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News

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**'FRED' ACCOMPLI:
EIGHTH BLACKBIRD PUTS MUSIC OF RZEWSKI
FRONT AND CENTER ON NEW CD**

**Composer Weaves a "Pocket Symphony"
For Celebrated Young Ensemble**

Celebrated new-music ensemble eighth blackbird (spelled lower case) explores chamber works of maverick American composer Frederic Rzewski on *fred*, its third and newest CD for Cedille Records (Cedille CDR 90000 084).

The exciting Chicago-based sextet performs the world-premiere recording of Rzewski's *Pocket Symphony* (2000), written expressly for them, plus never-before recorded versions of *Les Moutons de Panurge* (1969) and *Coming Together* (1971). Producer-engineer is Grammy Award-winner Judith Sherman.

It's a program imbued with the composer's trademark eccentric spirit, improvisational surprises, and social conscience.

Formed at Oberlin Conservatory in 1996, eighth blackbird is flutist Molly Alicia Barth, clarinetist Michael J. Maccaferri, violinist Matt Albert, cellist Nicholas Photinos, percussionist Matthew Duvall, and pianist Lisa Kaplan.

The ensemble met Rzewski (pronounced ZHEV-skee) through one of its early mentors, Cincinnati percussionist and professor Allen Otte. Although various members of eighth blackbird were familiar with his music, *Pocket Symphony* was the first Rzewski piece they performed as a group, recalls violinist Albert.

The wide-ranging *Pocket Symphony* is the inspired result of a 1998 Concert Artists Guild commission for eighth blackbird. It is "symphonic" in its multiple movements with alternating fast and slow tempos and concerto-like aspects: each of the six movements features a different player, who improvises a cadenza. Rzewski augments the instrumental palette with sounds of a Jew's harp, rain stick, trash can lid, and conventional instruments played in unconventional ways.

According to Rzewski, “pocket” refers to the portability of this small-ensemble work.

In a concert review of eighth blackbird, the *San Francisco Chronicle* called *Pocket Symphony* “a wonderful new creation” with thematic material ranging from “richly melodic” to “spare and evocative.” The *Detroit Free Press* described it as “pure music of exquisite character and a brilliant range of sonority . . . tonal and melodic but never cliched.”

Les Moutons de Panurge (The Sheep of Panurge) takes its name from a Francois Rabelais tale that satirizes those who blindly follow their leaders. It’s an energetically playful and tricky “musical game” based on a 65-note line, played incrementally as fast as possible and — theoretically — in unison. As one player (inevitably) goes off course, the others follow — with delightful and unpredictable results. A *Philadelphia Inquirer* critic heard in eighth blackbird’s performance “unplanned canons and a growing sense of derring-do.” The *Toronto Star* said that in eighth blackbird’s hands *Les Moutons* is “hypnotically engaging music.”

Rzewski’s dramatic *Coming Together* is presented here in a propulsive new arrangement by eighth blackbird’s Albert, who also narrates. The text, repeated throughout the performance, is from a haunting letter by Sam Melville, an Attica prison inmate and 1960s radical who was killed when New York state police brutally suppressed a 1971 revolt against inhumane conditions at the upstate penitentiary. Some believe Melville was targeted by authorities for his political activism. The work’s title comes from a line in Melville’s letter, written four months before the tragic event: “I think the combination of age and a greater coming together is responsible for the speed of the passing of time.” London’s *Guardian* called *Coming Together* “boldly and uncompromisingly conceived.”

In Albert’s version of the piece, different instruments share the ostinato bass line in unison arrangements — a departure from the work’s improvisational performance tradition. Also, ensemble members speak lines of text to amplify and provide counterpoint to the main narration. The goal is to open the text to multiple levels of meaning for each listener, Albert says.

Best-known in the U.S. as a composer-pianist, Rzewski was born on April 13, 1938 in Westfield, Mass. His teachers included composers Walter Piston, Roger Sessions, and Milton Babbitt. A contemporary of Philip Glass and Steve Reich, Rzewski is considered part of the same pantheon of major minimalist composers. Since the 1960s, he has based his career in Europe. In Rome in the mid-1960s, he founded the Musica Elettronica Viva group, which brought together the classical and jazz avant-garde. For a quarter century, he taught composition at the Royal

Conservatory in Liege, Belgium. In the U.S., he has taught at Yale and the University of Cincinnati, among other institutions.

In residence at the University of Richmond in Virginia and the University of Chicago, eighth blackbird has garnered prestigious engagements, glowing reviews, and competition victories, including the 2000 Naumburg Chamber Music Award.

The ensemble's first CD for Cedille, *Thirteen Ways*, was released in April 2003 and includes works by Joan Tower, George Perle, David Schober, and Thomas Albert (Cedille CDR 90000 067). Its second CD, *beginnings*, was released in May 2004 and includes Daniel Kellogg's *Divinum Mysterium* and George Crumb's *Vox Balaenae* (Voice of the Whale).

Cedille Records (pronounced say-DEE) is dedicated to showcasing the most noteworthy classical artists in and from Chicago. The nonprofit label is an arm of The Chicago Classical Recording Foundation.

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fred

**(Cedille Records CDR 90000 084)
Music of Frederic Rzewski**

**Pocket Symphony (2000) (27:38)
Les Moutons de Panurge (1969) (11:38)
Coming Together (1971) (18:51)
arr. Matt Albert 2000/2003**

eighth blackbird