

# **Social Metaphor in Frederic Rzewski's 'Down by the Riverside'**

Lecture Recital Abstract

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Frederic Rzewski writes in his Parma Manifesto that, "an art form which aims for the highest efficiency in times of highest urgency must be based on dialogue." In the third of his *North American Ballades*, "Down by the Riverside," Rzewski strives towards this ideal of art through a set of variations on the negro spiritual by the same name. By connecting the transitions between tonal and polytonal sections of the work, but drawing the material for the whole piece from the spiritual's melody, each section portrays a different perspective on the central issue of peace while imitating the give and take of dialogue. When connected in sequence, they form a discourse that expresses the conflict between the ideal versus the reality of human nature. Rzewski writes predominantly in a polyphonic texture, which musically becomes a metaphor for a society that pursues peace divided (polytonal) or united (tonal). Interestingly, this creates an effect like the difference between speech and song, most clearly visible at peak points where the polytonal section becomes a heated argument (protest) while the return to tonality is a multi-voice concert rag. Although the clearest representation of peace in the rag is the climax of the piece, the ballad ends with a chromatic return to the polytonal style, a move that critiques the attainability of that ideal. This postmodern irony presents a more cautious perspective on the future of humanity than the philosophy found in works like "The People United Will Never be Defeated."