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Rzewski and the Music of Change

Introduction

El pueblo unido jamás será vencido!

On a Spring day in 2013, fast-food workers from all five boroughs of New York City gathered in front of a Domino's Pizza to protest the recent termination of an employee who was trying to unionize. The event was used to fortify an ongoing argument that minimum wage jobs remained unlivable while CEO salaries were illimitable. This is the scene depicted in Morgan Spurlock's documentary series "[Inside Man](#)" whose final episode of the opening season concentrates on the history and tenuous future of unions in America. As the people gather to make their cause heard, the scene alternates from disgruntled employees and community activists, to crowds chanting and police officers sternly warning, finally lingering on the familiar and instantly memorable declamation emanating from the crowd, "*El pueblo unido jamás será vencido!*", followed shortly thereafter by the English: "The people united will never be defeated!"¹. While its original use was for the Chilean *Unidad* Popular movement led by Salvador Allende in the early 1970's, and then was later set to [song](#) by Chilean composer Sergio Ortega², the chant has been appropriated by numerous groups for reasons as disparate and times as recent as this protest.³

The Music of Change

It was in the same vein that composer/pianist Frederic Rzewski set Ortega's song in 1976 in the form of a sprawling, virtuosic and polystylistic theme and variations for solo piano entitled [The](#)

¹ Spurlock, "The Inside Man: Episode 8: Unions."

² Driver, "Recordings," 25.

³ Rzewski, *Nonsequiturs*, 252.

People United Will Never Be Defeated! (referred to hereafter as *The People United*). The subject of the piece was of a similar political theme that had permeated Rzewski's musical output, including his best known open-instrumentation work, *Coming Together*, completed just a few years earlier. Against the backdrop of the 1970's, a decade of particular political unrest including the "Years of Lead" in Italy, the Chilean coup d'état, and multiple American riots, an evolution in the composer's approach to instrumentation and fixed media took place, culminating in a mature style. In the course of this paper, Rzewski's biographical information, including his musical associations and the surrounding political developments will serve as a foundation to observe the change from open to closed instrumentation and from processed and/or improvised music to fixed musical materials. Through an analysis of key compositions, several commonalities will become clear between these two overarching styles: 1) the use of a preconceived formal design; 2) a compositional thought-process based in tonality despite his manifold materials; and 3) the use of extra-musical elements to express political themes. Ultimately, it is this author's assertion that no matter the method, Rzewski's music is still performed today because of its plasticity, its musical substance and its direct emotional impact.

Biography

Early biographical information

Frederic Rzewski was seven years old when World War II ended. His generation of composers, many of whom were coincidentally also born in 1938 (William Bolcom, John Corigliano, John Harbison, Joan Tower, and Charles Wuorinen), who had to wrestle with and surpass the postwar attitudes of what constituted "serious" music, each developing their own answer to the question. After his upbringing as a piano prodigy in Westfield, Massachusetts, Rzewski became intrigued by the politically subversive Shostakovich, prompting his future study in composition. During his studies at Harvard, Rzewski began an exploration of Schönberg and 12-tone technique, going

against the department's preference for the Stravinsky's neoclassicism.⁴ While there, composer and professor Walter Piston proved important to the academic side of Rzewski's musical development, but it was his friendship with composer Christian Wolff who influenced the development of his politics. Wolff was a PhD candidate in classics who avoided formal musical education, including the Harvard music department, preferring the avant-garde movement of Morton Feldman and John Cage. Wolff and Rzewski encouraged each other to find ways of expressing their political intentions through music, a concept which they would continue to explore past their studies. From one ivory tower to another, Rzewski spent his graduate education studying with Milton Babbitt and Roger Sessions at Princeton, before going to Rome on a Fulbright and to Berlin on a Ford grant.³ This move abroad ultimately proved the most influential.

Mature biographical information

After settling in Rome in the 1960's, Rzewski began a "Cagean interest" in composing for toy instruments, prepared piano and elaborate percussion set-ups⁴. He also remained an active pianist, premiering new compositions such as Stockhausen's *Klavierstück X* at a BBC Invitation Concert.⁵ In contrast to his conservative surroundings in politically fascist Italy⁸, he and his avant-garde musician friends who were influenced by the "Free Jazz" scene in Rome⁹, came together in 1965 to make *Musica Elettronica Viva* (MEV), an electric-acoustic group which experimented with instrumentation, audience participation and improvisation with synthesizers.¹⁰ The group was known to incite extreme reaction, as in 1968, when at the Festival Internazionale del Teatro University in Parma, Italy, a performance was terminated by

⁴ Rzewski, *Nonsequiturs*, 166.

³ Pollack, *Harvard Composers*, 370-372.

⁴ Pollack, *Harvard Composers*, 373.

⁵ Cardew, "A Note on Frederic Rzewski," 32.

⁸ Zimmerman, *Desert Plants*, 303.

⁹ Rzewski, *Nonsquiturs*, 176.

¹⁰ Rzewski and Verken, "Musica Elettronica Viva," 92.

authorities. The performers then carried the performance out of the theater and into the streets.¹¹ It is for this ensemble that Rzewski created his first lasting success in 1969, with the open-instrumentation work *Les Moutons de Panurge*. See Example 1 for a complete, one-page score with instructions by the composer and additional annotations by the author.

Frederic Rzewski

Example 1: *Les Moutons de Panurge*
 for Frans Bruggen
 For any number of musicians playing melodic instruments
 and any number of nonmusicians playing anything

Musicians
all in strict unison; octave doubling allowed if there are at least 2 instruments in each octave.

Nonmusicians
are invited to make sound, any sound, preferably very loud, and if possible are provided with percussive or other instruments. The nonmusicians have a leader, whom they may follow or not, and who begins the music thus:

Instructions: Read from left to right, playing the notes as follows: 1, 1-2, 1-2-3, 1-2-3-4, etc. When you have reached note 65, play the whole melody once again and then begin subtracting notes from the beginning: 2 through 65, 3 through 65, 4 through 65, ... 62-63-64-65, 63-64-65, 64-65, 65. Hold the last note until everybody has reached it, then begin an improvisation using any instruments.

As soon as the pulse has been established, any variations are possible. Suggested theme for nonmusicians: "The left hand doesn't know what the right is doing."

In the melody above, never stop or falter, always play loud. Stay together as long as you can, but if you get lost, stay lost. Do not try to find your way back to the fold. Continue to follow the rules strictly.

¹¹ Rzewski, "Parma Manifesto," 77.

Les Moutons de Panurge

Analysis of *Les Moutons*

Formal construction

The musical process of this piece embodies the French phrase, “Les Moutons de Panurge,” meaning one who will follow, blind to the consequences. The title literally translates to, “The Sheep of Panurge”—Panurge being a trickster character in François Rabelais’ series of five novels *Gargantua and Pantagruel*. One passage is revealing of his character:

Panurge, without another word, threw his sheep, crying and bleating, into the sea. All the other sheep, crying and bleating in the same intonation, started to throw themselves in the sea after it, all in a line. The herd was such that once one jumped, so jumped its companions. — Quart Livre, Chapter VIII

Although not explicitly political in nature, *Les Moutons* “presaged Rzewski’s overtly political work.”¹² The score consists of a 65-note melody that Rzewski whistled to himself while walking down the street. The process of performing the melody is additive and subtractive:

1; 1, 2; 1, 2, 3; 1, 2, 3, 4... and eventually: ...62, 63, 64, 65; 63, 64, 65; 64, 65; 65

The ensemble, a group of melody instruments plus any number of non-musicians playing anything, is instructed to perform as if to stay together, but to refrain from rejoining should anyone become lost from the flock¹³.

Musical materials and tonal thinking

The apparent simplicity of *Les Moutons*’ score as a single-line melody fitting neatly on a single page is deceptive. The piece goes on an expansive journey through various ambiguous and meandering modes due its additive and subtractive process as shown in the author’s analytical annotations made to the score in Example 1. The curious key-signature of 2-flats – A-flat and B-flat – and a repeated F throughout suggests a kind of F melodic-minor scale at the start,

¹² Pollack, *Harvard Composers*, 378.

¹³ Asplund, “Spontaneous Political Music,” 421.

operating as a mode instead of a functional minor scale. The material does not operate tonally in the traditional sense, but one can see that tonal thinking is inherent in the construction of the melody. The first five notes of the melody offers an ascending F melodic minor scale skipping the 6th scale degree before descending back down whence it came. The 12th note is the first and only time that D5 appears, only to be supplanted by a C4 in note 59. Note 28 is the first time we hear the 6th scale-degree in that octave, which is then repeated in an almost trill-like oscillation between C and D in notes 27-32. This and the dramatic Major-7th leap from notes 25 to 26, make a clear transition between the first line of music and the second.

G4 occurs for the first time in note 33, becoming the lowest note of the melodic line between 33 and 45, creating a new kind of “tonic” on the 2nd scale-degree of our opening mode. This shift becomes more dramatic with the inclusion of an A-natural in note 46 and a return to the bass-note F in note 50. The element of tonal thinking in a non-tonal context extends to the structural voice leading of an expansion from the “leading-tone” E in note 40 to a “tonic” F in note 51. The moment is further dramatized by the only octave leap in the entire melody from notes 50 to 51. Where the opening featured an F melodic minor scale avoiding the 6th scale degree, notes 46-65 transforms the overall mode into an F Major scale (Ionian mode) lacking the 7th scale degree. Notes 56-60 signal the end of the F Major diatonic collection; notes 61-65 act as a kind of half-cadence from G to C; but due to the wider intervals between notes 56-65, the sense of mode is lost in its ambiguous arpeggiations. The last 5 notes also fill in the 2 notes that were missing in the beginning 5-note collection – G and D, the 2nd and 6th scale degrees, here in a different context. All of the above points to a tendency of Rzewski to think tonally in a non-tonal setting.

Political elements in *Les Moutons*

In general terms, this piece represents a winding journey of transformation from beginning to end. Like sheep blindly following sheep, this unspecified ensemble follows Rzewski’s instruction

on a musical-metaphorical path. The move from a minor to a major modality in Romantic terms might signify a rebirth or positive transformation, here Rzewski uses the transformation, in part, to suggest that the sheep have been led astray. The end result is a cacophonous texture of interweaving melodies and clashing major/minor modalities. The elements of dual modality and a strong rhythmic energy foreshadow the work to come.

Coming Together

Political background of *Coming Together*

Rzewski developed Marxist views as early as his Harvard years. This is evident in his senior honors thesis on the social implications of the Second Viennese School, associating tonality with the bourgeoisie. Once he was removed from an environment which insisted on an acceptable forms of composition, he would come to think of the tight-fisted serialism guarded by the Ivory Tower, as the intellectual form of that elitism. At the same time that his acute interest in politics was developing, so too was his desire to connect with people in a more meaningful way than was typical of the modern “serious” composer. As the composer writes, art and artists themselves represent an ideal for non-alienated creative work, providing a “model for the creative negation of an oppressive reality.”¹⁴ This thought was put into action when upon Rzewski’s return to New York City in the early 1970’s, he and like-minded musicians who were interested in social change banded together to call themselves the Musicians’ Action Collective (MAC). They were known to put on concerts of vastly differing styles, to accompany political riots, and to incite musical and political controversy.¹⁵ It was for MAC that Rzewski wrote one of his most popular and lasting compositions, *Coming Together*.

¹⁴ Rzewski, *Nonsequiturs*, 192.

¹⁵ Zimmerman, *Desert Plants*, 311.

Introduction of *Coming Together*

In 1972, Rzewski became entranced with the historical event of the Attica Prison Riots of upstate New York that would become the basis for *Coming Together*.¹⁶ In recent years, there has been a renewed interest in and research on the Attica Riots, with Heather Ann Thompson's Pulitzer Prize winning book, "Blood in the Water". The setting of the infamous riot is that the inmates had grown fed up with the inhumane living conditions of the prison and began protesting. After three days of intense negotiations, Governor Nelson Rockefeller ordered the National Guard to take back the prison, resulting in the deaths of 43 guards and inmates. One of the leaders of the uprising was the Sam Melville, a left-wing activist and anarchist who was incarcerated for setting bombs in NYC in protest of the Vietnam War and the imperialism of the US government, and who was also killed in the siege. Of the State's response to the riots, Rzewski stated it was an "atrociousness that demanded of every responsible person that had any power to cry out, that he cry out."¹⁷ Reading Melville's printed letters detailing a strangely incongruent account of prison life and evidence of an ailing psychological state enabled Rzewski to find his inspiration for a vehicle with which he could cry out. The work was composed alongside the agitprop companion piece *Attica*, for a speaker plus a preferred ensemble of 10 players, with one specified to be piano, bass or synthesizer.

Analysis of *Coming Together*

Formal construction and its similarities to *Les Moutons de Panurge*

The score is a single *moto perpetuo* bass line in 4/4 time with text written above it, prefaced with a set of instructions detailing the improvisatory but organized approach to various sections. There are eight sentences used in the piece, with each sentence being divided into seven segments. The first sentence is as follows: I think/the combination/of age/and a greater coming

¹⁶ Rzewski, *Nonsequiturs*, 448.

¹⁷ Asplund, "Spontaneous Political Music," 419.

together/is responsible/for the speed/of the passing of time. The grouping of seven segments runs within each of the eight sentences, a dual process characteristic of other formal aspects. What Rzewski applied to the 65 notes of *Les Moutons*, he applies to the eight sentences of *Coming Together*, in another additive and subtractive process:

1 12 123 1234 12345 123456 1234567 12345678 2345678 345678 45678 5678 678 78 8

As Christian Asplund points out, the bass line also operates with an additive and subtractive process, but “with less rigor and without any temporal correspondence to the periodicity of the text.”¹⁸ While the bass line is playing throughout, the rest of the ensemble is instructed to gradually perform long notes and long rests, double the melody in any octave, and incrementally accelerate, coalescing into the unison line or in octaves. Just as Rzewski creates the rules, he predicts that they are difficult to follow as seen in the following instruction:

...the musicians should try to interpolate freely improvised passages that depart from this rule, with the condition that they do not get lost. It is hard not to get lost, so that to be free... [it] requires a struggle.”¹⁹

Recent performance groups

With this piece, Rzewski explored the concepts of freedom vs. control. It is free due to the variable components of an open instrumentation group reading but a simple bass-line of music with text above. It is controlled because there is quite a lot of instruction to follow in order to make a faithful performance of *Coming Together*. Instead of writing out his intentions in note-heads, he asks the performers themselves to make an ad-hoc arrangement of the piece by dividing each section and describing its musical components. Contemporary groups *eighth blackbird* from Chicago, *Newspeak* from New York City, and *Citywater* from Sacramento have made written out

¹⁸ Asplund, “Spontaneous Political Music,” 421.

¹⁹ Rzewski, *Coming Together* instructions in score.

arrangements based on these instructions which, while an interesting development, is perhaps going against the composer's original intentions.²⁰

Formal analysis

Like the 8 lines of text, the piece is divided into 8 sections lettered A through H, which are characterized by their various processes (listed under "Instructions" in Example 2). These divisions run in contrast to the process of the text unfolding as shown below, where the underlined numbers refer to where the new sections begin in relation to the line of text.

Example 2: the two determinate processes of *Coming Together*²¹

Lines of text	Sections	Instructions	Perceived form
<u>1</u>	A.	big attack and sustain	<i>a</i>
12			
123			
1 <u>2</u> 34	B.	high players accent/low players sustain a 'G'	<i>b</i>
1234 <u>5</u>	C.	like A but more activity, 2-3 notes chains of notes	<i>a_i</i>
123456			
<u>1</u> 234567	D.	like B, roles reversed, high B-flats sustain, low stacc.	<i>b_i</i>
<u>2</u> 345678	E.	short melody with rests	<i>c</i>
<u>3</u> 45678	F.	similar to E, with virtuoso character, random notes	<i>c_i</i>
4 <u>5</u> 678	G.	similar to E, with hocketing effect, expanding rests	<i>c₂</i>
567 <u>8</u>	H.	all notes unison	<i>d</i>
678			
78			
8			

Basic materials

As explained by the instructions, it is possible to perceive a form operating against the additive and subtractive process, as a kind of sonata form without recapitulation when one considers the elements of articulation, register, rhythm, phrasing, and character: *a b a_i b_i c c_i c₂ d*. In terms of pitch material, the piece is quite conservative in its palette. Like *Les Moutons*, *Coming Together* has a modal key signature of one flat – B flat – and is firmly rooted in the G. This would suggest

²⁰ Little, "Political Music During and After 'The Revolution'," 110.

²¹ Lochhead, "Two Determinate Processes of *Coming Together*."

a G dorian mode, but not one E or A occurs in the entire bass line throughout the work. The result is a bassline using the G minor pentatonic scale throughout. On the surface, it would seem this piece has more to do with rock music with its elements of regularity including an unwavering 4/4 time signature, a metronome marking of quarter note equals 80-84 and constant 16th notes in the bass from beginning to end. On closer inspection, the variety of note placement, the expansion of intervals, and odd phrase groupings give the music a feeling of constant invention, transformation and disorientation, seen already in the opening two measures of Example 3.

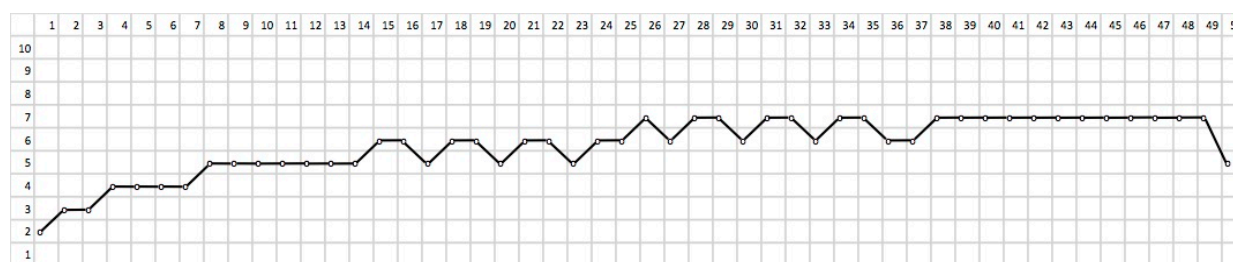
Example 3: *Coming Together*, mm. 1-2

A $\text{♩} = 80-84$
 I THINK¹ 2 THE COMBINATION

Expansion/contract of bassline

The main method of creating shape in the bass line is by the expansion and contraction of the musical material and range. See Example 4 for a data visualization of these elements at play.

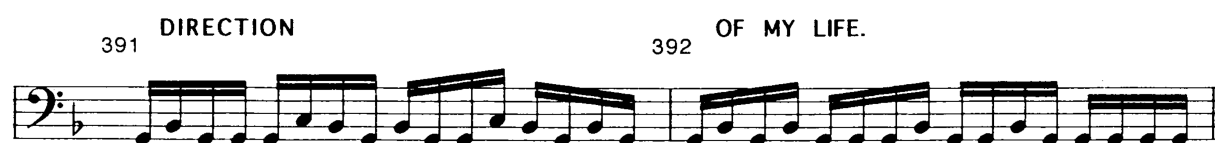
Example 4: “A” section of *Coming Together* – mm. (1-50) in relation to notes per measure



Represented here, we can see that m. 1 contains 2 distinct pitches, mm. 2-3 have 3, mm. 4-7 have 5, and so forth. All are expanding upwards in range from G2 in m. 1 to Bb4 in m. 26 (7 pitch classes). These expansions and contractions ebb and flow throughout the piece, incongruent with the expansion and contraction of the text. The text is just as varied in its placement, at

times being separated into a single word or phrase per measure. The expansion of notes and range at the beginning is mirrored at the end with a contraction from mm. 365-392, from 7 distinct pitches (from G2 to Bb4) down to 2 notes in the final bar (see Example 5). Even the final full beat is a further contraction down to a repeated unison G – an exact retrograde of the opening gesture. After 20 minutes of constant movement, this makes for a pronounced ending.

Example 5: *Coming Together*, mm. 391-392



Impact of *Coming Together*

What emerges is a musically and dramatically flexible piece that has both determinate and indeterminate elements, retaining a similar shape and length independent of its physical forces. His two formal techniques could be seen as both modernist (in terms of expansion/contraction of text and music) and of the Classical tradition (in terms of formal sections). The elements of text and a malleable ensemble have allowed this work to live in different musical spheres simultaneously, from the concert hall, to the small avant-garde forums, to a recent [notable version](#) accompanied by contemporary dance, performed by composer [David T. Little](#)'s political ensemble, *Newspeak*. As Little writes in his Princeton dissertation, after spending considerable time with both the composition and the composer, he considers *Coming Together/ Attica* as a piece of musical theatre.²² No matter what the definition of its genre or the performing ensemble, *Coming Together* is almost always a 20-minute performance with speaker plus acoustic and/or electric elements. The biggest variation in performance is in the lack of instruction for the speaker who could choose varying degrees of dramatic delivery. However, the excitement of the

²² Little, "Political Music During and After 'The Revolution'," 110.

music, and a clear musical process, necessitates that the speaker also gains excitement and volume towards the climax, often literally “crying out” as Rzewski most certainly intended.

Coming Together performances in 21st century

Coming Together was conceived as a reaction to the Attica Prison riots but it has since been adopted by others to highlight political and social concerns of their own. For example, its performance in 2011 with the Brooklyn Philharmonic was narrated by rapper/actor [Mos Def](#), and was dedicated to the memory of the recently executed inmate, Troy Davis.²³ The lasting success of this piece has been due to its flexible ensemble, its politically adaptive nature, and its visceral musical and dramatic impact. *Coming Together* certainly is an effective piece of its genre but it would not ultimately define his mature style. Only a few years later, he would compose a work very different in approach, and one that is now recognized as a modern masterpiece.

The People United Will Never Be Defeated

Political Background of *The People United*

In 1973, Chile was overthrown by a military coup and Augusto Pinochet established himself as the leader of the former democracy. Thousands of those who revolted were killed. As a result, many Chileans who made it out of the country centered in Italy, where Rzewski was still living, becoming acquainted with the exiled Chilean music group [INTI-ILLIMANI](#).²⁴ It was in this period that he was commissioned by pianist [Ursula Oppens](#) for a solo piano piece that would accompany a program at the Kennedy Center alongside Beethoven’s “Diabelli Variations”.²⁵ What resulted in 1976, was an approximately hour-long composition of massive musical proportions, with a vast polystylistic approach and a technically virtuosic requirement. As Dieter Schnebel describes, it has an “intense drive, classical construction and avant-garde virtuosity.”²⁶

²³ "Mos Def The Brooklyn Philharmonic," Accessed April 1, 2014, www.youtube.com/watch?v=1sIOqbWdOyg.

²⁴ Zimmerman, *Desert Plants*, 303.

²⁵ Wason, “Tonality & Atonality,” 113.

²⁶ Rzewski, *Nonsequiturs*, 10.

The People United is a theme and variations on the song “El pueblo unido jamás será vencido” written by composer Sergio Ortega with text contributions by the Chilean music group Quilapayún. The song itself has special political import in that it was adopted by the Chilean Uprising against its oppressive government led by the Pinochet regime. Being that both composers, Ortega and Rzewski, were political minded and friends, it is no wonder that Rzewski found political and melodic inspiration in this song for his grand project.

The People United analysis

Large Form

Like *Coming Together*, *The People United* is tightly organized, yet free within those restrictions. The form is a theme and 36 variations, with 6 groups of 6 variations each (similar to his group of 8 sentences in 7 sections of *Coming Together*). Each set of 6 variations is grouped by its large-form character and each 6th variation acts as a variation in review of those set of variations. In a similar fashion, the 6th set of variations acts as a variation-in-review for the entire work, containing an optional improvisation before finally returning to the grand theme. Rzewski himself describes the large-scale formal construction in his program notes: “simple events; rhythm; melodies; counterpoints; harmonies; combinations of all these.”²⁷ What Rzewski organizes at the large formal level, he also reflects in the musical phrasing: the theme itself is organized in three sets of twelve-bar phrases – thirty-six total. As Robert Wason has observed, Rzewski continues this 12-bar phrasing for most of the piece mostly as 24-measure variations, deviating in the fifth large subset.²⁸

Key centers and sequences

The structure of key centers is a large-scale ascending circle of fifths, (Dm-Am-Em, etc.) with some deviation. The opening Theme is clearly tonal, rooted in the key of D minor (see Example

²⁷ Rzewski, *Nonsequiturs*, 454.

²⁸ Wason, “Tonality & Atonality,” 111.

6). The 4-bar phrases expand in a circle of fifths progression (in mm. 9-12) to make the 12-bar total. The theme as a totality consists of an A part based on the tune of the political chant, and B part built with material consisting of the descending sequence, both of which make up the Theme.

Within the Theme itself, there are built-in stylistic variations.

Example 6: *The People United*, mm.1-4 present the unaltered folk-tune.

Example 7: *The People United*, mm. 5-16 are a triplet version of the theme making a jazz-like swing in the treble and a steady bouncing accompaniment in the bass.

Example 8: *The People United*, mm. 17-27 expand and fortify this triplet treatment with a

fleshed-out right hand and an interlocking pattern between hands. It concludes with a final 8 bars (mm. 28-36) which are in a near-Beethovenian homophonic treatment of the theme (Ex. 9).

Example 9: *The People United*, mm. 33-3



d: iv V/V i^{6/4} Vsus⁴ V

In mm. 28-32, Rzewski replaces the theme with a rhythmic motive already harkening back to the opening 4 measures in an overtly tonal progression. Within the Theme, there is a 24-measure variation from mm. 5-29, surrounded by the 4-bar opening and 8-bar closing phrases (12 being an important phrase length throughout). This internal variation sets a precedent in the piece of constant transformation, for within the variations to come, the audience will hear wild fluctuations of mood, style and process.

Atonal variations within a tonal framework

Once the Theme is complete, Rzewski quickly disperses with the linear melody, making instead a pointillistic variation on the theme, closely adhering to the theme with the exception of octave displacement, shown in Example 10.

Example 10: *The People United*, Variation 1, mm. 37-40

Var.1
Weaving : delicate but firm

(pp) (una corda) use pedal, but sparingly

pp

p

f

tre corde

The extremes of the high and low are juxtaposed, punctuating the end of the variation, with the most extreme utterance of this variation in m. 60 – an F7

followed by a dramatic E1. Robert Wason characterizes the octave displacement treatment as a kind of atonal thinking in a tonal world, and further points out that Rzewski conceives of atonal variations within a “tonal framework”.²⁹ This duality of traditional and modern processes is clearly at play throughout the composition, strengthening the metaphor of a pluralistic unity.

Phrases

The traditional phrase lengths of the opening theme are very important to Rzewski throughout *The People United*. In Variations 1 through 23, he strictly adheres to 24-bar phrases split in two groups of 12, with the second phrase often offering a different style or technique from the first phrase. Var. 24 adds 2 extra measures in preparation of the events to come, for in Var. 25-30, the 5th large subset of 6 variations, Rzewski completely does away with these phrase lengths.

Example 11: *The People United*, Variation 24, mm. 603-606

The musical score for Variation 24, measures 603-606, is presented in a grand staff. The tempo marking is "Very slow (♩ = ca. 2'')". The score begins with a "lunghissima (15-20'')" marking. The first measure is marked *fff* and includes the instruction "tremolo with both hands accel.-ritard like an alarm". The second measure is marked *ff* and includes the instruction "wait for sound to die to (5-10'')". The third measure is marked *ppp* and includes the instruction "una corda". The fourth measure is marked *p* and includes the instruction "rit.". The score is divided into two systems, each marked with a repeat sign and the instruction "(2da. sempre)".

Phrase length exception

Based on the compositional logic Rzewski establishes in the first 23 variations, Var. 24 would be the same phrase length if the system were not upset by the two *lunghissima* measures preparing the “Very slow” tempo marking. This includes but a held tremolo (uncharacteristic to this variation) and a held silence. It also seems purposeful that the composer’s strict adherence with 24-measure variations ends on variation 24, being the same number. The 5th subset of 6 variations that follows goes on a journey of multiple time signatures, repeats, and longer free-

²⁹ Wason, “Tonality & Atonality,” 108-109.

flowing variations, including a cadenza in Var. 27, to be finally brought back into focus starting with Var. 31. Within this final subset of 6, Var. 31-36 returns to the 24-bar phrase lengths (split in two), with the exception of the last, which is only 3 measures too long, and includes an “optional improvisation” lasting “anywhere up to 5 minutes or so”.

Example 12: Variation 36, 3 measures before the return of the Theme

pp

Cadenza

(optional improvisation; may last anywhere up to 5 minutes or so)

The People United ending

When the concluding Theme returns, it too is expanded, though always in even phrase lengths. Like *Coming Together*, Rzewski structures *The People United* using pre-compositional rules which are relaxed as the piece progresses. In the case of *Coming Together*, he allowed those freedoms to be decided by the performance group; in *The People United*, he started with a strict form and process in mind but allowed his composer’s intuition to guide the piece into its ultimate shape.

Impact of *The People United*

In terms of political inspiration, Rzewski himself has referred to *The People United* “as a symbol of the broad unity of social classes which was the ideal of Chilean society at that time,” and the grandness of design, alluding to the idea that the “unification of people is a long story and that nothing worth winning is acquired without effort.”³⁰ Indeed, the disparate music-historical allusions in the piece are striking, from the melodicism of the Romantics, the Americana à la Copland, the serial techniques of the Second Viennese School, the jazz styles in var. 13, the traditional Classical influence in var. 21, the late-Romantic harmony of var. 25, the Minimalistic

³⁰ Rzewski, *Nonsequitur*, 452.

figures of var. 27, and, of course, Bach throughout.³¹ With such varying styles, it is a wonder that the work hangs together as a whole.

Rzewski's and Wolff's thoughts on *The People United*

Interestingly, in response to a question about the Ortega's theme for *The People United*, Rzewski claimed in a French [interview](#): "I am not talented for melodies. I wrote some obviously, but I quickly realized that it is not my specialty."³² Rzewski also quotes Eisler's *Solitaritätslied* and the Italian Communist anthem *Bandiera Rossa* within the piece, simultaneously putting his preference on other composers' melodies while framing his composition in new political contexts.³³ Though his assertion of his lack of melodic powers is perhaps an exaggeration, or at the very least a composer's skewed perspective on his own work, it does give a glimpse into why a composer might delve into a massive variation set on a melody by his friend Ortega. On the subject of *The People United*, Christian Wolff, wrote:

The movement of the whole piece... is towards a new unity—an image of popular unity—made up of related but diverse, developing elements (not to be confused with uniformity)... achieved by a blend of irresistible logic and spontaneous expression.³⁴

While *The People United* shares political inspirations with *Coming Together*, some formal designs, and a similar approach to freedom of expression within that form, it struck a new path for the composer in the coming years.

After *The People United*

Ballads

Shortly after writing *The People United*, Rzewski received a full-time position at the Conservatoire Royal de Musique in Belgium, where he taught from 1977-2003. Only several years after *The*

³¹ Pollack, *Harvard Composers*, 385.

³² "Frederic Rzewski - Interview - Extrait De Concert - Vidéo Dailymotion." Accessed September 30, 2015. www.dailymotion.com/video/xemrri_frederic-rzewski-interview-extrait_music, translated by Valentine Biollay.

³³ Little, "Political Music During and After 'The Revolution'," 116.

³⁴ Asplund, "Spontaneous Political Music," 434.

People United, he would go on to write a piece which is another staple of his piano repertoire: the polystylistic, virtuosic, and politically-inspired *North American Ballads* (1978-79). This work, too, was based on folk songs, each of the four movements based on a separate song: I. “Dreadful Memories” was a song from the 1932 coal miner’s strike; II. “Which Side Are You On?” was from the same period; III. “Down by the Riverside” was used a peace song for protesters against the Vietnam War; and IV. “Winnsboro Cotton Mill Blues” was an industrial blues from North Carolina. Not only was this a fixed composition with similar folk-like qualities and a virtuosic demeanor, it was composed for the very same Ursula Oppens that had commissioned *The People United*.³⁵ Of the use of folk melody, Rzewski has likened these songs to universal archetypes which can “act like a kind of tonal ‘cement’, permitting wide-ranging improvisation without losing a sense of where ‘home’ is.”³⁶ One could apply the same description to the use of tonal thinking through his works.

De Profundis

Of his more recent work, Rzewski has said, “I look at the world, and it makes no sense, so I try to write music that makes no sense.”³⁷ This statement is just as provocative as *De Profundis* (1992), another grand piano piece with the theatrical element of a speaking pianist, creating what Rzewski calls a melodramatic oratorio.³⁸ *De Profundis* combines familiar elements of *Coming Together* and *The People United*, using dramatic text and fixed composition with a variety of extended techniques to be spoken, sung, whistled, and more. Musically, a sense of tonality at play from the opening arpeggiated figure – an Fm⁷ chord in the left hand with an upper structure Cm⁷ in the right hand, also interpreted as an Fm¹¹ chord. This is answered a tritone away with a Bm¹¹ arpeggio. Again, Rzewski is playing with “traditional” harmony in new contexts. The

³⁵ Warnaby, “Rzewski: Piano Works,” 76-77.

³⁶ Rzewski, *Nonsequitur*, 464.

³⁷ Little, “Political Music During and After ‘The Revolution’,” 140.

³⁸ Rzewski, *Nonsequitur*, 516.

form itself is based on the spoken text as divided into eight sections, each preceded by instrumental preludes.³⁹ The music expresses, interpolates, and supports the text of Oscar Wilde’s long letter on the same title, written after being jailed for “gross indecency” – essentially, for being homosexual in London, 1897. The elements of banging the lid of the piano, scratching underneath the piano, and whistling adds a sense of drama, and an experience in “violation of performance etiquette”.⁴⁰ Rzewski had already experimented with the use of whistling, singing, crying and slamming the piano lid in *The People United* (Var. 11, 35 and 36 respectively) but these were used as spices, not main ingredients. Within the first page alone, the performer is asked to audibly gasp and rhythmically sigh while playing (see Example 13). This is only the beginning of a long, dramatic experience for performer and audience which expresses the politics of sexuality, which is as Rzewski wrote, “just as lively a story now as it was a hundred years ago.”⁴¹

Example 13: *De Profundis*, mm. 1-5

Other works

Since turning a corner towards fixed composition, Rzewski wrote prolifically for the piano. Other than *De Profundis*, he wrote *Nanosonatas* (2006-2010) for solo piano; a *Piano Concerto* (2013); and a magnum opus, *The Road* (1995-2003), in 8 sections and 63 “miles” (or movements) as Rzewski describes as containing everything “but the kitchen sink”.⁴² All of these have the same

³⁹ Rzewski, *Nonsequiturs*, 516.

⁴⁰ Little, “Political Music During and After ‘The Revolution’,” 145.

⁴¹ Rzewski, *Nonsequiturs*, 516.

⁴² Fox, “Which side are you on?,” 67.

commonalities seen thus far: clear formal design, a use of tonal thinking using polystylistic styles, and theatrical elements which subvert the concert experience for the sake of political expression.

Stylistic shift

Analysis of his output

After sifting through the prolific output of Frederic Rzewski, it is possible to make delineations between his general approach from open-instrumentation (often involving improvisation) to fixed-instrumentation (using traditional notation). In what could be labeled as his Academic Period from 1953–1963, 100% of the 24 pieces in his catalog use of fixed instrumentation and traditional notation. During his Italian-New York Period from 1964–1972, out of 28 pieces, 18 (64%) of those use improvisational elements and a variable ensemble. Out of the others, 6 (22%) are for tape alone or with ensemble and 4 (14%) are traditional – three art songs and one work for chamber orchestra. As for his Belgian Period, from 1973 onwards, there are over 130 compositions that mostly use fixed instrumentation. In the span of 40 years, 17 (13%) of them use open instrumentation and/or improvisation, almost the same number as in his Italian-NY Period.⁴³

Rzewski's response to shift

When asked in a 1976 interview, Rzewski attributed this stylistic shift between *Coming Together* and *The People United* to social circumstance. From a practical standpoint, he was in transition from working in a group format—whether MEV or MAC—to writing music for specific performers like Ursula Oppens. Rzewski moved to New York in 1971, establishing MAC there, and then moved back to Europe in 1975. After that, MEV met less and less frequently.⁴⁴ However, writing 40 years later, Rzewski saw that shift as being ideological as well:

MEV's audience at this time consisted mainly of students, and under the influence of the European student movement the group unavoidably participated in some of its infantile ideological errors. The politicization of the group had both creative and destructive consequences. On the one hand, the exhilarating discovery of new environments:

⁴³ Rzewski, *Nonsequiturs*, 554–559

⁴⁴ Rzewski, *Nonsequiturs*, 180.

performances in occupied universities and factories; on the other, the confusion and conflicts which arose from the absence of a guiding theory. These contradictions led to the splitting of the group in 1970, after some two hundred-odd concerts.⁴⁵

This statement when compared to recent politics is reminiscent of the criticism towards the Occupy Wall Street movement, which for three months in 2011, occupied Zuccotti Park in the financial district of Manhattan. At the time, it was a provocative method of gaining the world's attention, but ultimately proved to lack clear goals and had difficulty communicating one message without a central leadership. Like MEV, Occupy Wall Street was formed by youthful people with varied backgrounds and different agendas who came together to respond to their time. What Occupy Wall Street achieved was putting "We Are the 99%" into the lexicon of American politics. What MEV achieved was important mainly in the world contemporary music: being a place where young composers and performers could gestate. Despite the "infantile ideological errors," Rzewski has also claimed that without MEV, his own work would never have developed as a composer.⁴⁶ This author's contention is that Rzewski's shift to composing fixed-instrumentation music outside of MEV and MAC provided the opportunity for the composer to deliver his message in the clearest and most effective way possible.

Politics throughout

As Dieter Schnebel writes in the preface to *Nonsequiturs*, the comprehensive collection of Rzewski's writings and lectures, "for Frederic Rzewski, music and politics always belonged together."⁴⁷ Though his methods and materials can vary greatly, the Rzewski we know from *The People United* and *Coming Together* are one in the same because of the political strain that runs throughout. Rzewski summarized best the complicated relationship between music and politics:

Art and politics are not the same thing. There are points where they converge and points where they diverge. One cannot easily be put in to the service of the other without weakening it, depriving it, of some of its inherent force as a vehicle of

⁴⁵ Rzewski, *Nonsequiturs*, 266.

⁴⁶ Rzewski, *Nonsequiturs*, 270.

⁴⁷ Rzewski, *Nonsequiturs*, 10.

communication. The politics of the art world tends to be fairly irrelevant to politics in general, whereas the kinds of art which satisfies the political world is often pretty feeble as art. An effective combination of the two, in nonetheless, theoretically possible.⁴⁸

As evidenced by his provocative statements, Rzewski is a man who can be full of contradictions. He writes that composing political music weakens both the music and the politics, and yet, that is exactly what he has done for decades. For all his political music, he also writes that he is not an expert in political questions, that he wields no influence, has no special knowledge, and is no more involved in political activities than are most people.⁴⁹ This may be offered in truth, but his work has been used by many musicians to express political aims in a scale that most composers could only dream of. Certainly, that should be held up as proof of his own influence.

Conclusion

From *Coming Together* to *The People United*

As we have seen, Rzewski's rich associations with politically minded musicians and his intense interest in the politics of the world around him have provided the impetus for composing many works throughout his life, including those analyzed here. In a literal sense, one could attribute the lack of instrumentation of *Coming Together* to a democratic impulse, allowing disparate people who come together to make change.⁵⁰ Here was a clamorous group of like-minded people trapped within the confines around them with only the voice of Sam Melville to speak for them. One can easily associate the polystylistic music of *The People United* with the many voices in Chile, all singing the same song in their own style, here with a singular pianist to represent them. This multi-faceted musical language appeals to performers as disparate as Geoffrey Burleson, Stephen Drury, Marc-André Hamlin, Corey Hamm, Ole Kiilerich, Igor Levit, Lisa Moore, Ursula Oppens, Ralph van Raat, Omri Shimron, Daan Vandewalle and many more.

⁴⁸ Rzewski, *Nonsequiturs*, 192.

⁴⁹ Rzewski, *Nonsequiturs*, 188.

⁵⁰ Lochhead, email to the author, July 2020

Both *Coming Together* and *The People United* are political but avoid preaching, preferring instead to “communicate on an emotional level”, as composer David Little describes.⁵¹ How does Rzewski equally reach an audience of academics, concert goers and even the passerby’s in a public space, like he did in Pittsburgh’s [Wholey’s fish market](#) in 2015? He uses folk song, hymns, and other tonal associations to act as the tonal cement which bind together his wide-reaching methods of musical language. Furthermore, he uses elements which subvert the concert experience, from the slamming of piano lids, to the gasping of breath, and the reading of political text, literally speaking his message to the audience. Tonal- and extra-musical elements are all used in the service of communicating a political statement, whether directly stated or not. Thus, *Coming Together* and *The People United* each provide a different approach to the same goal: to communicate with the People.⁵²

⁵¹ Little, “Political Music During and After ‘The Revolution’,” 115.

⁵² A Personal Note: in regard to communication with the people, I believe Rzewski succeeds. As a young composer, I was once reticent of contemporary classical music stylings. At 19, I heard *Coming Together* performed by eighth blackbird and it struck a chord in me. At 23, I heard the composer perform *The People United* for a house of concert goers and a light bulb turned on. Rzewski was not only my way into new music and politics, he was a model in how to connect with people. I doubt it is coincidence that what the two titles of his seminal works share is also what he is concerned with – coming together, the people united. Just as a change happened in Rzewski one year in 1976, so too a change happened in me when I first heard his music. Perhaps, that is how change is made: one piece and one person at a time.

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