

Pieces for Piano
Mechanical Angels
Reflections
Relics

Cristina Spinei

The Road
Mile 47, "Walk in the Woods"
Mile 48, "Why"

Frederic Rzewski
(b. 1938)

The People United Will Never Be Defeated!
36 Variations on ¡El pueblo unido jamás será vencido!

Matthew Phelps is one of the most versatile classical musicians in the nation. He is a sought-after performer as a pianist and conductor. He has performed recitals for the Nashville Cathedral Arts Series, Steinway Society of Nashville, Nashville Symphony's On Stage series, Wright State University, the University of Dayton, the Music at 990 series, and has appeared numerous times on Nashville Public Radio as a soloist and chamber musician. He has performed as a soloist with the Nashville Concerto Orchestra, Intersection, and participated in a complete performance of Beethoven's 32 piano sonatas, where he and 20 other pianists performed Beethoven's works in chronological order as part of a two-day festival.

A proponent of new music and classical improvisation, Phelps is known for his performances of Frederic Rzewski's monumental, "The People United Will Never Be Defeated," which he has played throughout the nation including a 2019 tour of California. He has also premiered music by Christina Spinei, Peter Morabito, Drew Dolan, David Macdonald, Dan Locklair, Dominick DiOrio.

Phelps is active as a chamber musician, often playing with Erin Hall and Keith Nicholas as a founding member of the Elliston Trio. The trio has played throughout the nation in a repertoire that spans from Mozart to Joan Tower. Their performance of the Triple Concerto, under the baton of Earl Rivers, concluded Nashville's Beethoven festival. He also frequently collaborates with Tucker Biddlecombe of Vanderbilt University and renowned countertenor Patrick Dailey.

Phelps is also well known as a conductor of choral and orchestral music. In his position at West End United Methodist Church in Nashville, TN, he has conducted critically lauded performances of Brahms' Requiem, Bach's Christmas Oratorio, and works ranging from Telemann to Morton Lauridsen. He is the Founder and Artistic Director of Vocal Arts Nashville, a professional chorus that specializes in early and contemporary music. With VAN, he has conducted all six Bach Motets, along with a repertoire ranging from Byrd to Esenvalds.

A frequent guest conductor, Phelps has led orchestras and choruses throughout the nation. He made his ballet debut conducting the American premiere of Peter Salem's "A Streetcar Named Desire," which won a Best of Nashville award. He frequently collaborates with the Nashville Concerto Orchestra and the Mozart Birthday Festival Orchestra. He guest conducted at the 2020

Southeastern Convention of the American Choral Director's Association and his choirs have performed at the midwestern regional conventions of ACDA and MENC.

Phelps received his degrees in conducting from the College-Conservatory of Music at the University of Cincinnati where he studied with Earl Rivers and Mark Gibson. He studied piano with Elisabeth Pridonoff and Jackson Leung. He has the rare distinction of winning awards in three separate disciplines (piano, organ, and conducting) including the 2015 American Prize in Choral Conducting. His debut CD, including sonatas by Haydn and Rachmaninoff, will be released in the fall of 2020.

Program Notes

Piano Pieces

Cristina Spinei

Composer and performer Cristina Spinei has written for numerous orchestras and chamber ensembles, but she is most known for her work with ballet, having been commissioned by Nashville Ballet, the New York Choreographic Institute, the Pacific Northwest Ballet, and many more. Growing up with dreams of becoming a ballerina, Spinei has channeled her love for dance into a devotion to musical movement, resulting in a style infused with “lyricism and rhythmic vitality.” (*Nashville Scene*)

Cristina has made her home in Nashville since 2014, and has since established herself as one of Music City's most versatile, forward-thinking musicians: Nashville Arts dubbed her “gifted and engaging”, while *The East Nashvillian* praises her “adventurous imagination.” Self-described as “minimalish,” Cristina anchors her musical ideas in melody, movement, and loops. Spinei's discography continues to grow: in addition to *Ex Voto*, her 2016 debut album, *Music for Dance* (Toccata Classics), contains work that blossomed from her collaboration with choreographers. In addition to her own records, Spinei's music appears on the debut album of Trio Celeste, as well as on St. Michel Strings' album *Adagio*, a record nominated for a Latin GRAMMY® Award.

Cristina Spinei holds both a Bachelor and Master of Music degree from The Juilliard School, where she studied with Christopher Rouse.

“Piano Pieces,” was written in 2018 and are programmatic. “Mechanical Angels,” is written in the style of a perpetual motion piece. Its rhythmic drive, yet simple musical material, evokes the image of the title—an angel that moves through time with the preciseness of a timepiece. “Reflection,” is impressionistic and expressive. It gives the listener the feeling of remembering a time that is standing in stillness. “Relics,” is a lilting and sentimental piece. It has a fragile pristine quality, while also suggesting a longing for something beautiful.

The Road and The People United Will Never Be Defeated

Frederic Rzewski

Rzewski was born in Westfield, Massachusetts, and began playing piano at age 5. He attended Phillips Academy, Harvard, and Princeton, where his teachers included Randall Thompson, Roger Sessions, Walter Piston, and Milton Babbitt. In 1960, he moved to Italy, where he studied with Luigi Dallapiccola and began a career as a performer of new piano music, often with an

improvisatory element. A few years later he co-founded Musica Elettronica Viva with Alvin Curran and Richard Teitelbaum. In 1971 he returned to New York.

In 1977 Rzewski became Professor of Composition at the Conservatoire Royal de Musique in Liège, Belgium. He has also taught around the world, notably at Yale University, the Cincinnati College-Conservatory of Music, the California School for the Arts, and Trinity College of Music, London, among others.

Nicolas Slonimsky (1993) says of Rzewski in *Baker's Biographical Dictionary of Musicians*: "He is furthermore a granitically overpowering piano technician, capable of depositing huge boulders of sonoristic material across the keyboard without actually wrecking the instrument." Michael Schell has called him "the most important living composer of piano music, and surely one of the dozen or so most important living American composers."

Rzewski's piano music runs the gamut in style and substance. Today's program displays two distinct parts of Rzewski's storied career. His Variations on "The People United Will Never Be Defeated" is his most famous and structurally recognizable piece. *The Road* is a sprawling work that shows Rzewski's style of both written out music that is inspired by improvisation and called for in the moment improvisation.

The Road is a collection of piano music that lasts approximately 8 hours. It includes 8 parts split up into 63 pieces, which he calls, "miles." The works include numerous extended techniques, including spoken words, use of voice to make sounds, hitting parts of the piano, using props (such as toys, like the mooing toy used in today's performance of "Why"), and specific uses of all three pedals of the piano. The piano writing is free, meant to elicit the sense that the pianist is improvising, even when it is written out. Many of the "miles" also call for in the moment improvisations by the pianist.

Rzewski wrote the piece to be experienced domestically—meaning he meant for it be experienced alone in a room, just the pianist and the piano, reading through the piece at his or her leisure for however long it takes, like reading a book. Though he is quick to point out that you are also welcome to choose excerpts to play for an audience. I chose to play these two works for a variety of reasons, however, I was struck by the idea that I will be alone performing them due to the live stream nature of this recital, while also exercising the right that Rzewski provides to perform them for an audience.

Mile 47, "A Walk in the Woods" displays someone walking through the woods at a leisurely pace. It creates this effect through two techniques, the knocking on the piano which portrays the actual walking, and the playing of repeated figures in different forms and variations that portrays the senses taking in the sights and sounds. There are two improvisations called for in this piece and extensive use of the sostenuto pedal.

Mile 48, "Why," is one of the more peculiar pieces in the entire set, if not in Rzewski's entire output. It sets an excerpt from Anton Chekov's short story, "In the Ravine," where the main character, Lipa, asks an old man why God would allow her baby to be burned alive. In this piece, the pianist plays with his left hand while tapping the piano with his right, all while reciting the

excerpt from the book. The material is somber and morose; but in the end, the old man encourages Lipa wryly not to ask questions. He tells her we must accept that God gives us only the knowledge we need to survive.

Two characteristics of Chekov's works are rural settings, and the attempt to find humor in the darkest and saddest tragedies. With both things in mind, Rzewski asks the pianist to play a toy with his right hand that creates a "cow-moo" sound. At first, this seems absurd, but as the piece goes on, it blends into the texture of the piece and Chekov's unusually dark sense of humor. This piece also requires two cadenzas. The first is improvised tapping on the keyboard lid, and the second Rzewski specifies to play the piano using only your left hand. Today's performance of "Why," is dedicated to my friend Rick Unterberg, who died prematurely of covid-19, but who also would have greatly enjoyed hearing me play a mooing cow toy on an otherwise serious recital.

"The People United Will Never Be Defeated," is arguably Rzewski's most famous work. It consists of 36 variations on the Chilean Socialist Protest Song of the same name. The song was written in 1970 by Sergio Ortega celebrating the mobilization of working-class people and the rise of the Allende government in Chile. The song became the anthem of the Chilean resistance after the 1973 U. S. backed Chilean coup that put Pinochet in power. Over time, the song has become a symbol of social struggle and has been used in various protests around the world, including the "White Night Riots" in San Francisco and the "Keep Families Together," protests in Washington D.C.

Rzewski composed the piece in the fall of 1975, fulfilling a commission by pianist, Ursula Oppens. Oppens premiered the piece on February 7, 1976 at the Kennedy Center, and recorded the piece in 1979 for which she received a GRAMMY® Award nomination for Classical Record of the Year.

Rzewski wrote the song in honor of the Chilean struggle, and included other songs generally considered sympathetic with leftist politics, including the Italian socialist song, "Bandiera Rossa," and Berthold Brecht's "Solidarity Song." The piece is divided into six sets of six variations. Each set of variations contains five distinct variations, followed by a sixth variation that contains elements of the previous 5, acting as a summary of the set.

Rzewski uses all styles of 20th-century composition including serialism, song form, romantic and esoteric harmonic language, minimalism, and various extended techniques including slamming the piano lid, whistling, (which unfortunately I cannot do) groaning in pain as if being struck, catching harmonics with the pedal after a note has been played, and humming.

As in all of Rzewski's works, improvisation plays an important role. Throughout the work, Rzewski leaves room for the unknown, marking parts of the score with the instruction, recklessly, and one moment in the score "accurately," implying that the accuracy of the rest of the score can be called into question. The climax of the work comes after the 36th variation where Rzewski requests the pianist perform an improvisation of at least 5 minutes. While Rzewski does mark the improvisation optional, one is left to think that without the improvisation an important aspect of the piece has been discarded. After the improvisation, the

composer brings the theme back for a last iteration, as Bach does in the Goldberg Variations. He follows it with a fiendish coda that requires the pianist to leap around the keyboard, drawing on any last bit of energy the person has not expended over the last hour.

The length, difficulty, and emotional trials of the piece are meant to display the struggle for change. The piece exhausts the pianist, and one cannot help but wonder where you started and how it ended. Like all change, the journey often feels endless. For the pianist and the audience alike, the journey of “The People United Will Never be Defeated,” can be a struggle, but in the end, the struggle gives way to a small feeling of triumph. As with all change though, nobody knows how long it will last before the struggle returns.