

FREDERIC RZEWSKI (b. 1938)

Biographical Outline¹

- 1938 – Born in Westfield, Massachusetts.
 1947 – Giving recitals of Beethoven’s Piano Sonatas.
 1954-58 – Harvard University – Studies with Walter Piston, Roger Sessions, Randall Thompson and Claudio Spies.
 1958-60 – Princeton University – Studies with Milton Babbitt and Oliver Strunk.
 1960 – Rome – Studied composition privately with Luigi Dallapiccola. Also performed works by Stockhausen, Boulez, Cage, Bussotti, and Kagel.²
 1966-71 – Co-founded Musica Elettronica Viva with Alvin Curran and Richard Teitelbaum.
 1977-2003 – Liège, Belgium – Professor at Conservatoire Royal de Musique.

Stylistic Information

Rzewski’s music ranges from improvisation, to serialism, minimalism, to tonal music. This wide variety of styles can be noticed by looking at several examples from his work. In *Les Moutons de Panurge* (1969), for any number of instruments (or even for nonmusicians), “A lively modal melody is developed by progressively adding notes and then compressed by subtracting notes from the beginning.”³ This is followed by an improvisation. The phrase *Mouton de Panurge* describes one who follows another blindly.⁴

His work is also rooted in political and social events. In *Coming Together/Attica* (1971), for speaker and variable ensemble Rzewski

speaks out against the subhuman living conditions in prisons, as well as the brutality that ensued after the 1971 revolt at Attica Prison in New York.

Another example of political activism is *The People United Will Never be Defeated* (1975). This piano piece emanates protest against the oppression of the worker throughout 36 variations on Sergio Ortega’s song *¡El Pueblo Unido Jamas Será Vencido!*

In *The Price of Oil* (1980), for two speakers and two instrumental groups, Rzewski protests against the risks of oil exploration. This piece is a great example of his use of graphic notation.

Other Important Pieces		
Piece	Date	Instruments
<i>North American Ballads</i>	1978-1979	Piano Solo
<i>Antigone Legend</i>	1982	Voice and Piano
<i>Pablo Neruda in Exile</i>	1983	Voice and Piano
<i>The Triumph of Death</i>	1987	Voices and String Quartet
<i>String Quartet</i>	1987-1988	String Quartet
<i>The Road</i>	1995-2003	Piano Solo
<i>Nanosonatas</i>	2006	Piano Solo

True to his fight for the people, Rzewski makes his music readily available for download on imslp.org.

¹ *Frederic Rzewski*, In The Living Composers Project, At <http://composers21.com/compdocs/rzewskif.htm> Accessed February 27, 2018

² Daniel Varela, “Frederic Rzewski,” In *Perfect Sound Forever Online Music Magazine*, 2003, At <http://www.furious.com/perfect/rzewski.html> Accessed February 27, 2018

³ Cornelius Cardew, “A note on Frederic Rzewski,” In *The Musical Times*, Vol. 117, No. 1595, 1976, 32 At <http://www.jstor.org.ezproxy.bgsu.edu:8080/stable/pdf/958921.pdf?refreqid=excelsior%3A0c579a3b8ea0ff226e742c60ea71edde> Accessed February 27, 2018

⁴ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Panurge>