

Frederic Anthony Rzewski (b. 1938)

Coming Together

The American composer and pianist studied at Harvard and Princeton Universities with Walter Piston, Roger Sessions and Milton Babbitt. While also studying Greek Literature and Philosophy, his compositions were equally influenced by a friendship with John Cage. Having gained a reputation as a virtuoso pianist (he was described later as a “granitically overpowering piano technician”) he travelled to Europe in the 1960s, studying with Dallapiccola in Italy and in 1966 helped to found a performance group called *Musica Elettronica Viva* (MEV). Based in Rome, the group performed concerts across Europe using live electronic instruments in improvisation. Their early experiments with amplification and the use of synthesizers to mutate sounds quickly became notorious as the concerts frequently resulted in riots. The following account of a MEV concert was given by Rzewski in an interview in 2003:

“.. So we came for this event and that afternoon I wrote these texts simply off the top of my head and in the evening, we did this happening, which consisted mostly in very free, improvised actions. Lebel prompted the audience to take the theatre out into the streets. People from the establishment and the authorities looked at this place full of people and all smoking good hash and they got a little freaked and decided to close the event taking off the electricity. MEV was playing and suddenly, there was no sound! ..Jean Jacques decided to go to the streets and take the event directly into the city but the next day, the University was occupied by the students- the action against the artists had an inflammatory effect.”

As so often in Rzewski's work *Coming Together* mixes together composed and improvised elements. The score consists of a written line of sixteenth notes from which the players extract their material by following detailed instructions. The music is set under text taken from letters written by a prisoner, Sam Melville, in Attica State prison at the time of the riots in 1971. This shocking event in which forty-three persons lost their lives is tragically reflected in the optimistic words of Melville:

“I think the combination of age and a greater coming together is responsible for the speed of the passing time. It's six months now, and I can tell you truthfully, few periods in my life have passed so quickly. I am in excellent physical and emotional health. There are doubtless subtle surprises ahead, but I feel secure and ready. As lovers will contrast their emotions in times of crisis so am I dealing with my environment. In the indifferent brutality, the incessant noise, the experimental chemistry of food, the ravings of lost hysterical men, I can act with clarity and meaning. I am deliberate, sometimes even calculating, seldom employing histrionics except as a test of the reactions of others. I read much, exercise, talk to guards and inmates, feeling for the inevitable direction of my life.”