

Lecture-Recital

MILTON SCHLOSSER, PIANIST

8 p.m., Monday, January 30, 1995

I. Lecture

"Queer Effects, Wilde Behaviour: Frederic Rzewski's De Profundis"

II. Performance

De Profundis: For Speaking Pianist (1992). Composer: Frederic Rzewski (b. 1938). Text by Oscar Wilde (1854-1900).

Mr. Schlosser is a candidate for the Doctor of Music degree in applied music (piano).

Convocation Hall, Arts Building

Department of Music
University of Alberta



1. People point to Reading Gaol, and say, "That is where the artistic life leads a man." Well, it might lead to worse places. Mechanical people, to whom life is a shrewd speculation depending on calculation always know where they are going, and go there. They start with the ideal desire of being the parish beadle, and they succeed in being the parish beadle, and no more. A man whose desire is to be something separate from himself succeeds in being what he wants to be. That is his punishment. Those who want a mask have to wear it. But with the dynamic forces of life, it is different. People who desire self-realisation never know where they are going. They can't know. To recognize that the soul of a man is unknowable, is the ultimate achievement of wisdom. The final mystery is oneself. When one has weighed the sun in the balance, and measured the steps of the moon, and mapped out the seven heavens, there still remains oneself. Who can calculate the orbit of his own soul?

2. We are the zanies of sorrow. We are clowns whose hearts are broken. We are specially designed to appeal to the sense of humour. On November 13th, 1895, I was brought down here from London. From two o'clock till half-past two on that day I had to stand on the centre platform of Clapham Junction in convict dress, and handcuffed, for the world to look at. When people saw me they laughed. Each train swelled the audience. Nothing could exceed their amusement. That was, of course, before they knew who I was. As soon as they had been informed they laughed still more. For half an hour I stood there in the grey November rain surrounded by a jeering mob. For a year I wept every day at the same hour and for the same space of time. In prison tears are a part of every day's experience. A day in prison on which one does not weep is a day on which one's heart is hard, not a day on which one's heart is happy.

3. Morality does not help me. I am a born antinomian. I am one of those who are made for exceptions, not for laws. Religion does not help me. The faith that others give to what is unseen, I give to what one can touch, and look at. Reason does not help me. It tells me that the laws under which I am convicted and the system under which I have suffered are wrong and unjust. But, somehow, I have got to make both of these things just and right to me. I have got to make everything that has happened to me good for me. The plank bed, the loathsome food, the hard ropes, the harsh orders, the dreadful dress that makes sorrow grotesque to look at, the silence, the solitude, the shame - each and all of these things I had to transform into a spiritual experience. There is not a single degradation of the body which I must not try and make into a spiritualising of the soul.

4. I have no desire to complain. One of the many lessons that one learns in prison is, that things are what they are and will be what they will be. Suffering is one very long moment. We cannot divide it by seasons. We can only record its moods, and chronicle their return. With us time itself does not progress. It revolves. It seems to circle round one centre of pain. For us, there is only one season, the season of sorrow. The very sun and moon seem taken from us. Outside, the day may be blue and gold, but the light that creeps down through the thick glass of the small iron-barred window is grey. It is always twilight in one's cell, as it is always twilight in one's heart. And in the sphere of thought, no less than in the sphere of time, motion is no more.

5. We who live in prison, and in whose lives there is no event but sorrow, have to measure time by throbs of pain, and the record of bitter moments. We have nothing else to think of. Suffering is the means by which we exist, because it is the only means by which we become conscious of existing; and the remembrance of suffering in the past is necessary to us as the evidence of our continued identity. Between myself and the memory of joy lies a gulf no less deep than that between myself and joy in its actuality. So much in this place do men live by pain that my friendship with you, in the way in which I am forced to remember it, appears to me always as a prelude consonant with those varying modes of anguish which each day I have to realise; as though my life had been a symphony of sorrow, passing through its rhythmically linked movements to its certain resolution.

6. The memory of our friendship is the shadow that walks with me here: that seems never to leave me: that wakes me up at night to tell the same story over and over: at dawn it begins again: it follows me into the prison yard and makes me talk to myself as I tramp round: each detail that accompanied each dreadful moment I am forced to recall: there is nothing that happened in those ill-starred years that I cannot recreate in that chamber of the brain which is set apart for grief or for despair: every strained note of your voice, every twitch and gesture of your nervous hands, every bitter word, every poisonous phrase comes back to me: I remember the street or river down which we passed: the wall or woodland that surrounded us, at what figure on the dial stood the hands of the clock, which way went the wings of the wind, the shape and colour of the moon.

7. The gods are strange. It is not our vices only they make instruments to scourge us. They bring us to ruin through what in us is good, gentle, humane, loving. Love of some kind is the only possible explanation of the extraordinary amount of suffering that there is in the world. If the world has been built of sorrow, it has been built by the hands of love, because in no other way could the soul of man reach perfection. Far off, like a perfect pearl, one can see the City of God. It is so wonderful that it seems as if a child could reach it in a summer's day. And so a child could. But with me and such as me it is different. One can realise a thing in a single moment, but one loses it in the long hours that follow with leaden feet. We think in eternity, but we move slowly through time. And how slowly time goes with us who lie in prison I need not tell again.

8. I hope to live long enough and to produce work of such character that I shall be able at the end of my days to say, "Yes! this is just where the artistic life leads a man!" For the last seven or eight months, in spite of a succession of great troubles reaching me from the outside world almost without intermission, I have been placed in direct contact with a new spirit working in this prison through man and things, that has helped me beyond words: so that while for the first year of my imprisonment I did nothing else, and can remember doing nothing else, but wring my hands in despair, and say, "What an ending, what an appalling ending!" Now I try to say to myself, and sometimes when I am not torturing myself do really say, "What a beginning, what a wonderful beginning!"