an improvisation.

The people in the space are divided into two groups but are not called “performers” and “audience.” They are rather “musicians” and “non-musicians.” The nonmusicians play a simpler and freer version of the piece: any sound in steady eighth notes. Even so, once the “pulse has been established any variations are possible.”⁸

The piece is exciting to play, both for musicians and nonmusicians. It begins in unison but after a time, quirky canons start to form. If you are the first to get away from the fold, i.e. get off by an eighth note, your first reaction is to want to get back on track. This is firmly ingrained in any ensemble-trained musician. However, the rule states that you must not vary your course or fake your way to where others are. You begin to recognize the beauty of the counterpoint you are producing and the boldness of your actions and you take pride in your exploit. Although you are not in the same place as other members of the ensemble, you realize you are going in the same direction at the same speed; you are playing with the same eighth-note pulse and you suddenly realize how undifferentiated this pulse is. It is not subdivided nor is it grouped into larger units, yet it is adhered to by all, including the nonmusicians. Very soon you completely forget who got off and everyone is playing the same melody inside and out with the same pulse but at different timepoints. When the first musicians reach the end of the course, they wait for the others to finish before commencing the improvisation that could well be the most important part of the piece. By this time a combination of discipline and freedom/individuality is so ingrained in the group dynamic that the improvisation will flow effortlessly out of the preceding music.

*PLAN FOR SPACECRAFT*⁹

This piece is weird. It is a piece of “prose music” in the sense that Rzewski defined it in his article of that name in the Vinton *Dictionary of Contemporary Music*.¹⁰ It was written for Musica Elettronica Viva and a realization of it by MEV is recorded on Mainstream 5002. The piece seems fit to model any and all of the struggles, failures, and victories that human beings have experienced and will experience. Rzewski starts by stating that rather than being or having form, *Spacecraft* is a process of crafting a space beginning with individuals and an idea. This idea is that there are two types of space: “occupied and created space.” Each performer begins with an awareness that he or she occupies space and that this space includes his or her body and all the vibrating objects and substance around him or her. The process of making music with voice or instruments is abstracted so that “by means of concentrated energy, he excites the air, creating a situation in which lines of force are set up between himself and other persons.”

Next they begin playing familiar things, falling into old patterns, well-worn licks. They make little attempt to do anything new or to interact with other performers. They set up a “labyrinth” for themselves. In the middle of this labyrinth, the performer imagines an audio or video monitor snapping incomprehensible orders in some dead language. The only obedient response the performer can make is to move in some direction in the labyrinth, which is, of course useless. The music of each individual begins to clash in an often violent way with that of the other individuals, creating confusion and chaos. “The way out of the labyrinth is not forwards or backwards, left or right, but up. To go up it is necessary to fly. The performer must enter . . . someone else’s labyrinth.”¹¹

This is the first of several junctures at which more than one thing can happen. One is the terminal option, the option that releases us from the piece, that allows the spacecraft to take off; the other pulls us back into the structure. With the first option, the “music” begins to happen magically or miraculously. The second and more likely option is that the music doesn’t take hold and each performer must individually search for some rhythmic principle that will unite his lines with those of the group. Eventually “a general oscillation, which forms the tonic for everyone’s individual music, sets in: it is as if a giant molecule were taking form out of nothing. The relations, manifold, between the individual parts of this structure make it, as a whole, infinitely richer than the individual musics with which the process began.”¹²

The performer feels freed and is aware of new, more liberating natural laws than the ones he was previously subject to.

The energy, which formerly had been expended in the general tumult and conflict, is now used more efficiently, used to move the giant pendulum. By placing his balance upon this fundamental rhythm, he finds that he can devote his energies to the adornment of this rhythm, to its enrichment with smaller and more complex sub-rhythms. . . . The space will no longer be occupied, but created [but] not by magic (which should have happened immediately) but rather the creating of conditions where music becomes possible at the end of a long process. It will be work. The difference between magic and *work* is one of duration.¹³

It is clear how the piece can model the experience of oppressed individuals engaged in tedious and pointless drudgery, halfway believing that what they are doing will somehow advance them to a state of freedom and happiness in the vague future. Once he or she becomes aware of the experience of others in his or her standing, he or she realizes that the work he or she is engaged in will not lead to freedom or happiness. It is a closed labyrinth. The only way to escape it is to forsake it. The newly acquired awareness of his or her comrades enables him or her to unite his or her energy to a common pulse of effort in changing society. This collective will and awareness can prove to be dangerous because it is closely watched by those who possess power and capital.

Likewise, in *Spacecraft* we come to another crucial juncture. There are two ways to go. First is a state of conflict, at which time the performer must recognize the need for violence and the need to isolate the enemy. He or she begins to realize that the enemy is most probably within him or herself. He or she may experience hostility from fellow performers or audience members, but this is a hallucinatory projection of the performer's own inner conflict.

The second situation is the "drifting into nothingness," which is seen as the more critical state. The performer must act quickly and has four options as to how to react to this nothingness in ascending order of "truthfulness and, therefore, of desirability": (1) *To be destroyed* = to do nothing. It is to deny the possibility of creation, to interpret *nothing* as absolute. The duration of this state of "drifting" must be as short as possible. (2) *To destroy*. (3) To revert to "professionalism." (4) To start over.

The first is to surrender to nothingness, to accept uncreativity. The second is to respond to nothingness with negativity—to destroy. This seems creative, but it ultimately leaves nothing in its wake. The third is to "*put on a professional mask* = to conceal, to falsify, to draw upon the reservoir of formulae that constitutes one's virtuosity, to save appearances. This is to interpret *nothing* as if it were a vacuum, to be filled with

something already existing; it is to transfer something from one place to another, like the convict who is punished by being made to dig a hole and then fill it up again.”¹⁴ It may save appearances, but it perpetuates a lie. It is not creation. The fourth and best option is to start the piece all over again. “To take zero as the common denominator between oneself and all other creatures, to admit the possible identity of oneself and all that is and is not.”¹⁵

Returning to the beginning is good because it keeps the process, by now the organism, alive. The process may be run through several times and ultimately end in exhaustion, since “as everything which has a soul is mortal, this cycle must always end.” It may also end spontaneously by magic or it may end by the “natural and necessary” application of work and effort over a certain duration of time.

The conflict/nothingness juncture is rich with analogy. In our scenario of a group of individuals on the brink of opposing those who oppress them, they either find that the oppressor fights back, in which case they must struggle and sacrifice, or perhaps they find that the group will dissipate, or that it never existed in the first place, or that they do not know how to proceed. In this situation they must go back and reaccumulate a consensus. The first three options are copouts. The first is a form of cynicism; to become nihilistic and lose all faith in the good of humanity and thus the will to act collectively. This is the kind of pessimism that capitalists try to foster in the oppressed. The second is to react with equal vehemence to the resistance offered. This reaction is blind, ignorant, and ultimately results in the destruction, not of the oppressor but of those who rise up since they are not skilled or experienced at playing the games of the oppressor. The third option seems to involve the subsuming of the revolutionary impulse into the already existing structure, say, the obtaining of a few seats in parliament. Clearly the fourth option is the only one to take.

WORDS

Certain Marxist themes crop up in Rzewski’s statements, writings and compositions. Some of them are:

- that art and specifically music should be didactic, making participants aware of the true nature of society and motivating an active response
- the clarification of the class war and the clear identification of enemy and advocate

- the idea of struggle, that good things will only be achieved through the application of hard work against an adversary for a long duration, that this struggle may require the sacrifice of many things, including perhaps one's life
- the paradoxical relationship between optimism and pessimism and the distinction between constructive pessimism and the pessimism fostered by the capitalists and their media to discourage and deaden action and resistance
- the essentially Darwinist belief in ultimate change for the better (the basis of optimism) and the relationship between evolutionary and revolutionary change
- the essential role of spontaneous action, or improvisation, as the only way to respond to a rapidly changing environment, and
- the idea that collective, democratic activity represents a higher plane of motion than individual activity and that only the concerted effort of a group is powerful enough to achieve lasting, positive change.

DIDACTIC MUSIC

[Music needs to provide] an adequate medium for new forms of expression of the human imagination and to contribute to the process of enlightenment.¹⁶

Rzewski has been a committed Marxist since the early 1960s and has openly consecrated his art to bringing about a consciousness that will aid world revolution. He has implied that this is the only conscionable use he can make of his work, that he has a duty that comes before any private artistic fulfillment or ambitions. Notwithstanding his commitment to the production of politically didactic music he has not been willing to denounce his musical heritage nor is he apt to produce propaganda. Rzewski is ultimately a humanistic, even mystic Marxist, and has become more and more willing to reflect on his rich and varied musical and extra-musical heritage and culture. I suppose this is part of what distinguishes him from a simple dogmatic.

The idea of a political music has been fraught with problems for millennia. Political music is immediately suspect because of its associations with propaganda and totalitarianism. Moreover the ability of music to be used in political discourse, or even to be representational, has been denied by many. Rzewski discusses these issues quite a bit:

“How can music be political if it has no text?” And if it requires a text, why is the music political in that case? . . . The answer is . . . that it doesn’t require a text. It *does* however require some kind of consciousness of the active relationship between music and the rest of the world. And the use of text is one way of accomplishing that. But it’s not by any means the only one.¹⁷

CLASS CONFLICT, DISTINGUISHING ENEMY FROM ADVOCATE, AND IDENTIFYING THE AUDIENCE

The above quote seems to suggest a level of consciousness not only in the composer and performers, but in the audience as well. Perhaps the preparation and state of mind of the audience is essential to the use of music as political discourse or motivation. And if they do not come to a performance prepared, there may be a way to prepare them. Rzewski suggests “a conscious employment of techniques which are designed to establish communication, rather than to alienate an audience.”¹⁸

Even more important is the need to carefully determine who one’s audience is in the first place, whom one is reaching and, ultimately, teaching.

The important thing is not to speak about people in general, but rather pose the question of who the audience is in particular, what people. . . . This is the main thing you have to be clear about.¹⁹

The awareness of audience is essential to being a revolutionary composer. And the concept of a composer’s detachment and apparent disregard of audience is another bourgeois fallacy intimately connected to the fallacy of absolute music.

While I am not sure he fully answers the question of who his audience is, he mentions the petty bourgeoisie on more than one occasion. Obviously he is going to reach both the political and the apolitical intellectuals who may be a link to the proletariat. At any rate, he must put his audience and their enrichment as his first priority. He works on their behalf.

Who am I working for? . . . The bourgeois public, . . . for *Rockefeller*, or the Arts Council, or the Banks, or the students? Or am I . . . trying to work for an entirely different group of people? . . . When you pose a question in those terms, then you stop thinking about music as something universal in the sense [that, say] Beethoven’s 9th Symphony is supposed to be “universal.” It is supposed to say something to everybody. . . . If you are working in a

political direction you give up that idea. You don't want to talk to the capitalists and the bourgeoisie.²⁰

Since Rzewski is as concerned about the experience of the performers and their enlightenment and arousal to action as he is about the audience, it is logical that his choice of performers, ensemble configuration and performative power structures is as carefully thought out as is his audience. The relationships among performers is *the* most important issue in Rzewski's earlier music because, as a group of people involved in the collective *production* of something, they *must* model Marxist structures or else be damnable hypocrites. The relationships of collectivity, trust, and mutual improvement that Rzewski facilitates between performers, audience, and composer are the most profound aspects of his work. Indeed, this is all we find in some Rzewski pieces: a prototypical relationship and a theory to explain phenomena and guide behavior.

Rzewski is clear about how music should be used as a revolutionary tool. It must convey information in a gestic manner and must foreground the participants' dissatisfaction with existing power structures, convey the possibility and hope of something better, model this alternative, and suggest a way of attaining it. Obviously this is a lot to do in a single piece of music and often Rzewski does not get to the latter items, but if one analyzes and performs his pieces, one finds a great deal naturally embedded in them.

STRUGGLE AND SACRIFICE

There can be no progress without struggle and this process of liberation may require the sacrifice of life.²¹

Each of the pieces I discussed in the first half of this paper has a problem inherent in its structure that can only be overcome by the performers through struggle, vigilance, and even failure. This is an extremely unique aspect in Rzewski's music. Other composers have explored the idea of making a performer struggle, sometimes for breath, but the focus of this struggle is usually based on a relationship of power in which a performer strives to fulfill instructions that verge on the impossible. The value of these performance situations is the drama that such danger provides. The struggles in Rzewski's works however are not based on individual virtuosity, on the performance of devilish physical feats, but rather on a virtuosity of collective action which serves not an unwholesome power relationship but a goal of collective betterment.

OPTIMISM AND PESSIMISM VS. PESSIMISM

In the letter to Peter Garland introducing to the score to *Coming Together* Part I, referred to earlier, Rzewski stated:

Regarding your comment on the pessimism presently affecting American composers, I would only like to point out that, where this phenomenon is manifested, it is usually a trivial and naive pessimism which does not really reflect their long-term attitudes, and it can be corrected by further discussion of the question “Whom are we serving?” in particular, and by further politicization in general. A new stage of revolutionary optimism is now beginning among American artists, I think, although this has to be expressed in concrete actions, and although a certain component of intellectual pessimism should perhaps at the same time be retained. Pessimism is the basic philosophy of the ruling class, for whom change can only be for the worse, whereas for us the prospects for change are good, although this may require long duration and effort.²²

At a later date he seemed more apt to accept a certain degree of pessimism in his outlook:

One should be very careful . . . about being too optimistic about the ability of the American people to take control over the present chaos in the country. I think the proper attitude must be [rather] one of constructive pessimism. Working for a change but at the same time being very realistic about the enormous problems.²³

CHANGE AND IMPROVEMENT BY EVOLUTION AND REVOLUTION

After bitingly critiquing the power structures inherent in western classical music, Rzewski writes:

One of the most striking characteristics of Western classical music has been its tendency to evolve rapidly by a series of revolutionary quantum-leaps. It has not stayed the same, nor has it changed in an even, continuous fashion, as one might expect of the music of tribal cultures or feudal agrarian societies; it has instead progressed by leaps and bounds. This kind of evolution has been largely due to the discoveries and innovations growing out of the individualist thinking typical of 17th and 18th-century Europe.²⁴

These changes were a sufficient response to bourgeois revolution and the toppling of aristocracy, but “as long as these changes are consistent with the mainstream, they are assimilated and become the general model. Otherwise the art must become progressively more isolated and eventually be extinguished.”²⁵ An adequate revolutionary response to the current capitalist order requires a different dynamism from that which has characterized western classical music in the past. Innovations that are tolerated now are not sufficient because those in power are skilled at containing any revolutionary impulse in these innovations.

Free and spontaneous behavior by individuals . . . where the probability of a given outcome . . . is high is likely to be inconsequential; individual deviations from the norm are then tolerated. Under such conditions, most music produced is likely to be trivial. . . . In an exception or emergency situation, however, where the probability of any given outcome of spontaneous individual behavior is low, or danger is great, individual deviations from a norm may be instantly and severely punished. Precisely in cases where individual creative behavior may be necessary for survival, pressure to conform to a norm may be greatest. . . . Classical [music] must make a crucial choice if it is to continue to progress in a revolutionary way . . . rather than stagnating in endless repetition of old forms, dallying with exoticism and mysticism in its eagerness to please the rich, dressing itself up in the trappings of technology, or getting lost in esoteric flights of abstraction. . . . It must bid farewell to bourgeois society and its institutions. . . . [It] must seek out a new social base within which to continue its development and to which this development is relevant, or else face extinction along with the institutions which presently impede this development.²⁶

SPONTANEITY AND IMPROVISATION

Rzewski talked at length about these issues as they apply to music in a somewhat polemical article on “Indeterminate Performance” in Vinton’s *Dictionary of Contemporary Music*. He begins with a critique of contemporary classical music performance practice, lamenting that the ideal of a concert is to try to sound as much like a recording. Regarding recordings, he says

The microphones, the electronic doctoring-up, the splicing and editing done by unknown technicians, the bureaucratic hierarchy of

the studio all combine to split time, space, matter, energy and consciousness into separate fragments, reducing performers, listeners and indeed all living elements of the process of musical communication to a state of isolation and imprisonment.²⁷

Rzewski posits a more healthy, spontaneous performance situation, such as the one that characterized MEV's concerts in the sixties and early seventies. In such improvised musical spaces "a mistake is beside the point, for once anything happens it authentically is."²⁸ With an MEV piece

The performance was the art, the collectively lived moment. . . . A "composition" was not a . . . Platonic model imperfectly mirrored in performance, but more like preparation, rehearsal, setting up the electrical equipment, phoning musicians, etc. Whatever structures we built were like musical instruments, flexible and maneuverable, and the music was in the playing of them. Composition became the preparation of schemes for improvisation, the construction of platforms or scaffoldings from which the performer could take off and fly [see the discussion of "Plan for Spacecraft"], or to which he could return as a place of rest.²⁹

Nonetheless, as a Marxist and Brechtian, he does not believe in abandoning one's reasoning powers, for this would leave one open to exploitation. Rzewski quotes Boulez, who said, "Music should be collective hysteria and spells, violently of the present time."³⁰ This statement seems like a description of improvised music in the ideal. However, Rzewski states that this perspective has

not generally produced more than a minor disturbance of the established order. The orgiastic, Dionysian aspects of performance are not . . . the . . . principal features of musical culture. Nor is it thinkable or desirable that music should limit itself to the abstraction of pure improvisation, free of the ordering power of the mind. The most extreme experiments in the abandonment of structure have shown that something more than absolute freedom is necessary if one wishes to avoid the alternative of terror.³¹

A situation of spontaneous concerted action then, whether it be a musical performance or a revolution must have some sort of premeditated structure. Otherwise a power vacuum is created which is most often filled by undesirably tyrannical, chaotic, or violent forces.

COLLECTIVITY

All music can be regarded as in some way a collective form of expression, either representative of a particular attitude or style typical of a particular class at a particular time, or as a moment of a larger social process involving and affecting broad strata of society over long time periods.³²

Note the Brechtian flavor of this passage. The expression necessarily carries with it an “attitude or style” or what Brecht called *Gest*. At another time Rzewski states further:

It's best not to talk about individual, personal styles, but rather in terms of larger movements. . . . You have to see [this] from a social and political viewpoint rather than from a personal and aesthetic one.³³

In describing *Variations on “The People United Will Never Be Defeated,”* Christian Wolff touched on the idea of collective action united by logic and the spontaneous response of the common will to the exigencies of the time rather than by an external power structure:

The movement of the whole piece . . . is towards a new unity—an image of popular unity—made up of related but diverse, developing elements (not to be confused with uniformity), coordinated and achieved by a blend of irresistible logic and spontaneous expression.³⁴

This blend of logical thought and spontaneity parallels other blends of opposites in the work of Frederic Rzewski: unity and individuality, freedom and responsibility, peace and conflict, pessimism and optimism, idealism and realism, ethnicity and international fraternity, dialectic materialism and spirituality. These and many other unified dualisms make a politically didactic music possible, beautiful, and necessary.

NOTES

1. Frederic Rzewski, "Coming Together, Part I," *Soundings* 4 (1974): 44.
2. Rzewski, "Coming Together, Part I," 44.
3. Walter Zimmermann, *Desert Plants: Conversations with Twenty-three American Musicians* (Vancouver: Aesthetic Research Center Publications, 1976), 310.
4. Rzewski, loc. cit.
5. Ibid.
6. Liner notes to LP: *Coming Together, Attica, Les Moutons de Panurge by Frederic Rzewski*, Opus One 20.
7. Robert Ashley, ed., "Scratch Anthology of Compositions" (Center for Contemporary Music, Mills College, June 1971), 43.
8. Ibid.
9. In *Source* no. 3, 67.
10. Frederic Rzewski, "Prose Music," in *Dictionary of Contemporary Music*, ed. John Vinton (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1974), 593.
11. Rzewski, "Plan for Spacecraft," 67.
12. Loc. cit.
13. Loc. cit.
14. Loc. cit.
15. Loc. cit.
16. Frederic Rzewski, "Private or Collective?" in *Pieces: An Anthology*, ed. Michael Byron (Vancouver: Aesthetic Research Center, 1974), 68.
17. Zimmermann, *Desert Plants*, 305.
18. John Rockwell, "The Romantic Revival and the Dilemma of the Political Composer," in *All American Music: Composition in the Late Twentieth Century* (New York: Knopf, 1983), 89.
19. Zimmermann, *Desert Plants*, 307.
20. Zimmermann, *Desert Plants*, 307.

21. Zimmermann, *Desert Plants*, 310.
22. Rzewski, "Coming Together, Part I," 44.
23. Zimmermann, *Desert Plants*, 308.
24. Rzewski, "Private or Collective," 67.
25. Ibid.
26. Rzewski, "Private or Collective," 68.
27. Frederic Rzewski, "Performance—Indeterminate Performance," in *Dictionary of Contemporary Music*, ed. John Vinton (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1974), 566.
28. John Cage, *Silence: Lectures and Writings* (Cambridge: M.I.T. Press, 1966), 59.
29. Rzewski, "Performance—Indeterminate Performance," 567.
30. Pierre Boulez, *Stocktakings from an Apprenticeship*, 71.
31. Rzewski, "Performance—Indeterminate Performance," 368.
32. Rzewski, "Private or Collective," 66.
33. Zimmermann, *Desert Plants*, 305.
34. Rockwell, "The Romantic Revival," 86.

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COMING TOGETHER-I
Principal (Bass) + Voice
Frederic Rzewski
Jan. 1972

A $\text{♩} = \text{M.M. } 80-84$

I THINK THE COMBINATION
OF AGE AND A GREATER COMING TOGETHER
IS RESPONSIBLE FOR THE SPEED
OF THE PASSING TIME. I THINK
THE COMBINATION OF AGE
AND A GREATER COMING TOGETHER IS RESPONSIBLE
FOR THE SPEED OF THE PASSING TIME. IT'S
SIX MONTHS NOW AND I CAN TELL YOU TRUTH-
FULLY FEW PERIODS IN MY LIFE
HAVE PASSED SO QUICKLY.
I THINK THE COMBINATION
OF AGE AND A GREATER COMING TOGETHER

-10-

THEIR EMOTIONS
OF CRISIS
WITH MY ENVIRONMENT.
THE incessant NOISE,
THE RAVINGS OF LOST
HYSTERICAL MEN
WITH CLARITY
I AM DELIBERATE
FREEDOM
EXCEPT AS A TEST
OF OTHERS.
EXERCISE
FEELING FOR

IN TIMES
SO AM I DEALING
IN THE INDIFFERENT BRUTALITY,
THE EXPERIMENTAL CHEMISTRY
OF FOOD,
I CAN ACT
AND REANING.
SOMETIMES EVEN CALCULATING—
EMPLOYING HISTORICALS
OF THE REACTIONS
I READ MUCH,
TALK TO GUARDS AND INMATES,
THE INEVITABLE

- 12 -

THE INCESSANT NOISE, THE EXPERIMENTAL CHEMISTRY OF FOOD,

THE HAVINGS OF LOST MYSTERICAL MEN I CAN ACT

WITH CLARITY AND MEANING.

I AM DELIBERATE — SOMETIMES EVEN CALCULATING —

SELDOM EMPLOYING HISTRIONICS

EXCEPT AS A TEST OF THE REACTIONS

OF OTHERS. I READ MUCH,

EXERCISE, TALK TO GUARDS AND INMATES,

FEBLING FOR THE INEVITABLE

DIRECTION OF MY LIFE.

The image shows a handwritten musical score on ten staves. The music is written in a rhythmic, repetitive style with many eighth and sixteenth notes. The lyrics are written in all caps and are interspersed between the staves. The lyrics describe a person's life in a prison, mentioning noise, food, lost men, acting, clarity, deliberation, calculation, seldom, histrionics, testing reactions, reading, exercise, guards, inmates, feebing, and the inevitable direction of their life.