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Adams Phrygian Gates; Rzewski Four Pieces

A bracing and revealing guide through these modern piano works

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Emanuele Arciuli is a deliberate pianist who’s unafraid to demarcate structural joins with his brittle attack and strategic nose for harmony. His playing is unlikely to find favour if a traditionally “classical” notion of pianism is your thing; but for Rzewski’s *Four Pieces* and Adams’s *Phrygian Gates* it’s manna from heaven.  
  
Frankly the *Four Pieces*, written in 1977, aren’t vintage Rzewski. He views them as a response to Schubert’s Impromptus, Op 142, in which each movement has a stand-alone feel, but taken as a whole the work is a cut-and-shut construct. Rzewski characteristically aims to make different styles co-exist within a structure that concertinas outwards to contain them. Socialist Realist revolutionary songs *à la* Cornelius Cardew are dropped into the structure and then dispersed with pointillistic clusters. Exploratory tremolos outlining familiar chord sequences break into expressionist outbursts, while the jazzy Thelonious Monk-flavoured second movement sounds surprisingly academic. Arciuli fastidiously characterises each panel of this information overload and guides the listener intelligently through what is a potential minefield. But the different styles struggle to illuminate each other, and the music remains unyielding.  
  
The trajectory of John Adams’s *Phrygian Gates* is – in contrast – plain sailing. The work has a satisfying inevitability from its first note to the epic conclusion that appears on the horizon some 20 minutes later. Other pianists, almost to a man, view it as “minimalism with climaxes”, but Arciuli chooses to highlight the romantic streak that’s equally part of its DNA. He does so without being theatrical or sounding retro. His is a brave and revealing response.

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Adams Phrygian Gates; Rzewski Four Pieces

Phrygian Gates

Four Pieces

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