

# MUSIC ACCORD

## FREDERIC RZEWSKI *Demons* (2018)

### Program Notes

In Dostoyevsky's novel of the same name (1871), the character Kirillov kills himself in order "to become God". Inspired by the Russian Nihilist movement of the 1860's, and specifically by the charismatic figure Nechayev, Dostoyevsky's book is a study of the self-destructive forces present in the Russian society of his time. It foreshadows Lenin and the Revolution of 1917, as well as the ideas of Nietzsche and Freud, and had a deep influence on writers like Thomas Mann, whose "Doctor Faustus" is a similar study of modern Germany.

While it is futile to try to express musical ideas in words, it is possible to say that my piece is a meditation on similar trends in the world of today.

In early November 2016, I had the honour to assist at a spectacular performance of my composition "Coming Together" of 1972 at the San Francisco Conservatory, with Angela Davis as the speaking soloist, a few days before the presidential elections. There was a public discussion that followed. Davis seemed to know the results already. She said that, if the Left had done its job, the present situation would not have arisen.

These and similar ideas were all going through my head as I was writing "Demons" a few months later. I am not religious, and don't know much about devils and such, but as an artist I cannot help feeling sensitive to whatever it is that awakens these ideas in humans, causing them to go crazy. I am not sure that scientists or doctors understand these things any better than writers or musicians. Perhaps, on the contrary, although we cannot explain them in rational terms, we can nevertheless throw some light on them, in our own way.

My piece is in four movements, and so is a kind of sonata, like the piece that preceded it, "Notasonata", written for Jennifer Koh.

There are periodic references to two songs throughout the piece: "Iroes", made popular in the 1990's by the singer Maria Dimitriadis, and a song that became known during the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960's (notably as performed by Barbara Dane), "Freedom Is A Constant Struggle", which also provided the title for the recent book of Angela Davis.

Thanks to a new generation of classical musicians like Benjamin Beilman, there is a revival of interest among younger players in new music that in some way continues the classical tradition. One can only hope that this trend will continue. Although Marx' analysis of capitalism as a ruthless system following its relentless course independently of human will continues to be valid, there are nonetheless reasons to think that alternatives are possible. As Mark Twain put it, prophecy is really hard, especially when it's about the future.

Frederic Rzewski (Feb. 12, 2018)

### Reviews

#### Boston Classical Review

With a storm outside, Beilman and Weiss provide musical sustenance  
March 8, 2018

By Aaron Keebaugh

Benjamin Beilman's Celebrity Series debut Wednesday night at Pickman Hall proved to be an evening of the unexpected.

First was the weather. Boston's second Nor'easter in a week was projected to dump up to ten inches of snow in the area.

Fortunately, the storm held off until later in the evening, making the commute to the concert relatively safe.

Beilman's program diverted from his originally scheduled selection, and the audience was treated to music by Mozart, Beethoven, and Fritz Kreisler instead of Bartók. The New England premiere of Frederic Rzewski's *Demons*, though, went on as planned.

The 28-year-old violinist is rapidly rising into the front ranks of soloists on the scene today. He plays with sterling technique and a kaleidoscopic sound that recalls that of his teacher, Christian Tetzlaff. His timbre shifts colors on a dime: sunlit phrases turn dark and then silvery within a single passage.

In Rzewski's *Demons*, those colors drive the music forward. Like much of the American composer's music, this four-movement sonata involves a political theme. Moved by the speaking of activist Angela Davis, the work's dedicatee, and by the results of the 2016 presidential election, Rzewski explores in music what he sees as the irrationality that drives much political thinking. "I am not religious, and I don't know much about devils and such," the composer said in his program note, "but as an artist I cannot help feeling sensitive to whatever it is that awakens these ideas in humans, causing them to go crazy."

*Demons* draws upon political songs for its sources. The second movement muses upon the spiritual "Freedom is a Constant Struggle," a song well known during the Civil Rights era, which unfolds through haunting passages for both violin and piano. But aside from its political message, *Demons* is a work of stunning power and simplicity. In its 30-minute length, the music traverses from agitated statements that would sound at home in Steve Reich's music to passages of sparse dissonance. Ever the experimental composer, Rzewski even calls for the pianist to dampen and pluck the strings for halo effects and metallic sonorities.

Once-popular styles shade the work as well. The pianist called upon to unleash torrents of jazzy riffs in the final movement while the violinist performs the languid parts of the score with bluesy slides.

*Demons*, written for Beilman, resulted in a searching and driving showpiece for both violinist and pianist. Beilman handled Rzewski's pointillisms and aggressive passagework with intensity and grace. Pianist Orion Weiss proved a sensitive partner here and throughout the evening, playing with crystalline technique and pearly tone. Both made a strong case for Rzewski's work, and one hopes it will go on to have many performances.

The opener was Mozart's Violin Sonata in A major, K. 526. A dance-like elegance swept through this music from the outset, with Beilman and Weiss shaping their phrases with singing tone at a swift tempo. Beilman's dusky sonorities tipped the hymn-like phrases of the second movement towards darkness. The finale was muscular and sounded with almost Beethovenian weight. Weiss was in command here, his running lines sounding with power, urgency, and crispness that enabled each note to come off with a ping.

In Beethoven's Violin Sonata No. 10 in G major, Beilman and Weiss found an avuncular warmth of tone and texture. The violinist's buttery sound transformed into rosy shades as the first movement progressed. Weiss's trills at movement's end added an almost pastoral glow.

The Scherzo had a bright, cutting edge to the sound, with Beilman's line taking on the verve of a country fiddler. Both musicians handled Beethoven's wide shifts of mood in the finale with dexterity and a touch of humor.

The beating heart of the work is the second movement, one of the most beautiful in Beethoven's violin sonatas. There, Beilman spun the arching melody through soft, radiant phrases. Weiss supplied chords that were felt more than heard.

Kreisler's Viennese Rhapsodic Fantasetta, which concluded the program, was a real treat, as Beilman and Weiss delivered a sweltering performance of its grand waltzes. Beilman's tone gleamed, and both musicians seemed to lead the other with tasteful rubato shading. As each phrase bounded with a delightful skip, one realized that both Beilman and Weiss are two musicians who can find interpretative depths even in the flashiest of pieces.

The snow, which started falling once the concert began, didn't keep the duo from offering encores. "Blues" from Ravel's Violin Sonata, had the swagger of a Gershwin song. The second, Kreisler's Liebesleid, returned the players to the lush, honey-toned sound worlds they explored throughout the evening.

CLASSICAL NOTES | DAVID WEININGER

A sure hand, at a young age, with violinist Benjamin Beilman

By David Weininger GLOBE CORRESPONDENT FEBRUARY 28, 2018

### Demons

Composer: Frederic Rzewski

Instrumentation: violin and piano

Premiering Artists: Benjamin Beilman, violin  
Orion Weiss, piano

Duration:

[Publisher Contact](#)

[Artist Contact](#)

Benjamin Beilman homepage

<http://www.benjaminbeilman.com/>

Orion Weiss homepage

<http://www.orionweiss.com/>



A few Sundays ago, the violinist Benjamin Beilman was in the midst of a rehearsal with pianist Orion Weiss, Beilman's partner for his upcoming Celebrity Series of Boston recital. They were doing their first run-through of "Demons," a formidable new piece by Frederic Rzewski, when a text appeared on Beilman's phone. It was his manager, informing him that French violinist Renaud Capuçon had had to withdraw from two sets of concerts with the Detroit Symphony Orchestra that were to begin four days later. Could Beilman step in on short notice to play three virtuoso pieces, two of which he hadn't played in some time?

That's a confluence of circumstances that might make even a seasoned musician hesitate. But Beilman simply carried on with the rehearsal until break, at which point he told his manager, sure, he'd do the Detroit concerts.

"Sometimes it's good not to have too much time to stress about something," he said by phone from Detroit. "When you get that text or that call, you immediately think: Is this possible? Maybe I'm naive or overly ambitious, but for me it was, yes, I can most certainly squeeze in whatever, 20 hours of practice a day if I need to until the concert."

Or perhaps it's neither naivete nor ambition, but rather a quiet confidence usually found in musicians with far more experience under their belts. That's the impression one gets from talking with Beilman, 28, whose playing already has its own sure balance of technical command, intensity, and interpretive finesse.

His self-assurance probably comes in part from the fact that despite early evidence of his musical gifts — he picked up the violin at 5 and seems rarely to have put it down — he was never considered a prodigy. Which he's happy about.

"To be completely frank, there were plenty of people who had far more ability than me," he said. "Who were more talented, more advanced earlier on." He admits to being "a naturally competitive person," so seeing his peers at one level simply prodded him to get better. "Whoever was in that next step, I was always clawing my way up to try and match them. So being just under the cream at the very top helped keep me motivated and hungry."

His early maturity also likely came from his studies with the German violinist Christian Tetzlaff, one of the world's most complete musicians. Asked what specifically he took from working with him, Beilman mentioned that for Tetzlaff, "the violin is kind of an afterthought. It happens to be the medium through which he interprets music, but he almost never thinks through a string perspective. He's always talking about orchestration, sounds of nature — all the important things that are not to do with the actual wooden instrument in your hand."

Beilman's recital includes music by Beethoven and Bartok, as well as the local premiere of the Rzewski, a piece commissioned for him by the Music Accord consortium. Beilman had gotten to know the American-born composer's music largely through YouTube videos, including one in which Rzewski, a superb pianist, gives a magisterial performance of his best-known work, "The People United Will Never Be Defeated!"

"There's a core strength behind all of his music," Beilman said when asked what attracted him to Rzewski's music. "You get the sense that there's a lot of muscle and aggression and aggravation to it. I know that sounds weird to gravitate toward. But there's something incredibly compelling about that."

"Demons," which is dedicated to the political activist Angela Davis, has the four-movement form of a 19th-century sonata. Its musical style and syntax, though, are clearly those of a present-day composer. This accord between old and new is of more than aesthetic significance for the composer. In a program note, Rzewski approvingly notes a trend in new music that "in some way continues the classical tradition." He then adds: "Although Marx' analysis of capitalism as a ruthless system following its relentless course independently of human will continues to be valid, there are nonetheless reasons to think that alternatives are possible."

"It feels to me like he really believes strongly in these revolutionary ideas, while still holding onto old forms," Beilman said. "The idea of a four-movement sonata — it's conservative. But what's packed inside of it, he wants to be punchy and aggressive and revolutionary."

And it's that punchiness, that muscular power to speak through musical forms, that appeals so strongly to Beilman, independent of the particular message behind it.

"What draws me in," he said, "is this idea that there's someone with such strong convictions that's able to communicate them through a fairly abstract form. Whatever motivation or political orientation he's coming from is almost irrelevant because he can communicate that without a program or without words or interviews or anything."

## About Music Accord

Comprised of top classical music presenting organizations throughout the United States, Music Accord is a consortium that commission new works in the chamber music, instrumental recital and song genres. The Consortiums goal is to create a significant number of new works and to ensure presentation of these works in venues throughout this country and, if the occasion arises, internationally. Music Accord awards commissions principally to performers who are US citizens or reside in the US and assists these performers in selecting composers who are United States citizens or who reside in the United States.

