

Frederic Rzewski: *Les moutons de Panurge* (1969)

Suddenly, I do not know how, it happened. I did not have time to think. Panurge, without another word, threw his sheep, crying and bleating, into the sea. All the other sheep, crying and bleating in the same intonation, started to throw themselves in the sea after it, all in a line. The herd was such that once one jumped, so jumped its companions. It was not possible to stop them, as you know, with sheep, it's natural to always follow the first one, wherever it may go.

Rabelais: *Le Quart Livre* (*Gargantua and Pantagruel*), chapter VIII.

Born April 13, 1938 in Westfield, MA, Frederic Rzewski is described by Nicolas Slonimsky as “a granitically overpowering piano technician, capable of depositing huge boulders of sonoristic material across the keyboard without actually wrecking the instrument.” In 1966, Rzewski founded, with Alvin Curran and Richard Teitelbaum, the ensemble *Musica Elettronica Viva* (MEV) that combined free improvisation with written music and electronics. These experimentations directly led to the creation of many of Rzewski's most important compositions—pieces such as *Les moutons de Panurge*, *Attica*, *Winnsboro Cotton Blues*, and *The People United Will Never Be Defeated*—that were inspired by secular and socio-historical themes and that reveal a deep political conscience. In fact, Rzewski emphasized the concept of collective improvisation, leading both to a penchant for socialist-political compositions and a style that often combined notated and improvised passages.

Rzewski's *Les moutons des Panurge* (“The Sheep of Panurge”) is based on the fourth book of *Gargantua and Pantagruel* series by the French Renaissance author Francois Rabelais. In the eighth chapter, Panurge is traveling by ship with Pantagruel when their boat meets with a merchant ship carrying sheep. When the merchants make fun of Panurge, he buys one of their sheep and then proceeds to throw it into the ocean—and all of the other sheep follow it. To this day, the phrase “sheep of Panurge” implies a person who blindly follows the lead of another.

Written “for any number of musicians playing melody instruments, plus any number of nonmusicians playing anything,” Rzewski's *Les moutons des Panurge* contains a 65-note melody in F played in a cumulative sequence (1, 1-2, 1-2-3, and so on) by the entire ensemble in unison; once the entire melody is played, the sequence is reversed with the melody continued, but with notes from the beginning shed with each repetition (2-3-...65, 3-4-...65, and so on), until only one note remains. That final note is held until all the players have reached it, at which point all begin improvising. Rzewski's instructions are: “Always play loud, never stop or falter, stay together as long as you can, but if you get lost, stay lost. Do not try to find your way back into the fold. Continue to follow the rules strictly.” That instruction proves not only artistic, but also quite pragmatic since, as Robert Everett-Green of *Globe and Mail* observes: “*Les moutons de Panurge* turns...into a study of human error. Incremental group repetitions of this theme...fall out of synch, and then everyone is free to follow the tune, and each other, wherever that takes them.” Eric Eriksson of the *Northeast Wisconsin Music Review* agrees: “The complexity assures that someone will get lost and, when that happens, the others follow – like Panurge's sheep. Ingenious – and wickedly charming.” As if the borderline chaos of the (un)intentional melodic canon were not enough, Rzewski also adds a part for “nonmusicians,” encouraging them to make any loud sounds, following the dictum: “The left hand doesn't know what the right is doing.”