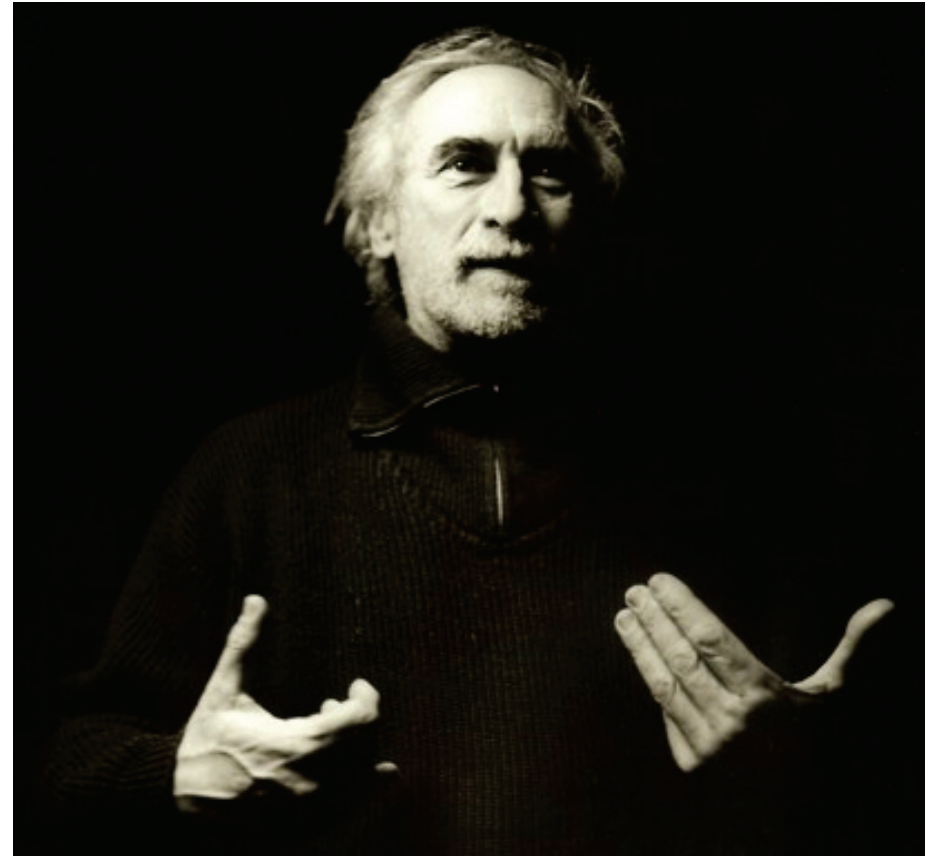


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PERFORMANCE + TALK

FREDERIC RZEWSKI

SATURDAY, MARCH 20 8:00 PM

CURTIS R. PRIEM EXPERIMENTAL MEDIA AND PERFORMING ARTS CENTER



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PERFORMANCE PIECES

1. Dreams (Study 2), 1961 12 minutes
2. Nanosonatas 27 & 28 (2008) 5 minutes
3. Nanosonatas, Book 5 (#29–35, 2008) 15 minutes
4. Nanosonatas, Book 6 (#36–42, 2008/09) 15 minutes
 - #36 To A Young Man
 - #37 To A Young Woman
 - #38 To A Great Guy
 - #39 To A Runner
 - #40 To A Dead Infant
 - #41 To A Sweet Guy
 - #42 To A Girl
5. Nanosonatas, Book 7 (#43–49, 2009/10) 15 minutes

NOTES ON STUDY II (DREAMS)

“Study II (Dreams)” was written in February, 1961, when I was living at the Pensione Bartolini in Florence, while on a Fulbright scholarship to Italy to study with Luigi Dallapiccola. (Maestro D. terminated our relationship after four lessons, when I failed to show up for a lesson just before Christmas, having gone instead to London to visit an old girl friend. It was a dumb thing to do, and I was very sorry about it for many years afterwards.) It is dedicated to Mara Sahl, wife of my friend the composer Michael Sahl, who was also living in Florence at the time. I first performed it at the Palermo Festival later that year. I remember that Stockhausen liked it (or at least said so), but David Tudor, who was also in the audience, didn’t.

Although I wasn’t very seriously into improvisation at the time (that would come a few years later in the MEV group), and although, strictly speaking, there isn’t any improvisation in the piece, it is written in what could be called an improvisational style. The pitches are not subject to any kind of serial or other organization, and the rhythms are mostly free. Events are notated in space, with each line equivalent to about fifteen seconds. Some leitmotifs keep coming back in a leaden, insistent way, while other things just happen and disappear, apparently without any significance whatsoever. It seems to me now, looking at this piece after almost fifty years have gone by, that the spirit of Samuel Beckett hovers over this music, although I don’t remember thinking this at the time. At any rate, I decided to dust it off after all this time because, naïve as it may be, it seems to ask some of the same questions to which I am still, a half century later, trying to find answers.

NOTES ON NANOSONATAS

In the summer of 2006 a young Japanese – actually Okinawan – friend of mine, Hideyuki Arata, a scientist and amateur pianist, sent me an article he had published in the American Journal of Applied Physics, at the end of which he gives me credit for “our valuable discussions on nanomolecular motors,” together with a letter in which he informed me that my name would “now live forever in the annals of science.”

I thought I should send him something in exchange, so the idea of a “nanosonata”, about two minutes long, technically somewhat demanding but not requiring a lot of practice, seemed right. I had a commission to write a new piece for Milton Schlosser in Edmonton, Alberta, and I liked the first nanosonata, so I thought that if I strung together, say, seven of them, it would fill the bill.

Then a second commission came along, from the Hanover Society for New Music, in Hanover, Germany, for the young pianist Igor Levit.

By that time the first seven were mostly written, and again I found the results good. So a second group of seven seemed appropriate. Book Two, although it is a continuation of the first book, is quite different from it: Book I is more an aggregation of individual pieces different from each other. Book II is more internally coherent.

For a while I thought of doing one more book, thinking of Schoenberg’s « dreimal sieben Gedichte ». But by 2007 things had changed. The war in Iraq was still going on. Several pianists had asked me to write something having to do with it. I started work on Book III, imagining a series of « war dances ». But I was unhappy with it, and put it away for a year. By the time it was finished in late 2008, it turned out to be a mixed bag of warlike explosions and sober reflexions on classical tradition. No. 18 quotes both Mozart’s a-minor Rondo and Haydn’s g-minor sonata. A group of magpies gathered in a tree outside my window, and for half an hour sang up a storm. I tried to write down what I heard, and did No. 20, « Magpies ».

At the end of 2007 Sarah Cahill asked for something on the theme of peace. I did Book IV, « Peace Dances ». In both Books III and IV various traditional songs appear, like « We Shall Overcome » and « Die Mohrsoldaten » (Peat-Bog Soldiers), from the German concentration camps of the 1930’s. Nanosonata 27 is an arrangement of the spiritual « Same Train ». No. 28, « It Can Be Done », written for Elliott Carter’s 100th birthday, refers to Pete Seeger’s recently (at age 89) recorded song « Take It From Dr. King », which begins with the words « Don’t say it can’t be done... »

I wrote Book V, the most abstract of the series, in the summer of 2008. Although it contains no quotes and does not have a particular theme, it is inspired by the spirit of Shostakovich, who has always been my favorite composer.

In September 2008 I wrote a piece for my son Noam, who was about to turn 18. A month later it was the turn of my daughter Noemi, on her 27th birthday. Then my son Jan, who was 38 in November. I realized I had fathered seven children, including my son Nicolas, who died in 1963 aged six weeks. I decided that Book VI would be a series of portraits of all of them, in the order of their birthdays, ending with daughter Esther, who will be 13 in July of 2009. One evening we were talking about the story of the rat-catcher of Hameln, also known as the « Pied Piper ». I asked her what kind of music he could have played to lure all the children from their families. « Easy, » she said, « something that makes people get up and go, like this : » And she sang a tune which I wrote down, that became (modified somewhat) the theme for No. 42.

Book VII was written from November 2009 to January 2010, while I was living in London as a guest of Annette Morreau, to whom it is dedicated. It is an exploration of a territory which might seem to be thoroughly familiar—namely chromatic scales— but which nonetheless contains a few surprises: rather like taking a close look at the door to one's own house as though one had never seen it before. This fusion of the banal and the enigmatic, and the techniques employed to achieve it, is something elusive, that can't be clearly defined, but is a thread that winds through much classical keyboard music, from Scarlatti through the Bagatelles of Beethoven, to Mendelssohn and Schumann, all of whom are in some way present in this collection.

The basic idea of a nanosonata is a form in which different elements come together as they do in a sonata, but do not develop. Instead of developing, they are left hanging, something like the characters that frequently appear in Tolstoy, who are described in a few words in a way that makes it clear that a whole book could be written about them, but isn't.

A nanosonata should seem too short. It seems to be going somewhere, but that's it, it stops. It did of course go somewhere, but we will never know, we went somewhere else. It is just a record of a fugitive moment.

None of these sonatas succeed in doing what they set out to do. They are all imperfect. Some come closer than others, but always as a curve approaching a limit. There is an overall form (7 x 7), but this is purely abstract. Some books are simply collections, others (Book V, for example) seem to have unity. This unity is illusory. In the end, everything becomes melody.*

(April 2009)

*My friend Christian Wolff taught me this, when we were both students at Harvard in 1956-58. He pointed out that as time passes it provides automatic continuity, so whatever « form » one tries to impose on it is trivial.