

An aerial, high-angle photograph of a futuristic city. The most prominent feature is a tall, ornate spire with a pointed top, resembling the Chrysler Building. The city is built on a grid of roads and features various other tall buildings and structures. The overall color palette is muted, with greys, blues, and browns. The sky is overcast with soft, diffused light.

# 21ST CENTURY MUSIC

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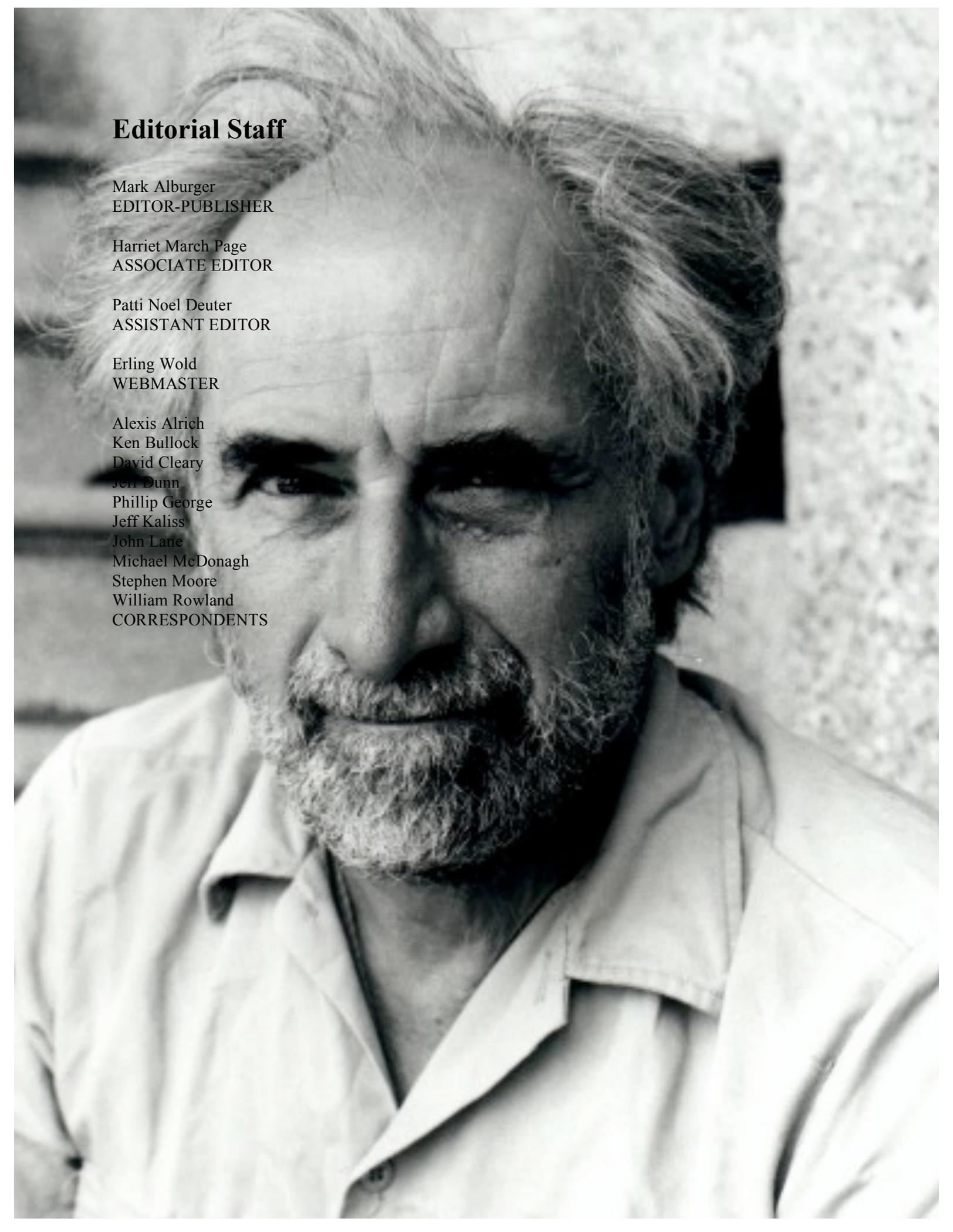
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# Performer's Perspective: Allen Otte on Frederic Rzewski and *The Fall of the Empire*

John Lane

Frederic Rzewski's *The Fall of the Empire* was written for and premiered by Allen Otte on June 14, 2007, at the *Music 07* festival at the Cincinnati College-Conservatory of Music. The piece consists of a prologue and seven short acts. Each segment is a percussion solo with text spoken by the performer. Each text is set to a different solo instrument or a small multiple-percussion arrangement; in the later case, the instruments are chosen by the performer. The texts are from various and disparate sources -- some even seemingly unconnected to the topic:

Prologue (text by Thomas Jefferson)

Act 1: Angel Shoot (text by Rzewski)

Act 2: Monsters

(text by Charles Dickens, from "The Chimes")

Act 3: Three Sons (text from Mother Goose)

Act 4: Global Warming (Rzewski)

Act 5: The Ground (Rzewski)

Act 6: Sacrifice

(Rzewski, with Bill Buchanan / G.W.F. Hegel)

Act 7: Sabbath (text by Mark Twain, from *Shem's Diary*)

The performer must portray a different character for each movement. The texts in *The Fall of the Empire* (if they are about anything) are about the fall of a great empire as it disintegrates from within. From Rzewski's point of view, they clearly allude to the breakdown of the current American democratic, capitalistic, political, and foreign relations systems (e.g., the war in Iraq). I was present at Rzewski's coaching and the premiere of this piece, and was fascinated by the depth of the composition, in both its socio-political commentary and its musical/textual intricacies. I interviewed Allen Otte in order to investigate more fully the socio-political content in the work and to better understand the ephemeral nature of the performance experience of Rzewski's music, specifically through *The Fall of the Empire*.

The most striking insight from the performer's standpoint is the cumulative experience. The work, taken in total, reflects the different symptoms present in empires (not only currently, but throughout history) that crumble and ultimately collapse. When one looks at the totality of the composition — texts, music, character, set-up/staging — it becomes clear, at least to the performer, how the overall design serves the purpose of the work.



Music that addresses socio-political content can be a powerful tool for raising awareness about current, yet long-term and recurring, societal issues. The composer Herbert Brün states, "I see the membership of each human in a society as an existence that manifests itself by being either a product — an output of the society of which it is a member — or an input to the society (where the "or" is not exclusive). There is the nontrivial situation where a person is an output of society but, in being this output, changes it to such an extent in himself that when he now feeds it back, it turns into an input." Rzewski provides us with just such an input to this system — our society — in creating an opportunity for this dialogue. Given the current socio-political climate in America now, it seems like a good time for that dialogue.

LANE: This new solo piece is dedicated to you -- you've had a personal relationship with Rzewski?

OTTE: I have known Frederic, seen him regularly and often for 30 years, and have played and coached quite a few of his pieces over that period. Two years ago we did the premier of *Bring Them Home* (two pianos and two percussion) with him. A year ago it was *Spoils*, "for a mixed band" -- a wonderfully interesting, quirky, multi-movement piece for unspecified instrumentation. I think some movements needed up to 12 or 15 people, others less. It all started with *Les Moutons de Panurge* back in 1973.

LANE: I know you have a profound respect for his work both as a musician and a composer. During these 30 years, what shaped your opinions/feelings toward this man whom many consider as an enigmatic, if not problematic, figure in new music?

OTTE: I regard him as one of the giant musical talents of the late 20th and early 21st centuries, and this is based not only on his composition, but maybe even mostly on having seen him play the piano all these years -- having heard him play Bach and Beethoven, Boulez and Stockhausen, in addition to his own pieces. He is always playing new music by his friends -- Christian Wolff, for instance, or new music by young people, most recently Gao Ping. But especially to hear him play Beethoven, Shostakovich, and do those kinds of things is for me to realize where my depth of respect for this guy as a musician comes from. He is a consummate virtuoso of the traditions I revere.

LANE: *Les Moutons de Panurge* was a staple in your repertoire with Blackearth and subsequently with Percussion Group Cincinnati. How did you come to know the piece? Certainly you have developed some refined techniques in playing it over these many years. Perhaps you can talk about your experience with the piece on a personal/professional level.

OTTE: Rzewski brought the piece to Buffalo when he was a Creative Associate. This was a group of highly skilled professional musicians doing the newest music through Rockefeller grant money that paid people a yearly stipend to put on concerts at the Contemporary Art Gallery in Buffalo. They commissioned composers and had resident composers. Rzewski was a resident composer/player in '71, I think, and that is how Garry Kvistad met him. Rzewski brought *Les Moutons*, which was then a pretty new piece and had only been done in these Scratch Orchestra things in Europe. Garry brought it to Blackearth the next year. After playing it on nearly every concert for our first season, Frederic asked us to record it in the spring of '73 for the Opus One LP that also includes Frederic with some New York musicians playing *Coming Together* and *Attica*.

LANE: Christian Asplund points out in his article in Perspectives of New Music, "Frederic Rzewski and Spontaneous Political Music," that there are some specific socio-political phenomena that can be analyzed in Rzewski's music: class conflict, struggle and sacrifice, optimism vs. pessimism, change by evolution or revolution, and the power of the collective. Asplund makes compelling observations about these phenomena. Do you feel like this is true or that this experience exists in his music?

OTTE: I think there is a category of his work where the doers of the piece are intended to experience the social constructs. He might make something for the Scratch Orchestra of London, *Les Moutons* for instance, but by the time it gets to me for the Blackearth group some things have changed. In that piece I certainly experience what we're talking about in the sense of "Don't follow leaders, assert your own independence," and all of that. We've never played the piece without me telling the Rabelais story and how the analogy works, which then audiences enjoy tremendously; it is a long piece and if they don't know the story, even if they are amused, they'll get a little impatient... this takes 16-17 minutes. I could have written a serious article that would have been a performer's analysis of *Les Moutons* and all of the rehearsal techniques we worked out in order to be able to play that piece. For instance, what's the worst possible scenario? OK, let's create that and practice it over and over in case it comes up! [laughter...] All the different ways to bar it -- different places so that you can feel the beat in different ways; everybody is going to fall into [sings part of the last few notes] so you have to be able to feel it [sings again]. In order to do it as conservatory trained, serious musicians, there is real conflict. What we're doing is making a highly professional chamber music polished version of the piece; we're not actually anymore in the space of his original conception. Now, this is more so in recent decades. Blackearth did some of this, but did not achieve the kind of clarity we achieved in more recent years. These days Rzewski comes back with recordings of garage bands in Turin or Moscow and is very excited about these things, the spirit and all that stuff. I'm not capable of doing it on that level. I can only do it as a high art, conservatory trained, chamber music player. This actually ends up applying to so much of this music.

So, that spills over immediately to, "Who's the audience?" Who are we doing this for? Certainly his experiences were different, when and where he was playing these kinds of pieces in Europe, in different kinds of venues. These days, we're playing in universities, in concert halls. The only kind of non-university place is going to be a contemporary art gallery with rich patrons, etc.... So, we know that's our audience and our audience is not the proletariat. It's a significant aspect of the history of Rzewski's music: think of the people who are totally and frighteningly disenfranchised in current American society -- for instance, the absolutely scary aspects of African American culture, what it has mostly devolved to for all the complex reasons it has arrived there. However, at the time of Frederic's *Coming Together*, you could take a text by a black prison inmate and set it in that kind of propelled way, but still an erudite way, and be able to play it to people who were listening to Archie Shepp and Coltrane. There would be a cross-over community. Malcom X, everybody was reading these things. It is preposterous that there'd be any kind of cross in these cultures now. So, if I know that I'm playing these pieces to university audiences what does that change? I give myself the excuse, sort of, that these are people who never experienced these things originally, who are more likely to vote, if you're still in that mode... Frederic is not. John Cage was not [laughter].

LANE: "If you stop voting, the politicians will leave." (laughter)

OTTE: You vote for them, it only encourages them!

LANE: I'm very interested to hear then how all of this connects to your experience with the new piece he wrote for you, *The Fall of the Empire*.

OTTE: The first piece to arrive from Frederic was the bass drum movement. That was the first one.

LANE: For solo bass drum, chime, off-stage radio, with a mysterious text by Dickens.

OTTE: Yes. Dickens!

LANE: When I first came to see you working on the piece you were using this charming, yet rather thin, old Italian bass drum. However, in the subsequent coaching and performance, you went with a very large concert-sized bass drum.

OTTE: I had a different idea of what a bass drum for a solo performer in this context would be than he did. When he arrived, he said he only thinks of a bass drum as something as large and deep as possible. His use of it here is wonderfully atmospheric with lots of stuff at the threshold of audibility. Of course it was immediately clear to me then as a better fit for what he was writing in this movement. And about the radio, he said he was a guest in someone's house where he heard, ever so faintly, a radio coming from another room while he was lying in bed musing about this quite special Dickens text.

LANE: And I noticed you typed out all of the texts here as well.

OTTE: Yes. Partly, I did that because I was bothered by the accumulation, one after another, of these bizarre texts. You have to remember, each movement arrived separately over a period of months, and not in the order of final presentation. Every one was stranger than the next and I was worried: does he know what he's doing? Maybe someone should make him look at and read through all these things together. In one sense I was claiming that I had just typed these out for myself to familiarize myself with them. But, once I had learned them, why not send it to him? I guess I wanted him to look at them and say, "This is pretty odd, isn't it?" And all he wrote back was, "Yeah I don't know if they're any good, and if they're not, don't play them with text, or play the pieces you like without text, or don't play the ones you don't like or..." You know, wonderfully, frustratingly, typical Frederic.

LANE: Well, in his lecture, *Nonsequiturs*, which we saw at MUSIC 07 here in Cincinnati, he said afterwards, "It doesn't really matter what the texts mean. People infer meaning from them." And so he strings together all of these nonsensical things, these nonsequiturs, and plays music in between that has nothing to do with the texts, but inevitably people infer meaning and make connections between the music and text. And I think maybe the same is true of this piece. You can go through the text and it makes no sense on the whole, but when you are on stage performing, scratching around on the instruments up there, and saying the texts, it seems to make perfect sense. Somehow it makes sense!

OTTE: I suppose I'm the first one to end up experiencing that—to experience the totality of it. Then, feeling that my opinion of, my suspicion that just because he is an older guy and I have this lifelong awe and respect for all aspects of his career, and he wrote these iconic pieces—does it mean everything he puts on paper is right and great? He is a very prolific composer and writing all the time. He wrote 16 hours of music, or something like that, for *The Road*. I mean, come on, is that all great piano music? I think not every one of those 16 hours are as good as some of his other music.

LANE: Yes, but isn't *The Road* specifically meant to be an extended "novel" for piano. Clearly this alludes to his great interest in music of the 19th century designed for home use. Collections that one could turn to any point, play the piece, then walk away from it. Maybe it is not intended to be a total immersion kind of experience? Perhaps it is like an episodic Dickens novel in that you can read an episode and walk away.

OTTE: Good point, but really is it possible for a composer, a musician of his stature, to honestly offer something like that? Will anybody in our society use it like that? Or are its only manifestations now bound to be CD's, with him playing some of them, other people playing others, doctoral dissertations analyzing parts of it, marathon concerts like great event birthday celebrations where they do the whole thing. I have seen him give concerts here and in New York playing whole sections of it, even over a number of days. Would anybody -- I think of some of the pianists I know who are interested in Rzewski -- just entertain themselves at home with it? I think anybody who gets that music is going to want to sell themselves and get concerts with the latest Rzewski piece as

part of their repertoire. Well, that doesn't change the fact, for me, he has credibility as a musician at all levels, and "street credibility" as someone who really was in Paris during the '68 riots and played hundreds of improv concerts in all sorts of places throughout Europe; has, in fact, been invited and played music at specific workers' conferences and social events, and never betrayed his part in that history. Anyway, I was confused if not actually doubting.

LANE: You were actually unsure about this piece in the early stages?

OTTE: Of course, some things were immediately attractive and exciting, and I was just delighted to get them. But he is a very prolific composer and just because he wrote *The People United*, well, maybe this new work is not the next great piece. He'll write a great piece again, but I was getting a little skeptical as the movements were coming in one at a time. Then finally to be able to look at the totality of it once it was all there, I was able to string them together, and I realized it was brilliant in a certain way -- for the topic it claims to be: the fall of an empire. Well, how does an empire fall? It rots from all different little points. Different points rot away further than others and finally the thing crumbles. It starts to teeter in different places at different times. A lot of that is purely where any given individual is at any given moment -- the consciousness and conscientiousness and the internal machinations of a member of any certain strata of that society. This plays into the final picture. What is the society but its little individual pictures of what's going on? So, how would you make a piece about the fall of an empire? Well, one way to do it would be to have this patchwork quilt of all these crazy episodes/stories from quite different perspectives -- every one of them would be a little bit odd. Some looking out and others looking in; some would look only one way or another, each one even unaware of any other's existence. Then, furthering these disparities, each is for a different "instrument." OK, percussionists could accept it as a typical contemporary percussion piece where we expect to go around and do all these different things. Yet, you know, it's funny, the first thing he said to me when he came in is, "Oh, you're going to be moving around?" Is that how he said it? Something like that. Kind of asking, but a kind of typical tone of voice from him—almost as if he was expecting something else.

LANE: Well, a couple of these movements were already performed, correct?

OTTE: Yes. He had a concert in San Francisco the week prior to coming to Cincinnati in which he tried out *Prologue* and the glock movement.

LANE: What I remember him saying when you did the pod rattle movement, when you were sitting on the stool, he said, "You're sitting down? You know, the other guy was moving around." Like it hadn't occurred to him that someone would just sit and play the pod rattle, that you should be moving around and "using the space."

OTTE: Yes, but it's the pod rattle, not the person, that needs to travel through the air. But even before that he was talking

about the set-up, like he hadn't really pictured how much space this thing was going to need, even though he had clearly imagined his way through each movement sitting at his kitchen table in Brussels. Almost as though he had some huge *Zyklus* kind of big multiple percussion situation in mind -- that you would be in one place and just turn and do all these things. I don't know that for a fact, but I got that impression that he was surprised that I was going to be walking to all these different stations spread out over the entire stage.

LANE: Considering what you have to do for each movement, you'd almost have to move around to different stations.

OTTE: Yes, I think so. But still, I was saying as a modern percussion piece it is not odd that one person would go and do all these different things. Yet, for anyone outside of the world of percussion to play a thirty-five minute solo means that, for instance, Frederic just sitting at the piano and playing or a violinist standing in one pose; one enters a world and pretty much stays in that world for the duration of the piece. With *The Fall of the Empire* you really go to very different places, crashing chimes, a little junk ballet, car parts... When I could start doing it as a complete set of pieces it really emphasized his good idea, the brilliance of how to convey this huge subject matter, "the fall of the empire." It had to be done through individual stories and characters, individual little touch-points, very disparate themes and places. Only then would you have accumulated all of this. And a distant observer would have to put all this together, what the various levels of decay in that empire are from those perspectives.

LANE: Much of the work is very dark, some would probably say pessimistic. This is one of the traits that Asplund pointed out in his article, yet with a twist. Rzewski's pessimism is somehow optimistic towards change, if that makes sense?

OTTE: Some people did say exactly that, and felt it quite strongly. On the other hand, I was also actually surprised; I didn't think it was going to include anything funny. I was at first most disappointed by *Global Warming*. In an email from Frederic, he said, "I'm working on this piece called *Global Warming*." My wife Cynthia had just bought for me the Al Gore DVD [*An Inconvenient Truth*], and she said, "Oh, that's great. You're going to have a piece about global warming! Maybe you could show the DVD while you play the piece. You could get a concert at local high schools and talk about this important topic." I could hardly even tell her, well, the piece has arrived and Frederic's first sentence is, "I don't give a shit about global warming." [laughter...]

LANE: This *Global Warming* movement does not specify the sounds, right?

OTTE: Yes, I think he says for four sounds, nor are there any dynamics. Now, is any percussionist going to actually play this on two tom-toms and two temple blocks?

LANE: The answer is yes, someone probably will! Or worse... (laughter...)

OTTE: So, is that OK? I think the piece would not be funny or powerful. Cage does this too, like in the *Composed Improvisation* for single-headed frame drums. He talks about it in some other context. The premiere of that piece had a wonderful player doing one after another elegant ethnic grooves, which of course had nothing to do with John Cage. But Cage is not going to put in the instructions, "Don't play typical middle eastern grooves," or "Please see my other music for..." any more than Frederic Rzewski, I think, is going to put, "Please use junked car parts..." In both cases there is a certain assumption on the part of the composer that they want this to be in the hands of cognizant and sympathetic people.

LANE: It is interesting to find humor in a work that is based on such a tremendously serious premise.

OTTE: I didn't consider the fact that there was humor in *Global Warming*. It only came later, when I was already doing it as part of the whole piece. Here's a topic with a great amount of weight and importance, and the first sentence is this guy who doesn't care about it. You find out over the course of these few minutes that Rzewski paints a picture of a real character, self-absorbed, who is just mumbling and drifting off on tangents, from one tangent to another.

LANE: This character is the type who can't make up their mind about something. They just eat what they're fed, you know? It's curious. It is a duality—to take the perspective of someone who doesn't care about global warming. I guess he is saying that global warming is an important issue, but maybe he's not? Maybe it's a distraction from the larger problems of poverty and exploitation that he talks about in the other texts?

OTTE: I don't think we can know from this text or this piece what his personal feeling is about that.

LANE: What did you think about the content of the texts? Did you ever feel that it was too over the top, politically speaking, or that it was "preaching to the choir"?

OTTE: I was worried about these texts once I had them all written out, and especially confused about the concluding Mark Twain piece. I was thinking my colleague Jim Culley would know where these Twain things came from and might have a dispassionate view of the whole thing. So, I sent them to him and his reaction to just reading the texts was extremely negative. His concern was the preaching to the choir issue. I felt guilty for having sent him just the texts because that was not the piece; the piece is how Frederic uses these texts. Any auditor would certainly have a different feeling of it once the texts are in context. I would also be very curious—because Frederic said a number of times, "I knew who I was writing this for, this piece was written for you..."—to know what he was thinking about. Maybe he just had an image. We exchanged a lot of emails over those months, and he always said he considered the weeks of the Music X festival here as a workshop situation, and he was open to whatever might develop once we were together with the actual instruments. Indeed, that some of the pieces might be rejected altogether. He knew and had commented that, as opposed to some other very good percussionists he knows, I was not a bull in a china

shop, that I was the opposite. For example, the piece *Ground* for five objects -- which I purposely stretched out as far as possible in a straight line -- just says to arrange them from left to right. That seemed to imply something about the act of touching them -- reaching for them -- more than anything about their actual sound. As with *Global Warming*, there are no dynamics, though he does say "fingers" at a couple of points, and also that an object could be a collection of objects. This is where the little pile of recyclables entered for me, and then the stack of cookbooks -- a kind of indoor complement to the outdoor car parts. I felt it was crucial here that I not include things already in the lexicon of percussive found objects, you know, flower pots and the like. *Ground* is also the only piece that has a significant improvisation in it; and also, by the way, the piece that he thought beforehand might be the weakest and least likely to make the final cut, turned out to be a big success.

LANE: OK, but why would you perform a piece like this if you know that you are performing for a mostly sympathetic audience? What purpose does it serve -- why do that?

OTTE: Well, partly I do it because I have a responsibility to generations of students, of next generations of people, who are for the most part not thinking about these things, or not experiencing them. I came to these things because I lived through the late 60's and early 70's when all of this music and social activity was a vital part of my college environment and all around me. It is not anymore, for decades of students that came after. At least I feel I can explain through exemplification. I can be involved in a kind of consciousness that makes it clear that choosing this career in an ivory tower of rarified high-level music needn't necessarily divorce me from issues, concerns, and responsibilities, to awareness of other issues. All right, I play concerts in this setting, but I can play music that keeps these issues alive rather than choosing to play music that further isolates us from these issues. In that sense, it doesn't feel like preaching to the choir. After all, the choir is very small in these concerts anyway. I don't mean to make the comparison or sound pretentious; I don't feel that exactly. But I'm inspired by and awestruck with his artistry on all levels, including predominately that he knows his instrument, he knows his literature, he has the credibility for me. To do that doesn't mean you give up your status as a thinking, caring member of society, knowing that most people are so much less privileged. So, in my own small way I've wanted to take his example and do the same thing.

LANE: I noticed that in this movement -- maybe more than in any of the other ones -- the music is informed by the rhythm of the words. Did you find that to be true? I mean, it seems obvious, at least at the beginning ("and not nothing") where the written rhythms match the vocal rhythms. Maybe this is the first time where the rhythms relate to a rhythm you're playing. We talked some time ago about his 1984 piece *To the Earth* and of having a delivery that's too square or spaced.

OTTE: Would this then make someone give a performance where the rhythmic delivery is very obviously related to the text [Sings and taps out the rhythms at the beginning of the last movement].

LANE: You could say it just like that. I think that is a problem with performances that I've heard of *To the Earth*. The player is so confined by trying -- because of the notation -- to speak the words where they are indicated above the written rhythms.

OTTE: And of course I didn't speak rhythmically at all in that movement.

LANE: You seem to have a more freely flowing delivery and not much concern for the exact notated rhythms (when there are notated rhythms). I didn't even make the connection until now that we're really scrutinizing the score. Now I see the syllables in the music and how they correspond to the written rhythms before and after the speaking measures. It makes me think of the Dan Senn piece, *Peeping Tom*, where the rhythmic activity of the text permeates the snare drum rhythms completely. That piece totally incorporates the text into the rhythmic activity and that is very obviously the idea. I can really hear the drum talking and saying those words in that piece. When I looked at this movement, I thought, here's the same sort of thing. But then that's the only time in the whole 30 minutes of the piece that the text and music sort of come together.

OTTE: So, it's just a question of...

LANE: So, is it just a question of performance?

OTTE: Yeah, so maybe it's more interesting if this is the only time it happens. Maybe it would be more rhythmic or...

LANE: It is curious that he didn't indicate it.

OTTE: Right. Seems like something that may have occurred to him, but not something he would explicitly instruct. Actually, the last piece, with the *Adam's Family Chronicle* text by Twain, is the most specific in its rhythmic notation of the text, much like he did years ago in *To The Earth*. I think in both this piece and the earlier composition you have to be very careful about not letting the rhythmic placement of the words turn the delivery into some monotonous chant. The rhythms are an aid for integrating the words to the percussion, but not to take precedence over a natural and expressive delivery. In this Twain setting, the instrument is so much less controllable than the flower pots of *To The Earth*. We had discussed the homemade ocean drum idea in emails and he had done things for himself at home. I tried and showed him many different things, ending up with a large thick-skinned frame drum with BB's and a few ceramic pie weights.

LANE: Probably the most disturbing text is *Angel Shoot*.

OTTE: Yes...

LANE: Curiously, when you just read the text it sounds, well, ridiculous. In the context of the piece, though, it becomes scary or powerful somehow. Especially after you've played this very angular metallic vibraphone music. How do you feel about this movement in relation to the piece?

OTTE: This question is related to the issue of players experiencing the society in which they are functioning in many of his ensemble pieces. Throughout the whole of *The Fall*, I am consumed with and by my task as a professional musician. I put all my energies into finding the right sounds (where they are up to me) and accepting, rejecting and redoing all of that stuff, practicing the right pitches, trying to find the way to effectively integrate the texts and deliver the texts, how to be a better actor/communicator, etc... Those things are almost my only assignment. I mean, there are many assignments there, but as the performer/presenter of all of that stuff it means finding a voice, a character for the different movements. The religious fanatic talking about the ark at the end is clearly a different character than anyone who has come before, so that is definitely part of the professional assignment. But the experience of it is not that much different from any of us who play any piece of new music. When you play a piece by Ferneyhough you are busy. You've spent so much time practicing the intricacies of learning it and you know it so well yourself; you're invested in it. You love it and you know what's going on. Then someone asks you, "Is it a good piece?" Well, as yet I have no idea. As the doer of it your experience is singularly different than everybody else's experience. Other than deciding that I'm supportive of the ideas in the piece, that's it. Now, if Rush Limbaugh has some composer that he likes as a person and wants to have him write a solo percussion piece with text, I think I'm not going to play that piece. It's not for me. So, I'm not going to get involved. (laughter...) Other than the initial assignment of accepting or rejecting what I read on the page and the responsibility of knowing where the composer's head and heart are, of wanting what he or she wants, I am the technical executer of the assignment. This is interesting because there will be people who come to *The Fall* and not have much feeling for all this crucial background; background without which you really can't properly address even the technical requirements. But I would guess that even in Frederic's solo piano music it's the same thing, that as a soloist you're not always going to experience these social/psychological aspects so much as just needing to accomplish the technical tasks at hand.

LANE: Do you feel that you experienced struggle and sacrifice, a common theme in Rzewski's work? I'd have to argue that you did struggle to choose the right sounds, etc... The vibraphone piece has technical difficulties, so there are various things that you have to go through there. However, these kinds of technical difficulties or struggles can be found in any serious 20th or 21st century percussion composition.

OTTE: To further that line of thinking, though, it is a different kind of challenge than standing and learning a marimba piece or standing and learning a piece like *Zyklus*, where it's still one big instrument. Here you go through these different incarnations, really switching gears. It is, and has to be, exhausting.

LANE: What about future performances?

OTTE: A number of the pieces, "acts," as he calls them, are delightful and challenging as quite individual compositions. Yet, having experienced the totality of his concept, I'm sure it

would be a little disappointing to have this input reduced to one or two four-minute offerings on a percussion recital. Given what we've said here about the meaning of all of this -- his wonderful and experienced insight that this particular whole would be best shown with a sum of parts so diverse as to be hardly even credible as an integrated set -- that is, the piece really does mean something. Well, I can't imagine, either musically or socio-politically, excerpting just a couple of the "coolest" parts. But then, no one would be less likely to wish to prevent such a thing than Frederic himself; he will say to do what you want. You've experienced it from the outside, what do you think?

LANE: Well, I agree that a number of the movements would be perfectly delightful as individual pieces. It goes back to what you said earlier about choosing to play music that is relevant socially/politically. There aren't many pieces like this. So if a person (read student) wants to get a taste of this, I do not feel there is a significant artistic compromise in choosing to do only a few of the movements. Also, an audience member who had not seen all the movements would not have the same point of reference. So why would it matter?

OTTE: It would only matter in so far as the missed opportunity to address the real subject matter here, the current event of the fall of an empire. To hear only one or two acts, even if they are cited as extracts from the larger work, must be a little like the old story of a number of different blind men describing an elephant: perfectly accurate for what one is able to report, but ultimately insufficient and thus a failure. Everyone would be left with some "delightful"—as we keep saying—parts, but no commentary on the whole.

LANE: You have often referred to the "good old days of new music." I read in an interview of Rzewski's observation about new music concerts -- that new music concerts these days are not really presenting "new" music. He said he would go to concerts and hear pieces that were 30 to 50 years old, but the concert was said to be a "new music" concert. We can see clearly from his entire body of work that Rzewski is interested in issues. Do you think that music of this kind becomes irrelevant once the topic has moved out of public consciousness? For instance, what about *Attica*? Do you think that people would remember that event well enough to make a powerful performance of *Attica* or *Coming Together*? Clearly, these are pieces that are still done often on concerts all over the world, but they are now 30 years old. At what point does music become too old, that we shouldn't program it on a new music concert?

OTTE: Well, we get caught up in the history of classical music and one could even be sympathetic to the pianists. There is more and more music being constantly made. Even if you agree that there are great composers writing great and stimulating piano music, there is such a backlog of great, stimulating, challenging music to play that you already know you will not have enough time in your life to play. So, you become selective: maybe there is a cut-off line where you just don't do any of the newer stuff. But it becomes true for us (percussionists) as well, because we, too, have accumulated all this stuff: the things that were brand new in the 50's and 60's,

and today retain some of their experimental freshness, their avant-garde-ness. You can still sense the spirit of experimentation in those pieces. That is partly why I make that joke ("good old days"), but I'm not joking. We were making new music that was rich and varied for all of its experimental and accepted experimentalism. When Phil Glass was brand new, that too seemed like another very raw exploratory kind of place to go, partly as a reaction to other camps: Cage, Carter, Crumb, improvisers, electronics... So, this was another way to do it, and *Les Moutons* was an early and unique example. Retrospectively, this earlier period was a high level of discourse; the highest level of philosophical/artistic discourse in which the art of music was a participant and the people who did it were experimenters and contributive members of a vital scene. Oh, sure, Varèse famously said, "My experiments are in the waste basket. I know what I'm doing when I offer you something..." But to even make that clarification now in the 21st century, it would just be obvious that we're talking about people who knew from whence they came, and what traditions they were either against or adding to. All this made for a highly intellectual and thrilling endeavor. For me, this connects very easily into the whole history of chamber music, if we agree that all along the whole world of orchestral music has been difficult in every way. It still can happen with soloists and chamber music -- current practices that you could connect to the traditions of Beethoven's string quartet playing at its highest level. But I worry that all of that seems very much dissipated and watered down by decades of conservatism and the availability of easy answers: periodic rhythm and tonality recaptured, laptops... Maybe it also has to do with the fact that there are hundreds of thousands more people, including composers and performers, as the population grows. How does one decide what are great pieces, who are the great composers? The "anointed" successors?! Partly what I bridle at with that kind of attitude is that with so many people -- the Internet and the ease of mass communication notwithstanding -- it is not possible to know all of the creative work that's going on. In the 1950's I think there were, half a century ago, proportionally fewer people involved in this activity than there would be now with music schools all over the world just pouring out hundreds of composition students. Even if we say that's good -- lots of creative choices for performers and audiences and the potential for a vital local contributive culture -- we have to admit we're in the midst of the dissolution of the culture from which this sprang. So even a quarter of a century ago one felt deeply connected to traditions that we thought we were trying to add to and/or change. To come back to Frederic's comment, though it's certainly not contemporary music, it's still for sure new music that needs to be programmed and heard.

## Concert Review

### To Thine Own Self Be Musical

PHILLIP GEORGE

In a world increasingly fraught with the artifice of movies and the unrealities of reality TV, sometimes it still pays to be true to oneself.

As a composer and writer, I need to be reminded of this; and perhaps someone should have cautioned Igor Stravinsky way back when. His four-movement *Divertimento* (1945) from *The Fairy's Kiss* (1928), an homage to Peter Ilyich Tchaikovsky, has all the rhythmic sprung-synopatic energy of his idol and all of his own emotive, melodic grace.

Meaning not much of either; the lesser of probable musical worlds.

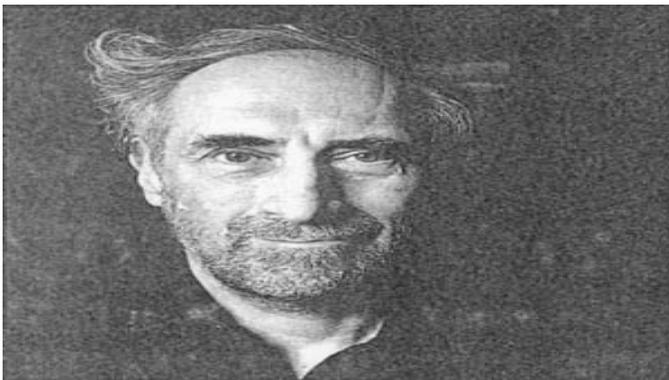
While Alasdair Neale and the Marin Symphony did their best, on January 20 at Marin Center, to energize this mildly interesting sidebar in the great composer's career, this is pretty much a musical dog that won't hunt out much sustained interest from a mainstream audience.

By contrast, Stravinsky's *Symphony in Three Movements*, completed the same latter year, has much of the crackling vitality more typically associated with the composer. In some ways a conscious harkening back to the landmark *Rite of Spring* of 1913, this music is filled with the elliptical logic and non-sequiturs of the Russian expat's unique musical mind. Neale and company brought out the paradoxes and twistedness of the score, with ensemble and tempo considerations usually well in hand.

While all three movements of the above had connections with various cinematic sources, and *The Fairy's Kiss* was a non-pictorial approach to an intriguing, if traditionally told, balletic tale, it was the Tchaikovsky that followed that drew the strongest musical depictions.

This was no doubt in part due to the dynamic Vadim Gluzman, who served as spectacular soloist in the *Concerto for Violin in D Major*. This young Russian-Israeli wunderkind, born in 1973, danced and emoted his way through Tchaikovsky's violinistic masterwork, with technique and tone to burn, belying any notion of "unplayableness" that had dogged the composer in the year of its incandescent creation (1878). The orchestra responded in kind, breathlessly keeping up with a passion and vibrancy that gave everyone a run for their money -- a sincere reading of an honest work of the heart. Then again, Gluzman's well-deserved encore was a dizzily fake, exciting amalgam of J.S. Bach's *Phorion* and the ominous death-chant *Dies Irae* (the apocalyptic *Day of Wrath*).

Guess "To Thine Own Self Be False" still works, too.



# Calendar

March 1

*Relache: The Wonderful Sound.* Greenwich House Music School, New York, NY.

March 3

Network for New Music in *Ten for Carter*, piano pieces for the composer's 100 years, plus his *Triple Duo*. Settlement Music School, Philadelphia, PA.

March 8

San Francisco Composers Chamber Orchestra: Erling Wold's *Mordake Suite No. 2*, Philip Freihofner's *The Bell Tree*, plus music of Alexis Alrich, Michael Cooke, Dan Reiter, and Martha Stoddard. Old First Church, San Francisco, CA.

March 30

Chamber Orchestra of Philadelphia presents *Terry Riley meets Maurice Ravel*, including the premiere of the former's *Triple Concerto*. Perelman Theater, Philadelphia, PA.



# Chronicle

January 1

Radiohead's *In Rainbows*, available online for almost three months on a pay-whatever-you-want basis, is finally available in record stores, with a list price of \$13.98. "One matter remains: will anyone buy the CD? . . . Though hailed by critics, the album is seen as an uncertain prospect commercially. That is because the band has declined to say how many copies have been distributed since October" [Jeff Leeds, *The New York Times*, 1/1/08].

January 4

Death of composer Mort Garson (b. 1924, Saint John, New Brunswick, Canada), of renal failure, at 83. San Francisco, CA. "[His] greatest fame came fusing the Moog synthesizer with orchestral music. . . . He attended the Juilliard School of Music . . . and was inspired to write a work for orchestra about 10 neighborhoods, which he called *San Francisco Suites*" [Carolyn Zinko, *San Francisco Chronicle*, 1/16/08].

January 5

Death of Irene Reid, of cardiac arrest, at 77. New York, NY. "[She was] a singer who toured and recorded with Count Basie's band and appeared on Broadway in *The Wiz*" [Peter Keepnews, *The New York Times*, 1/12/08].

January 6

Kile Smith's *Vespers* premiered by Piffaro. Presbyterian Church of Chestnut Hill, Philadelphia, PA. "[T]he synthesis devised by Philadelphia-based composer [Fleisher Collection curator,] and WRTI radio personality Kile Smith for his ambitious 80-minute *Vespers* . . . updated the clock, with music that joined hands with centuries-old Lutheran hymn without the fakery of attempting some sort of musical time travel. The results are thoroughly engaging, sometimes ecstatically beautiful -- and evidence of fine compositional talent blessed with inspiration and strategy. This practice of making ancient things modern is more common in Europe, but few such endeavors by Peteris Vasks, Giya Kancheli or Arvo Part have Smith's lyrical immediacy and ability to find great musical variety while maintaining an overall coherent personality" [David Patrick Stearns, *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, 1/8/08].

January 7

Death of Boris Lurie (b. 1924, Leningrad, Russia), of kidney failure, at 83. New York, NY. "[He was] a Russian-born artist who survived the Holocaust and then depicted its horrors while leading a confrontational movement called No! Art. . . . In 1959, along with Sam Goodman and Stanley Fisher, he formed a group that began exhibiting at the March Gallery. Their work, which appeared in displays with names like the *Doom Show* and the *Vulgar Show*, was intentionally jarring and provocative. . . . A 1952 etching by Mr. Lurie, for instance, combined a swastika and a Star of David. A 1959 work, *Railroad Collage*, superimposed an image of a partly dressed woman over another image of corpses stacked on a flatbed rail car. 'We are not playful!' Mr. Lurie wrote in a statement for a show in Milan in 1962. 'We want to build art and not destroy it, but we say exactly what we mean -- at the expense of good manners.' . . .

The artists gave a name to their movement [in 1963] . . . at the Gallery Gertrude Stein in Manhattan. That work was meant to be a rebellion against Abstract Expressionism and Pop Art as well as a protest against dehumanizing influences like fascism, racism and imperialism. "They were saying no to a world that was saying yes, buy more, spend more," said Ms. Stein [!] the gallery owner. . . . Lurie, the last survivor of the three artists who started out at the March Gallery, left no immediate survivors.. He continued to make art through the 1970's and 1980's but took part in only a handful of shows during those decades, all overseas. In 1993 the Clayton Gallery on the Lower East Side organized the first American show in 29 years to display Mr. Lurie's work. . . . His work is included in permanent collections at the Museum of Modern Art in New York and the National Gallery of Art in Washington" [Colin Moynihan, The New York Times, 1/12/08].

Jeremy Denk in Charles Ives's *Concord Sonata*, Elliott Carter's *Piano Sonata* (1946), and Leon Kirchner's *Piano Sonata No. 2* (2003). Curtis Institute, Philadelphia, PA. "Though this cannot be proved, Jeremy Denk probably holds the record for playing the most notes in a two-hour Philadelphia piano recital . . . built around . . . [the] Mount Rushmore-like *Concord Sonata* in a performance that was the most fully realized I've heard in concert or on recordings. . . . A program for critics, in effect -- though this one felt a bit trapped . . . in moments when Denk's steely fingers and the music's boulder-like sonorities made the air feel, well, crowded. . . . [E]ven Bach leaves him more enthralled with the physicality of the playing. . . . Carter's . . . can be a Coplandesque walk in the park -- when undersold (if only a bit) . . . Denk . . . seemed to shove [the work] back toward the cutting edge with bright, metallic sonorities" [David Patrick Stearns, The Philadelphia Inquirer, 1/9/08].

January 9

*The Jewish Americans*. PBS. "These six hours . . . dwell in deeper detail on familiar names . . . [including Irving Berlin, who was a cantor's son who became the nation's new standard-bearer, writing *God Bless America* and even *White Christmas*]" [Ned Martel, The New York Times, 1/9/08].

January 10

Lark Chamber Artists in Jennifer Higdon's *Soliloquy* and *Scenes from the Poet's Dream*. Merkin Concert Hall, New York, NY

January 11

*Kings of Crescent City*, with music of Louis Armstrong (including *West End Blues*), King Oliver, and Jelly Roll Morton (including *Hyena Stomp*). Rose Theater, New York, NY.

Ensemble ACJW in Alan Hovhaness's *Mountains and Deserts Without End* and Olivier Messiaen's *Quartet for the End of Time*. Paul Recital Hall, Juilliard, New York, NY. "There are 10 players: a wind and brass quintet, a harpist and four percussionists. . . . Hovhaness . . . loved big, often violent contrasts, with slender, modal-flavored reed solos set next to sudden pounding drums. Hovhaness also liked the spaces between conventional pitches . . . [Flute, oboe, and clarinet] take on the properties of Asian wind instruments and their non-Western attitudes toward pitch . . . [Trumpet and trombone] are similarly slippery but with a happy American forthrightness. . . . Alan Pierson prepared *Mountains* . . . but sat in the audience, evidently conducting by remote control. . . . Like the title, these eight movements [of *Quartet*] . . . are neither old nor new. . . . The music exists outside, far beyond the politics of

20th-century composing. Any idea of avant-garde or reaction is rendered meaningless. . . . Messiaen is both hypnotic and hypnotized. . . . Andrew Beer was the violinist for the composer's piece-ending climb toward his own private heaven" [Bernard Holland, The New York Times, 1/14/08].

January 12

New York Philharmonic in *Music4 Story: Sergei Prokofiev's Romeo and Juliet*, Rajon Herbert's *Fairy Mount*, Edward Pichardo's *Wild Glissando*, Claire Wegh's *Instrumental Conversation*, Nathan Mannes's *Traveling the N.Y. Streets*, Abraham Pagan's *Storm*, and Richard Strauss's *Till Eulenspiegel's Merry Pranks*. Avery Fisher Hall, New York, NY. "The audience perked up when the orchestra played five brief, vibrantly imaginative works created by fifth and sixth graders in the Very Young Composers program. . . . One of Strauss's most child-friendly works, it still couldn't retain attention at the end of a long concert with no break" [Steve Smith, The New York Times, 1/14/08].

*Winter Jazzfest*. Knitting Factory, New York, NY.

January 13

*Globalfest 2008*. Webster Hall, New York, NY.

Gail Archer in Olivier Messiaen's *La Nativite du Seigneur*, as part of the centenary celebration of the composer's birth. Church of the Heavenly Rest, New York, NY.

Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center in Edgar Meyer's *Serenade*. Society for Ethical Culture, New York, NY.

January 14

The Mars Volta. Terminal 5, New York, NY.

January 15

The producers of Jonathan Larsen's *Rent* announce its upcoming closure, after the evening performance of June 1. New York, NY. "Nine hundred thirty thousand, one hundred eighty minutes. That's how you measure the total running time *Rent* will have played on Broadway . . . making it the seventh-longest--running Broadway show in history" [Campbell Robertson, The New York Times, 1/16/08].

January 16

John Adams's *Christian Zeal and Activity* (1973), Gavin Bryars's *Sinking of the Titanic* (1969), and Radiohead lead guitarist Jonny Greenwood's *Popcorn Superhet Receiver* (2005), performed by the Wordless Music Orchestra. Church of St. Paul the Apostle, New York, NY. "*Popcorn* . . . [is] a gritty, energetic string orchestra work. . . . named for a shortwave radio, as a study in white noise . . . But it also contrasts old and new technologies: white noise is approximated by antique instruments made of wood, horsehair and catgut. And where pure white noise is an undifferentiated hiss, Mr. Greenwood's score, even at its most densely atonal, has a consistently alluring shimmer and embraces everything from lush vibrato glissandos and sudden dynamic shifts to slowly rising chromatic themes. Toward the end his clusters give way to a prismatic full-orchestra pizzicato

section: imagine the scherzo of Tchaikovsky's Fourth Symphony on steroids, or acid, or both" [Allan Kozinn, NYT, 1/18/08].

Juilliard Vocal Department presents *A Modern Person's Guide to Hooking Up and Breaking Up*, featuring Frank Loesser's *Standing on the Corner*, Christopher Berg's *Is It Dirty* and *My Little Green Cactus*, William Bolcom's *I Knew a Woman* and *At the Last Lousy Moments of Love*, Justine F. Chen's *Internal Monologue Drinking Song*, Ed Kleban's *Do It Yourself*, James Sellars's *JNNY*, Gabriel Kahane's *Neurotic and Lonely*, Adam Guettel's *Light in the Piazza*, Tom Lehrer's *Masochism Tango*, Peter Winkler's *Tamara, Queen of the Nile*, Andre Previn's *Vocalise*, and music of Leonard Bernstein, Paul Moravec, Kurt Weill, Olaf Bienert, Jerome Kern, Cole Porter, the Beatles, and Bruce Springsteen. Juilliard, New York, NY.

January 17

Death of chess master Bobby Fisher (b. 3/9/43, Chicago, IL). Reykjavik, Iceland. "A few years ago the Philadelphia Inquirer, obtaining F.B.I. records under the Freedom of Information Act, . . . found compelling evidence that Bobby Fischer's father was not the man named on his birth certificate, but a brilliant Hungarian scientist, Paul F. Nemenyi, with whom his mother had an affair. . . . If that identification is accurate, the paradoxes of Mr. Fischer's virulent anti-Semitism become still more profound, since Mr. Nemenyi, like [his mother Regina] Wender, was Jewish. . . . The gift of early insight into chess or math or music is often also accompanied by a growing obsession with those activities, simply because of the wonders of connection and invention that unfold in the young mind. . . . At least in mathematics and music, we may be grateful . . . that ultimately, with the coming of maturity, the world starts to put constraints on abstract play. Great music attains its power not simply through manipulation and abstraction, but by creating analogies with experience; music is affected by life, not cut off from it" [Edward Rothstein, The New York Times, 1/19/08].

Lucerne Festival Academy Ensemble in Pierre Boulez's *Le Marteau sans Maître* and *Sur Incises*, conducted by the composer. Zankel Hall, New York, NY. "In 1952 Pierre Boulez wrote that 'any musician who has not felt . . . the necessity of the dodecaphonic language is of no use.' A year after this youthful, narrow-minded declaration, Mr. Boulez indulged his open-minded interest in the music of foreign cultures by evoking non-European sounds in a chamber work featuring a groundbreaking combination of instruments. . . . The sonorities in [*Marteau*], a homage to Schoenberg's *Pierrot Lunaire*, are often bewitching. But the exotic sounds are still part of Mr. Boulez's stern serialist language, and the piece sometimes feels interminably static. But the opposite is true of Mr. Boulez's riotously kaleidoscopic *Sur incises* written more than 40 years later and scored for an equally unusual lineup of three harpists, three pianists and three percussionists. The often relentlessly driven, exuberant piece (based on *Incises*, an earlier short piano work) is sometimes so exhilaratingly intense that you're almost grateful for the intermittent periods of sonorous calm, as if you were retreating into a quiet corridor from a room crammed with brilliant people shouting out ideas at full blast. The 'Organized delirium (as Mr. Boulez calls it) of *Sur Incises* demonstrates a remarkable mellowing of the organized tedium of early serialism. It was certainly hard to imagine Mr. Boulez, dapper and charming as he amiably chatted with [host Ara] Guzelimian, as the polarizing firebrand he once was. 'I like virtuosity not for the sake of virtuosity but because it's dangerous,' Mr. Boulez said" [Vivian Schweitzer, NYT, 1/19/08].

*Ursula Oppens Celebrates Elliott Carter*. Symphony Space, New York, NY.

Opening of David Mamet's play *November*. Ethel Barrymore Theater, New York, NY.

Alexander Scriabin's *Symphony No. 4 ("Poem of Ecstasy")* (1905) performed by the New York Philharmonic, conducted by Riccardo Muti. Avery Fisher Hall, New York, NY.

January 18

Kelly O'Connor sings William Bolcom's *Cabaret Songs* and *Waitin'*. Weill Recital hall, New York, NY.

New York City Ballet in *Traditions*, including Sergei Prokofiev's *The Prodigal Son*. New York State Theater, New York, NY.

Paul Haas and the New Century Chamber Orchestra in *Rewind*, including Alfred Schnittke's *Violin Concerto*, Igor Stravinsky's *Pulcinella* and *Suite for Small Orchestra No. 2*, Aleksandre Raskatov's *Five Minutes from the life of WAM*, and Arnold Schoenberg's *Verklarte Nacht*. Yerba Buena Center for the Arts Forum, San Francisco, CA. "The program ran nearly two hours in a single unbroken stream. The repertoire consisted of a dozen or so short pieces, ranging from the 17th century to the 21st, all pasted together with musical connective tissue written for the occasion. . . . [R]etrospective snippets that were interlaced with the main repertoire work, three contemporary composers -- DJ Mason Bates, Joshua Penman, and Judd Greenstein -- would rehash the music the audience had just heard, fragmenting it, reassembling it or turning it to another direction. Some of the *Rewinds* were literal samplings, like Bates' electronic collage drawn from the just-completed performance of Stravinsky's *Suite* . . . . Others were newly composed, like Greenstein's afterward to *Verklarte Nacht*, which isolated and expanded on the work's final chord" [Joshua Kosman, San Francisco Chronicle, 1/21/08].

January 19

Death of Andy Palacio, of respiratory failure after a stroke and heart attack, at 47. Belize City, Belize. "[He was] a bandleader and songwriter who spearheaded a revival of the Garifuna music of Central America. . . . The Garifuna (pronounced ga-RI-foo-nah) are descendants of West African slaves who were shipwrecked in 1635 off the coast of what is now the island of St. Vincent and intermarried with local Arawak and Carib people. Garifuna villages arose on the coasts of Honduras, Nicaragua, Guatemala and Belize. There are now an estimated 250,000 Garifuna people worldwide, a minority culture under pressure from assimilation and coastal development" [Jon Pareles, The New York Times, 1/21/08].

Death of John Stewart, of a brain aneurysm, at 68. San Diego, CA. "[He] wrote the Monkees' hit *Daydream Believer* . . . [and] came to prominence in the 1960s as a member of the folk group the Kingston Trio" [The New York Times, 1/21/08].

*The Drum Is the Thunder, the Flute Is the Wind*, presented by the Kevin Locke Native [American] Dance Ensemble. Symphony Space, New York, NY.

January 21

*Grand Piano Marathon*. Gyorgy Ligeti's *Poeme Symphonique* for 100 metronomes (1962), John Adams's *Hallelujah Junction*, Michael Riesman's transcription of three movements from the Philip Glass *Dracula* (1998), Frederic Rzewski's *Piano Piece No. 4* (1977), Martin Bresnick's *Dream of the Lost Traveler* (1997), William

Bolcom's *Ballade* (with Ursula Oppens). Merkin Concert Hall, New York, NY.

January 22

Leonard Bernstein's *Symphony No. 1 ("Jeremiah")* performed by the Philadelphia Orchestra, conducted by Christophe Eschenbach. Carnegie Hall, New York, NY.

January 23

Robert Aldridge's *Elmer Gantry*. Montclair State University, Montclair, NJ. "Aldridge incorporates gospel music and hymns into a classical idiom, as Carlisle Floyd and Gershwin weaved the vernacular into their operas. . . . Though unlikely to have atheists on their knees, the opera is a tunefully entertaining and thoughtful piece of theater" [Vivien Schweitzer, *The New York Times*, 1/25/08].

*American Songbook*. Deborah Voigt sings music from *Mary Poppins*, *Mame*, Jerome Kern's *Sweet Adeline*, the Robert Wright / George Forrest *Kean*, *Ingenue* (Wally Harper / David Zippel), and of Jerry Bock, Sheldon Harnick, Kurt Weill, and Stephen Sondheim. Allen Room, New York, NY.

Richard Foreman's play *Deep Trance Behavior in Pototoland*. St. Mark's Church, New York, NY.

New York City Ballet in *Passages*, including *Oltremare*, (with music of Mauro Bigonzeni), George Gershwin's *An American in Paris*, and Jean Sibelius's *Waltz Triste*. New York State Theater, New York, NY.

January 24

San Francisco Symphony in Olivier Messiaen's *L'Ascension*. Davies Symphony Hall, San Francisco, CA.

Gershwin's *Porgy and Bess* set on Katrina-like flooded rooftops. Austin, TX.

January 25

*American Songbook: A Leonard Bernstein Songbook*. Allen Room, New York, NY.

*Focus! 2008 Festival: Elliott Carter*, conducted by Pierre Boulez, including Carter's *Triple Duo* (1982) and *Penthode* (1984-85), Boulez's *Derive I*, and Edgar Varese's *Integrales*. Peter Jay Sharp Theater, The Juilliard School, New York, NY. "Carter . . . will turn 100 in December" [Anthony Tommasini, *The New York Times*, 1/28/08].

January 26

Fort Worth Symphony in Osvaldo Golijov's *Mariel* (1994). Carnegie Hall, New York, NY.

January 27

Met Chamber Ensemble in Arnold Schoenberg's *Six Little Piano Pieces* and *Pierrot Lunaire*, Anton Webern's *Concerto for Nine*

*Instruments and Four Pieces for Violin and Piano*, and Alban Berg's *Four Pieces for Clarinet*. Zankel Hall, New York, NY.

*John Corigliano Festival*. Brooklyn Academy of Music, New York, NY.

Xiao Bai's *Farewell My Concubine*. Avery Fisher Hall, New York, NY.

Orchestra 2001, conducted by James Freeman, in the Philadelphia premiere [!] of Pierre Boulez's *Le Marteau sans Maître*. Independence Seaport Museum, Philadelphia, PA. Repeated 1/28, Lang Concert Hall, Swarthmore [PA]. "10 rehearsals . . . probably will be just enough, said Boulez, 82 . . . [T]he Philadelphia premiere -- hatched because . . . Freeman simply decided it was about time -- left Boulez visibly pleased. . . . 'I'm surprised [the piece hasn't been done in Philadelphia] but also surprised for the good. . . . I write what I think is for me necessary to write. And I try to give performances that justify what I've written. After that, what can you do?'" [David Patrick Stearns, *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, 1/24/08].

January 29

Richard Thomas's *Jerry Springer: The Opera*, with Harvey Kettle. Carnegie Hall, New York, NY. "Will it turn out that the great American musical of the early 21st century is an opera born in Britain? A convincing case for the rights to the title was made" [Ben Brantley, *The New York Times*, 1/31/08].

January 30

Loren Maazel conducts the New York Philharmonic, with Synergy Vocals, in Luciano Berio's *Sinfonia*. Avery Fisher Hall, New York, NY. "*Sinfonia* . . . is . . . emblematic of the 1960s. . . . Maazel . . . is at his best in . . . contemporary works. . . . [The] performance was mesmerizing, especially the audacious third movement, the core of the piece. Berio quotes the scherzo movement from Mahler's *Second Symphony*, using this familiar music as a jumping-off point to scramble and recompose not just the Mahler but also a panorama of musical (and cultural) history. He slips in snippets of scores from Beethoven's *'Pastoral'* *Symphony* to the Viennese waltz form Strauss's *Rosenkavalier* to Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring*" [Anthony Tommasini, *The New York Times*, 2/1/08].

Sequitur in Scott Wheeler's *The Palace at 4 a.m.*, Lee Hyla's *House of Flowers*, Steven Stucky's *To Whom I Said Farewell*, Ned Rorem's *Two Sermons*, and Arthur Levering's *Furies*. Merkin Concert Hall, New York, NY.

January 31

Viviane Hagner in Bela Bartok's *Sonata for Solo Violin*. 92nd Street Y, New York, NY.

Joanna Newsom. Brooklyn Academy of Music, New York, NY.

Robert Sirota's *212* performed by the Manhattan School of Music Symphony. John C. Borden Auditorium, New York, NY.

Ottorino Respighi's *The Fountains of Rome* and Albert Roussel's *Bacchus and Ariadne* performed by the San Francisco Symphony. Davies Symphony Hall, San Francisco, CA.

# Comment

## Items

Dante's *Divine Comedy* is not, at first glance, obvious libretto material for contemporary musical theater. . . . Yet for the composer, sgr. Marco Frisina, Dante's journey to the three realms of the dead -- hell, purgatory and paradise -- was a score in waiting. "There is a lot of music in *The Divine Comedy* already," said Monsignor Frisina, who has been director of the Musical Chapel of the Basilica of St. John Lateran here since 1985. "Dante wrote it in canticas and cantos. There's rhythm, a lot of passion. It is the perfect text for a musical work." But Monsignor Frisina does not consider his new stage production, called *The Divine Comedy, the Opera: Man's Quest for Love*, now playing on the outskirts of Rome, a musical. "I see it as Italian opera . . . I leave musicals to the Americans, who are better at it". . . . The production opened in November in Tor Vergata, a section of Rome, and runs to the end of February. Reviews so far have generally focused more on the special effects than on the content, but audiences have been enthusiastic. The effects were in part created by Carlo Rambaldi, who has two Oscars for visual effects: one for his work in *Alien* (1979), the other for *E.T.: The Extra-Terrestrial* (1982). . . . The effects are so spectacular . . . that a special theater . . . was built in Tor Vergata, about nine miles from the city center. At the Teatro Divina Commedia, as the theater is called, there are red-eyed demons writhing acrobatically in various spheres of hell against a backdrop of sets inspired by Gustave Dore, whose 19th-century engravings of *The Divine Comedy* are arguably the most famous. . . . Monsignor Frisina's score touches on a mélange of styles: sweeping melodic arias of Puccinian score, somber Gregorian chants, even a dash of heavy metal and a wailing guitar riff in some of the numbers composed for the first ac, which takes place in hell. "The guitars express the deep pain of the sinners," he said, quickly adding that the heavy-metal sound "was chosen for its dramatic intensity" and was "not a moral judgment on rock." For the record there's an entire Web site dedicated to adaptations of Dante in music ([the-orb.net/encyclo/culture/lit/italian/da\\_mu.htm](http://the-orb.net/encyclo/culture/lit/italian/da_mu.htm)). . . . The electronic music pioneer Edgar Froese of Tangerine Dream also put the text to music. The *Divine Comedy* was the first opera for Monsignor Frisina, the choirmaster of the Basilica of St. John Lateran, though he has composed several oratorios as well as the soundtracks for Italian made-for-TV movies like *Callas and Onassis* and *Pompeii*. For the lyrics he and the librettist Gianmaria Pagano mostly drew on Dante's text, although it is abridged and in some cases paraphrased for dramatic effect. Never in the original do the characters give the cheer "Hooray for poetry." [Elisabetta Povoledo, *The New York Times*, 12/24/07].

Anyone who sees Mikhail Baryshnikov in *Beckett Shorts*, the set of four brief plays by Samuel Beckett at the New York Theater Workshop, must reflect on how far this former ballet luminary has come from his training in Leningrad and his roles in the 19th-century classics. He is best known now as the star of the TV series *Sex and the City* and the distance

between that and *Beckett Shorts* is virtually as far. . . . [W]here Beckett comes close to dance is in the precision with which he choreographs movement. . . . For many or most stage actors, whose time-honored method is often to ignore stage directions whenever possible, such precision can seem maddeningly prescriptive. But for dancers, who often learn to do exactly the same steps their predecessors were doing decades or even centuries ago, this is home terrain. There are more links between Beckett and ballet than have been recognized. I cannot see *Footfalls* . . . without wondering if he was drawing on some memory of *Giselle*. . . . The Beckett biographies don't say whether he saw *Giselle*, which had its premiere in 1841, but the most thorough of them, James Knowlson's *Damned to Fame* . . . tells us that Beckett attended the ballet several times while living in London, from 1933 to 1935. He saw one-act ballets by the Ballets Russes, including *Les Sylphides*, *Le Spectre de la Rose* and *Le Tricorne*. In particular, he saw *Petrouchka* (1911, music by Stravinsky, choreography by Fokine) danced by two companies in different theaters, once with Leonide Massine in the title role, once with Leon Wolzinkowski, and was prompted to write a letter about the character's philosophy. And in *Murphy*, the novel he was writing at this time, he wrote of Murphy's heart: "Buttoned up and left to perform, it was like *Petrouchka* in his box." . . . Especially in the first half of the 20th century, [the] second scene [of the work] was seen as a high point of ballet as drama. (Nijinsky, the original *Petrouchka*, was hailed in the role by Sarah Bernhardt as 'the greatest actor in the world.')

The role has tempted more recent stars to dance it, including Baryshnikov, who not only performed it onstage but also filmed this second scene for Margo Fonteyn's 1979 TV series, *The Magic of Dance*. The image of *Petrouchka* alone in his cell bears a definite resemblance to more than one of Beckett's characters. The protagonist of Beckett's nearly silent 1965 movie *Film* (played by Buster Keaton) is seen in public and alone in his small room. He says not a word; a marked connection to *Petrouchka* occurs in his alarmed reaction to a picture of God the Father on the wall. . . . And *Petrouchka* may have been in Beckett's mind again when he wrote *Eh Joe* (1965), the final and greatest of the four plays in *Beckett Shorts*, though written by Beckett entirely as a television drama. . . . The camera close-ups of Mr. Baryshnikov on a scrim at the front of the stage show what a truthful actor he is: there is no fake, no exaggeration, as he listens, listens, listens. Is it too much to hope someone might film him in Beckett's *Film*? I notice that Beckett's 1986 edition of his Complete Dramatic Works pointedly observes of *Film* that 'no attempt has been made to bring it into line with the finished work' and that the 1965 version with Keaton includes a considerable departure from what Beckett had imaged. For all Mr. Baryshnikov's charm, there is a deep affinity between this most objective, economical, ego-escaping performer and Beckett's bleakness that the wordless *Film* might suit, to mutual advantage" [Alastair Macaulay, *The New York Times*, 12/27/08].