

Earlier this fall,

at a conference sponsored by the International Society for Contemporary Music's 'World Music Days', Frederic Rzewski was invited to discuss the viability and necessary conditions for a new form of music-theatre. Rzewski bluntly called for a radical restructuring of the social conditions of cultural production. I will respond to Rzewski's position only indirectly, by considering his 'Antigone-Legend' (composed in 1982 and performed recently in Toronto at the New Music Concerts series) as his 'artistic' response to the questions posed during the ISCM festival. It is a response that generates and deserves further reflection.

The musical and theatrical rendering of the Antigone story using the Brecht text speaks to and from an immanent tradition: the conception of music-theatre formulated by Brecht in his collaborations with Eisler and Weill, and indirectly (and by implication) in the writings of Walter Benjamin. I want to point out the relevance of Brecht and Benjamin to the project of music-theatre Rzewski has exemplified in 'Antigone-Legend'. Of course this is not, nor should it be, the only basis from which to discuss the work. In this context it happens to be quite a fruitful approach if one is concerned, as Rzewski surely is, with articulating the contemporary possibility of music-theatre as an evolving question; a question whose evolution is expressible in an argumentative force and in a musical and textual vitality that is both immediate and potential.

A close reading of the work (score analysis) is unlikely to be of much value to the general reader. Nor would an intersemiotic translation from musical to ordinary language—a practice leaning too often on perfumy adjectives. I will instead focus on the trajectory of Rzewski's project of what I have liberally, *but not literally*, called 'misuk-theatre'. The term 'misuk' is Brecht's invention. By inverting the order of the vowels in the 'word' music he is advancing a conception which represents an inversion of the 'practice' music. Brecht was known to have been very disrespectful towards concert music and the formalism of the avant-garde. (See his conversations with Hans Eisler.) Misuk may be inferred to represent the fabric of our 'social soundtrack'. In his preface to the score (thoughtfully reproduced in the concert notes), Rzewski writes how he realizes this concept in 'Antigone-Legend':

A number of effects are used, such as the pianist's vocal sounds, knocking on wood, the singer's drum, a bell, and an optional tape recording of thunder at the end... These sounds are meant not so much as 'noise-music', of the kind frequently encountered in avant-garde concerts; but rather as a sort of pseudo-musical evocation of a corresponding dramatic situation, somewhat akin to Brecht's peculiar concept of 'Misuk'.

The music of this work cannot be subsumed by Brecht's concept of misuk—it is clearly not intended to do so. Only by virtue of its supporting role to the action of the text does its overall function come close to the 'idea' of misuk-theatre. Rzewski writes that the

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melodic and harmonic material was based on an all-interval tone-row. His treatment of the row however does not defer to serial practices, but rather, is treated as a resource scale or mode from which a variety of material (including non-western and folk-derived) can be developed. It is always interesting to hear a composer as sophisticated as Rzewski treat folk materials, for instance, in his piano variations on a Chilean folk-song 'The People United Will Never Be Defeated'. The inevitable issue is the resolution of the inherent historical and dialectical tension between 'art' and 'folk' music. This issue is re-posed and resolved in 'Antigone-Legend'.

Rzewski's approach to the treatment of the text provides an understanding of his attitude towards this problem. He writes:

The rhythms of the sung text are mostly written very simply with few melismas and even fewer large leaps, systematically in order to exclude both operatic and avant-garde clichés.

In effect, Rzewski is consciously resisting the instrumental tradition of vocal writing—a tradition that has been predominant in Western art music. This tradition has modelled vocal writing on the virtuosic tradition of instrumental performance practice. The effects of this in modern music can be heard in the preference given to the aural and sonic possibilities of the text over and above its narrative possibilities. The music of 'Antigone-Legend' retains the strophic structure of its 189 strophe text. Rzewski troped 72 textless strophes onto the original that are meant 'to serve as musical accompaniment' to the action on stage. Unlike the role of a film score (or rather, most film scores), which is to enhance and reinforce the moods and contexts of the action, the supporting role played by the music of 'Antigone-Legend' with respect to its text and action is a *relational* one, not a substantial one. It is wonderful music that can clearly stand on its own. But the project of music-theatre 'Antigone-Legend' represents what would surely miss its mark entirely if it were to become a 'naturalized' citizen of the reified concert music repertoire.

Importantly, Brecht's text reads like a story, not a play. It is a dry description. Like a sign, it 'points' to the action. The non-dramatic form it most resembles is that of storytelling. We can distinguish the actor from the storyteller: the

actor identifies with the action, the storyteller 'points' to it. In his essay 'The Storyteller', Walter Benjamin makes some relevant observations: 'Experience which is passed on from mouth to mouth is the source from which all storytellers have drawn'. In choosing a text which Brecht reworked with the intention of recapturing its lost 'folk-realism' I believe Rzewski is attempting to evoke this oral folk tradition. It is also one in which his social and political concerns can be expressed undidactically.

An orientation to practical interests is characteristic of many born storytellers... In every case the storyteller is a man who has counsel for his readers... counsel is less an answer to a question than a proposal concerning the continuation of a story which is just unfolding.²

Rzewski's response to the questions facing music-theatre offers counsel in the content of his chosen text (Antigone's story) and in his conception of music-theatre. It is a conception that does not depend on elaborate and expensive staging, large casts and other trappings of techno-lust. The staging of the text was done by manipulating costumed and masked figures representing the major characters. They were fittingly stark and simple.³ This music-theatre is one in which the 'production values' are internal to the work, developed from within, not superimposed from above. I am reminded of Stravinsky's strategy at a time when the social, political and economic crisis of the day (World War I) ruled out lavish works in the mode of 'Petrouchka' and the 'Firebird', resulting instead in works like 'Renard' and 'L'histoire du Soldat'. Works, one could argue, that have conspicuous elements of misuk in them. Although Stravinsky has been chastised in some intellectual quarters for not being politically correct (the conversion to neo-Catholicism), his turn to more humble forms is instructive. At a time when cultural production is constrained by another kind of crisis, Rzewski's *misuk-theatre* music-theatre is an exemplar for those with an interest to create and support a music-theatre with a practical intent.

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1. Benjamin, Walter, *Illuminations*, New York: Schocken, 1969, p. 84.

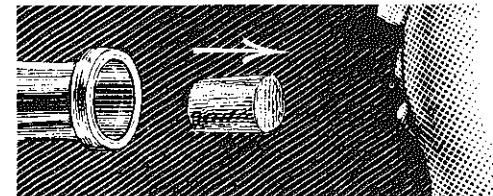
2. *Ibid.*, p. 86.

3. These large puppets supported on music stands were created and manipulated by Felix Murrli. The actual division of labour in the work consists of a pianist, vocalist and a puppeteer. Those who might have been at the concert may realize how fragile the relationship between music, text and action can be in the course of a performance. Rzewski is a very physical and virtuosic pianist whose intense performance was sometimes as dramatic as the text. Vocalist Carol Plantamura responded impressively to the demand to match Rzewski's intensity and his volume. There were only a few occasions in which there was a mismatch in dynamics between piano and voice.

Laura Mulvey on the conference, 'Well, I look at it as a form of entertainment.'

If words there be, or body there be, somewhere there is a desire for dialogue, intercourse, exchange.

Jane Gallop
*The Daughter's Seduction:
Psychoanalysis and Feminism*
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Like the Sphinx we are outside the gates, the archetypal feminine position: our position is mediated. However, we are inextricably locked in this circuit of pedagogical relations. The institutionalization of knowledge: possession, acquisition, consummation, consumption, lures us away from this feminine border. We give up our liminality, our state of crisis.

BAD SISTERS
IN THE
BIG APPLE:
Feminist Film
Theory

'How does woman evoke an image of herself?' Paola Melchiori, conference participant.

But what is not tight, what is open, unattainable, and thus infinitely desirable, are the films themselves. The feminine textual bodies of Ackerman, Duras, quoted throughout the conference. The slippery heterogeneity of these texts, which exceed critical discourse, mastery, closure. Our good objects, the desired bodies on which, the Italians claim, we relieve our unconscious atavistic bond with the mother.

