



Frederic
RZEWSKI

Piano Music

Fantasia

**Second Hand,
or Alone at Last**

De Profundis

Robert Satterlee



Frederic Rzewski (b. 1938)

Fantasia • Second Hand, or Alone at Last • De Profundis

Born in Westfield, Massachusetts in 1938, Frederic Rzewski studied music at first with Charles Mackey of Springfield, and subsequently with Walter Piston, Roger Sessions, and Milton Babbitt at Harvard and Princeton Universities. He went to Italy in 1960, where he studied with Luigi Dallapiccola and met Severino Gazzelloni, with whom he performed in a number of concerts, thus beginning a career as a performer of new piano music. Rzewski's early friendship with Christian Wolff and David Behrman, and (through Wolff) his acquaintance with John Cage and David Tudor strongly influenced his development in both composition and performance. In Rome in the mid-sixties, together with Alvin Curran and Richard Teitelbaum, he formed the MEV (Musica Elettronica Viva) group, which quickly became known for its pioneering work in live electronics and improvisation. In 1977 Rzewski became Professor of Composition at the Conservatoire Royal de Musique in Liège, Belgium.

Fantasia (1989-99)

The first version of *Fantasia* was commissioned by pianist Aki Takahashi in 1989. Ten years after its inception the composer created a new version of the piece. According to Rzewski, "... changed the music to obscure the tune, putting in lots of wrong notes and kind of stomping on and smudging everything."

Following a brief introduction Rzewski launches into a rhythmic dance, full of punctuating syncopated chords. After a series of episodes the texture becomes more flowing and lyrical. Rzewski ends the piece with a reflective nostalgic section, using widely-spaced arpeggiated chords over a rocking left hand figure. These harmonically diffuse chords are reminiscent of the piano writing of Charles Ives. In the haze the original source material barely peeks through.

Robert Satterlee

Second Hand, or Alone at Last (2005)

Second Hand, or Alone at Last is a set of six virtuoso studies for left hand alone, written in 2005 for the pianist Robert Satterlee. I had some pain in my right hand, so I decided not to use it for a week or so. Although I had written for left hand solo already (in Part 7 of *The Road*), I had never seriously explored its subterranean universe. As I began to play around with different ideas, I found that my left hand was capable of executing all kinds of complex maneuvers, of which I was dimly aware, but to which I had never paid much attention. It almost seemed as if the two hands are like brothers, one of whom always gets the most prominent position, with all the privileges, while the other is always left with the job of accompanying. When given the possibility of occupying the whole playing field, however, it is in fact able to execute the most spectacular acrobatics.

Frederic Rzewski

De Profundis (1992)

De Profundis, for speaking pianist, is one of the most startlingly original works of the 1990s. Rzewski describes the piece as a "melodramatic oratorio, in which eight sections with text are preceded by eight instrumental preludes." The text, by Oscar Wilde, is from a long essay written to his lover Lord Alfred Douglas during Wilde's imprisonment in Reading Gaol, where he was sentenced to two years of hard labor for homosexual offences. The piece requires audacity, laying bare the performer's soul by having the pianist recite an often wrenching text in notated rhythm, as well as singing, humming, whistling, hitting the body and the piano, using a Harpo horn, all while playing a score of considerable variety, drama and expressive detail.

The opening is especially striking. Rzewski begins the piece with piano figures interspersed with labored breathing, amplified by a lapel microphone. The pianist's amplified vocalizations (as well as other noises produced by the body) continue through the entire piece, becoming an integral part of the music, making the body an instrument in its own right alongside the piano. The sheer physicality of the combination of playing, reciting and vocalizing is quite exhilarating for the performer.

Wilde's text, while starkly describing the physical deprivation and psychological torment of his imprisonment, goes beyond this to contemplate broader artistic and spiritual themes: Wilde's artistic journey and his place in the world, the transformation of Wilde's experience in prison into "a spiritualising of the soul", and the mystery of knowing oneself authentically. The text evokes the sheer tedium of life in prison and makes several allusions to the intensity of Wilde's anguish caused by the slow passage of time.

One particularly painful passage recalls Wilde's failed relationship with Lord Alfred Douglas. Rzewski sets this in a compelling manner, by having the performer shut the keyboard lid and drum and strike the body of the piano, all

while whispering despairing words about the poisoned friendship. The passage devolves into hysteria, where the performer chants nonsense syllables, makes animal noises, blats out a bit of Leporello's music from *Don Giovanni*, rails against government, and finally is left masochistically hitting various parts of the body.

The instrumental sections of the piece range from a Bachian fugue to piano writing reminiscent of textures found in nineteenth-century piano music. Rzewski ends the piece with a section of text that hints at a triumph of the spirit over the privations of prison life: *...in spite of a succession of great troubles reaching me from the outside world almost without intermission, I have been placed in direct contact with a new spirit working in this prison through man and things, that has helped me beyond words: so that while for the first year of my imprisonment I did nothing else, and can remember doing nothing else, but wring my hands in despair, and say, "What an ending, what an appalling ending!" Now I try to say to myself, and sometimes when I am not torturing myself do really say, "What a beginning, what a wonderful beginning!"*

Robert Satterlee

Robert Satterlee



Pianist Robert Satterlee has concertized throughout the United States and Europe, in addition to making appearances in China and Thailand. He has been heard in radio broadcasts throughout the United States, most notably on Minnesota Public Radio and WFMT in Chicago. Music of our time plays an important rôle in Satterlee's performing activity, and he has given premières of works by Frederic Rzewski, William Bolcom and Gabriela Lena Frank, among others. His identification with the music of Frederic Rzewski dates back to his student days, when he first met the composer in a class at Yale University. Satterlee's keen interest in chamber music has led him to collaborate with members of the Chicago, London, Philadelphia and Detroit Symphony Orchestras in chamber music performances, and he was co-artistic director of Chamber Music Quad Cities, a music festival based in Iowa. Satterlee is on the faculty of Bowling Green State University in Ohio and teaches at the Interlochen Arts Camp during the summer.

Frederic
RZEWSKI
(b. 1938)

Piano Music

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| 1 | Fantasia (1989-1999) | 7:06 |
| | Second Hand, or Alone at Last
(Six Novelettes for piano, left hand)
(2005) | 19:53 |
| 2 | No. 1 | 3:15 |
| 3 | No. 2 | 3:02 |
| 4 | No. 3 | 2:35 |
| 5 | No. 4 | 3:19 |
| 6 | No. 5 | 3:21 |
| 7 | No. 6 | 4:22 |
| 8 | De Profundis,
for Speaking Pianist (1992) | 28:39 |

Robert Satterlee, Piano

Recorded at Mabel Shaw Bridges Hall of Music,
Pomona College, Claremont, California, USA,
on 27th and 28th May, 2007

Producer: Genevieve Lee

Engineer: Fred Vogler • Editor: Sergey Parfenov

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Booklet notes: Robert Satterlee and Frederic Rzewski

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AMERICAN CLASSICS

Frederic Rzewski is one of the most influential figures in contemporary music. In the composer's own words, for this second, 1999 version of *Fantasia*, "I ... changed the music to obscure the tune, putting in lots of wrong notes and kind of stomping on and smudging everything." *Second Hand, or Alone at Last* was written for Robert Satterlee, the left hand "executing the most spectacular acrobatics." Described by the composer as "melodramatic oratorio" for speaking pianist, *De Profundis* is a startlingly original work which uses an Oscar Wilde text written during his imprisonment in Reading Gaol and requires the pianist to recite, sing, hum, whistle, use a Harpo horn, and hit his own body and the piano while playing a score of considerable variety and drama. Rzewski's *The People United Will Never Be Defeated* can be found on Naxos 8.559360.

www.naxos.com

Playing
Time:
55:38