

NWCR747

Frederic Rzewski

Jefferson / Antigone-Legend



1. *Jefferson* (1970) (12:13)
2. *Antigone-Legend* (1982) (53:12)
Carol Plantamura, soprano; Frederic Rzewski,
piano

Total playing time: 65:25

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Notes

Carol Plantamura and Frederic Rzewski met in 1965 when they were both at the Center for the Creative and Performing Arts at the State University of New York (SUNY), Buffalo. After beginning to work together in 1966, they collaborated in Rome as members of the improvising collective Musica Elettronica Viva, and from 1966 to 1970 they performed together throughout Italy, Belgium, the Netherlands, and Germany as a piano-vocal duo. *Jefferson* was written for Carol Plantamura in 1970 as part of a series of pieces called “Monuments.” The text consists of the first paragraph and the first four sentences of the second paragraph of Thomas Jefferson’s eloquent *Declaration of Independence*, which was adopted by the Continental Congress, in Philadelphia, on July 4, 1776. In setting this text Rzewski made a political statement that was both particularly meaningful in the context of the turbulent late 1960s, and pertinent for all times. The premiere took place at the American Academy in Rome and roused a great deal of positive and passionate public sentiment. This recording was made in the studios of the Westdeutscher Rundfunk (WDR) in Cologne, Germany, in the fall of 1970 during a tour Rzewski and Plantamura were making in Germany. In both *Jefferson* and *Antigone*, Rzewski, striving for a more “natural” sound, asked Plantamura to sing with a diction that was more vernacular than what her training would normally lead her to. In 1971 Rzewski returned to the United States, while Plantamura remained in Europe. They were reunited in Rome in 1976, and in 1983 they teamed up again to perform *Antigone-Legend* at the California Institute of the Arts. This performance created such a stir that Rzewski and Plantamura went on to perform the work many more times between 1983 and 1992 in the United States, Canada, Belgium, Switzerland, and Italy, often in conjunction with a puppeteer or a puppet

troupe. *Antigone* was recorded in 1986 at the University of California, San Diego, where Plantamura has been a faculty member since 1978.

Jefferson

I wrote *Jefferson* in the summer of 1970 in Rome, after coming back from a U.S. tour with the improvising collective MEV—a tour cut short by the massacre at Kent State University in the spring of that year. The bloody confrontation, the government’s increasing tyranny, and its readiness to use violence against its own people convinced many that a potentially revolutionary situation existed in the United States, and indeed in the world. A vision existed of a nascent revolutionary culture, both peaceful and beautiful, that would replace the old, patriarchal, acquisitive, and warlike culture that had dominated the century. The music of this new culture was free improvisation in the street, with no distinction between “performers” and “audience.” MEV’s *Sound Pool*, in which audience and musicians improvised together, with the musicians trying to give some direction, came closer to this revolutionary esthetic than any other formalized music I knew. This ecstatic, collective, spontaneous music oscillated between the two poles of sustained high-intensity screaming and static, trance-like drones.

Although to the skeptical outsider it might have seemed primitive, monotonous, and totally predictable, to the active participant this music contained startling surprises, moments of exaltation, and perceptions of apparently miraculous communication among large numbers of people. (In my opinion, both of these viewpoints had validity, but neither was valid without the other.) Although for some time I had been mainly concerned with the spontaneous and largely

improvised music of MEV, I felt the need to return to the discipline of writing as well. I also desperately needed to earn some money. The prospect of some vocal recitals with Carol Plantamura provided the impetus for the composition of *Jefferson*. I wanted to write a series of vocal pieces based on three texts that had special meaning for me, but I only completed two (the other was based on Freud's *Civilization and its Discontents*).

In the case of *Jefferson* I chose the opening sentences of the *Declaration of Independence*, a text I had read in school but hadn't paid much attention to since. Suddenly it seemed relevant. It spoke of the legitimacy of revolution: "Whenever any form of government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the right of the people to alter or abolish it." Its lofty rhetoric was clearly the source of much of the current political jargon, and in fact provided a cloak of respectability for the antiwar movement.

Governments, according to the *Declaration*, are not to be overthrown for "light and transient causes"; on the contrary: "all experience hath shown, that mankind are more disposed to suffer, while evils are sufferable, than to right themselves by abolishing the forms to which they are accustomed." Just as the French and English revolutions wore the Roman toga or spoke the language of the Bible, the revolution of today could invoke the words of the Founding Fathers. The more I read and reread the text, the more it seemed to me like a lofty *cantus firmus* that could overlay one of the quieter sections of a MEV "Sound Pool." Long notes in the voice part evoked the tribal chanting characteristic of these spontaneous gatherings.

The hypnotic repetitions in the piano part are a kind of sublimated condensation of the things I was doing in MEV improvisations. At the same time, a rigorous structuralism in the writing techniques seemed necessary, both to provide a rational counterweight to the otherwise unrestrained freedom of the chant, and to reflect the sober and careful construction of the text. The basic technique, which I first used in a piece called *Les Moutons de Panurge*, I called "squaring"—a melodic sequence is gradually built up by adding a note at a time, and then washed away, in a slow, giant wave, by subtracting notes from the completed pattern. We performed *Jefferson* in a number of venues, and made a few radio recordings. The reception was generally less than enthusiastic. The tonal language was unacceptable in contemporary music circles, and in the milieu of the political left—in many ways equally orthodox—the piece was denounced as "capitalist realism." It was put in a drawer and was not performed at all for twenty-five years (partly also because of the extreme difficulty of the piano part). Looking at it again now, however, as the world shifts into the Age of Globalitarianism, I do not find it old or dated. Could it be, as some have suggested, that the time has come around again when it may become necessary to call, with music as well as words, for "a new social contract on a planetary scale"?¹

—Frederic Rzewski, 1997

Bertholt Brecht's "Antigone-Legend" is a 189-line poem in dactylic hexameter, written in a kind of pseudo-archaic German, which Brecht drafted at the time of his return to Europe in December 1947, simultaneously with his adaptation for the stage of Hölderlin's translation of the *Antigone* of Sophocles. The "bridge verses," in which the dramatic action of the play is condensed in narrative form, as if in a sort of folk-epic, were secondarily intended as an exercise for another long-standing project (never realized): a version in verse of the *Communist Manifesto*. But their principal function was another, practical one, directly related to the

play's first performance in Chur, Switzerland: during the rehearsals, the lines from the "Legend" corresponding to the scene about to be played were read by the stage manager to each actor before his/her entrance. The purpose of this operation was, in Brecht's words, to "subordinate the spectacle of the story" (Preface to the *Antigone-modell*). One of Brecht's main objectives in adapting the Sophocles/Hölderlin text was to bring the "highly realistic folk-legend" out of the "ideological fog" that surrounded it (*Diaries*, December 16, 1947). The use of the "Legend" as a transitional text to be recited backstage between scenes was supposed to prevent the "transformation of the actor into the character": the actor's main function was to "point" out, to show what was going on (Preface to the *Antigone-modell*).

In my setting of Brecht's poem I have tried to remain faithful to his basic conception: Firstly: The piece should be performed, if possible, not as pure concert music, but rather as an accompaniment to a visual representation of the play's action. Secondly: I have tried with various musical means to reinforce the "folk-realism" of Brecht's treatment. The pseudo-ancient flavor of the German is largely absent from Judith Malina's translation, which is written in more or less idiomatic English; in exchange, however, it adheres with remarkable fidelity both to the sense and to the meter of the original, and in some case I feel it is better suited to the music than Brecht's text itself. I wrote the *Antigone-Legend* between April and November 1982, at a time when on the world stage another tragic story was played out, of a country that had forgotten the wisdom that could have been learned from earlier tragedies: "That's right. That's how it is. Anyone who uses violence against his enemy / Will turn and use violence against his own people" (*Antigone*, vv. 433–434, translation Malina). As I worked every day on my piece, I often had the uncanny feeling that I was not dealing with material from the past, but on the contrary with a continuing story that from day to day approached its fateful end. This was not exactly a pleasant sensation, but perhaps therein lies a clue to why such a tale continues to speak to us today after thousands of years. My piece is respectfully dedicated to Roswitha Trexler, the East German singer-actress.

—Frederic Rzewski, 1982

Frederic Rzewski (b Westfield, MA, 13 April 1938) studied music at first with Charles Mackey in Springfield, Massachusetts, and subsequently with Walter Piston, Roger Sessions, and Milton Babbitt at Harvard and Princeton universities. In 1960 he was awarded a Fulbright Fellowship to go to Italy, where he studied with Luigi Dallapiccola and met Severino Gazzelloni, with whom he performed in a number of concerts, thus beginning a career as a performer of new piano music. Rzewski's early friendships with Christian Wolff and David Behrman, and (through Wolff) his acquaintance with John Cage and David Tudor strongly influenced his development both as a composer and as a performer. In Rome in the mid-sixties, together with Alvin Curran and Richard Teitelbaum, he formed the group MEV (*Musica Elettronica Viva*), which quickly became known for its pioneering work in live electronics and improvisation. Bringing together both classical and jazz avant-gardists (like Steve Lacy and Anthony Braxton), MEV developed an esthetic of music as a spontaneous collective process, an esthetic that was shared with other experimental groups of the same period (e.g., the Living Theatre and the Scratch Orchestra). The experience of MEV can be felt in Rzewski's compositions of the late sixties and early seventies, which combine elements derived equally from the worlds of written

and improvised music (*Les Moutons de Panurge, Coming Together*).

During the seventies Rzewski experimented further with forms in which style and language are treated as structural elements, the best-known work of this period being *The People United Will Never Be Defeated!*, a fifty-minute set of piano variations. A number of pieces for larger ensembles written between 1979 and 1981 show a return to experimental and graphic notation (*Le Silence des Espaces Infinis, The Price of Oil*), while much of the work of the eighties explores new ways of using twelve-tone technique (*Antigone-Legend, The Persians*). A freer, more spontaneous approach to writing can be found in more recent compositions (*Whangdoodles, Sonata*). Rzewski's largest-scale work to date is *The Triumph of Death* (1987–1988), a two-hour oratorio based on texts adapted from Peter Weiss's 1965 play *Die Ermittlung* (The Investigation). Work in progress includes *The Road*, a two-and-half-hour "novel" for solo piano, and an orchestral work commissioned by the Donaueschingen festival for performance in October 1997. Since 1983 Rzewski has been professor of composition at the Conservatoire Royal de Musique in Liège, Belgium. He has also taught at the Yale School of Music, the University of Cincinnati, the State University of New York at Buffalo, the California Institute of the Arts, the University of California at San Diego, Mills College, the Royal Conservatory of the Hague, the Hochschule der Künste in Berlin, and the Hochschule für Musik in Karlsruhe.

Soprano **Carol Plantamura** has collaborated with many of the leading composers of our time, including Frederic Rzewski, Pierre Boulez, John Cage, Luciano Berio, Pauline Oliveros, Betsy Jolas, Robert Erickson, Lukas Foss, Bernard Rands, and Vinko Globokar. She is the author of the children's coloring book *Woman Composers*, published in 1983 by Bellerophon Books, and of *The Opera Lover's Guide to Europe*, published in 1996 by Citadel Press. Plantamura was born in Los Angeles, graduated from Occidental College, and was an original member of the Rockefeller-funded Creative Associates at SUNY Buffalo under the direction of the composer Lukas Foss. She spent twelve years living in Italy and performing in virtually all the important concert venues in Europe, as well as in Australia, New Zealand, Japan, and the United States. She was an original member of the groups Musica Elettronica Viva (Rome), Teatro Musica (Rome), and 2e2m (Champigny, Paris), and performed many times with Nuova Consonanza (Rome) and L'Ensemble Intercontemporain (Paris), as well as in opera houses and with symphony orchestras throughout Europe. She founded and

performed for fourteen years with the Five Centuries Ensemble, a group that specialized in seventeenth and twentieth century music. As a professor at the University of California, San Diego, she is head of the vocal department, and teaches voice and undergraduate music literature courses, in which she attempts to stimulate renewed interest in live performances of Western art music. Plantamura has made six recordings for CRI, featuring music by Robert Erickson, Bernard Rands, Roger Reynolds, Frederic Rzewski, and Joji Yuasa. She has also recorded new works for Wergo and DGG, and seventeenth-century music for Italia Fonit-Cetra, as well as a record of seventeenth-century Italian music by women composers for Leonarda.

Jefferson Text:

When in the Course of human events, it becomes necessary for one people to dissolve the political bands which have connected them with another, and to assume among the Powers of the earth, the separate and equal station to which the Laws of Nature and of Nature's God entitle them, a decent respect to the opinions of mankind requires that they should declare the causes which impel them to the separation. We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness. That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed. That whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or abolish it, and to institute a new Government, laying its foundation on such principles and organizing its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their Safety and Happiness. Prudence, indeed, will dictate that Governments long established should not be changed for light and transient causes; and accordingly all experience hath shown, that mankind are more disposed to suffer, while evils are sufferable, than to right themselves by abolishing the forms to which they are accustomed. But when a long train of abuses and usurpations, pursuing invariably the same Object, evinces a design to reduce them under absolute Despotism, it is their right, it is their duty, to throw off such Government, and to provide new Guards for their future security.

– Thomas Jefferson, 1776

¹ Ignacio Ramonet, "Régimes globalitaires," *Le Monde Diplomatique*, January 1997.

Production Notes

Jefferson: Recorded October 1970 at the WDR (Westdeutscher Rundfunk) Cologne, Germany.

Antigone-Legend: Recorded by Josef Kucera at Mandeville Auditorium, University of California, San Diego, on October 25 and 26, 1986; special thanks to Jean-Charles François, George Bloch, Victor Blum, and Marc-Henry Cykert. Edited by Josef Kucera and Carol Plantamura, and produced by Carol Plantamura. Frederic Rzewski plays a Bösendorfer grand piano. *Antigone-Legend* originally appeared on CRI SD 548, a recording made possible by the generosity of the University of California, San Diego (UCSD). Special thanks to the Academis Senat of UCSD.

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