

Frederic Rzewski Visits America

**A conversation with Frank J. Oteri @ Nonesuch Records, NYC
On John Cage's Birthday (September 5, 2002), 1:30 PM**

Videotaped by Amanda MacBlane

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1. Hierarchy, Power, and Pedigree

FRANK J. OTERI: You studied composition with a very diverse group of people whose music is very different from your own: Babbitt and Sessions, Randall Thompson, Piston, Elliott Carter...

FREDERIC RZEWSKI: I never studied with Carter...

FRANK J. OTERI: The *Grove Dictionary* says you did...

FREDERIC RZEWSKI: No!

FRANK J. OTERI: But you did study with Babbitt and Sessions?

FREDERIC RZEWSKI: Technically, yes

FRANK J. OTERI: The first pieces of yours to gain wide exposure are so different from their music, but to this day, the notion of twelve-tone composition plays a role in your work and is part of your vocabulary.

FREDERIC RZEWSKI: Hard to say. I was at Harvard in the '50s and I had some teachers who were very important for me. Randall Thompson was one of the best teachers I ever had. I was in his counterpoint class at Harvard. I think in those days the school was most importantly a place where I came together with people like myself and I think that's probably the most useful function of schools in general. It's not so much a matter of studying in the sense that information is transmitted from one generation to another, but it's where under the guidance of perhaps older people it's possible to link up with people who are doing things similar to what you're doing.

FRANK J. OTERI: Even younger people sometimes... Vaughan Williams studied with Ravel who was younger than him and that experience was very important in his development as a composer...

FREDERIC RZEWSKI: It's complicated because of course the teaching of composition is still done according to certain time-worn procedures which really don't make that much sense anymore. For instance, private lessons are something I find unproductive. So I try not to have private lessons. I try to have people in groups, for a number of reasons—one of them being the reason you had private lessons in the first place is that was the way that trade secrets could be passed from master to disciple. Mozart had secrets, and probably Beethoven had secrets, too. But there are no more secrets. So that particular forum doesn't make sense...

FRANK J. OTERI: In a way, the whole process of academic training is about validation. Those are the composers with pedigree; the others are the great unwashed. Your career has been a challenge to that. You've always been about challenging authority and challenging hierarchy. So it's interesting that you come from this illustrious academic background, studying with Babbitt who has certainly had so much influence on composition and composition training in America.

FREDERIC RZEWSKI: Well, that's something of an exaggeration. I don't think any composer has ruled over anything in this part of the world. There's not much power involved in musical composition. Aaron Copland, maybe, had a lot of influence, which he used in a good way. I don't think composers have very much to say. It's different than in Europe. In Europe, there's a situation in which people in intellectual areas and cultural positions actually wield some kind of power and influence.

FRANK J. OTERI: Definitely, to this day, Boulez hovers over music life in France...

FREDERIC RZEWSKI: For example...But you don't have that in the United States for all kinds of historical reasons. There are very few cases if any in American history where you can point to an intellectual or cultural figure who had some kind of influence in the same way that Tolstoy or Jean-Paul Sartre could be said to have held some kind of position of importance. Maybe Mark Twain is as close as you could get.

FRANK J. OTERI: It's funny. It's hard for me to see Mark Twain, who was such a cultural critic, as an authority figure in any way.

FREDERIC RZEWSKI: In the sense of an American intellectual universally respected whose voice carried some kind of weight. But not really. You can't really compare him with someone like Tolstoy who, when he spoke, masses of people listened. We really don't have that here in the United States. So, I think if there is some sort of parallel, like what you're describing, it doesn't boil down to real power or influence. Take someone like Susan Sontag. Nobody in the United States really cares what she says or what she writes about. Occasionally she might offend some people. I don't think any American president has ever felt offended by what some intellectual might say.

FRANK J. OTERI: Except for maybe Harry Truman who was really offended when Paul Hume wrote a bad review of his daughter...

[Rzewski laughs]

FRANK J. OTERI: You left America many, many years ago becoming an "expatriate composer," whatever that means. You describe a cultural life here in America where nobody wields cultural power, where it's less hierarchical. And you've based yourself in Europe, which is so much more hierarchical. Yet, musically, maybe I'm wrong in thinking this, your life's work seems to be about breaking down those hierarchies.

FREDERIC RZEWSKI: I'm the last person to have an opinion on that *[laughs]*. I don't know...I can't think of any examples where I've broken down any hierarchies.

2. On Systems

FRANK J. OTERI: Well, in trying to access where your music falls in the historical scheme of things. There was definitely a period at some point when your music was informed by minimalism, I'm thinking of pieces like *Coming Together*, but it was never really a pure minimalism in terms of what minimalism meant: a process where you don't do anything else in the piece but follow the process. And certainly, your own unique approach to serialism, which you returned to in the 1980s in pieces like *Antigone*, doesn't sound like any other music coming out of that particular systemic approach. I'm curious about how you apply serial techniques...

FREDERIC RZEWSKI: I find it difficult to say. I've studied this material and certainly have spent a lot of time with it and probably in many ways am still thinking of serialism.

FRANK J. OTERI: It's interesting because serialism was originally designed to throw out the shackles of the tonal system and liberate us from it but it very quickly became a system unto itself which also had shackles that we needed to be liberated from.

FREDERIC RZEWSKI: Well, system in a very large sense, maybe, yes. But in the same way throwing dice or consulting the *I Ching* or applying some kind of minimalistic procedures or using the collage technique, all of these things are systems. So serialism is just one system among many.

FRANK J. OTERI: So, when you write a work employing serial technique, such as *Antigone*, it's not purely serial. At least it doesn't sound like it is. I'm curious about how you constructed that music.

FREDERIC RZEWSKI: It actually was written almost in the form of a diary. And of course it's based on a text and the text has its own structure. It's not a purely musical structure; it's partly dramatic. I don't think there's time to go into it in detail.

FRANK J. OTERI: Your music has always been heterodox, polystylistic...

FREDERIC RZEWSKI: Yeah, I've heard that before. It's probably true.

FRANK J. OTERI: So it interests me, given your stylistic inclinations, that you've based yourself in Europe which to our notions is so much more stratified.

FREDERIC RZEWSKI: I can't really say. I've thought about why I've done certain things in my life and I've come to the conclusion that there really is no reason at all. And I think that's true of many people. One tends to make life-changing decisions... You fall in love. You get married. You make important decisions very often on impulse without thinking about it and for no good reason. And later you invent reasons to explain why you did what you did. I don't know why I ended up living in Brussels. I just can't say why something happened the way it did. I wish I could. But I can say how it happened. I went to Italy on a Fulbright in 1960 and I ran into Severino Gazzelloni, who was playing in lots of festivals at the time, and I ended up being his pianist for a while. And that way I got into performing in Europe. One thing led to another. I met my wife. We had children. I came back to the United States a few times. But by the time we moved back to New York in the '70s, we had three children already. We were living in New

York for five years with basically no money and it was not a good situation. So we moved back to Europe and things just developed that way. It's true that probably it was easier and still is, as far as I can see, to make a living with new music in Europe than in North America.

FRANK J. OTERI: Why do you think that is?

FREDERIC RZEWSKI: I think there are many reasons for that, both having to do with the culture and the structure in which the culture is replenished and supported. The fact that in North America, people tend to live separated geographically and it's an automobile-based culture so people don't go to concerts as often as they do in European cities, and all kinds of reasons. I don't know myself. But I do know that I play a lot in Northern Europe, especially, and have very few concerts in the United States.

FRANK J. OTERI: I want to get back to that meeting with Gazzelloni. Here you were a Harvard grad who studied with all these big names, and you came to Europe on a Fulbright and soon met up with David Tudor, John Cage, Christian Wolff, people who had a view of musical composition that people at the time believed was diametrically opposed to the serialism of Babbitt and his followers.

FREDERIC RZEWSKI: Well, you might think so. Actually, there's a lot more that these different currents have in common. I reflected on this subject in the last few years and I realized you have all these different trends in 20th-century composition and they seem to be different. But actually they have one thing in common, all these different schools, and that is that they're all system based. They're all based on systems of one kind or another: there's the twelve-tone technique; there's chance procedures; there's minimalism... All of these have to do with some kind of gimmick or machine for producing music. The one thing that they don't do, the one thing that composers in the 20th century don't do, is to simply write down the tunes that are going through their heads. I think for quite interesting reasons, composers, unlike painters, poets, and so forth, have never seriously been concerned with exploring the area of the unconscious. There are no surrealist composers. There are people who are kind of cousins of the surrealists like Erik Satie, or you could point to early Schoenberg or Mahler or Morton Feldman. But there are no composers who, unlike jazz musicians or who like jazz musicians rather, simply explore stream of consciousness methods of writing. Composers in the 20th century tend to be more like scientists or mathematicians than poets. I think it has to do with the fact that so-called serious music is still a descendant of sacred music. It's secular, but there's division between serious and light, which is very clear in music as opposed to other forms of expression. It's still related to the division of sacred and secular. So composers are still very much a part of the Christian theological tradition, if you like. And so, the unconscious mind, and everything connected with it, is still, so to speak, anathema. And this is the area that interests me.

FRANK J. OTERI: Well, one of things I've always found so fascinating about Cage is that although he was promulgating indeterminate music, he hated jazz.

FREDERIC RZEWSKI: No, he didn't hate jazz. In fact, there are some of his pieces that are definitely jazz-related.

FRANK J. OTERI: He made a great deal of comments that were disdainful toward jazz and the whole notion of improvising musicians.

FREDERIC RZEWSKI: I know what you're talking about but it's not completely true. He and Tudor did a lot of improvising. They didn't call it that, but that's what it was.

3. Performing

FRANK J. OTERI: Well, during that time in Europe you also came into direct contact with some of the leading figures of the free jazz movement such as Anthony Braxton. You even recorded an album with Steve Lacy. Part of what separated you from all these other composers from the beginning is that in addition to being a composer, you were always a performer as well, a pianist.

FREDERIC RZEWSKI: That's how I make my living.

FRANK J. OTERI: And you frequently play the music of other composers, not just your own...

FREDERIC RZEWSKI: Correct.

FRANK J. OTERI: You've also recorded music by Tom Johnson and Henri Pousseur. I heard your recent recording of music by Cornelius Cardew; it's wonderful...

FREDERIC RZEWSKI: I'm glad you like it.

FRANK J. OTERI: What started first for you?

FREDERIC RZEWSKI: Playing or writing? I think they started more or less at the same time. It was so far back that I can't remember it clearly. I started playing the piano when I was four or something like that. I still have some notebooks of infantile scrawls from age five, so the two things went together from the very beginning.

FRANK J. OTERI: To have that physical tactile connection to making music, rather than just a cerebral one, perhaps guarantees that you're not going to exclusively be a scientist, but also a poet.

FREDERIC RZEWSKI: There was a time when I entered the idea of going into science. I was interested in chemistry, astronomy... Still am! I try to keep up with new work in the sciences.

FRANK J. OTERI: But your approach to music is not exclusively a scientific or a mathematical one, it's more poetic...

FREDERIC RZEWSKI: Oh no, I don't know what it is. I just write down what's in my head.

FRANK J. OTERI: I'd be inclined to group you with those composers you were grouping together before when you talked about musical cousins to the surrealists: Satie, Feldman...

FREDERIC RZEWSKI: I would like to be in that league. I aspire to be in that league. I'm not sure I'm there yet.

4. Electronics and Live Music

FRANK J. OTERI: Recently I went record shopping and picked up a re-issue of an LP you were part of: Musica Elettronica Viva. An LP called *The Sound Pool*...

FREDERIC RZEWSKI: Where did you say you found that?

FRANK J. OTERI: A great record store called Downtown Music Gallery. That record is quite a sonic experience...

FREDERIC RZEWSKI: That recording was a total accident. As I remember, this was a concert that we did. Well, you can hardly call it a concert, because it was Paris in 1969 and there were perhaps 300 people performing in this building. They were all over the place. And I think Alvin Curran happened to have his tape recorder going in the men's room. There must have been 50 or 60 people in that men's room. And I think that's where most of that recording took place. I don't remember exactly. So it was a total accident.

FRANK J. OTERI: For me this recording raises the whole issue of the difference between a live performance and a recording. One of the things I kept thinking while I was listening to it is that while it was interesting, there was something I really wasn't getting from the record. I wish I could have been there because I missed something from the record...

FREDERIC RZEWSKI: Well, you know what they say about the '60s. If you can remember it, you weren't there! But I can tell you about it...

FRANK J. OTERI: But even the name of the group, Musica Elettronica Viva, implies that it is meant to be a live experience. It was hard for me to hear what the electronics were on this record.

FREDERIC RZEWSKI: The electronics were definitely there someplace, but whether they were in the men's room, I rather doubt it. *[laughs]*

FRANK J. OTERI: Your music is so associated with the piano because you are a pianist. You have written so much piano music over the years and now Nonesuch has released this seven CD set of you playing your piano music. So I don't really think of you as someone involved with electronic music but you were part of this extremely influential group with Alvin Curran and Richard Teitelbaum, both of whom still work extensively with electronics...

FREDERIC RZEWSKI: I did quite a lot of work with electronics until my children started to grow up and then I had to make a choice. I couldn't afford both. So all of my equipment I turned over to Alvin Curran who stayed in Rome when we moved back to New York in the early '70s and that was kind of the end of my active involvement in electronics. I've been thinking of going back to it again because now of course it's cheaper and easier.

FRANK J. OTERI: The other people who were part of that group, Curran and Teitelbaum, are still very active. I just recently heard an album on New Albion of new work by Teitelbaum for electronically processed shakuhachi. Fascinating stuff, but a very different road than the one you took.

FREDERIC RZEWSKI: That's his specialty. He also does not have children. Neither does Alvin. I just couldn't afford all of the expense and feed the children at the same time.

FRANK J. OTERI: That's really food for thought. This taps into this whole idea of a live versus pre-recorded experience. Forgive me if I'm putting a thought in your head, it seems that for you music is first and foremost a live experience. I know we're here at Nonesuch and one of the reasons we're talking is because of this amazing, unprecedented seven CD set of you playing your piano music. But I get the sense that it is important for you to perform in front of an audience.

FREDERIC RZEWSKI: Well, as I say, that's how I make my living. But, on the other hand, a lot of the stuff I've done is meant for piano players. Not so much for an audience as for the performers.

FRANK J. OTERI: Certainly the extremely long piece of yours, *The Road*, four parts of which are on these CDs, which you describe as a novel, is analogous to something like the *Well Tempered Clavier*. It's really a piece that's meant to be played at home.

FREDERIC RZEWSKI: That's right.

FRANK J. OTERI: Who would sit and listen to this in a concert hall for seven hours?

FREDERIC RZEWSKI: Nobody. But that's not important. Maybe a few people...but that's not the point. I wanted to write something that was long enough, when it is finished it will be eight hours, so that very few people, if any, would cover the whole territory. The whole point of *The Road*, which is what it's called, is that it is there when you turn on to it and it's still there when you turn off of it. So it doesn't have a clear beginning or an ending.

FRANK J. OTERI: For years in the *Guinness Book of World Records* the longest piano piece was Sorabji's *Opus Clavicembalisticum*, and then that was knocked out of the ring by La Monte Young's *Well Tuned Piano* which now lasts about 6 hours when he does it, but you've beat them both...

FREDERIC RZEWSKI: But this is nothing new. The *Well Tempered Clavier* lasts about 4 hours. And the *Fitzwilliam Virginal Book*, but I guess it's not a single work. The Mendelssohn *Songs Without Words* lasts a couple of hours. This is part of a long tradition.

5. Other Pianists

FRANK J. OTERI: I wanted to talk with you about your piano music played by other pianists. Certainly a work like *The People United Will Never Be Defeated* has almost achieved the status of being a piece of standard repertoire in new music. There have been so many different pianists who've played it over the years and there are so many recordings of it in circulation: Ursula Oppens, Marc-André Hamelin... There have been a really wide variety of interpretations. And then there's you—the performer who also plays this music. What is your feeling about sending this music out in the world and getting back all these other interpretations?

FREDERIC RZEWSKI: What do you mean?

FRANK J. OTERI: Well, it's almost like a parent-child situation. You give birth to this music and then one day there it is—existing out in the world separate and apart from you.

FREDERIC RZEWSKI: I see what you mean. Sometimes it's a little difficult. Sometimes I have mixed feelings about that because sometimes I notice that the young guy gets the gig and I think, "Well, you know, why not me?" On the other hand, I can't really complain if somebody's playing the music well. I guess it's all for the best.

FRANK J. OTERI: Well, certainly even though you play all of these pieces yourself, some of them were written for others, like *De Profundis*, which was originally written for Anthony de Mare...

FREDERIC RZEWSKI: Yes.

FRANK J. OTERI: That's quite an intense piece...

FREDERIC RZEWSKI: Depends on who does it. When Tony does, it's funny. When I do it, it's sad.

FRANK J. OTERI: In both cases, it's pretty intense. I've heard both of you do it. Tony I heard do it live as well which was really an experience.

FREDERIC RZEWSKI: A number of people have done it and I noticed that all of the interpretations I've heard of that piece have been good. There's something about the writing that's a built-in safety mechanism against mediocrity. No conventional or inhibited performer will go anywhere near this piece because it calls for a considerable amount of courage to perform these things in front of an audience. So everybody who does play this piece has an original and creative approach to it.

FRANK J. OTERI: A great deal of your piano music is not virtuosic in the standard definition. It's more virtuosic as performance art, if you will: the grunting and tapping, the whoops, singing, and so forth. It's a really different approach to the notion of performance.

FREDERIC RZEWSKI: Well, I learned a lot from John Cage. He was always an important role model for me and, of course, he was a master of this kind of thing.

6. Other Ensembles and the Orchestra

FRANK J. OTERI: You've written for other instruments as well so I thought it would be interesting to talk a bit about groups you've worked closely with and not so closely with who have played your music. You've written several pieces for Zeitgeist, a wonderful ensemble based in Minneapolis. And they recorded these pieces. Now, they're a rare example of a group that will really spend the time to get inside the music.

FREDERIC RZEWSKI: It's true. There aren't too many groups like that, but there are some. I feel quite optimistic, actually. I think there are more and more groups of young performers. I feel like the avant-garde is now coming back. There was kind of a lull period in the '90s when not much was happening. And now I have the feeling that the kind of 20 to 30-year-old generation is starting to get interesting again in experimental music. And that's true all over the world.

FRANK J. OTERI: Getting back to working with Zeitgeist, how did their musical sensibilities inform the music you wrote for them.

FREDERIC RZEWSKI: For a number of reasons, I wasn't able to spend too much time with them so we weren't in very close contact. But on the other hand, we kept renewing it. So I got to know them pretty well. A lot of it had to do with the nature of the instrumentation. Minneapolis is a place where they build steel drums, so that's how I got into writing for steel drums because they happen to be particularly good at it. So that's just a geographical accident I guess. But, certainly that conditions the choice of instruments, for example.

FRANK J. OTERI: What about writing for the orchestra? You've written six orchestral works over the years I believe.

FREDERIC RZEWSKI: That many?

FRANK J. OTERI: I remember being at a performance almost 20 years ago at the New York Philharmonic. It was part of the *Horizons* Festival that Jacob Druckman coordinated. I'm still trying to remember the title of your piece, but I never forgot the piece itself, which I thought was really fascinating. But, to my surprise at the time, the audience reaction was so bad.

FREDERIC RZEWSKI: I don't remember that. [laughs]

FRANK J. OTERI: You were a piano soloist in that...

FREDERIC RZEWSKI: *The Silence of Infinite Spaces*.

FRANK J. OTERI: Yeah, that's the name. For me it was sort of a horrible and wonderful experience at the same time. When people were booing and loudly walking out, part of me thought, "Yeah! This is great!" As a teenager I felt this was the real punk rock, playing a piece that got all these subscribers mad. But at the same time it was really upsetting to get a taste of this orchestra subscriber culture which is so closed minded, where music has to go a certain way in order to be valid, and if you don't make music that way you're not making music in their mind. And as a composer this is upsetting, because it's appealing to write in a large form for a

whole bunch of musicians because it can sound really, really great, but there are all these other issues associated with it.

FREDERIC RZEWSKI: What can I say? What kind of issues?

FRANK J. OTERI: You know, the internal structure of how an orchestra works and the whole subscription model for constructing an audience. Who goes to the orchestra?

FREDERIC RZEWSKI: I don't. I certainly don't. It doesn't appeal to me.

FRANK J. OTERI: But there's a lot of really great music written for this medium.

FREDERIC RZEWSKI: But it is an anachronistic form. The social structure of the orchestra is really something inherited for 18th-century feudal society where the musician is not an artist but some kind of servant. Of course, this is something that shouldn't exist. It shouldn't be allowed! *[laughs]* My wife Nicole always thought that orchestras should be abolished. Maybe one should be kept, some kind of museum like they have some kind of gagaku ensemble in Japan just to keep the tradition going. And I sort of agree with that. I don't see any reason orchestras should continue. They don't do anything useful.

FRANK J. OTERI: But you've written six orchestral pieces!

FREDERIC RZEWSKI: Well, usually it wasn't my idea. It was somebody who asked for it. And with few exceptions, I can't think of any good performances of them. Mostly my experience with orchestras has been negative. No, I'm no longer really interested in it and I don't have much to do with this form, it's true. Some people do this very well, and that's fine, but it's not my particular forte and I'm not drawn to it and the orchestras in general are not drawn to me either. So, we have a very good relationship!

7. Publishing and Recording

FRANK J. OTERI: How about publishing and recording? You took a very interesting stance that we did a news story about on *NewMusicBox*, the notion of "copyleft" as opposed to copyright...

FREDERIC RZEWSKI: Yes.

FRANK J. OTERI: Now we're in an era where all the record companies are all up in arms about the proliferation of file swapping. Everything's going to be free and there will no longer be an economy to fuel the making of recordings. And, theoretically, scores can similarly be swapped, so what is a publisher to do? The models that have been the infrastructure for music are now at a crossroads.

FREDERIC RZEWSKI: I have very little to do with music publishers and this is something that's always puzzled me because I have spent most of my professional life doing new music, not merely my own, but other composers, yet I've had little or no contact with the world of publishing. I've felt that one of us must be wrong and I've decided it's them. I can think of very few cases where music publishers are actually helping the cause of new music. In most cases they are obstacles to the dissemination of new music. And quite sincerely I can't understand why anyone would want to be a music publisher in the first place! It must be very difficult to make money with new music. Why would anyone want to do it? I think it would be better if they just disappeared. Besides, today you don't need music publishers, you can be your own publisher.

FRANK J. OTERI: I know so many people in that world who really are true believers in and crusaders for new music

FREDERIC RZEWSKI: Yes, I know, it has a symbolic value, which still carries a lot of weight. It's somehow a form of prestige if your music is published by a well-known publisher. But as far as I can see, most of these people don't do anything for the music. On the contrary, they just take the money and run!

FRANK J. OTERI: I think there are some important exceptions to this, not just publishers but record companies as well. Take Nonesuch, for example, putting out this seven CD set of your music. That's a tremendous endorsement of you and your work. It's atypical in our time or in any time. It's a huge statement for them to be making. And I know it's going to be lower priced than a seven CD set would normally be in order to reach more people. A lot of work on their part went into this. And that's true for the other smaller labels that have put out your music over the years like New Albion and O.O. Discs and CRI. And record companies are businesses so this is an investment they've made. But one wonders with what is going on in the record business right now, where this will be ten years from now...

FREDERIC RZEWSKI: I don't know. I have never understood the music industry. I don't know how it works. I know very little about it. I've had very little contact with it. I've done a number of things for various record companies. But as far as Nonesuch is concerned, this is the first time I've had a contact at a record company that has actually asked my opinion about certain things like: am I happy about the cover, and so forth. I'm very flattered by that. But I don't know how it

works. I don't know what they hope to achieve. I'm just glad they're doing it. I don't know anything about the music business.

8. The Role of the Composer in Society

FRANK J. OTERI: Let's talk a bit about the role of the composer in society. You're an outspoken person about politics and have pretty firm opinions about music making. What should the role of a composer in our society be?

FREDERIC RZEWSKI: I don't think there's any "should." You could say something about what composers have been objectively in terms of the world around them historically and I think that probably if it's possible to speak about what the role of the composer is, as you put it, today, it's probably not that much different from a hundred or a hundred and fifty years ago. It seems to me that there it's much clearer, if you look at the second half of the 19th century, you had what were called these national composers: Grieg, Smetana, Dvorak, and of course Wagner is the biggest one. And the role of these composers in my opinion seems to have been to express in lofty terms, with more or less impressive means like symphony orchestras, the national soul as it appears in the mythological history of the nation, the natural beauties of the country, and so forth. And I think that has not changed a great deal. So today, composers no longer write symphonic poems about national heroes but they still somehow express the aspirations of the national culture. Notice that whenever you see the name of a composer in print it's usually accompanied by an adjective qualifying the nationality of the composer.

FRANK J. OTERI: Which is interesting getting back to you as an expatriate. Do you still consider yourself an American composer?

FREDERIC RZEWSKI: Yeah, sure. There's no way you can avoid it. If you take somebody like John Cage who was certainly one of the most cosmopolitan figures in this field, he was still an American composer and I think there are very few people who can escape from that. This is something that you have around for better or worse.

FRANK J. OTERI: Certainly I hear it in some of your works directly, whether it's the *North American Ballads*, or *Jefferson*, where you're setting part of the Declaration of Independence. A composer from Finland or Venezuela wouldn't do that or, if they did, it would be for very different reasons.

FREDERIC RZEWSKI: Yes, I agree. But where does that take us?

FRANK J. OTERI: Well, if you're still an American composer and you say composers aspire to their national myths, does your music aspire to a national myth about America? Should people be thinking about this when they listen to your music?

FREDERIC RZEWSKI: I don't know. It's true that probably a good chunk of what I've done has to do with some kind of local... Well, I did grow up in North America and I speak the English language. I'm an American even though I've spent more than half my life outside the United States by this time. I'm still very connected with this country's culture.