

WER 6730 2 Frederic Rzewski: The People United will never be Defeated



RZEWSKI *The People United Will Never Be Defeated* • Kai Schumacher (pn) • WERGO 6730-2 (64:51)

I don't know how a piece of music becomes a masterpiece. There are no general referendums where we all get to vote on it. I'm not aware of any published guidelines which indicate what a composition needs to do to qualify to be one. Is it simply by a number of references in print—if enough people call it one, then it reaches masterpiece status? How many such references are required? What's a consensus? Can we trust any *one* person's judgment? Who decides?

I've seen the acclaimed composer and New Music pianist Frederic Rzewski's *The People United* (1975) called a masterpiece more times than I can remember. I've done so myself. But it's only in preparing this review that I think I've found one possible way of proving it (he said, only partially tongue-in-cheek). To my knowledge there have been nine pianists who have recorded this hour-long set of variations on Sergio Ortega's revolutionary Chilean protest song "El Pueblo unido jamas sera vencido"—Rzewski himself (at least four times by my count), Ursula Oppens, Stephen Drury, Yuji Takahashi, Marc-André Hamelin, Ralph van Raat, Thomas Schultz, Kai Schumacher, and one on YouTube (Bobby Mitchell). And I must confess, I haven't heard most of them. So I did a little research and looked up, on the *Fanfare* Archive and elsewhere, some various reviews of these recordings. And every review that I read was a positive one. That is to say, none of them said that the work was a masterpiece but the pianist could have done better—every *performance* was given a positive review. So I asked myself, is this because, due to the overwhelming difficulty of the score, only amazing pianists feel comfortable and secure enough to *attempt* to play it, so therefore the results are always going to *be* amazing? Or is it that the score is *composed* in such a way that anyone who *can* play it is assured of sounding great—the combination of music that sounds great and makes the performer sound great playing it? I opt for the latter. And perhaps *that's* what makes it a masterpiece.

Which brings us to Kai Schumacher. Simply put, yes, the music sounds great under his hands. There's no doubt that it is a formidable challenge to play; Rzewski is a world-class pianist, and he wrote it to challenge himself. It requires enormous stamina, masterly technique, stylistic sensitivity, and ... courage (I almost used another, gender-specific word). Schumacher has all of these in abundance. His version is different from the others I've heard (that would be two of Rzewski's, Oppens', and Drury's). His tonality is leaner, his phrasing a tad more nuanced. I find him most effective in those passages where the music swells to a neoromantic fullness. The score is so ripe with stylistic allusions (*not* imitations) that, as is typically the case, I heard passing echoes of Mussorgsky, Rachmaninoff, Liszt, Feldman, Stockhausen, Monk, Basie, maybe more. Nothing specific, just amusing echoes—but at the same time, Schumacher impresses with his ability to not get bogged down in the details, to keep the momentum flowing, to tie together all 36 separate variations (plus cadenza) into a coherent, convincing whole.

I guess the moral of the story is that it may not matter which recording you hear—Rzewski's score is brilliant, mesmerizing, moving, inspiring, thrilling, and *fun* to listen to. If you don't know this music, just choose one, and enjoy. **Art Lange**