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Maverick With a Message of Solidarity



(Photo:) Nan Melville for The New York Times

Frederic Rzewski at a 2006 performance. Mr. Rzewski, who has just turned 70, is featured this week at the Gilmore Keyboard Festival in Kalamazoo, Mich., and at Zankel Hall in Manhattan.

By MATTHEW GUREWITSCH

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In photographs the American composer Frederic Rzewski resembles an Old Testament prophet, all high-domed brow, deep-gazing eyes and white, wind-swept hair. Over the phone from Brussels, his home since the 1970s, he projects a different image: casual, common-sensical, to the point. Toss him a question sure to prompt the self-important to pontificate — something about the extramusical associations of old songs, say, or the consolations of tragedy — and Mr. Rzewski (pronounced ZHEV-ski) shoots it down. “I don’t think I have any more to say about that,” he replies. Or, “I think we’re getting into deep waters here.”

Politics is another subject that fails to coax him onto a soapbox. Yes, his scores are shot through with melodies associated with the left and often have titles to match. Yes, the blacklisted folk singer [Pete Seeger](#) was a culture hero of his. But Mr. Rzewski is a musician, not a pamphleteer. None but the naïve could imagine contemporary classical music as the lever for social upheaval. It was a teaching job that brought him to Belgium, not the state of the American nation. “No philosophy,” he said recently. “I had a family to support.”

More than music is on his mind these days. He turned 70 on April 13, “and for some reason, it made me go back to Ibycus,” he said. He quoted the poet’s haunted lines about falling in love in old age: “Like the old racehorse, I tremble at the prospect of the course which I am to run, and which I know so well.” Mr. Rzewski reads the ancient Greeks in the original. Tolstoy too.

On Monday the Gilmore Keyboard Festival in Kalamazoo, Mich., is celebrating the milestone with a sampler of Mr. Rzewski’s music, to be repeated at Zankel Hall in Manhattan on Thursday. A formidable pianist with a touch and attack sometimes eerily reminiscent of [Glenn Gould](#), Mr. Rzewski will play his new “War Songs,” arrangements of six traditional war or antiwar songs written over six centuries, from “L’Homme Armé” to taps. With Stephen Drury he will also perform a two-piano version of “Winnsboro Cotton Mill Blues,” from the series “North American Ballads.” The contemporary-music ensemble Opus 21 will join Mr. Rzewski in “Attica,” a response to the notorious 1971 prison riots in upstate New York. Mr. Drury joins the group for the premiere of “Natural Things,” pieced together from 49 mostly unrelated segments that run 20 to 25 seconds each.

A prefatory note to the score alludes to the Haymarket massacre in Chicago in May 1886, which began as a labor rally in support of striking workers. And it lists household objects to be incorporated into the percussion section: tin cans, cardboard boxes, bottles and a bathtub or trash can. “It has to be a large metal container,” Mr. Rzewski said, “like a black hole in the middle of the music.”

Once asked if commentators were right to call him a Marxist composer, he snorted, “Harpo or Groucho or what?” The anarchic streak in his music is as much comic as it is political. Somewhere in his seven-CD box “Rzewski Plays Rzewski: Piano Works, 1975-1999” on the Nonesuch label, between fantasias on protest songs and chapters of his mammoth pianistic “novel” in progress, “The Road,” there is a cameo turn for a seriously vocal rubber ducky. Yet what emerges above all is a picture of a pianist enamored of his instrument as handed down by the master builders of the 19th century.

“Rzewski is in the line of the great pianist-composers like Brahms, [Beethoven](#), [Mozart](#) and Haydn,” said Daniel R. Gustin, the director of the Gilmore festival and the prime mover behind the current tribute. “He’s a bit of a maverick, which is fun, and it’s hard to pin him down as to style and approach. But his piano works connect to the great pianistic tradition.”

Mr. Rzewski’s concentration on writing for piano is easily explained. “I tend to work with what is there,” he said. “Opera houses don’t come asking me to write operas. Symphony orchestras don’t come asking for symphonies. But there’s this piano player I see every day who keeps asking me for music. So that’s what I do.”

A friend once suggested that he drop off some scores with the mesmerizing pianist [Martha Argerich](#), another Brussels resident. “I thought, no, why bother the woman?” Mr. Rzewski said. “I have great respect for those who specialize in Schumann or whatever. The classical tradition needs to be kept up.”

But if the Argerichs of the world pass Mr. Rzewski by, other adventurers of the keyboard seek him out — [Ursula Oppens](#), for instance. The story goes that she requested a pendant to Beethoven’s monumental “Diabelli” Variations and that Mr. Rzewski obliged with an instant classic: the magisterial 36 Variations on “The People United Will Never Be Defeated!,” based on a Latin American revolutionary chant.

Not quite so, Ms. Oppens said recently. “I asked him to write a piece. Anything. He said: ‘I want to learn more about you. What are you interested in?’ I said, ‘The next thing I’m going to learn is the ‘Diabelli’ Variations. Then this piece turned up, and I never did learn the ‘Diabelli.’”

“It’s very challenging, but technically most of the time the writing is quite traditional. If you’ve had your normal background of practicing Chopin études, it’s right in that vein. I also think of Liszt because it’s so virtuosic. But above all one thinks of Beethoven because of the personality, the way Rzewski wants to defy the limits.”

And then there is the vision. Much as the Beethoven of the Ninth Symphony harps on universal brotherhood, Mr. Rzewski hammers home the message of solidarity through dozens of musical permutations.

More interested in structure than in timbre, Mr. Rzewski makes no great claims for his skills as an orchestrator. Writing for instruments other than the piano, he often leaves the choice of instruments and even of octave up to the performers. That came in handy for the oddball collective Opus 21 when it picked up a piece called

“Spots.” But “Natural Things” was written for its specific configuration of violin, cello, clarinet, saxophone and piano, plus two percussionists.

“The new piece brings together so many things that Rzewski is noted for,” said Richard Adams, the ensemble’s founder and artistic director. “The speaking of text of a political nature, moments that are very lyrical and almost Minimalist, others that are pointillist and 12-tone, along with a lot of everyday sounds and ad hoc sounds like tapping and strange effects like a musical saw.”

No question, Mr. Rzewski likes to keep listeners guessing. When he plays other people’s music, he can raise hackles by improvising cadenzas in the middle of such untouchable masterworks as Beethoven’s “Hammerklavier” and “Appassionata” Sonatas.

“I do it because I think it’s authentic,” he said. “It’s what I think Beethoven would have done. A few years ago, after a concert at [Bard College](#), a musicologist came up to me and told me very sternly that you could do that at parties but not at a concert. Usually people don’t hire you at all if they think you’re going to go in for such shenanigans.

“And maybe they’re right. My Japanese friend Yuji Takahashi, the pianist and composer, says: ‘It’s redundant. All the irrational stuff is already there, in Beethoven’s writing.’ I do whatever I think is right at the moment. One thing is for sure: You shouldn’t prepare it. Improvisations have to pop into your head then and there, or there’s no reason for them.”

Critiquing his own performances Mr. Rzewski can be severe. The Sonata (1991) as played for the Nonesuch collection, he said, is not good. “It’s very hard, and I hadn’t played it in a long time. So I fooled myself into thinking that if it was slower, it would be more profound. But it just drags.”

When others play his music, Mr. Rzewski is most appreciative. “Usually I find with some satisfaction that they play my stuff because they have something to say,” he said. “I’ve never heard a bad ‘De Profundis,’ ” he added, citing his elaboration on [Oscar Wilde](#)’s bleak yet comforting testament from prison. “It has this ridiculous theater stuff in it. A pianist has to go out on a limb. A conventional pianist won’t go near it.”

Yet many of his pieces are as intricately constructed as a Swiss watch. Descriptions of the architecture make the head spin, yet the music is easy to listen to. Are all those wheels within wheels meant to register?

“I’m not sure it matters that much,” Mr. Rzewski said. “You never know whether structural details have any counterpart in meaningful existence. They’re fantasies. Perhaps something happens when the structure is partly submerged. After all, that’s more like real life. You don’t see crystals and perfect forms. You see imperfect forms, unfinished forms. If you want music to be like life, it has to be imperfect. I think music should be as much like life as possible.”

Full of grand designs, in other words, and full of surprises.