

THE PIANIST’S BODY AT WORK: MEDIATING
SOUND AND MEANING IN FREDERIC
RZEWSKI’S *WINNSBORO COTTON MILL BLUES*

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When I die don’t bury me at all
Just hang me up on the spoolroom wall.
Place a knotter in my hand
So I can keep on spoolin’ in the Promised Land.

I got the Blues, I got the Blues,
I got the Winnsboro Cotton Mill Blues.
Lordy, Lordy, spoolin’s hard.
You know and I know, I don’t have to tell,
Work for Tom Watson, got to work like hell.

I got the Blues, I got the Blues,
I got the Winnsboro Cotton Mill Blues.
—“Winnsboro Cotton Mill Blues”

Frederic Rzewski uses the melody of this industrial folk song as the basis for the last of his *Four North American Ballads* for solo piano, which he completed in 1979. In the cycle Rzewski sets four American folk songs that are linked with activist movements in American history. He is known for making political content explicit in his music, and his choices of songs to set—including “El Pueblo Unido” for his earlier set of 36 variations from 1975—reflect a stance of solidarity with the working class.¹ The origins for “Winnsboro Cotton Mill Blues” are traced to the 1930s when workers at the textile-mill-turned-tyre-plant in Winnsboro, South Carolina first began coining verses.² The lyrics are intended to provoke sympathy for the hardship of factory labour and promote solidarity among the

¹ For more on Rzewski’s compositional output see Gann, *American Music in the Twentieth Century* and Pollack, *Harvard Composers*.

² The lyrics given here are taken from DuPlessis, “Textile Mill,” 2-3.

workers. The worker subsequently describes this hardship in ironic terms, with the desire to “keep on spoolin’” in the Promised Land. Such a contradictory stance is typical of Blues lyrics, where the cause of grief is presented with humour and irony as a means for tolerating difficult circumstances.³ Although *Winnsboro Cotton Mill Blues*, as a solo piano piece, does not state the lyrics explicitly, Rzewski conveys their subtle meanings through compositional techniques, situating the pianist as the song’s protagonist.

The piece opens with two alternating bass notes a half-step apart that gradually evolve into hand and forearm clusters resulting in a striking evocation of cotton mill machinery. As a first-time listener to Rzewski’s own recording of the work, I was immediately taken in by the success of the sonic representation. I initially perceived the opening as an impersonal reference to technological sounds that Rzewski skillfully developed into recognisable styles such as the blues. However, I have come to interpret the opening—and the entire work—through my own performances as an exploration of both the human agency inherent in technology and the role of technology in shaping human experience. Rzewski’s compositional approach in *Winnsboro Cotton Mill Blues* and his active role as a performer provide a unique context for discussing pianism as the interface between the human body and the piano. Reflecting on several of my own performances of Rzewski’s piece, this chapter will develop an analysis of the work in terms of embodied subjectivity, performance attention, gesture and sound mimesis, and in order to reflect on the relationships between sound, body and technology elicited by the piece I will particularly focus on a close analysis of the opening piano clusters of the piece.

Technologising the Body

Our daily language is full of references to technology for mental and physical processes resulting in assumptions that the invented technology now governs such processes. “She fell apart” and “he has a screw loose” are two common metaphors. But it is difficult to establish *what* they are metaphors for without additional implied references to technology, as in “mental breakdown” or “mental defect.” The language of computers has infiltrated our understanding of the mind and contributed to formulating a notion of the mind as distinctly separate from the body. The field of

³ It is important to note, however, that the Blues is not simply a style or an expression of social injustice and despair, but rather it also originated as an African-American genre responding to a specific experience of oppression.

medicine also plays a role in distancing mind and body, defining the latter as something to be controlled through operations, procedures, tests and substances decided on by medical practitioners. Theorists like Chris Shilling have identified the result of such technological developments as a “post-modern concern of disappearing bodies.”⁴ Writing about television in the 1970s, Jacques Lacan also noted,

You are now, infinitely more than you think, subjects of instruments that, from the microscope right down to the radiotelevision, are becoming elements of your existence.⁵

But one could argue that even with the simplest of tools—the earliest extensions of ourselves—we began to mediate our experiences through technology. Indeed, media scholars like Marshall McLuhan and Friedrich Kittler have confirmed the importance of technology not only in shaping modern and modernist understandings of the body, but in extending our perceptual capacities.

The influence of Michel Foucault on such discussions about technology and the body should also be stressed. In particular, I want to draw on Foucault's definition of technology from his 1982 essay “Technologies of the Self,” in which he outlines four categories of technologies in terms of 1) production, 2) sign systems, 3) power and 4) the self. He defines the latter category as technologies that

permit individuals to effect by their own means or with the help of others a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality.⁶

Foucault's choice of the word “technology” for each category, but particularly for the self, acknowledges the predominant role that technology plays in our perception and understanding of the world. His use of the term establishes the presence of outside forces on one's development of self, but his language also creates distance between “operations” and “bodies,” with less consideration of the role of intention and initiation in the processes. Foucault's language ultimately betrays an understanding of effect on the body from the outside—through an

⁴ Shilling, *The Body in Culture*, 14.

⁵ Lacan, *Seminar*, 82.

⁶ Foucault, *Technologies of the Self*, 18.

operation—rather than through the internal processes of intention and agency. The social constructivist underpinnings in Foucault’s analysis lead him to emphasise that “technologies permit” rather than “humans initiate.”

There are remarkable similarities between the lyrics of “Winnsboro Cotton Mill Blues” and Foucault’s theory. The song calls for a technology (the bevel) and an outside operation by another (placing the tool in the worker’s hand) to assist in achieving and maintaining immortality (“in the Promised Land”). The song’s lyrics thus make clear that “technologies” and “instruments” in such operations need not be advanced, since simpler tools have also shaped our souls. In *Winnsboro Cotton Mill Blues*, Rzewski situates the piano as a tool that has the capacity to transform the self.

Perspectives from psychology are useful when considering how work and play figure in the creation of the self. In his extensive research on “flow,” or optimal experience, psychologist Mihalyi Csikszentmihalyi explains that “following a flow experience, the organization of the self is more *complex* than it had been before.” He describes the processes of differentiation and integration that are a result of flow experience and that contribute to the growth of the self:

The self becomes more differentiated as a result of flow because overcoming a challenge inevitably leaves a person feeling more capable, more skilled....Flow helps to integrate the self because in that state of deep concentration consciousness is unusually well ordered.⁷

Csikszentmihalyi identifies different categories for flow experience, including “work as flow.” Whereas one’s work in the creative and performing arts would seem a highly likely means for achieving flow, Csikszentmihalyi also relates case studies of people who despite barren and uninspiring work conditions manage to “play with and transform the opportunities of their surroundings” in order to create flow experiences from their work.⁸ These findings from psychology help to resituate the “Winnsboro” song lyrics in terms of the pianist’s affective labour. Moreover, the emphasis on work as flow is a useful supplement to Foucault’s notion of “technologies of the self,” since it credits an

⁷ Csikszentmihalyi, *Flow*, 41. His concepts of differentiation and integration also relate to Rzewski’s compositional processes as he creates contrasting, differentiated, stylistic references that are integrated through the unifying device of the title melody.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 149.

individual's ability to direct experience through intention and mindful activity.

The "flow" experience created by focused and structured attention applies to multiple facets of pianism. Pianism refers to three aspects of piano playing. Firstly, there is the longer-term practice involved in mastering multiple styles and techniques as the requisite preparation for learning new repertoire. Secondly, there is the shorter-term practice involved in learning a new piece such as *Winnsboro Cotton Mill Blues*. And finally there is the flow of an actual performance, which concerns how the performance event creates and experiences the narrative of Rzewski's work. The piece also brings the perspective of the "work as flow" to the fore as the pianist divulges the results of hours of labour and embodies the role of "worker" from the song's lyrics. In what follows, I will develop these observations about piano technique in Rzewski's piece with regard to theorisations of mimetic acts and physical gestures in performance.

Sound Mimesis and Synaesthesia

The concept of sound mimesis has figured prominently in the field of ethnomusicology. Steven Feld's work on the cultural practices of the Kaluli people of Papua New Guinea and Theodore Levin's work on the music of Tuva in Siberia established the practice of "sound mimesis" as one of the oldest sonic cultural expressions through which people interact with and relate to their natural surroundings. Levin discusses a number of forms and functions of mimesis, including the use of instruments by hunters to lure prey, which leads him to ask if such practices would make hunters and pastoralists the "earliest sound technologists." He also points out that the Tuvan's musical practices provide spiritual sustenance in an unforgiving landscape, thus highlighting how sound technologies can fulfill a transformative function as well as serve practical needs for hunting.⁹

In addition to the movements of music-making, Levin notes the importance of physical gestures in sound mimesis, such as hand movements to depict wings fluttering, while mimicking the bird's call in sound.¹⁰ The result is a kind of synaesthetic depiction and experience, through the human body, of a known phenomenon. The work of psychologist Merlin Donald informs Levin's discussion of the cognitive

⁹ Levin, *Where Rivers and Mountains Sing*, 75-8.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 103.

foundations for mimetic behaviour, and his work on imitative behaviour highlights the movement inherent in any communication. Donald defines a mimetic act as

basically a motor performance that reflects the perceived event structure of the world, and its motoric aspect makes its content a public, that is, a potentially cultural, expression.¹¹

By privileging movement in these explanations of mimesis, and all communication, Donald establishes intentional activity as essential to acts of communication.

Although Feld and Levin's work relates mimetic theory to distinctly older and pre-modern sound practices, these concepts offer a useful framework for interpreting Rzewski's use of machine sounds at the piano. The opening of *Winnsboro Cotton Mill Blues* is at once a sonic representation of the cotton mill, a physical representation of repetitive labour and a commentary on the mechanical nature of the piano and a pianist's relationship to it. As in the visual examples above, the hand and arm movements of the pianist and the resulting action of keys, hammers, and dampers all contribute to the mimetic act, but in this case they involve the same movements needed to produce the sounds of the cotton mill at the piano rather than additional mimetic acts.

If one function of sound mimesis is to establish intentional relationships with an environment and others, then one of the most appropriate locations where I have performed *Winnsboro Cotton Mill Blues* is in Bishkek, the capital of Kyrgyzstan. On a two-week trip in June 2001 as an "American Cultural Specialist" sponsored by the U.S. Department of State, I performed Rzewski's piece along with the music of Henry Cowell and John Cage at the American University of Kyrgyzstan. My choice of Rzewski was particularly fitting as the performance took place in the former building of the Soviet Politburo, and large mural paintings of Lenin and Marx still adorned the walls of the small auditorium.

Prior to the performance I was instructed by a state department official that my task in Kyrgyzstan was to demonstrate "the American way of doing things," which implied the need to provide cultural enlightenment for the Kyrgyz people. In this context, my choice of Rzewski as a political activist with socialist leanings was an interesting take on my obligation. This cultural exchange, however, also revealed an unexpected parallel in terms of gestural and mimetic practices in music making. I already knew

¹¹ Donald, "Imitation and Mimesis," 283.

of the role that sound mimesis played in traditional Kyrgyz musical culture as a reflection of the region's nomadic heritage, but in Bishkek I also heard students play piano transcriptions of traditional songs and instrumental pieces. One of these interestingly enough was entitled "The Train" and the transcriber, Mikhail Burstein, used similar repetitive bass figures (although without clusters) in the opening to mimic the starting of a train engine.

Rzewski's piece and its pronounced physical gestures also served to bridge several encounters with students during my stay when translation failed to capture musical meanings. At one point during a presentation at Kurenkeeva Musical School, students were trying to request a piece I had played at an earlier public recital. Clarifying which piece they wanted to hear was easy. I simply asked if students wanted to hear Cowell or Rzewski by moving only my left arm (for Cowell's *The Tides of Manaunaun*) and then moving both arms in alternation (for Rzewski's *Winnsboro Cotton Mill Blues*). The back row immediately broke out into an imitation of Rzewski's cotton mill machinery with arms flying.

I have drawn attention to the visual aspects involved in the opening's sound mimesis, but my first exposure to the piece was through listening to an audio recording without the benefit of the synaesthetic experience produced in live performance, with visual and aural references to the cotton mill. Hearing piano clusters in a recording does indicate how sound is translated and experienced as movement by the listener. The purely sonic representation of the cotton mill on the recording was successful in eliciting a physical response from me, namely recognition of the movements involved, and a visual imagination of the piano's mechanics. This recognition is to be expected of the pianist, since a significant function of listening to recordings and learning by ear from them is the ability to recognise movements involved in playing. What is so successful about Rzewski's opening is that it transcends pianistic knowledge and ability to allow virtually anyone remotely familiar with the piano to identify with the large movements of the opening clusters. That is the physical attraction of clusters at the piano: to take a hand or forearm and depress keys is the most immediate technique, the most immediate interface between human and piano. The irony is that the large movement of clusters, while the "easiest" piano technique to acquire (meaning without intricate finger movements that make execution more neurologically complex), actually makes the pianist's role as "laborer" clearer to the listener and audience member. However, the lengthy repetitions of the opening do require a certain amount of physical exertion on the part of the performer and the duration of the clusters, as well as the

impressive build in texture and dynamics, contributes to the listener's understanding of the pianist's "work" in the piece. In other words, even with a purely audio recording, the "*jouissance* of embodied sound" can be successfully communicated to the listener.¹²

Rzewski's embrace of the mechanics of the piano and the necessary physical movements of piano playing provides a stark contrast to the predominant aesthetic of piano playing for much of its history but particularly in the nineteenth century when the successful pianist was required to transcend sheer mechanics and make the instrument "sing" through "effortless" playing. In effect, through the activity of sound mimesis Rzewski situates the pianist as sound technologist in the opening passages. By considering the pianist's body at work in the opening passages the listener of an audio recording or an audience member is invited to consider the work involved in interpreting multiple styles throughout the piece. However, the activity of the pianist's gestures not only raises questions concerned with listening and cultural practices of mimesis. In what follows, I will develop my analysis to reflect on modernist and postmodern strategies in terms of cultural memory.

Pastiche and Cultural Memory

In addition to the mimetic nature of the opening, the entire opening sequence is also a reference to minimalism, a style Rzewski had fully embraced in the 1960s but later rejected. In *Winnsboro Cotton Mill Blues* Rzewski is able to revisit minimalist techniques through the inherently repetitive nature of the machinery he is evoking, and the trajectory of the opening builds over three minutes to reach a stunning climax. The initial two-note motive that Rzewski expands with hand and forearm clusters gradually morphs into a boogie-woogie bass, but without the swing so as to still effect the static drive of the cotton mill. Over this bass line he introduces the *Winnsboro* melody but in an extended, rhythmically disjointed manner so as only to give a hint of the flow of the melodic line. The right hand then picks up the bass line but a minor ninth above the bass to continue the drive towards alternating ninth chords in both hands that climax in alternating black and white key clusters at the extremes of the keyboard. Even throughout the darker cluster sections and the final climax, Rzewski maintains motivic unity by referencing the descending third sequence from the beginning of the *Winnsboro* melody.

¹² Korsyn, *Decentering Music*, 152.

Following the climax of this sequence there is a long pause to allow the resonance of the strings to fade away. Rzewski then creates a complete contrast by introducing a slow, 6/8 Blues reminiscent of Art Tatum's pianism. This section sounds improvisatory, even if it is fully composed and based on the *Winnsboro* melody. It creates the effect of a cathartic spark of inspiration from the pianist after the intense mechanical drive of the opening. However, the two-note opening motive returns following this excursion to accompany the first overt statement of the *Winnsboro* melody in its original rhythm albeit at the dynamic level of *ppp*. This is in fact only a transitional moment before the player launches into a passage of complex, contrapuntal writing that juxtaposes the thematic material in different intervallic and rhythmic relationships. Only after this exploration of the *Winnsboro* melody through multiple stylistic lenses does Rzewski then allow the full melody to emerge accompanied by the original boogie-woogie bass line that grew out of machine sounds. The result is a joyous culmination of the struggle that came before, which is the struggle to find the melody and to find one's voice—one might even say to find one's self as a pianist.

This struggle is manifold in the multiple styles that the pianist is required to perform, both as a technical feat and as a search for identity and cultural memory. Rzewski's crafting of the piece is a collage of stylistic references unified by the title melody. The references themselves stand as examples of pastiche, creating a collage of pastiche as it were and bringing together various forms of postmodern discourse.¹³ Ingeborg Hoesterey has commented that

postmodern pastiche is about cultural memory and the merging of horizons past and present. One of the markers that set aesthetic postmodernism apart from modernism is that its artistic practices borrow ostentatiously from the archive of Western culture that modernism, in its search for the "unperform'd," dismissed.¹⁴

The irony is that Rzewski is borrowing from styles that were considered radically new at an earlier time and representative of modernism. His use of clusters is itself a tribute to the early American modernists Henry Cowell and Charles Ives. It is also a reference to Futurism, a facet of modernism that embraced the "enjoyment...of the noises of trams,

¹³ For a contextualisation of this view in relation to music, see Kramer, "Beyond Unity," 28.

¹⁴ Hoesterey, *Pastiche*, xi.

backfiring motors, carriages and bawling crowds” as Luigi Russolo stated in his 1913 essay “The Art of Noises Futurist Manifesto.”¹⁵

Douglas Kahn remarks on the “persuasive” nature of sounds “that announced an encounter of metal and flesh”¹⁶ and comments on the important role that war and its violent machinery had in heightening awareness of noise among the Futurists and others. Drawing on Russolo he concludes that “the battlefield serves as a model for modern listening and an art of noises since in combat the ear is much more privileged than it is in daily life.”¹⁷ To survive in the newly technologised warfare, to be aware of threats and danger, meant to have a keen sense of hearing. In his own 1968 “Parma Manifesto,” Rzewski similarly stated his view that “to be responsible means to be able to communicate the presence of dangers to others.”¹⁸ In his work as a composer and performer this responsibility surfaces in music and texts that communicate his political ideals. In the works of Futurism and even later movements influenced by its ideals, sounds of actual machines were used to create a new form of art that rejected the role of the artist as creator. Indeed, in Rzewski’s piece the pianist serves as machinist using the piano to create machine sounds. Calling on the pianist to create industrial noise rather than automated machines and develop that noise into the varied musical styles later in the piece thus underscores the agency of humans in industrialisation and the dangerous nature of factory labour for the human body.

In addition to references to Futurism and the early avant garde, Rzewski invokes cultural forms of memory throughout *Winnsboro Cotton Mill Blues*, thus forming a collage of stylistic references. Collage gained currency again in the 1960s and 1970s not only in the visual arts but also in literature and music. In a visual collage, the objects stand for themselves, albeit resituated in a different context. In *Winnsboro Cotton Mill Blues*, however, Rzewski first had to compose the objects of his collage as pastiche representations of several musical styles. The settings of the title melody, itself a reference to an earlier era, create multiple ways of hearing it: as Art Tatum’s blues, as Mary Lou Williams’ boogie-woogie, or even as the dissonant counterpoint of Ruth Crawford Seeger and other avant-garde artists of the 1930s. The result is similar to the function of collage as described by the group *Mu* in a manifesto published the year before Rzewski’s composition:

¹⁵ Quoted in Apollonio, *Futurist Manifestos*, 27.

¹⁶ Kahn, *Noise, Water, Meat*, 24.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 63.

¹⁸ Rzewski, “Parma Manifesto,” 78.

Each cited element breaks the continuity or the linearity of the discourse and leads necessarily to a double reading: that of the fragment perceived in relation to its text of origin; that of the same fragment as incorporated into a new whole, a different totality.¹⁹

Jonathan Kramer similarly notes that collage and pastiche “encourage the perceiver to make his or her own perceptual sense of a work of art.”²⁰

However, the contexts for performances also shape and mediate the listener's perceptions. As an example, a performance that I gave of Rzewski's work in the Rivera Court at the Detroit Institute of Arts in September 2005 is indicative of how the performance venue can reinforce the cultural and political references in the piece. The court is named after Mexican muralist Diego Rivera, who received a commission in 1932 from the Detroit Institute and the Arts Commission led by Edsel Ford to decorate the walls of the court. Rivera dedicated his life's work to subjects concerning the working class and its struggles, and he appropriately chose the automobile industry as a central subject for one of the murals.²¹ Rivera's vivid depictions of auto machinery resonated with Rzewski's sonic evocation of cotton mill machinery and with his collage of musical references to the 1930s. The audience confirmed my perceptions following the performance, as one member exclaimed “We got it [and] they got it too,” referring to the autoworkers and bosses depicted in the murals. This comment affirms the potential of the pianist as an agent of cultural memory whose performance interacts with and mediates between present-day audiences and the seemingly fixed representations on the walls of a museum. The audience member's comment aligns the figures in the murals and the people in the court for the duration of *Winnsboro Cotton Mill Blues*. Moreover, Rzewski's work achieves this meaning because of his evocation of styles from the American modernist era—keyboard cluster techniques, dissonant counterpoint, even its jazz harmonies—within a postmodern framework that privileges pastiche techniques and thereby heightens a sense of shared cultural and musical memory in the listener. By drawing attention to the physicality of human labour in the machine era, Rzewski further heightens these references in the context of live performance.

In conclusion, *Winnsboro Cotton Mill Blues* presents an illustrative case for analysing live performance as sonic mediation. My perception of

¹⁹ Group *Mu*, *Collages*, 34-5.

²⁰ Kramer, “Beyond Unity,” 28.

²¹ These murals can be viewed online at <http://www.dia.org/collections/AmericanArt/33.10.html>.

the work stems from my experiences as a performer. Intrinsic in my interpretation and analysis is the recognition that a successful performance of the piece requires the performer to interpret and evoke multiple styles. I trace this attribute of the work to Rzewski's creative process, which necessarily draws on the formidable experience and expertise he possesses as a pianist himself. Having performed repertoire ranging from Ludwig van Beethoven's *Hammerklavier* sonata and Karlheinz Stockhausen's *Klavierstücke* and established himself as an accomplished improviser, he has a range of stylistic languages literally at his disposal—as embodied experience—from which to craft a commentary on American musical modernism and postmodernism. In learning and performing *Winnsboro Cotton Mill Blues*, the pianist then engages with Rzewski's own representations of sounds and styles and imbues them with his or her own struggle for pianistic identity and expertise. Rzewski uses the collage of styles to comment on a pianist's mastery of the instrument and to establish the pianist's role as a cultural agent. By presenting pianism as work, Rzewski allows the piano to serve both as a means for self-expression and as a tool, or technology, that shapes the self.

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