Composer and pianist Frederic Rzewski is dead at 83

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Frederic Rzewski, the American-born composer who rejected both serialism and minimalism in his struggle to create a significant body of work over the past half-century, much of it politically themed, died on June 26 in Italy.

Rzewski, who taught at the Royal Academy of Music in Liège, Belgium from 1977 until his death, is best known for his set of variations for solo piano, *The People United Will Never Be Defeated*, based on a protest song, written by Chilean composer Sergio Ortega, that became inseparable from the resistance of the working class to the coup that overthrew Salvador Allende and installed fascist dictator Augusto Pinochet in 1973.

The massive set of 36 variations, spanning nearly an hour in length, was premiered by and created for the pianist Ursula Oppens in 1976, at a series of concerts in Washington D.C. to mark the bicentennial of the United States. It was often performed by Rzewski himself, and a 2005 recital by him was reviewed in the WSWS.

The song itself is a very simple tune. Rzewski later explained, "I wanted to write a piece that [Oppens] could play for an audience of classical-music lovers who perhaps knew nothing at all of what was happening in Latin America. By virtue of listening to my piece for an hour, they might somehow get interested in the subject. I really was trying to reach the audience by using a language they would not find alienating."

What the composer did with the song made all the difference. The work is suffused by the originality and improvisation that characterized his composition as a whole. It is a complex mixture of old and new, the popular, romantic, jazzy and experimental, full of contradictory and unpredictable qualities, yet also unified and exhilarating, as performed by Rzewski, Oppens and many others. As Ms. Oppens, a lifelong friend of the composer, told critic Tim Page for his obituary for Rzewski in the *Washington Post*, the work is "that mountain that pianists see and they feel they have to climb it—because it is there!"

The People United has been recorded by some of the most well-regarded, thoughtful and original pianists of recent decades, including Marc-Andre Hamelin, the Canadian virtuoso a generation younger than Rzewski, and Igor Levit, of yet a later generation. Many of those who seek out the work are undoubtedly attracted to its theme of resistance to dictatorship. Levit's 2016 recording of it, on a three-CD set that included Beethoven's Diabelli Variations and Bach's Goldberg Variations, provocatively placed Rzewski alongside sets of variations by the two most famous giants of Western classical music. It won the *Gramophone Magazine* award for "Recording of the Year."

While *The People United* is most instantly recognized by those familiar with the name of Rzewski, the composer wrote prolifically for various ensembles, especially chamber and vocal works, and above all piano. Nonesuch Records released a seven-CD set of Rzewski's compositions for solo piano between 1975-1999. Wikipedia lists more than 150 works by the composer, who longtime *Boston Globe* music critic Richard Dyer, writing about 20 years ago, described as standing "in an honorable line of barnstorming pianist-composers that includes Chopin, Liszt, Prokofiev, and Rachmaninoff. He is a daredevil pianist who has composed his most important works for his own instrument, and one of the three or four most significant composers for the piano in the past half-century."

Rzewski, born in 1938 in Westfield, Massachusetts (a suburb of Springfield), studied at and obtained degrees, first from Harvard and then from Princeton, studying with such well-known composers as Randall Thompson, Roger Sessions and Milton Babbitt. He spent part of the 1960s in Europe. He played the most avant-garde works by Stockhausen and Boulez, and also helped to organize an experimental electronic music group, MEV. However, Rzewski began to take a very critical approach to serialism and atonal music in general, even though it was then triumphant in academic circles.

The composer was also greatly influenced by the international social and political upheavals of the 1960s. He was part of a milieu, including younger musicians like Oppens, the late Peter Serkin and others, who were similarly drawn to radical politics during this period. Rzewski had come of age in the previous decade, and by the 1960s had already drawn some conclusions. As the composer Christian Wolff described it, in an article in the *New York Times* from 1997, by 1956 Rzewski "was very vocal in his viewpoints, which more often than not concerned left-wing politics. He knew all about Marx before the rest of us had even read him."

These performers and musicians each tried in some way to

make their work more relevant to the world around them. Rzewski returned to the US in 1970 and remained there for the next five or six years. Among his compositions from this period, before *The People United*, was *Coming Together*, from 1973, a monodrama for actor and ensemble, consisting of the reading of some letters from Sam Melville over a jazz-influenced repetitive background. Melville was one of the organizers of the 1971 Attica prison rebellion, in which the murderous assault ordered by then-New York Governor Nelson Rockefeller led to 43 deaths, including Melville himself.

Rzewski, always politically outspoken, found it very difficult to obtain a university teaching job, which is how most of his fellow musicians earned a living. Oppens later explained, "People wanted to make him irrelevant, due in part to political opposition." When Rzewski was offered a job in Belgium, he accepted it.

He continued composing until the end of his life, as noted above, but the political elements tended to recede along with the sharp move to the right in the capitalist West, led by the Thatcher and Reagan governments, and culminating in the Stalinist dissolution of the Soviet Union. The 1990s nevertheless saw, among other work, one of his more significant historical-political efforts, *De Profundis* (1992), in which a speaking pianist reads the poem of that name, written by Oscar Wilde from jail in 1897, alternating the text with music for piano.

While continuing to compose, Rzewski acknowledged some discouragement about the state of the world and its connection with his compositional work. He told the *Times* in the abovementioned article, "There's a big difference between 1997 and 1977. I have my own feelings about what's happening in the world, but I don't think I can express them musically with any great clarity as I could have 20 years ago. Things seemed simpler and clearer then. For one thing there was a movement, there were large numbers of people who shared similar ideas, and one could feel that one was part of something larger than oneself."

The difficulties were real enough, as is Rzewski's acknowledgment of the impact on his music. While he may have been disappointed, however, and unable to see that a new upsurge in the class struggle was being prepared, he was not bitter, and he did not accommodate himself to the filthy business of enriching oneself at the expense of the working class.

This comes out very clearly in a lengthy interview at the US Library of Congress from 2016, in conjunction with a commission for "Satires," a work for violin and piano, that was performed at that time by Rzewski himself, along with violinist Jennifer Koh.

In the hour-long conversation, which is available online, Rzewski restates his hostility to serialism and minimalism ("Serialism did not help to advance the art of music…even worse was Minimalism"). He explains that "the creative level of music has been going down for the past 100 years, or more," that there has been "a steady decline, from Brahms through Richard Strauss to Stockhausen," while "the level of performance has gone up."

This has been a "complex process," he says, but "basically, capitalism is not good for culture, capitalism does not lead to better art; on the contrary, it is destructive in many ways. It's time to get rid of it, we need something else."

The composer adds, perceptively and accurately, that this was not always the case, of course, that in the 19th century, during the period of the ascendancy of the capitalist system, art could and did flourish.

When questioned about "music with a social message," Rzewski responds that it is not obligatory. The composer can write about "love, death, a lot of things," but "if you have one [a social message], it's important to speak it out…If you have something to say about society and you can use music to say it, yes," said Rzewski, pointing to the way in which Verdi's *Nabucco*, especially its Chorus of the Hebrew Slaves, helped inspire the Italian Risorgimento of the 1860s, and also the example of the Internationale, whose melody was composed by Pierre de Geyter in 1888, and went on to have what Rzewski calls "a notable career, although it is largely forgotten now."

That last phrase once again reflects the discouragement of Rzewski and most of his generation. At the same time, he set an important musical example, and remained true to his socialist ideals. As recently as 2019, in one of many interviews with Rzewski that can be found online, he called Rosa Luxemburg, the Polish-German revolutionary Marxist who was assassinated in 1919, "the most important personality of the 20th century."

Igor Levit, one of the most widely known pianists of his generation, and who has placed himself courageously in the forefront of the struggle against xenophobia, anti-Semitism and the threat of resurgent fascism in his homeland of Germany as well as elsewhere, paid tribute to his friend and mentor Rzewski in an interview with the *New York Times* this week, declaring that "he must have believed in the possibility of what music can do to people. It can provide people with an idea. A piano piece can't save the world. But we can. He will not see the beautiful revolution he was hoping for, but the revolution will come anyway. And when it's here, his music will sound with it."