

## FREDERIC RZEWSKI

*The People United Will Never Be Defeated!*

**AMERICAN COMPOSER AND** pianist Frederic Rzewski has rarely shied away from engaging with social and political themes in his music. Works like *Stop the Testing!* and *Bring Them Home!* emphatically proclaim an anti-war message, while *Coming Together* criticizes modern incarceration, having a narrator intone the words of an inmate killed during the 1971 riots at Attica State Prison. Less explicit but no less effective is Rzewski's *North American Ballads*, four virtuosic piano arrangements of U.S. labor songs. Across his entire output, though, Rzewski embodies an eclectic and sensitive musical voice. His style is wildly difficult to pin down, mainly because it embraces so much along the way, from minimalism and atonality to jazz and folk music. This creates music that is both deeply personal and intensely powerful for listeners and performers alike.

*The People United Will Never Be Defeated!* is perhaps the prime example of Rzewski's various leanings, musical and political. The work's foundation is the popular Chilean song "¡El pueblo unido, jamás será vencido!" (The people united will never be defeated) by the composer Sergio Ortega. As Ortega recalls, the tune was written during a sudden burst of inspiration in June 1973:

"I was walking through the plaza in front of the Palace of Finance in Santiago, Chile, and saw a street singer shouting, 'The people united will never be defeated'—a well-known Chilean chant for social change. I couldn't stop, and continued across the square, but his incessant chanting followed me and stuck in my mind. . . . When I reproduced the chant of the people in my head, the chant that could not be restrained, the entire melody exploded from me . . ."

"¡El pueblo unido, jamás será vencido!" was an instant smash hit after a concert performance by the folk group Quilapayún (who wrote the song's lyrics) and soon became closely associated with Chilean president Salvador Allende and his socialist Unidad Popular movement. However, in September 1973, Allende's government was violently overthrown by a military coup and replaced with a dictatorship led by Augusto Pinochet. As a result, Ortega's song took on a much more acerbic tone—what had started as an anthem of Chilean unity became one of resistance.

Around the same time, Rzewski developed a deep-seated interest in political protest songs, particularly those of left-wing movements, and had even met Sergio Ortega while studying in Italy. Thrilled to make the acquaintance of someone who shared similar musical and political interests, Rzewski



Women demonstrating, holding signs, c. 1980 (fabric and burlap) by anonymous. Arpilleras (literally, "burlap") are palpable testimonies to the lived experiences of Chilean citizens who lived under the Pinochet regime. Colorful sewn cloth backed with burlap, they depict the stories of women and their communities, denounce the cruelty of the government, and bear witness to the human rights abuses carried out by the dictatorship. [The signs on this arpillera translate to, from top to bottom, "Free the political prisoners," "No to the death penalty," and a form of the Spanish verb *codear*—to prod.] Courtesy Royal Alberta Museum, Daily Life & Leisure Program.

decided to use Ortega's anthem as the basis for a set of piano variations after the American pianist Ursula Oppens asked Rzewski for a companion piece to Beethoven's *Diabelli Variations*. The resulting work—*The People United Will Never Be Defeated!*—was composed in fall 1975 and premiered at the Kennedy Center on February 7, 1976, with Oppens at the piano. Though some early critics were turned off by the work's marathon length and political undertones, it is now recognized as one of the cornerstones of the twentieth-century piano repertoire.

Like its Beethoven counterpart, *The People United* is a masterful exercise in musical structure and transformation, taking Ortega's theme in dazzling and unexpected directions. The opening statement of the tune is followed by thirty-six variations, which are divided into six sets—or "cycles," as the composer calls them—that contain six variations each. (Some have suggested that the opening five variations of each cycle represent the hand's five fingers, while the sixth is a clenched fist.) Further, each of these six variation cycles explores a different musical characteristic. The first cycle presents variations centered around simple events; the second cycle focuses on rhythms; the third, melodies; the fourth, counterpoints; and the fifth, harmonies. The sixth and final cycle presents a combination of all the preceding material.

The theme-and-variations form is an ideal conduit for Rzewski's eclectic musical tastes and provides a focused framework for the musical journey on which he takes listeners. All throughout *The People United*, Rzewski uses distinct musical gestures to characterize the individual variations. Specific rhythmic motifs, harmonic progressions, and melodic fragments are woven into the texture, and some of the most audible markers return at the end of each cycle, as every sixth variation "summarizes" characteristics of the previous five. Rzewski believed that this makes the structure more perceptible, especially in the work's denser and thornier moments. Pianist Ralph van Raat agreed, stating that the work "is able to carry the listener through some very complex music in a natural way."

Rather than offer an exhaustive summary of the work in its full and forbidding detail, what follows is a condensed outline which highlights select moments of interest.

**Cycle 1 (Variations 1–6):**

After the opening statement of Ortega's song, which alternates between a martial style and a bluesy feel, the variations immediately get underway. The melody is displaced across the entire span of the keyboard in Variation 1, and the fifth variation—marked "dreamlike, frozen" in the score—asks the player to "catch" the piano's overtones with the sustain pedal. Though there is no explicit program to the work, detailed expressive markings like this, along with their accompanying musical events, suggest a fierce struggle taking place. The fourth variation, for instance, features a dense flurry of pyrotechnics from which the tune emerges "like a cry" at the climax. This aural conflict between victory and defeat will continue throughout the work. Variation 6 sums up elements of the previous five variations, a pattern that will be repeated at the end of every cycle.

**Cycle 2 (Variations 7–12):**

Rhythmic transformations take center stage in the following set of variations. The ninth variation features a chordal reimagining of the melody, which hovers over an irregularly-knocking bassline before it explodes into a Stockhausen-esque fantasy characterized by complex figurations and keyboard-length glissandos (Variation 10). Following this, the texture pares down dramatically (Variation 11). Microscopic fragments of the tune are here punctuated by a handful of extended techniques—at several points, the player is asked to shout, whistle, and slam the piano lid.

**Cycle 3 (Variations 13–18)**

Variation 13 clears away the haze and offers an unobstructed view of the tune, played in a blues style. The coda presents wisps of a new melody high in the piano's treble register. This tune is the Italian revolutionary song "Bandiera Rossa" (Red Flag), which Rzewski quotes in tribute to the Italians who took in Chilean refugees during the 1970s. A soft jazz feel, à la Keith Jarrett, takes hold in the following two variations (14 and 15), while the seventeenth variation features spontaneous outbursts of melody over a plodding bassline.

**Cycle 4 (Variations 19–24)**

The subsequent cycle is dominated by contrapuntal textures. A mischievous dance opens the cycle (Variation 19), which soon

takes on a Lisztian character in the large octaves of the twentieth variation. Most of the following variations are relentless in their virtuosity, which comes to a head in a pointillistic presentation of the tune in Variation 23. (The score requests that the performer play this section "as fast as possible.") In the final variation of the cycle (24), a climactic crash in the piano's bass register is answered by a striking, alarm-like tremolo, which lasts for several seconds. The cycle ends with a mournful lament and some soft echoes of Variation 19.

**Cycle 5 (Variations 25–30)**

Harmonic exploration is the focal point of the fifth cycle of variations. The twenty-fifth variation begins with sharp staccato attacks before a dotted figure—played in the high register "like a question"—ushers in a clear recall of the theme, set over murky chords. The energy builds, and the tune suddenly mutates into a sarcastic march reminiscent of Shostakovich (Variation 26). Similar to Variation 13, another melody appears here in counterpoint—Hanns Eisler and Bertolt Brecht's anti-fascist "Solidaritätslied" (Solidarity Song) from 1932. These allusions to other political songs operate, according to Rzewski, as "a reminder that parallels to present threats exist in the past and that it is important to learn from them." After the military march dies down, the dark musings of Variation 27 give way to a chugging, minimalistic groove. (A similar, albeit brighter, dance appears a few moments later, in Variation 29.)

**Cycle 6 (Variations 31–36)**

The summing-up of the fifth cycle (Variation 30) is followed by a sixth and final set of variations, which recall various rhythmic ideas, chords, and melodic gestures that appeared in all the preceding variations. The theme rears its head occasionally, but the attempts seem in vain, as it is buried in a tornado of cacophony. After the thirty-sixth variation, the pianist is given the option to improvise an extended cadenza, which ultimately fades into silence. All hope seems lost. Then, ragged but resolute, the tune emerges one last time in its complete original form. Starting quietly and growing in power and determination, the melody becomes a full-throated song once again before the final lines—repeated three times—end in a defiant smash. —© KM