Fredric Rzewski's The People United Will Never Be Defeated

At Venice's Teatro Fondamenta Nuove

David Adelaide
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At Venice's Teatro Fondamenta Nuove on January 13, composer and pianist Fredric Rzewski gave a remarkable performance of his composition, *The People United Will Never Be Defeated*. Rzewski's work is a set of 36 variations, spanning 50 minutes, on Chilean composer Sergio Ortega's *El Pueblo Unido Jamás Será Vencido*—the song most closely associated with the resistance of the Chilean working class to the 1973 coup that installed the 17-year military dictatorship of General Augusto Pinochet.

According to legend, the catalyst for Ortega's song was a street singer that the Chilean composer heard chanting the text in front of the Palace of Finance, in the months leading up to the coup. Ortega quickly composed his own song based on the chant, which, when performed soon thereafter by the group Quilapayun, became an anthem.

On that occasion, in September 1973, the people were most certainly *vencido* [defeated]. This is well known, but the reasons are frequently mystified or passed over in silence.

A wave of militancy on the part of the Chilean working class, part of an international upsurge, had brought Salvador Allende's Popular Unity government to power in a 1970 election. The illusion that Allende's reformists would fulfill their promises of profound social and political transformation was encouraged by the Stalinist Communist Party and by various centrists internationally. Disarmed and disoriented by the Allende government, which had appeased international financial institutions and the right wing, and which came to rely on the military against workers' opposition to its policies, the working class was not able to resist the Washington-backed coup. In the bloody aftermath, 4000 people were executed, thousands more detained and tortured and nearly a million forced to seek exile.

Rzewski's set of variations for solo piano, composed in 1975, is among the many historical echoes of this fundamental strategic experience, and both deserves and rewards a close listening. Ortega's song becomes in Rzewski's hands—and under his fingers—the point of departure for a rigorous process of synthesizing and extending the developments bequeathed by a number of preceding musical traditions. (*The People United Will Never Be Defeated* is available on recordings made by, among others, the composer himself, Marc André Hamelin, and Stephan Drury.)

A European composer of the nineteenth century would typically have maintained the same melodic and/or harmonic basis throughout an entire set of variations. The final movement of Brahms 4th symphony, for instance, is a *passacaglia* in which a (relatively) constant set of harmonies is repeated and repeated while other elements of the musical fabric change.

The general trend of musical development during the twentieth century was towards an awareness of the structural possibilities of musical elements other than pitch, including rhythm, timbre, and space, to name just a few. *The People United Will Never Be Defeated* confronts this development systematically. The 36 variations are divided into six groups of six variations, with each group focusing on a different musical element. Different aspects of the theme are maintained at different points of time, allowing the composer to bind together a wider variety of sounds and styles on the surface of the work.

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To give some indication of the range of these styles: florid right-hand angular lines recalling bebop or hard bop idioms; “pointillistic” sections in which individual notes are separated from their neighbours by silences; lush, deep chorale passages such as one might find in Liszt; virtuoso outbursts in which the pianist’s two hands play rapid successions of chords in opposite directions out from the centre of the instrument; complicated sustain effects, in which control of the piano’s dampers via the pedals and/or the keys leads to a subtle interplay of tiny sounds at the threshold of audibility.

This succession of styles never takes place in a contrived or mechanical way. A certain density of ideas is maintained throughout, ensuring that one’s attention is continually drawn to the complex relationships created between adjacent or overlapped phrases, rather than simply to their isolated, individual characteristics.

The final effect is no mere calculus of notes, but rather a substantial series of transformations of treatment and mood, in which it is nonetheless always possible for the attentive ear to find Ortega’s original tune. To this listener, the overall emotional impact hovers somewhere between melancholy and anger. Perhaps more important than this emotional evaluation, however, is the recognition that the original sonic experience is revealed to be one that contains a complex unity of other states, relationships, and emotions.

By the time Rzewski (born 1938) was commissioned to write the piece—intended to accompany Beethoven’s *Diabelli Variations* in a concert—he already had behind him a number of significant involvements as a composer and performer of new concert music. During the 1950s, his contacts with Christian Wolff, John Cage and virtuoso pianist/composer David Tudor were formative experiences. Rzewski spent the 1960s in Italy, where he studied with Italian composer Luigi Dallapiccola, accompanied the legendary flautist Severino Gazzelloni on piano, and, together with Alvin Curran and Richard Teitelbaum, co-founded the Rome-based group Musica Elettronica Viva.

An important element of the historic avant-garde of the first half of the twentieth century was the desire to bridge the gap between so-called “high” and “low” arts—in other words, the desire to create a mass art that would at the same time represent an advanced form of human cognition. Rzewski would become one of the figures who continued this tradition of the historic avant-garde during the Cold War period. This engagement would lead him to work with material from spirituals, from the poetry of American workers, and with Oscar Wilde’s text *De Profundis*, among other things. The following excerpt from a program note by Rzewski (here translated from Italian) gives an idea of the various aesthetic currents of which this body of work was an expression:

“When I lived in New York at the beginning of the 1970s, I had the chance to meet Pete Seeger, one of my heroes. I spoke to him of a group of musicians, the MAC (Musicians’ Action Collective), which we had formed in order to put on socially relevant concerts. Some of us were also interested in the idea of a collective of singer-songwriters.

“He already knew everything, because his father had organized a similar group in the 1930s. The important thing was to have regular encounters, once a month, for example, and to sing the songs which had been written in that month. Then, he said, we should follow the example of Bach, referring to the use by Bach of melodies that anyone could sing, the chorales. Seeger held it to be essential that a concert should include the participation of the public.”

Rzewski’s performance in Venice was relaxed but concentrated, with a stage manner entirely lacking in the melodrama or stiffness one too often fears at solo piano concerts. Instead, there was a carefully calibrated attention to the work’s overall arch of tension, with the consequence that the work’s fifty minutes on the clock seemed to last at most half that as a lived experience. The audience rewarded Rzewski with an appreciative five curtain calls.

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