RICE UNIVERSITY

From Ideology Into Sound:
Frederic Rzewski's North American Ballads
And Other Piano Music From The 1970s

by

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ABSTRACT


by

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Frederic Rzewski's contribution to twentieth century piano literature is deep and varied. Works such as the North American Ballads and the Variations on The People United Will Never Be Defeated represent some of the greatest technical accomplishments in all of piano literature. The composer borrows from the music of different nations and, through a pastiche of styles, tries to communicate many personal ideological beliefs. This document sets these cultural references and ideological values into context, primarily focusing on the North American Ballads of 1979. Other important works, such as the Variations on No Place to Go But Around, Les Moutons de Panurge, Coming Together, and Attica will also be discussed as predecessors to the composer's mature style that developed in the 1970s. Thorough discussion of Rzewski's source materials is featured, as well as a complete motivic analysis of the Ballads. The author has also included a list of the composer's solo piano music and a discography of the piano works discussed in the body of the paper.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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CHAPTER ONE
INTRODUCTION

Drawing from eclectic sources both musical and historical, Frederic Rzewski has made a significant contribution to late twentieth-century piano repertoire. His contribution is represented through works that exhibit a spirited mixture of psychological complexity and technical brilliance, as well as a historically and progressively informed sense of stylistic control. Piano music represents Rzewski's most developed genre of instrumental writing. This is owed, no doubt, to his prodigious skills as a pianist. In this body of literature that spans his entire career, the composer displays a striking and individualistic voice. His is a voice that can adopt the unmistakable dialects of classical conventions and speak them in the tongue of the avant-garde. Being able to adopt techniques and aesthetics the way a precocious child may learn a new language, the composer's piano music parades a prodigious mental agility. The impression that is left by his varied style of composition is that of a mentally revolving door through which concepts pass easily in and easily out. Fusing eclectic elements with extra-musical associations, Rzewski exploits music's inherent capacity to act as a meaningful symbol. This compositional objective, combined with his outspoken aesthetic and political beliefs, has resulted in some of the most virtuosic and individualistic music for the piano written at the close of the twentieth century.

Rzewski's major works for the piano dating from the 1970s represent many early milestones in his career as a composer and performer. With the exception of two works, the pieces written for the instrument in this decade nod toward conventions of classical
repertoire. This is executed subtly through the character piece, and more overtly through variation and improvisational forms. At the same time, these works also represent an aesthetic culmination in twentieth-century American piano music drawing inspiration from a broad sampling of sources.

The primary focus of this paper is Rzewski’s *North American Ballads*, which were written in 1979. Comprised of four movements, the set exhibits a collage of our American musical history through a wide variety of regional styles and devices that rely extensively on improvisation. Rzewski borrows melodies of social protest for each movement thereby creating extra-musical historical associations that deepen the symbolic power of his music. The four movements of the set are titled *Dreadful Memories* based on the protest ballad sung by Aunt Molly Jackson; *Which Side Are You On?* after Florence Reece, another protest singer from the Depression; *Down by the Riverside*, a Negro spiritual; and a work song called the *Winnsboro Cotton Mill Blues*. Consideration of this large-scale solo work will be accompanied by discussion of pertinent selected works from the composer’s oeuvre, namely two piano works which bear the same sort of symbolic social message, *Variations on No Place To Go But Around* and *Thirty-Six Variations on ‘The People United Will Never Be Defeated!* A detailed and critical account of Rzewski’s career, aesthetics, and pivotal early compositions shall provide a framework for better understanding the piano music. The discussion will serve to reveal the social context in which Rzewski turned toward a more conservative instrumental and formal style.

Throughout his career as both a composer and performer, Rzewski has been a champion of everything new and cutting edge. His experiences as a public musician have
run the gamut from concert pianist to performance artist, as both a solo and collective improviser. Undoubtedly, collaboration and friendships with many of the most distinguished European and American composers of the past fifty years have nurtured the development of a unique stylistic complexity in Rzewski’s music. His stylistic palette is broadly based, exhibiting the influences of serialism, minimalism, folk and popular styles, as well as improvisation. Rzewski’s output defies classification as a whole. Throughout his career he has explored many avenues of composition, taking from each defined medium what is useful for his desired effect. His work celebrates the most esoteric as well as the most mundane influences, which allow him to provide much irony and commentary on the surrounding world.

Such eclecticism is by no means particular to Rzewski alone. Many of his contemporaries exhibit a similar combination of compositional procedures and musical styles. Indeed, the end of the twentieth century is most distinguished from any other period in music history by this kaleidoscope of aesthetic practices. In America, this eclecticism can be traced back to Charles Ives, who began experimenting with stylistic juxtapositions. Ives often alternated sections of tonal and atonal writing to frame the borrowed hymn tunes of his native New England. In doing so, he created meaningful associations between the simplicity of the borrowed tunes and their motivically derived or freely written counterbalancing sections. Ives also set a precedent for the development of related techniques in American music in later years.

Other American composers greatly exploited the use of musical quotations later in the century. George Rochberg extensively makes use of musical quotes in his piano
works dating from the late fifties and early sixties, such as his *Sonata-Fantasia* of 1958.\(^1\) This technique was later developed in his string quartets. Other later works of his such as the *Carnaval Music* (1971) and *Partita Variations* (1976) exhibit an interest in tonal methods and stylistic juxtapositions without literal quotations. George Crumb began to include quotations of other composers’ music in his *Makrokosmos*, volumes one and two. His *Ancient Voices of Children*, and string quartet *Black Angels* also exhibit quotations prominently. Other composers to demonstrate an affinity for this eclectic style include William Albright, William Bolcom, and Donald Martino, who experimented with juxtapositions of tonal and atonal writing.

Rzewski’s eclecticism stems from an artistic environment that evolved after the Second World War. As a music student at Harvard in the fifties and Fulbright scholar in the sixties, he exhibited an interest in the more structural stylization of serialism. The aesthetics of John Cage and David Tudor, with their eastern inspired philosophies regarding sound-inclusiveness, improvisation, and use of electronics, also attracted his attention. Exploring the possibilities of performance art, Rzewski made open-ended social commentaries through many conceptual works and theater-like pieces. These youthful works from the sixties exhibit a tendency toward ideals that were anarchistic in both the musical and political sense. Such preoccupation with free-form improvisation and radical performance stratagems came to mature in a style that eventually rejected happenstance occurrences in favor of more organized and classically derived structures.

The composer reconciled his personal aesthetics and political preferences in an important collection of works that he produced in the seventies. Beginning with several

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pieces composed in the minimalist vein, he embraced a tonal medium. This return to
tonal organization was followed by the pieces that will be the focus of this document.
These works, written for the piano, represent a continuation of the grand tradition of
romanticism. Neo-romantic is a useful label for them inasmuch as they are large-scale,
tonal, virtuoso works for the piano based on historical models. The textures of
minimalism, ambiguous tonal syntax, and complex principals of organization enhance the
composer's preoccupation with neoclassicism and perceptible musical forms.

In each of these important compositions for the piano, Variations on No Place To
Go But Around, Variations on The People United Will Never Be Defeated, and the North
American Ballads, Rzewski presents the listener with a magnificent post-modern musical
collage assembled through a seemingly impromptu pastiche of styles and devices. These
run the gamut from the transcendentally modeled writings of Charles Ives to the
reductive aesthetics of Steve Reich and Terry Riley. The composer also relies heavily on
indeterminacy and serial techniques gleaned from the Darmstadt school as well.
CHAPTER TWO
BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

Frederic Rzewski was born April 13, 1938 in Westfield Massachusetts. He began piano lessons at the age of four, showing an early interest and aptitude for music. Between the ages of seven and fourteen, the composer studied under the guidance of Charles Mackey of Springfield, Massachusetts. Mackey provided the young virtuoso with a solid grounding in harmony, counterpoint, and composition. Lessons also included discussions of history, style, and political ideology. Mackey was an outspoken socialist, which would later prove to be quite influential in the young composer’s career.

Rzewski developed into a concert pianist with a significant international career. Although he is now primarily recognized as a composer, Rzewski relied upon his skills as a performer to support himself and his family at least until the mid-1980s. His monumental set of variations based on The People United Will Never Be Defeated! helped to give the composer the exposure necessary to cultivate international interest in his music. This recognition has led to many visiting stints at universities throughout Europe and America. Rzewski’s peripatetic career has accented his talents both as a composer and a performer. His repertoire includes music by Boulez, Stockhausen, Cage, Feldman, and other contemporaries as well as his own compositions. Although new music has been a staple of his career from early on, classical literature also comprises a small part of his concert repertoire.

The composer's preparatory education took place at Andover Academy. He then attended Harvard University, like many other composers who figure prominently in twentieth-century American music history. As a music student from 1954 to 1958, Rzewski felt that Harvard's music program was lacking in dimension. He was drawn to other disciplines and pursued studies in philosophy, particularly feeling attracted to the theories of Hegel, Holderlin, and Adorno. Rzewski studied piano privately during his stay in Cambridge, although he did not pursue private lessons in composition. Classes in modal counterpoint with Randall Thompson, and Walter Piston's composer's seminar, satisfied the need for a compositional outlet. Rzewski wrote his undergraduate thesis comparing late medieval isorhythmic techniques and post-war serialism. The paper, which makes many references to the theories of Hegel and Adorno, foreshadows his eventual synthesis of ideological values and aesthetic beliefs, many of which he began to express through composition.

Through an introduction by Charles Mackey in Springfield years prior to his residency at Harvard, Rzewski grew interested in the procedures and aesthetics of Arnold Schoenberg. His early efforts at composition applied many of the principles of the second Viennese school. In contrast, the university favored the aesthetics of neo-classicism and Stravinsky's modernism in the late fifties. It was during these undergraduate years that Rzewski developed friendships with other musical "outsiders" at Harvard. With these young and promising composers, namely Christian Wolff and David Berman, he organized concerts that promoted the music of Cage, Feldman and Tudor. These concerts also featured the composers of the so-called Darmstadt school, such as Stockhausen and Boulez. Although the music of this blossoming avant-garde generation
was held to the fringe at Harvard, the concerts managed to attract the attention and
support of Randall Thompson, whom Rzewski cites as his most important teacher at the
time.

A Woodrow Wilson Fellowship followed the Harvard stint, leading Rzewski to
Princeton. Once again, the young scholar and composer felt dissatisfied with his
academic surroundings. As a continuation of studies that he began at Harvard, he
immersed himself in Greek philosophy and language. At this time, Rzewski studied
composition with Roger Sessions and Milton Babbitt.

Rzewski made his first extended trips to Europe in 1960 as a Fulbright Scholar in
composition. The fellowship enabled him to study composition further with Luigi
Dallapicolla in Florence. While on this trip the composer also met his first wife, Nicole
Abeloss, a Belgian student of archeology and classics in Rome. Performance
opportunities arose through association with Severino Gazzelloni, an Italian flutist with
whom Rzewski had performed the Boulez Flute Sonatine. After funding through the
Fulbright organization came to an end, Rzewski was able to survive on income generated
by his performing career in Europe. In 1962 he premiered Stockhausen’s Klavierstucke X
at the Parma Festival, which led to further performances and recordings of the work. As
his performance career expanded and his personal life developed in Europe, it became
increasingly more difficult for him to return to America.

Rzewski did return with his wife and child, however, in the summer of 1963.
Through an introduction by Earl Brown, Frederic met Charlotte Moorman, the infamous
avante-garde instrumentalist. Together they collaborated on organizing a festival of new
music at Judson Hall in New York City. The festival made quite an impact on the new
music scene in New York. Moorman would continue to be successful organizing events such as this for the next twelve years. Rzewski's opportunities for carving a personal niche and making a living were still greater across the ocean, even though this appeared to be a great opportunity to settle in the states. The family returned to Europe that fall.

This episode is one of many instances in the composer's life where greater circumstances prevented him from settling down in America. It is a commonly held misconception among those that are superficially familiar with Rzewski's music that, as an outspokenly socialist artist, he has rejected an American lifestyle for himself. On the contrary, the composer has openly expressed a desire to reside in the United States. Never having been able to secure to a major academic post in the states, Rzewski has pieced together his living across the ocean where his reputation was founded as a performer.

Interestingly, during the early stages of his performing career, Rzewski was not known through performances of his own works. Though he was working on his own compositions at the time, the composer hadn't promoted his works over the music of his contemporaries. The composer did occasionally perform his own compositions, but the general demand was for his skill in performing difficult new scores by other more well-established composers.

Inspired by his longtime friend Christian Wolff, Rzewski studied the impact of indeterminacy on integral serialism. Stockhausen's Klavierstucke XI, served as inspiration for the path that he would follow for the remainder of the decade. The piece is composed of nineteen musical fragments that terminate with specific performance directions pertaining to tempo, dynamics and attack. These indications are applied to
musical fragments that are selected at the performers discretion. In this work, Stockhausen was successful in incorporating parameters of dynamics and attack, as well as tempo, into a serial composition. In actuality, the piece was more of an exercise in musical possibilities than a controlled composition. John Cage had devised similar methods in several of his works of the same era, which possibly precede the Stockhausen work.

This more improvisatory, although finite, language that stood behind the new aesthetic of integral serialism led to the coming together of several like-minded composers who were living in Italy. In 1966 this collective founded an electronic music improvisation ensemble called Musica Elettronica Viva. Rzewski was a founding member of the group along with Alvin Curran, Richard Teitelbaum, and Allan Bryant.

Musica Elettronica Viva was one of many important groups active in Europe and America during the sixties that explored a combination of traditions stemming from the avant-garde and improvisation. The performing basis for the group was modeled after the experiments of Cage and Tudor, who incorporated the use of electronics into several ensemble pieces. These electronics were employed alongside traditional instruments, singing, and anything else available in the immediate vicinity. Through this group, Rzewski found an outlet for performance of several of his compositions that he had written in the early sixties. Among these works were Self Portrait and Composition for Two Players which were published in an Italian magazine titled Collage.

These unmistakably youthful works explored improvisational interpretations of graphic scores. Reflecting the growing social consciousness of the sixties, these innovative scores employed symbols that denoted unity, similarity, and opposition.
There were also several compositions, such as *Street Music* and *Symphony* (1969), that existed only in verbal sketches as their performances were highly variable, thereby escaping the grasp of notation. At performances of these works, audience participation was emphasized. Musica Elettronica Viva sought to dissolve the distinctions between the trained, virtuoso musicians and the audience members who were, most likely, completely unskilled.

The highly conceptual nature of these works represents an important stage of development in the composer’s career. Musica Elettronica Viva provided an opportunity for the young Rzewski to experiment in improvisation and control. The many repeat performances of works that were composed for the ensemble allowed for a deeper understanding of the nature of “happenings” and the inherent possibilities that lie in the context of performance scenarios. An approach to improvisation that would inform his later works began to develop in the years that the group spent traveling Europe in Volkswagon buses living communally.

The group performed in traditional as well as innovative venues. Performance spaces included theaters, cultural centers, and nightclubs where the audiences were most often more socially radical than musical. These audiences did not typically consist of members who were familiar or even sympathetic with the European avant-garde. Audience reactions were often times very strongly opposed to the sounds of Musica Elettronica Viva. Rzewski discusses the situation in an interview with Vivian Perlis. He states:

…[T]hese were unusual times, and, as I say, since we typically found ourselves performing for this kind of audience, and put up against the wall, and asked why,
what business we had trying to stuff this elitist culture down the throats of people who were setting out to change the world...I would say it was a situation in which the...avant-garde artists, or the artists who thought of themselves as being avant-garde, suddenly found themselves being outflanked on the left by the supposedly uncultivated audience...And it was in some ways a very exciting situation, and in some ways a very fertile one, in that we were forced to rethink our whole position regarding the relationship of art to the world around us.³

Musica Elettronica Viva conducted a tour of America in 1971 which ended abruptly following the Kent State massacre of student protesters. In the same year, an uprising at the penitentiary in Attica, New York also left blood on the hands of the government. Both of these incidents resonated loudly with Rzewski, who had heretofore exhibited radical political leanings. In combination with the volatile reception granted to Musica Elettronica Viva and the political climate of the youth movement, the composer radically changed his compositional style: he turned to more conventional mediums of representation. These included works for varied chamber ensembles, vocal compositions, and most traditionally, music for solo piano.

In the years that followed Musica Elettronica Viva’s American tour, the conceptual paradigm of Rzewski’s earlier works gave way to a post-serial, sometimes classically derived formal basis. These neoclassical leanings, however, do not represent such a definitive trend in his overall output as to bring the label of “neoclassicist” to the composer. These works merely represent an important turning point in his career and a maturation of his early compositional style into forms that represent communicative models of ideological values and aesthetic. By adopting the musical language and forms of the classical tradition and combining these with a decidedly avant-garde musical

perspective, Rzewski made it possible for himself to communicate with a larger and more receptive audience.

Rzewski secured his international reputation with the piano music that he wrote in the seventies. Undoubtedly, the Thirty-six Variations on The People United Will Never Be Defeated! garnered the greatest amount of attention and applause, owing much thanks to the high-profile premiere it received in Washington, D. C. at Kennedy Center in 1975. The work was commissioned by pianist Ursula Oppens to be performed on an American Bicentennial commemorative concert alongside Beethoven’s monumental Diabelli Variations. The work is a fine example of a trend that Rzewski began to explore in the seventies and continues to cultivate to this day, namely an interest in combining popular melodies with intensely wrought, technically demanding, appealing writing.

Musica Elettronica Viva’s aborted tour led several of its members to settle in the States. Rzewski moved to New York with his wife, but returned to Europe in 1975, when he was invited by Henri Pousseur to teach composition at the Conservatoire Royal in Liege, Belgium. Since 1975 he has divided most of his time between Rome and Liege. Concurrently, many prestigious universities have hosted the composer for residencies and workshops. These appointments have included positions at Yale University, Cincinnati Conservatory, Royal Conservatory of the Hague, and the Berlin Hochshule der Kunste. Rzewski has also dedicated much of his time since the seventies to performing and recording his own pieces as well as works by his contemporaries.

Musica Elettronica Viva still brings together many performers for improvisational performances, but no longer exists as a concrete ensemble. The breakup of the group did two things for Rzewski. First, it allowed him to assume an individual
voice through his own compositions, since these would no longer be identified with the controversial image of the group. Secondly, it allowed him to combine the experience of radical performance art and improvisation with a more concrete method of representation, such as solo instrumental composition or chamber music. By combining the spirit of the sixties avant-garde with more traditional forms, he emerged as a composer who is deftly able to energize the symbolic capacity of his music. He achieves this through extra-musical associations and a penchant for improvisation that draws from many different musical styles.
CHAPTER THREE
AESTHETICS AND POLITICS

Although Rzewski is now recognized primarily as a composer, it is important to remember that he was first known as a performer of new music in Europe. Composition has played an important role in his life pre-dating his undergraduate years at Harvard and undoubtedly played a central role in his graduate studies. From his college days on, however, the two aspects of his musicianship developed parallel to one another. His Fulbright fellowship took him to Europe as a composer, but it was ultimately his interpretive and technical skills that earned him a living. It was not until after the dissolution of Musica Elettronica Viva in 1971 that his reputation as a composer began to surpass his fame as a performer. This did not take place overnight, but was the result of a few important works which announced the emergence of a distinctly individual voice and complex aesthetic.

The process of individuation began with a work written in 1968 that foreshadowed a growing politicization of Rzewski's music. The proto-minimalist work titled Les Moutons de Panurge represented a socialist critique of capitalist society through a balance of high technical demands and a fluid margin of indeterminacy. This work was Rzewski's first widespread success. It was followed in 1972 by two companion works that again portrayed a critique of capitalist oppression, Coming Together and Attica. Both works firmly expose an appreciation for supple minimalist textures in a solidly tonal framework.
Several works explicitly embraced tonality through minimalism while exploiting political subjects. Rzewski set the preamble of the *Declaration of Independence* for singer and piano in a work called *Jefferson* (1970). Other similar works included settings of texts by Otto Rene Castille and Langston Hughes. Concurrent with these works, Rzewski still produced some highly conceptual works for Musica Elettronica Viva that dealt with very open structure in regard to instrumentation and performance context. Several of the works that were written for the ensemble were published in *Source* magazine in 1968 and 1969. Rather than actual musical scores, these were prosaic descriptions of "meaningful" performance contexts titled *Spacecraft, Street Music*, and *Symphony*.

Although the composer wrote pieces in many different styles during this period that surrounded the end of Musica Elettronica Viva, public recognition of his tonal works gave him incentive to compose more music in this vein. The attention also made a great platform for political discourse, which he had heretofore consistently explored through his music. Rzewski seems to have participated in minimalism's rejection of serialism, but this is actually a falsehood. The pieces from *Les Moutons de Panurge* through *Attica* resemble the greater zeitgeist of the late sixties and early seventies, in which the minimalist aesthetic combined tonality with the procedural sophistication of serialism. Throughout his life as a composer he has continued to write music in the serialist vein, even after producing these seminal minimalist works.

Situated in the context of the late sixties and early seventies, Rzewski's music represents a synthesis of what he finds appealing in the complexity of serialism and its tonally reduced counterpart, minimalism. Examined as a whole, the body of work that he
composed during this period resembles an eclectic mixture of styles and techniques. As stated earlier, this eclecticism was not a phenomenon unique to Rzewski alone, but is a reflection of the greater compositional trends in Europe and America. Eclecticism embodied many different guises. It is commonly associated with quotation techniques in which pre-existing materials are borrowed by composers and set into new musical contexts. This primal manifestation of paraphrasing techniques resulted in the juxtaposition of tonal and atonal music, which came to be one of the hallmarks of an eclectic style.

From early in his career, Rzewski’s eclectic style stood apart from many of his peers as an individualistic combination of tonal and structural principles that were guided by external associations. While many of his peers employed stylistic quotations to imply a connection with the past, Rzewski used his eclectic style to reflect more of a sense of the present. There are two types of associations that the composer uses. The first of these associations is representative. This type does not indicate a specific chain of events or narrative, but rather focuses more on evoking the psychological ramifications of a chosen object or idea.

The representative type of association is most obviously explored through the relationships between musical form, compositional styles, and featured cultural references. For example, Rzewski’s treatment of the borrowed tune in the Winnsboro Cotton Mill Blues, the fourth movement of his North American Ballads, evokes conflict between two opposing forces. He employs repetitive, machine-like patterns that are paired with lyrical quotations of a work song. This expressive tune possesses a bluesy quality that evokes the music of the blue-collar worker. It is this contrast between the
expressive, human element and the often bombastic sounds of machinery that represent an extra-musical message through the music.

Chains of representative associations, such as this, evolve into the second type of association, which is the narrative. Rzewski uses the narrative association more subtly than the representative one. Most often, the narrative association builds out of the listener's sense of relationships between representative associations that sequentially evoke many moods or psychological states. The listener is, more often than not, called upon to piece together this sort of subtextual connection together by him or herself.

Rzewski's Variations on The People United Will Never Be Defeated is the most obvious example of this large-scale type of narrative. The structure of this monumental work grows from smaller structural units that exploit the dynamic relationship between musical style and content. Large-scale relationships emerge as the listener tracks the associations between the theme and each variation's particular compositional style. Through cycles of variations that chart a sort of character development Rzewski reveals a psychological account of the social movement from which the quoted song was borrowed. The general character begins defiantly and passes through periods of introspection, meditation, and preparation for battle. These sentiments lead to music that suggests social conflict and revolution, ending on a foreboding note. A larger unified whole emerges out of the smaller, meaningful structural units that depict the development of revolutionary sentiment and its eventual suppression. The sense of the narrative is constructed by means of psychological development that evokes the rise and fall of a social movement.
This emphasis on external associations begs the question of whether his compositions stand on their own as music. The perceived political bent of the works is often greeted with suspicion. The combination of politics and music is frequently associated with totalitarian regimes and propaganda.¹ At several points in his career Rzewski has given addresses, published articles, and written program and recording notes that discuss and clarify his ideological values and theories. Always passionate in his quest to justify his music, Rzewski’s language in these texts leans toward the learned and somewhat pedantic. One wonders when listening to some of his works if this dogmatic verbiage, which is intended to explain the music, is really necessary. The question arises then of whether the explanation that the composer sometimes supplies with his music is a distraction from its inherent weakness or an enhancement of the experience.

One could easily argue that the composer’s prose stylings are proof of some sort of compromise in quality. This may be true in part, but one cannot overlook the fact that his words do shed valuable light on the nature of his music, his compositional process, and into the realm of what his music may “mean” to him. In these texts, however, the composer may not directly state his motivations for composing a given piece, but through the words he may reveal other notions that resonate throughout the music. The listener to his music or the performer studying these scores may find direction and mental imagery from many of these performance directions and editorial notes.

A passage that illustrates this point clearly is taken from the Carnegie Hall Millennium Piano Book. Prefacing his contribution to the volume, a short piece called The Days Fly By, Rzewski writes:

*The Days Fly By*, written in the summer of 1998 for the Carnegie Hall Millennium Piano Book, is also #37 of *The Road*, a five-hour "novel for piano" in 64 parts, or "miles." It is both a short piano piece and part of a long cycle.

Passing the milestone of the millennium makes us aware that time is neither short nor long: If you are at the beginning, it is long; if you are at the end, it is short. Urban civilization has existed for about ten millennia. Are we at the beginning or at the end? Or both places at once?

The ability to suppress impulses, a consequence of the discovery of time, has made this civilization possible. My urge to kill my brother can be substituted by the lesser satisfaction, over a longer period of time, of making him my slave, a gain for both of us: from the Hell of the past to the Purgatory of the future.

But civilization creates a new environment, with new challenges to our instinctual behavior patterns, in which neither murder nor slavery suffices. A new civilizing process is necessary, in which the repressive logic of profit is replaced by spontaneous altruism: Paradise now.

If this process takes place, music will be relevant. It has existed longer than this civilization and will outlive it. It is generous. It hangs in the air for only an instant, but its content is both archaic and utopian. It is optimistic: important in a chaotic situation, in which positive and negative outcomes are equally likely.

This fleeting thing is a symbol of civilization's fragility, but also of its will to move forward. That is why this little piano piece about the millennium is neither at the beginning nor at the end of my story, but at the middle.²

By means of introducing this small composition, Rzewski's expounds his own social criticisms and theories. He reveals himself as a sort of sociological mystic that is preoccupied with utopian theory. The music is described in a roundabout way through this prosaic introduction. The levity of the work is justified in contrast to the severity of the discussion. One wonders after reading this passage exactly what effect it has on how the music will be perceived.

This somewhat didactic approach, in which Rzewski tries to teach the audience or the performers something of relevance to the music, surfaces throughout his work

frequently. On numerous occasions, the composer has quoted tunes or texts that symbolize leftist politics. In several important works, namely the *Variations on the People United Will Never Be Defeated* and *Apolitical Intellectuals*, Rzewski has exploited these quotations as a springboard for raising consciousness. As a result of these selections, his music, as well as his persona, have been stigmatized as “political.” Unfortunately, this label is bandied about freely in discussion of his works in general, even if many of them are not intended by the composer to be political in nature. The composer seems reluctant to accept a pigeonholed label for himself such as “communist” and even more critically disavows the label of “political” for his music.  

Prior to the dissolution of Musica Elettronica Viva, Rzewski’s activity with leftist politics occupied an important place in his life. During the sixties in Europe, he participated in many protests and demonstrations. The composer admits to involvement in the social movements of the sixties in Europe, describing them as culturally and politically confused, although highly energized. This was a time of great experimentation for Rzewski in which he formed several important professional relationships. Working with the anarchist “Living Theater” of Julian Beck and Judith Malina, Rzewski was invited to give an address at the International Theater Festival in Parma, Italy in 1968. It is in this address that the composer outlined his social function as a composer.

Using the language of a social scientist, Rzewski introduced theories on the nature of composition and the role of the composer in twentieth-century music. His lofty prose touches on the motivations looming behind the creation of artwork in general, the

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4 Ibid.
necessity of artistic expression, and the direction in which music must continue for it to become a progressive, and therefore, life-perpetuating form of communication. Through a very Darwinesque turn of logic, he equates artistic creation with survival. According to the composer, the creative instinct is actually a survival mechanism that is activated by the presence of life-threatening forces. Creation in the artistic sense is therefore equated with procreation and propagation of the species. The author offers up the preceding assertion through a ponderous logic:

Normally, human beings are open to the joyous pain of creation only in moments of immediate threat to individual survival. Civilization produces forms of behavior conditioned by limited sensitivity to the larger organic process and excludes others which tend to expand such sensitivity. In fact, the economy of minimum survival-efficiency on the level of the individual organism, which civilization by its competitive games systematically cultivates, is not sufficient to ensure survival. It results in the cancerous growth of the total life process.5

Appropriated from biological theory, Rzewski sees the survival of the human race as dependent upon those who perpetuate sensitivity to the “larger organic process.”

Speaking as a composer about modern music, Rzewski claims that the primary contributors to this process are artists of all disciplines.

Extending his logic, he later reveals that the “process” of expression can achieve a state of self-perpetuation. Rzewski sees the artist as the facilitator of a sort of expressive transaction. If the artist cultivates an awareness of the world around him or herself and communicates that awareness to others, then those who receive the stimulus will respond in kind. This is not to say that audiences everywhere would cultivate expressive skills in

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reaction to any thought produced by one who is artistically inclined. It merely indicates that the artist has the ability to transform the audience through artistic perception, as well as the ability to instruct the audience on how to transform themselves in the same manner.

Because of its seemingly “magical” powers, the work of art is seen as special territory that is marked by a heightened sense of removal from that which is perceived as ordinary or mundane. Rzewski states in his address:

An artist is a person who lays claim to a heightened state of perception. His perceptions are acts of communication dictated by a sense of responsibility to the life process. He creates the sense of emergency in a state of tranquility where there is no threat to individual survival and where the spirit is free to emerge, to extend its dimensions, to create space.\(^6\)

As one who lays claim to this elevated state of awareness, Rzewski assigns the artist a great responsibility. The responsibility that accompanies such a great gift requires that the artist “communicates the presence of social dangers to others.”\(^7\) This communication is most effective in the form of dialogue between the audience and the artist. Form is rejected here as a relic of history. As the artist is bound to the responsibility of interpreting the present, improvisation becomes the necessary mode of expression. Harmony reveals itself through the act of communication, as the act itself requires a relationship between two parties.

These foregoing theories reveal the youthful idealism of the sixties and the composer’s own radical socialist leanings. Though the address represents the thoughts of

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\(^6\) Ibid.

\(^7\) Ibid.
a young composer caught up in the romance of his craft and his commitment to social reform, Rzewski has remained true to this testament later in his life. Twenty-six years later, the composer gave another public address at the Berlin Hochschule der Künste in 1994. The title of the lecture was *Inner Voices*, which alluded to the art of composition and the interior process by which music is created.

In this later lecture, Rzewski focuses more on his “method” of composing music and addresses the issues of improvisation and form. The scientific social theories that were the central focus of the earlier talk are absent here. Rzewski replaces them with a discussion of the aesthetic that is practiced as their extension. This aesthetic is revealed through psychological terms, in contrast to the sociological slant of the first address.

The title *Inner Voices* alludes to the origins of composition on two arbitrary planes that are expressed through abstract and psychological terms. The first is presented as a “gray area between [the] conscious and the unconscious”\(^8\) pertaining to the manners in which musical ideas surface from the psyche. The second plane is purely abstract, describing the manifestation of ideas in their pre-symbolic state. Rzewski describes both planes as amorphous, bleeding over into one another.

To differentiate between conscious and unconscious ideas, one may identify the conscious musical thought as one that is categorized and formally recognized within the composer’s individual vocabulary. Those thoughts that are unconscious have yet to find symbolic expression. When they do emerge into a notated form, Rzewski notes that the artist usually tries to discern the shape of the thought through a comparison to similar shapes within the composer’s understanding. This understanding is, of course, based on

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personal experience. The idea of comparison based on a sort of personal compositional template activates the composer’s censoring mechanisms. Such instinctual mechanisms either alter the content or shape of the thought to fit with ideas that are perceived as similar, or they reject the thought on the grounds that the brain cannot classify it. This forcing of an idea into a preconceived form equates with self-imposed censorship in that the composer has forced his will on the idea and, therefore, altered it.

While composing, Rzewski works toward disarming these censoring devices. He describes the composer as one who accounts for the musical activity in his or her mind. Rzewski recognizes the brain as the territory where stimuli manifests itself into musical thought. To him, the creative process is not linear, but full of spontaneous diversions. It is, therefore, a microcosm of the greater world, and its organization reflects this. Sometimes musical shapes appear as self-contained ideas, while at other times they seem to evolve into other thoughts in the process of transcription. As an artist, Rzewski can volley back what he perceives in his subconscious through formed musical thoughts. The process of doing this is otherwise known as composition.

Put simply, composition is the process of revealing the form of musical thoughts. To do so, ideas must be transcribed in a manner that allows for an objective assessment so that they may be evaluated on a banal level and pieced together a communicative whole. To this end, the composer only writes down and keeps what comes naturally and easily to him. Of course, many thoughts escape the process of transcription, but this is not seen as a problem. Rzewski is more concerned with how the thoughts actually develop rather than how they should develop.9

9 Ibid, 408.
Undoubtedly, what Rzewski is describing is a process for musical observation. In science, observation is used as a means for collecting data. Through observation, he may collect his musical thoughts in the same way. To the composer, this means of representing his perceptive musical abilities enables him to communicate to others an awareness of the world around him. As a method of composition it bears a close resemblance to improvisation, which plays a significant role in his music. Here, Rzewski identifies himself with Stravinsky who noted that his compositional process was like improvising with a pencil.\textsuperscript{10}

It should be stressed that in light of the present description of his method for compiling musical matter, Rzewski’s music is not as formless as his lecture makes it sound. The foregoing description of methods that he reveals merely presents his preferred manner of generating ideas and selecting them. It is a manner of working rather than a law that governs his every compositional decision. Indeed, his oeuvre does include works that are beyond formal categorization. The composer counterbalances these works, however, with others in which formal decisions mandate compositional restrictions.

The method described in the \textit{Inner Voices} lecture remains true to the youthful composer’s ideals as expressed at Parma in 1968. The two speeches complement and support each other in many ways. The earlier talk presents Rzewski’s sociological reasons for composing and the latter discusses the psychological workings of the actual process.

Through each of these justifications of his aesthetic and philosophy, Rzewski elucidates the role that composition plays in cultivating an understanding of society. The composer, as a member of a particular culture, receives messages from his environment and is able to convert these messages into musical thought. It is a privileged position to occupy, but, most importantly, one that carries with it an incredible responsibility. This is the responsibility of communicating an interpretation of this outer world back to the culture from which the messages were taken. As a result, when social danger is perceived, the messages will urgently warn of these potential threats. This is, in the biological sense, important for the continuation of the species and therefore a requirement of survival.

Naturally, the composer’s music reflects this ideology. Although, it is impossible to trace the development of any one particular style linearly through Rzewski’s career, his philosophical and moral tone is always evident. The piano music that he composed in the seventies is the perfect realization of his mission. In this music the composer beautifully melds social criticism and aesthetic. This mixture resulted in associations that the public strongly perceived as political. Though Rzewski is evasive about his motivations being political, it is hard to conceive that these works have no resonance in this arena.

Three of his important works for the piano focus specifically on concepts of social change, which is undeniably always political. The composer’s Variations on No Place To Go But Around is explicitly based on incidental music that he composed for Beck and Malina’s anarchist play The Tower of Money. The monumental variations on The People United Will Never Be Defeated! borrow their main theme from the socialist anthem by Sergio Ortega, a Chilean composer. The North American Ballads quote folk music that is
associated with protest and resistance to the capitalist system of the United States
government.

Undoubtedly, the composer selected the core material for these works from
sources that he found personally meaningful. It is clear from examining Rzewski’s
public addresses and articles that he is a man who is attracted to the expression of
ideological concepts as much as to the music he creates and performs. Were this not true,
his compositions would be more likely to carry more abstract connotations either in
content or through their titles. Rather, he has produced works with evocative titles and
texts that leave little room for speculation as to their political objectives.

It is rather peculiar that Rzewski should be so outspoken regarding his role as a
composer, yet so reluctant to embrace his politically charged appearance. It stems from
his original logic that the composer should claim that identity in order to set a precedent
for others to follow. Instead he passes much of the discussion of politics and artwork off
as incidental. In the first of two interviews for the Oral History of American Music series
at Yale University, Rzewski confronted the question of what it meant for him to be
considered a political composer. He states:

It doesn’t mean very much to me. I don’t think of myself as being an especially
political composer. I am in the habit of trying to relate my work to the world
around me, and if this means being a political composer, then I suppose that’s
what it has to be, but I don’t think that there’s anything especially unusual about
it.\textsuperscript{11}

\textsuperscript{11} Frederic Rzewski, interview by Vivian Perlis, 2 December 1984, tape 165 a, b,
transcript, Oral History of American Music, Yale School of Music, New Haven, Ct.
One senses that the composer views the association of politics and music as threatening to the condition that music must satisfy for it to be art. According to his early statement at Parma, art occupies a privileged niche in society that evades function. Music as a political platform, therefore, cannot satisfy such criteria and therefore is disqualified from being considered art.

This is the great conundrum of his music and possibly where he exposes his weakness: can his music be called art in the true sense of the word? A deeper look into the actual components of his compositions undoubtedly reveals an affirmative response to the question. Much of his piano music is infused with so much technical skill and brilliant instrumental writing that it is hard to argue the point. Rzewski shows so much invention and innovation that there is actually little to prove. It seems that the deeper one looks into the music, more of a case is built in support of its brilliance as artwork.

Rzewski's craft is so well-honed that the music he produces can bear the label of 'art' while at the same time evoking a response politically. It must be reiterated that not all of the composer's works are political in nature, but those that are present an interesting situation that Rzewski seems to have managed well. In the following chapters I will discuss how this political slant affects his compositional decisions and actually manifests itself in the music.
CHAPTER FOUR

POLITICAL ALLUSIONS IN RZEWKSI’S EARLY MUSIC

Certainly, Rzewski wishes his works be valued fundamentally as music. To litter his work with labels limits its possible relevance as music. This binds the product to a specific event or topic whose value may expire with the passage of time. As stated earlier, political tags are applied indiscriminately to anything that he has written, becoming a smokescreen behind which much unjustified criticism hides. In his book *All American Music: Composition in the Late Twentieth Century*, John Rockwell attacks Rzewski on the grounds that his music patronizes the audience. He states:

[Rzewski] subverts his esthetic inclinations to his political opinions, and concentrates on winning over the lower middle class... [His] political art is an art of condescension. And of folly... Condescending for political reasons is just as deleterious to inspiration as selling out for commercial reasons.¹

Throughout an entire chapter dedicated to discussing Rzewski’s compositional platform, Rockwell demonstrates little knowledge of his career. He seems to take issue more with the composer’s emblematic nature than with his actual music. The music, however, must first be evaluated on the basis of its intrinsic properties. To do so, one must treat the composer’s personal aesthetic separately from his political values. Discussion of the music, also, should not dismiss the composer’s political or social focus as irrelevant. Instead it should emphasize that these aspects contribute to his well-developed style. An

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approach that recognizes the music as independently valuable succeeds in complementing
the composer's work, not in dismissing it as propaganda.

Understanding that political subjects would later become the focus of many of his
works, it is easy to trace the development of a musical and ideological dynamic from the
very beginning. Rzewski’s music that pre-dates his Fulbright fellowship is exclusively
composed for the piano. This comes as no surprise, since he was trained as a pianist from
eyear childhood. The pieces generally explore compositional procedures that are highly
sophisticated, reflecting his appreciation for serialism. With the exception of one work,
the *Introduction and Sonata* for two pianos, written in 1959, he avoids traditional forms.
Although structure in the classical sense may not have been of value to him as a young
composer, the tight organization imposed by the processes of serialism compensated for
it. Rzewski, however, abandoned the piano piece for the decade following his
*Introduction and Sonata*. The hiatus is a result of his emerging career as a performer of
new music by other composers and his growing commitment to Musica Elettronica Viva.

Although the composer may reject a label such as "political" when it is applied to
his own works, one cannot dismiss the fact that Rzewski is attracted to issues that have
been highly politicized. It is hard to ignore the fact that Rzewski was caught up in the
discussion of social issues and public demonstrations that were typical of Europe and
America during the sixties. Much of the information that is widely available about
Rzewski’s personal life supports a picture of a socially radical artist. The composer is
often cited as being an avowed Marxist. His first wife was an active member of the
socialist party. There were important friendships and collaborations in his past with
people such as Christian Wolff, who is a personally avowed Maoist, and the theatrical
duo of Judith Malina and Julian Beck, who were both outspoken anarchists.

The composer has said that he was seduced by the incredible power of the student
movement in Europe in the sixties and the incredible sort of social transformation to
which it aspired.² Rzewski was greatly impressed by several enormous public
demonstrations that took place at that time. The youth movement, which gained
momentum after the Second World War and was active beyond the Vietnam era, rejected
the model of lifestyle that suppressed personal expression and prohibited emancipation
through sex, drugs, and interest in non-Western philosophies. A newly found
appreciation for the rights of the individual surfaced in the social movements that focused
on minority rights. This movement originally focused on the rights of women and
African-Americans, eventually spreading out to encompass a broad spectrum of interest
groups. All of this social transformation was seen in contrast to the “establishment.” In
the eyes of these newly organized civil movements, the dominant social order was held
accountable for the tense international political situation, degradation of the environment,
and cultural hegemony.³ Rzewski’s works for Musica Elettronica Viva embody this spirit
of social transformation and emancipation. Works such as Spacecraft (1968) and
Symphony (1969) capture the flavor of these sentiments vividly. Through these
improvisational, highly abstract compositions, Rzewski honed his skill at combining

² Ken Terry, “Frederic Rzewski and the Improvising Avant Garde,” Downbeat, January
1979, 20.
³ Robert P. Morgan, Twentieth Century Music: A History of Musical Style in Modern
ideological notions with musical events in a manner that continues to develop in his works to this day.

Musica Elettronica Viva represented the confluence of many influential attitudes among the avant-garde in Europe after World War Two. Conceived by its members, the group’s music explored the possibilities afforded by different musical situations. This was practiced through collective improvisation that included found instruments and cheap electronics. The possibilities for sound were limitless given the ensemble’s parameters for “instrumentation.”

Tapes, complex electronics – Moog synthesizer, brainwave amplifiers, photocell mixers for movement of sound in space – are combined with traditional instruments, everyday objects and the environment itself, amplified by means of contact mikes, or not. Sounds may originate both inside and outside the performing-listening space and may move freely within and around it. Jazz, rock, primitive and Oriental musics, Western Classical tradition, verbal and organic sound both individual and collective may all be present.\(^4\)

Quite obviously, this openness to new sounds reflects the greater social climate of the sixties. Groups such as Musica Elettronica Viva opened the musical parameters of composition and sound inclusiveness much in the same way that social groups sought to challenge the establishment.

Musica Elettronica Viva’s instrumentation was not at all unique in regards to the greater practice of groups in Europe that also focused on collective improvisation. The period in the early sixties in which these groups were formed, however, is peculiar in music history, because of these rapidly widespread innovations that developed pertaining

to musical inclusiveness. These innovations reached far beyond instrumentation producing a more open musical structure that blured the boundaries between the actual performance of a work and its environment. Rzewski and his group conducted concerts in which the audience was invited to contribute to the actual performance, regardless of their training, preparation, and perhaps comfort. The composer states:

At that time we were involved with opening up the musical structure as much as possible, first throwing away the score then throwing away any kind of structure. For example, we invited the audience to bring songs to a forum we called the sound pool. We’d invite people to bring sounds to the concert and to throw them into the pool. Very often, there would be 300 to 400 people making these sounds, and we would try to guide it or steer it in some way. Basically, the impetus was toward complete openness and spontaneity, which was consistent with the atmosphere of that time and place.⁵

What developed out of this type of performance was an “approach to improvisation through the discipline of composition.”⁶ Ultimately, the score was cast off in favor of more descriptive scenarios in which the music was merely suggested. Rzewski likened the printed score to a “punch card” which performers never truly understand or obey. To remedy the current treatment of the score, the composer sought to simplify its nature so that it could be memorized without the encumbrance of it actually existing.⁷

Rzewski published three works that resembled the above situation in Larry Austin’s magazine *Source: Music of the Avant-garde*. The first two works, *Street Music* and *Symphony*, were extremely brief and appeared on the same page. The setting for

⁵ Terry, 21
each piece differs, but both concentrate on how sound defines a performance space. Both works demand that the participants explore movement in relation to certain sounds that they are either seeking out in the environment, or trying to blend with. A very idealistic and cosmic sense of social awareness permeates these pieces. Both address a sort of unification of the players, either between themselves as a group, or as individuals and the outside world. *Street Music* is most definitely imbued with the sixties “look around” mentality, while *Symphony* exhibits the influence of the sexual revolution through its performers who are encouraged to embrace and exchange vibrations between their bodies.

The third piece presented in *Source* is titled *Plan For Spacecraft*. It is presented as a very abstract proposal for a performance in a space occupied by performers who aspire toward some sort of “transformation” through a possibly musical method. Their transformation takes place either by “magic” or through “work.” The notion of working towards transformation is born out of the idea that each performer has his or her own pre-learned improvisational musical vocabulary through which they may communicate. Undoubtedly, when the performance begins, these individual vocabularies exist in conflict, creating utter chaos. The performers are beset with the task of transforming their space from “occupied” (full, so to speak, of conflict) to “created” space (harmony brought about by a group effort).

In the process of performing this work, the boundaries between composer, performer, and audience are completely absent. The work represents a struggle from division into unity. The composer’s intent is to lead the performer/composers/audience members to a “higher region” that is attainable only through compromise and
communication. The performance space is to be “exorcized” of “anti-music” in hopes of a very human and cosmic over-soul being created.

Such new-age sentiments very clearly reflect the zeitgeist of the sixties and reveal a faddish mysticism. Though ultimately relics of their era, the three works included in Source clearly indicate the composer’s penchant for improvisation and the unpredictable “transformations” that follow suit. Here, the resolution of conflict is brought about by improvisational methods of communication. Each performer expresses his or her own personal understanding of the situation through their improvisations. This is an important tenet of Rzewski’s music that he developed further in the piano pieces that followed in the seventies. Following these works written for MEV, Rzewski gained widespread notice with an ensemble piece called Les Moutons de Panurge in 1968. This piece represents a change in style from the conceptual works that precede it and a more concise representation of social issues through absolute music.

Les Moutons de Panurge (example 4-1) is scored for “any number of musicians playing melody instruments plus any number of non-musicians playing anything.” The performance is notated as a single line melody that is rhythmically complex and modally structured. The performers begin playing the sixty-five note melody in unison. The melody is presented in ever expanding increments. The first note is played, then repeated followed by the second note. The repetitions continue in this manner always adding on one more note of the melody as the piece progresses until the melody is complete. Once the entire melody is played through, the repetitions continue and notes are subtracted from the beginning. The last note of the melody is held until all players have reached it.

After the ensemble has again reunited on this sustained tone, an improvisation on any instruments begins.


The rhythmic difficulties of executing a performance of such a melody are staggering and well beyond the proper expectations of ensemble playing. There is no possible way that an ensemble, which includes non-musicians, could possibly stay together for long. The situation is also made more contentious by suggestions that the non-musicians may or may not follow a designated leader, making any sort of sounds that they like, and preferably very loudly.

*Les Moutons de Panurge* presents a contrast to the free-from works from *Source.* Much like the earlier works, *Les Moutons* provides allegorical social commentary. The title (in English: *Panurge’s Sheep*) alludes to a passage from the fourth book of Rabelais’s *Gargantua and Pantagruel.* Panurge throws a noisy sheep from his ship into
the ocean. The rest of his flock follows suit, jumping overboard to their deaths in the water. The flock’s suicide is the result of a mass psychology which no single sheep is capable of overcoming in order to save itself or its brethren. As an allegory, the “sheep” will follow the example of their “leader” blindly, even to their own deaths. For Panurge, the cost of the incident is his entire flock. For the flock, the cost is their lives. Rzewski was attracted to the association between his music and the literary allusion for obvious reasons that reflect his perspectives on the individual and society.

In the performance directions to the piece, the composer suggests to the musicians who lose their place that they stay lost, not trying to find their way back into the “fold.” The non-musicians are presented with the option of following or not following their leader. The composer suggests the theme of a performer whose two hands act independently of each other without regard for the discord. To Rzewski, this is the music of the sheep as they follow each other, one by one, into the ocean and ultimately their deaths.

One could also read into the work a sense of conflict between an “establishment,” represented by the musicians, and a “minority” group, represented by the non-musicians. The performance would then represent a battle for the emergence of individual thought. *Les Mouton’s de Panurge* is a pessimistic commentary of the insignificance granted to personal identity. No amount of exertion on the part of any one performer could preserve the musical integrity of the work. Under such circumstances, nothing can be done to rescue the players from their destiny of floating dead on the open sea (represented by the sustained final pitch, C).

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In contrast to the works from Source, which are entirely textual evocations of performance scenarios, Les Moutons de Panurge employs more conventional materials such as pulse and modality in its critical attack of a virtual bureaucratic system. The critique also differs in that it is steeped in irony rather than idealistic visions of emancipation. All individual voices in this work perpetuate conflict and ultimately catalyze the ensemble’s dissolution. As an analogue to its social context, the work reflects conflict and the disintegration of capitalist society.\textsuperscript{10} What the composer could previously only express by indeterminate, evocative means was now given shape through conventions of absolute music. The allusion to Rabelais served as a channel through which the commentary was filtered to the audience.

Les Moutons de Panurge represents the mature thrust of Rzewski’s critical apparatus. Works that followed in this vein would be more explicitly based on a more tangible literary or cultural type of allusion. The composer also made the evocations manifest by means of more concrete musical content and design.

Two companion pieces that Rzewski composed in 1972 exemplify his growing attraction to the combination of ideological and musical values. Coming Together and Attica are both based on the actual words of prisoners that were involved with the prisoner uprising at Attica prison in New York in 1971. The insurrection was smothered in a military attack ordered by Governor Nelson Rockefeller. In the process, thirty-one prisoners and nine guards were killed. The debacle made the perfect case for a socialist critique.

Coming Together and Attica display a more developed sense of the composer's newly found attraction to conventionally tonal mediums and minimalism. As in the earlier Les Moutons, the composer employs clearly defined tonal centers with modal inflections. The works evolve over a bass line that acts as the musical foundation for varying textures created by the instrumental ensemble and speaker. This fundamental line stylistically evokes the energy of rock music in Coming Together, and the simplicity of pop in Attica. The instrumental group contributes layers of activity that structurally expand from the presentation of the spoken text. Short motivic ideas are repeated and developed into related motives through rhythmic alterations.

The texts are presented in a formally restrained manner that controls the presentation and development of musical material. The process of expanding the musical structure follows the same process as Les Moutons de Parurge. In the manner of reading and rereading a coded message, the composer reveals the first stanza of the text, then repeats it followed by the second stanza. These two are repeated followed by the third and so on, until the entire text is spoken. At this point, stanzas from the beginning are subtracted one by one so that the repetitions begin from the second stanza, then the third, then the fourth. The repetitions, now favoring the end of the text, continue to contract the design until there is nothing left.

The hypnotic minimalism of these works exhibits the influence of Steve Reich's Come Out and It's Gonna Rain. The surface texture, deriving from the development and combination of motivic cells also betrays the influence of Stockhausen and Boulez. Rzewski pursued this tonal and minimalistic vein of Coming Together and Attica in

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several other successful compositions that followed, namely a cantata titled *Struggle* for solo baritone and ensemble. He also set texts by Langston Hughes and Otto Rene Castille in which political themes serve as the basis.

The foray into minimalism led him to embrace a method of composition in which his ideological values could be dramatically displayed in forms that were accessible to a large audience. In the early seventies, Rzewski sough to reconcile his position as a composer and performing artist with his cultural mission. He abandoned the conceptual symbology of performance art and serialism. The new tonal medium enabled him to more effectively speak out against oppression and the evils of capitalist society. Through the use of such derivative elements as the rock and roll bass line of *Coming Together*, Rzewski cultivated a familiarity of sound and rhythmic energy that still proves to be gripping in its effect. Adopting minimalism led him to employ musical form as a meaningful allegory. That is, the actual structure of the music, not only the musical material, could perceptibly evoke a cultural critique. Together, these perceptible structures and stylistic allusions gave body to the musical and political objectives that so consumed him. Through these materials, he was able to create lucid and credible analogues to his personal ideology. Most notably, his political leanings gave impetus to some of his most ambitious compositions for the piano. In these pieces, ideological values are assimilated into the very essence of the music. The meaningful forms most conspicuously assumed the guise of variation sets, which the composer himself performed and recorded.
CHAPTER FIVE

TWO VARIATION SETS

The success of *Coming Together* and *Attica* grew out of a major stylistic change that took place surrounding Rzewski’s trip to America with Musica Elettronica Viva in 1970. The tour ended abruptly after the massacre at Kent State University in Ohio, which took place that spring. Rzewski saw in the tragedy an increasingly tyrannical government taking root in America. Such a situation seemed ripe for revolutionary sentiment and action both in the United States and around the world. These global sentiments of revolution inspired the composer with notions of freedom from self-perpetuating cycles of denigration by institutions of patriarchy, acquisition, and war.\(^1\) To Rzewski, capitalism was accountable for the situation at hand in 1970.

These sentiments ran parallel to those expressed collectively by Musica Elettronica Viva’s members. Their improvisationally based ensemble works critiqued social inequalities that were represented by the boundary between the audience and performers. These two forces could improvise freely together under the guidance of members from the group, which was responsible for constructing various performance contexts. Interaction between performers and audience members was meant to represent a microcosm of the outer world. These members of the group who would attempt to influence the direction of the improvisations fulfilled the role of the “revolutionary” in real society. Their examples could alter the course of events and steer the entire

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improvising entity toward some identifiable and tangible result. Whatever the result of a particular event, wherever the Musica Elettronica Viva traveled, it tried to raise the consciousness of its participants.

Through the work of Musica Elettronica Viva, the composer explored the representation of progressive and idealistic manners of social thought. Rzewski’s ideological values were expressed more through the construct of performance situations than through the music that resulted. His performance suggestions led the participants to act out their inner dramas of conflict and unity much in the manner of a therapeutic exercise. Through his early works he explored a sort of collectivity that conveys a socialistic ideal in which all notions of equality are validated. This vision is glimpsed through the expression of collective consciousness.

Following the dissolution of Musica Elettronica Viva, Rzewski’s music focused on more concrete structures that incorporate an openness of design. This openness invites similar interaction between the composer and external parties similar to earlier works. It is incorporated in the form of improvisational cadenzas that are realized by the performers. The idea of the musical revolutionary, however, is still present, even in the confines of this more generally organized structure. The first of Rzewski’s major piano works, *Variations on No Place To Go But Around*, is based upon this formula.

**Variations on No Place To Go But Around**

While living in Rome, Rzewski made the acquaintance of the theatrical team of Judith Mailna and Julian Beck. The two American actors were living in Europe, having fled America to protest paying taxes. They founded a socially radical group known as the
Living Theater, which was dedicated to producing shows that promoted leftist propaganda. The duo and their ensemble undoubtedly had a strong impact on Rzewski. Involvement with Beck and Malina led to the composer’s participation at the International Theater Festival in Parma in 1968 where he delivered his address on the role of the artist in society discussed in Chapter Three. The duo asked Rzewski to compose incidental music for their anarchist play *The Tower of Money*. Though the show was never actually produced, the musical score would later serve as the basis for his first major set of variations for the piano based on an original theme titled *No Place To Go But Around*.

Written in 1974, the *Variations on No Place To Go But Around* was designed on the premise of Beck and Malina’s theatrical storyline. Rzewski himself described the play as an anarchist perspective of social stratification and tension. Malina and Beck resolve social conflict in the storyline through “magic” much in the same vein as Rzewski’s earlier *Spacecraft*. This “spontaneous and non-violent” transformation implies a type of social epiphany that results from the theatrical discussion of ideology in the play.

The theme and variations serve a symbolic function for the composer. The variations represent many different social levels within capitalist society ranging from the lowest ranks of the workers up to the grand bourgeoisie. Improvisation is incorporated into the musical plan as an enactment of ideological revolt. Through the improvisatory section in the work the composer implies both political and artistic revolution.

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2 Rzewski, album notes from the composer’s recording, *Variations on No Place To Go But Around* on Finnadar SR 9011.

3 Howard Pollack, 382.
Rzewski’s original theme evokes a feeling of hopelessness with its plodding cyclical quality. Upon the architectural basis of phrase rhythm dictated by internal cadences, the integrity of the primary material remains evident throughout the following variations. The theme is imbued with a ponderous and inescapably dark character reflected in the harmony’s systematic descent through a sequence of minor tonalities. This descending and cyclical quality also lends the work a chaconne-like character.

The variations progressively build in complexity, implying a mounting tension. The pianistic writing also becomes more technically demanding, exploiting varied textural combinations through counterpoint. The symbolic musical elements from the theme are presented here in new combinations that evoke a point/counterpoint discussion between the various levels of bourgeois society. Rzewski saturates the musical texture to the breaking point, employing intensely virtuosic figuration. At this point, the intensity explodes into an enormous section of improvisation. This section, according to Rzewski, represents an attempt to convey the symbolic working out of class conflicts through musical materials. What was previously uniform and predictable in the chaconne-like variations is abandoned here in a musical free-for-all.

In a recording that he made of the work in 1976, this section lasts approximately half of the total twenty minutes and sounds like a transformation that is anything but peaceful. The improvisation is tension ridden and bombastic, with glimpses of stable tonal melodies making appearances. These snippets of melody are actually quotations of revolutionary anthems. The message is quite explicit that amidst the “struggle” there exists a glimmer of hope. Hope is represented by the revolutionary communist anthem *Bandiera Rossa.*
Example 5-1: Bandiera Rossa

Advance, people, even to the risk,
Red flag, red flag.
Advance, people, even to the risk,
The red flag will triumph!

The red flag will triumph!
The red flag will triumph!
The red flag will triumph!
Long live communism and liberty!

\footnote{Nunzia Manicardi, ed., \textit{Storia d'Italia nel canto popolare} (Bologna: Arnaldo Forni Editore, 1976), 96-97.}
Advance, people, sound the canon, 
Revolution, revolution, 
Advance, people, sound the canon, 
We will have a revolution.

We will have a revolution, 
We will have a revolution, 
We will have a revolution, 
Long live communism and liberty!⁵

Rzewski never presents the tune in its entirety, constantly abbreviating its phrases with violent interruptions of chaotic material. With the repeat appearances of this borrowed material, the composer obviously wishes to demonstrate a symbolic resiliency. He first uses Bandiera Rossa in the improvisation as a modest and peaceful tune. With each reappearance, however, Rzewski turns it into a crusading militaristic march. The "revolution" is made dignified and glorious by the harmonies that surround the important inclusion of this theme. These quotations are the only harmonically stable moments in the improvisation. Rzewski elides this enormous section back into the original theme, which he uses to close the work.

Following this massive and complex improvisation, the music from the opening takes on a new subtext. Though the middle section of the work is intended to represent the transformation of society through magical and non-violent means (which it really does not sound like), Rzewski opts to close on a pessimistic note. The rallying cry of Bandiera Rossa, proves only to be a fleeting idea that succumbs to the hegemony of the chaconne. Leaving the listener in such a shroud of darkness, and with the dissolution of

⁵Translation by Armando Lasa.
the opening textures in the extreme ranges of the keyboard, the composer acknowledges the stark contrast between his ideals and political reality.

Through this combination of classically derived form and improvisation, Rzewski synthesized his progressive, improvisationally inspired aesthetics with more traditional compositional methods. Balancing the concretely organized variations with the limitless possibilities of an improvisational section, he engages the performer to debate the ideology of socialism versus the corruption of capitalist society. This debate embodies the concept of socialist realism through which the critique of the present is conveyed. Social realism is reflected by the political ideal set in relief to the actuality of the current social climate in which capitalism dominates.

Rzewski contrasts his view of capitalistic hegemony with the idea of free expression. In this context, free expression, which democracy supposedly protects, is subverted in favor of conformity of thought. Rzewski conveys through this set of variations that free expression in capitalistic society is only valued if it serves the few who are politically powerful. By extension of his sense of social Darwinism, freedom of expression is equated to survival and hope. Rzewski's rendition of the work is pessimistic because of the thwarted attempt to develop the socialist anthem in the improvisation. Any performer of this work may project their personal perspectives on the nature of social idealism and realism through a similar combination of symbolic features.

The composer's allegory also reflects an interpretation of the avant-garde in relation to the classical tradition. Examining the relationship in a manner that reflects the spirit of the sixties and seventies, the classical tradition would represent the "establishment" that social movements were out to change. While the improvisational
section may sound radical, it has historical precedents. The most immediate connections to the past imply an inspiration gleaned from John Cage, who pioneered the opening of musical structure. The style of free-association in the improvisation also recalls the meteoric fury of bebop as well as to the entire lineage of great jazz improvisers.

Improvisation is also deeply connected to the classical tradition. Historical anecdotes attest to the important role that improvisation played in the lives of composers such as Beethoven and Mozart. In the twentieth century, this skill was further cultivated by a generation of pianists such as Earl Wild and Vladimir Horowitz, who improvised sections within well-known works. Improvisation blurs the boundaries between the composer, the piece, and the artist, making for a fluid amalgam of the three. As part of Rzewski's "revolutionary" idealism, the loosening of this identity represents a revolt against hierarchy in general.⁶ Performers of his music are not merely called upon to expound his ideals, they are expected to converse with the composer and participate in the debate of his politics possibly engendering a viewpoint that, potentially, may not reflect his own.

Unfortunately for most classical musicians and performers nowadays, the skill of improvisation is not cultivated as part of their training at music schools and conservatories. Subsequently, the composer does not command that the pieces be performed only by those who have a highly developed sense of this skill. All of his improvisations are optional and many are directed by several compositional guidelines. Though many of the works that follow the same format of open structure receive successful performances without the improvisational sections, they may lack in some

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⁶ Terry, 21.
dimension as a result. *Variations on No Place To Go But Around* benefits from an extended improvisation. The musical content of this work balances well with an equally weighty extemporization by the performer.

The composer has left a recording legacy that performers should consult for a wealth of ideas related to improvisation in his works. Though, ultimately, it is the performers discretion that guides the musical content of the improvisations, the composer’s recorded versions employ a rich juxtaposition of styles and ideas that are surprising and inventive. In his improvisation the classical converges with the avant-garde. Rzewski’s mixture of styles extends the variation and development of motivic and symbolic relationships originating from theme and variations proper. A thoroughly contemporary improvisation in which the performer indulges in merely new techniques would circumvent the social critique that the composer intends. With the inclusion of major sections of improvisation in his pieces, Rzewski has invited all performers of his works to join in both the creation of the music and the discussion of it.

**The People United Will Never Be Defeated**

Rzewski followed the *Variations on No Place To Go But Around* with a striking and technically imposing work, *The People United Will Never Be Defeated: Thirty-six Variations on ¡El Pueblo Unido Jamas Sera Vencido!* The work developed on the combinations of classical style and improvisation that he had begun in the previous work. In this set, however, the element of improvisation is more restrained, while the symbolic use of formal principles is further expanded.
Rzewski quotes a political anthem in *The People United Will Never Be Defeated.* The tune was written by Sergio Ortega, a Chilean composer whose work was part of the cultural movement that took place in his homeland of fusing folk-like elements with classical contexts for performance. Artists that ascribed to this movement presented popular melodies in classical forms or performed folk-like compositions on classical instruments. Although the borrowed tune does not reflect this style, Ortega was a composer that reflected an approach similar to Rzewski's regarding the boundaries of classical and popular styles.

Ortega himself was inspired to write the popular melody after hearing a street protester chanting the words “¡El pueblo unido jamás será vencido!” outside a government building in Santiago a few months before Pinochet’s military coup. Affected by the rhythmic chanting and its powerful message, he sat down days later and quickly composed the melody. The musical group Quilapayun led the first performance of the song in public two days later. Opponents of Salvadore Allende’s government quickly adopted the tune. It came to be recognized the world over as one of the most popular chants of the socialist movement (example 5-2).

Rzewski’s treatment of the theme takes approximately one hour to perform. This is the work that has garnered the most attention to date for the composer owing to its formidable proportions and rich stylistic eclecticism. Pianists and audiences, as well as critics and scholars received the work enthusiastically comparing it to Bach’s *Goldberg Variations* and Beethoven’s *Diabelli Variations.* The work was written on commission for pianist Ursula Oppens, who asked Rzewski to compose a companion piece to the *Diabelli Variations,* which she was performing at Kennedy Center. Since
Example 5-2: ¡El Pueblo Unido Jamás Será Vencido! by Sergio Ortega

EL PUEBLO UNIDO JAMÁS SERÁ VENCIDO

MAS SE-RÁ VENCIDO De pie cantar que vamos A triun-far a

van-zan ya ban-deras de u-ni-dad y tu ven-dras mar-chan-do jun-to a mí, y

asi ve-ras tu can-to y tu ban-de-ra flore-cer, la luz de

un ro-jo amán-ce-rr a-nun-cia ya la vi-da que ven-dra. De pie, lu-char el

pueblo va a tri-un-far se-ra me-jor la vi-da que ven-dra a

con-quistar nues-tra fe-li-ci-dad y en un cla-mor mil vo-ces de com-bate se al-Za-

ran di-ran can-ción de li-ber-tad con de-ci-sion la pa-tría ven-ce-ra. Y

aho-ra el pue-blo que se al-za en la lu-cha con voz de gi-gan-te gri-tan-do a-del-an-te.
I
On foot to sing that we will triumph.
Already they advance,
flags of unity.
And you will come
Marching together with (or by) me.
And thus you will see
Your song and your banner.
Bloom – the light
Of a red sunrise
Announces already
The life that is to come.

III
The country is
Forging unity
From north to south
From the sea coast
Hot and rocky,
To the forests in the south
United in the struggle
And to work they go
The land they will cover
Already their step
Announces the future

II
Standing, to struggle
The People will triumph.
It will be better
The life that comes to be.
To conquer
Show our happiness
And in chorus
A thousand voices of combat
Will rise to speak.
Songs of freedom
With certainty
Our country will win.

IV
Standing to sing
The People will triumph
Millions now
Implore the truth
Of steel they’re made
Brave Balloon
Their hands go
Carrying justice
And the cause, woman,
With fire and courage.
Already you are here
Together with (or by) the worker

CHORUS
And now the People
That rise in the struggle
With the voice of a giant
Shouting! Forward!

The People, United, Will Never Be Defeated!

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Oppens is not comfortable with improvising, the composer restricted the indeterminant aspects of the composition to effects such as whistling, vocal cries, slamming the lid of the piano, and a well-defined optional cadenza near the end of the work.

The stylistic plurality of the variations is striking. Each of the thirty-six variations represents a different stylistic aspect of the theme. The diversity brilliantly evokes a kind of distraction or preoccupation with varying and evolving these styles. One can easily sense the composer’s mental facility for adopting and uniting many contrasting manners of writing. Indeed, as much as the theme itself, style is the material of variation. We sense that there is little that the composer does not find stylistically relevant, incorporating elements of jazz, folk, rock, chance music, serial techniques, and neoclassicism.

Regardless of the stylistic gymnastics, the essence of the original melody always seems to be present. The borrowed theme is subjected to many avant-garde, populist, and neo-romantic re-dressings. The act of exploiting the basic thematic material and varying the style, however, is not achieved arbitrarily. Rzewski institutes a strict formal design that maximizes his ability to change musical costumes. The guiding formal principles keep the content of the variations intelligible. Rzewski employs a timeline along which the various styles are exploited. The work as a whole examines the possibilities of the thematic material as creatively as Rzewski’s mind allows, while at the same time retaining a directed psychological narrative.

The theme itself is thirty-six measures long, stating the folk tune, at first, in sparse, assertive octaves. This statement relaxes into a homophonic, popularly flavored section. This theme is followed by thirty-six variations. Most of these variations are
twenty-four measures long. This reflects the actual length of the theme minus the opening and closing choruses that account for twelve measures. The thirty-six variations are divided evenly into six cycles. The cycles themselves focus on different elements of variation techniques directed by the following plan: [1] simple events; [2] rhythms; [3]

melodies; [4] counterpoints; [5] harmonies; [6] combinations of all of these. The first six variations are concerned with transformations of the theme on an immanent level through basic changes in the musical setting. The second cycle manipulates elements of rhythm. Variations thirteen through eighteen cultivate a more lyrical quality, while nineteen through twenty-four highlight conflict in opposing voices. In the fifth cycle, Rzewski exhibits the greatest compositional liberty by loosely paraphrasing the theme. The sixth cycle represents a synthesis of all the preceding processes in a swirling vortex of variation technique.

The individual variations within each of these six cycles represent a microcosm of the larger process of the work as a whole. Looking at the first cycle, for example, variations one through five explore different surface level changes in the original music. Each of these five variations is stylistically distinct from its surrounding neighbors. A seamless manner of variation is avoided altogether here, with each variation remaining distinct from those that precede and follow. The sixth variation, however, summarizes the previous five variations in the order that they were presented, citing in groups of four measures the style of each variation from the first cycle. Therefore, in any of the concluding variations in any cycle, measures one through four reflect the variation techniques employed in the corresponding first variation. Measures five through eight correspond to the second variation, and so on. Rzewski does not quote music from the earlier variations but alludes to it by newly composed music, which keeps this intensely developing plan from sounding too rigid or predictable.

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The last cycle of the work summarizes the set as a whole. The first variation in this cycle reflects upon the techniques of all of the first variations in each cycle. The second variation here does the same for all second variations in all cycles. The same holds true for all following variations until the sixth. In this last variation, Rzewski reflects back on all six cycles, summarizing the whole work through evocations of their techniques and styles.

The work is firmly centered around the tonality of D minor. In the first cycle of variations the composer harmonically relates the variations by intervals of a fifth proceeding from D upwards to C#. The second cycle leads the music from C# to G, which tonicizes a return to D in the third cycle. The tonal center remains in place until the fifth cycle, which is more harmonically daring. In this cycle, Rzewski also deviates freely from the theme exploring minimalistic meditations that reflect an inwardly brooding quality. This cycle reestablishes the harmonic progression from the first cycle (D to C#). The final section completes the harmonic adventure leading us back by fifth relations to the theme at the end that reinstates the tonality of D minor.

It is a tribute to the composer’s skill that such an imposing compositional process could result in such inspired and dramatic music making. Rzewski’s genius lies in his talent for combining style in such an emotionally powerful and direct manner while never obfuscating the theme. This stylistic promiscuity is most effective in the confines of some sort of greater musical form. In The People United Will Never Be Defeated Rzewski shows an unabashedly exhibitionistic ability to explore different procedures through the guise of variations.
The People United Will Never Be Defeated represents a conservatism that Rzewski had not previously exhibited until 1975. The music displays so much historical allusion revealing debts to Cage, Boulez, Copland, Glass, Beethoven, and the greatest composers of the jazz tradition.⁹ Undeniably Rzewski’s greatest influence is that of Bach in his skilled use of counterpoint, keen sense of formal design, and harmonic planning. This is all made explicitly clear through an open reference to the C major prelude from book one of the Well-Tempered Clavier at the end of variation 28 (example 5-4).

Rzewski’s political implications surface in this work in many respects. The theme itself is suggestive of revolutionary ideologies. As well, the composer includes at different points in the piece two other well-known revolutionary songs, which add to the programmatic aspect. Bandiera Rossa, which the composer used in his improvisational section in No Place To Go But Around, appears as a cadenza in variation thirteen. Rzewski also includes a paraphrase of the Eisler-Brecht Solidarity Song.¹⁰ Throughout the rest of the work, the performance directions are evocative of the revolutionary drama. The composer sprinkles indications such as “with determination,” “with firmness,” “violently,” “gathering speed,” and “relentless, uncompromising” throughout the score. These are directions for the stage as much as they are for the music. Through these directions, in combination with the compositional process, and the general tone that evolves, the composer develops a dramatic arch. The shape of the piece as a whole reflects the shape of an experience such as that of social mobilization and conflict. As a

⁹ Pollack, 385-386.

¹⁰ Pollack, 384

whole, the work symbolizes a cyclic process that originates and ends in determinism, following a path through struggle, defeat, madness and celebration.\footnote{Pollack, 385.}

Originating out of borrowed folk-inspired material, Rzewski executes a master stroke in this work. The *Thrity-Six Variations on The People United Will Never Be*
Defeated represents a combination of the most sophisticated compositional techniques with the simplest of materials resulting in an impressive statement. The irony of an American composing a monumental variation set such as this, based on music that reflected the emerging political situation in Chile cannot be overlooked. This is the music of a composer from the country that assisted in the overthrowing of the leftist regime in Chile that is celebrated in the title theme. Rzewski’s work commemorates the lives of those oppressed and murdered in the coup. The composition serves the purpose of mourning the suppression of the socialist element in the South American country and criticizing American influence around the globe. Rzewski composed the variations in anticipation of the American bicentennial in 1976 for a performance in the nation’s capital. The composer’s brilliant commentary could not have been more perfectly timed or placed.

Rzewski followed The People United Will Never Be Defeated with two more significant pieces. In 1977 he composed Four Pieces, which had no overtly specific program. The work basically fit the design of a multi-movement sonata displaying an affinity for the writing style of the earlier works in a more Debussian vein. The level of abstraction in these pieces serves more to explore the tonal potential of the instrument, than to make a political statement. In the last movement of this set, however, the composer does set folk-like music in a tonal landscape that seems to evoke the mood and spirit of the previous work. Instead of actually replicating the impact of The People United Will Never be Defeated, this movement foreshadows his use of folk song in subsequent works. The impressionism captured in Piano Piece Number Four emerges from the alternation and conflict of simple melody with more grandly executed sonorous
gestures. Rzewski sought to cultivate this more sensuous style in another large-scale work that followed in 1979 called *North American Ballads.*
CHAPTER SIX
NORTH AMERICAN BALLADS

The piano works that garnered so much attention for Rzewski in the seventies represent a shift in his career from group member to solo composer. Following the Kent State massacre and the growing sense that their work was losing relevance, Musica Elettronica Viva disbanded for the most part.\(^1\) Anticipating the group's dissolution, and inspired by the mostly negative reaction to their music in America, the members were confronted with an important question: who was listening? Though the group conveyed an important perspective on cultural and political issues, its audience was incapable of making sense of their message. As a result of this compromised position, Rzewski began to weigh some important compositional decisions.

His affiliation and activity with Musica Elettronica Viva was not financially lucrative. Members of performance ensembles, especially those of the avant-garde persuasion, can rarely rely on the income generated from their performing careers. Income is generally supplemented through teaching or some other musical service. Discussing his years with the group, the composer openly expresses that he suffered from poor financial health.\(^2\)

Obviously, Rzewski's future security as a composer was dependent on cultivating an audience. Composing solo piano pieces was a logical decision, since he could perform

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\(^1\) The composer states that from this point forward, Musica Elettronica Viva ceased to exist as an ensemble of stable personnel and activity. To this day, however, musicians come together to perform under the name of the group for improvisational style concerts. The core performers seem to bring the name out of retirement when there is an opportunity for performance.

and record the works himself. Rzewski imbued these works with his signature sense of social critique and improvisation. Owing to the reputation that preceded him as a performer and as the creator of works such as *Les Moutons de Panurge, Coming Together,* and *Attica,* the composer was able to attract the attention of important and influential performers such as pianists Ursula Oppens and Paul Jacobs. These artists encouraged the writing of his solo piano works and ensured a wide dissemination of the music through both performances and recordings. Paul Jacobs extended a commission to Rzewski for a set of pieces that he planned to record on an album including various rags and blues by contemporary American composers such as William Bolcom and Aaron Copland. For this project, Rzewski produced his *North American Ballads.*

Rzewski’s *North American Ballads* exhibits borrowed material in much the same fashion as his two preceding variation sets. The pieces are based on four different American protest songs. Each setting borrows its title from the quoted folk melodies: *Dreadful Memories, Which Side Are You On?, Down By The Riverside,* and *The Winnsboro Cotton Mill Blues.* Similar to the earlier works, these pieces are imbued with variations that organically emerge from the source melodies. There is also an identical appreciation for the contrasts of complexity and simplicity within each movement. These pieces stand apart from the other works, however, in the manner that they represent the culture from which they are drawn.

Rzewski was inspired to set American folk melodies by a group of Depression era composers who sought to achieve in the United States what Bartók and Kodaly had done in Eastern Europe. Known as the Composer’s Collective, the group was active in America in the 1930s recording and transcribing many folk songs. They sought to
cultivate a native aesthetic for American concert music by researching the music of the common folk in the United States. The group was led by Charles Seeger and Elie Siegmeister. The membership roster included composers such as Aaron Copland, Henry Cowell, and Marc Blitzstein. As composers of the highest ranking in American society, they saw the hope of American music lying in its roots. Much like Rzewski, they were also outspokenly socialist in their views.

During the seventies the composer was an active member of a group of about thirty classical, folk, and jazz musicians that modeled a society after the Composers’ Collective. The group called themselves the Musicians’ Action Collective. The Collective sought out performance opportunities at community functions such as holiday celebrations and block parties. Members composed original material that was based in the popular musical language for these occasions. The group focused on writing songs collectively and participating in the life of the community around it. In this way, it was an organization that emulated the activities of the earlier Composers’ Collective, which sought to bring the talents and understanding of the highly esteemed American composers to a broad public through the voice of the people. The composers created a connection to their audience through an understanding of the craft of popular song and what function it serves to the public.

Rzewski’s *North American Ballads* reflect the homespun socialism of both of these collectives. In much the same manner as the musicians of the Composer’s Collective, he exhibits an admiration for the voice of the people. The texts of the quoted

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4 Rzewski, interview, 1997.
folk songs reflect socio-economic conditions in the lives of the American working class. Through the paraphrase of these common melodies, Rzewski constructed a meaningful set of pieces that broadly reflects cultural and political aspects of American life and consciousness.

The set illuminates the connection between popular styles and their political significance. These four movements treat the borrowed folk melodies as powerful seeds from which a wealth of musical and political ideas germinate. The composer generates each piece through basic motivic ideas that he derives from the quoted melodies. The idea for this organic style was suggested to the composer by the famous folk singer Pete Seeger. During Rzewski’s involvement with the Musicians’ Action Collective, he met with Seeger to discuss the activities of the group. The composer later addressed this encounter in an interview with Vivian Perlis discussing his compositional style in the *North American Ballads*.

[Pete Seeger] said, “You should get together regularly, and immediately sing the songs that you write,” and so forth. And also, “When you do these concerts, you should have something that everybody can sing...You should follow the example of Bach.” And that really caught me off guard. I said, “Well, what do you mean follow the example of Bach?!” He said, “Yes, when you do these concerts you should have at least one or two things that everybody can sing which is what Bach did.” Which is something that I had never quite considered before. And it stuck in my mind...if you know these pieces, all of the material, the motivic material, is in some way derived from the tune. In a way which is, although not exactly like Bach’s technique, it has some analogies with what he does in his Chorale Preludes for instance. And so, in a sense...there is a case where classical technique [merges] with folk material.\(^5\)

\(^5\) Rzewski, interview, 1997.
In the manner of the chorale preludes, Rzewski varies the use and combination of motives in counterpoint. This is an approach similar to what he had done in the earlier works. Rzewski presents the melodies in their entirety at least once in each movement. These presentations may occur either at the beginning or end of the movement. The remainders of the movements are built through variation techniques that emphasize the manipulation of basic motives. Imitating Bach’s example, the motives are layered and combined in manners that evoke a multiplicity of meanings through their relationships.

 Practically all of the material in the four movements derives from the quoted themes. Distilled down to their component parts, each popular tune proves to be so fertile as to create a sense of self-reference. Rzewski explores motivic aspects of the tunes in various combinations while meditating upon the implications of their meanings. As in the traditional chorale prelude, much of this is accomplished by means of pictorial or graphic gestures. These dramatic gestures are crucial to the communication of the composer’s musical ideology.

 Although Rzewski’s historical precedent follows the example of J. S. Bach, the counterpoint and textures that evolve produce a sound that hearkens back to Ives rather than Bach. As in the music of Charles Ives, ideology is most clearly communicated through contrasting associations and an exhaustive exploration of the basic material. Much like his musical forebear, Rzewski unveils a complex psychology of representation through stylistic juxtapositions, effective layers of counterpoint, conflicting blocks of sound, and fleeting moods. The *Ballads* exhibit a stylistic versatility that exhibits influences from impressionism, polyphony, minimalism, and folk music. Rzewski’s eclectic assemblage of devices and styles reveals a thread of populism conveyed through
many literal quotations of folk melodies as well as evocations of gospel, ragtime, and the blues.

Rzewski achieves an emotional and critical impact in his *North American Ballads* by means of many juxtapositions of varying mood and character that result from a prodigious ability to develop borrowed ideas. In the *North American Ballads*, the sense of variation is based upon select motives and their constant growth into new combinations and forms. The result is a musical discourse that betrays the influence of serialism in its ever-changing manner of development.

By means of his technically rich compositional palette, Rzewski manages to evoke an almost tangible message. He expresses a sense of the naiveté of political idealism and the horror of a life of real poverty. The thread that unifies the composer’s particular collection of tunes is a calling for unionization in the workforce and social change in the face of poverty and discrimination.

Obviously, before examining these works, it will prove helpful to outline an approach to the musical and political issues that the composer addresses. More than simply a quoted theme in essence, each piece is rooted firmly in cultural stylistic references. These references and what social relevance they carry will be discussed prior to dismantling the music for its component parts. A comparison of these references with the musical workings of the scores reveals the composer’s message more clearly. For further clarification of the motivic relationships that are discussed in this analysis, a complete score of the *North American Ballads* with annotations is included in chapter eight.

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DREADFUL MEMORIES

The first movement of Rzewski's *North American Ballads* is based on the song *Dreadful Memories*. The title page indicates that the quotation is modeled after a version of the tune by an American folk singer named Aunt Molly Jackson. Though her name may not be familiar to many listeners currently, she occupies an important place in the history of the American protest singer. Her experiences are preserved in more than 150 songs that she recorded for the Library of Congress between 1935 and 1939.

Born Mary Magdalene Garland in 1880, Aunt Molly was active in the 1930s as a singer, songwriter, guitarist, and political activist. Probably married twice and carrying one of her husband's last names and her nickname "Molly," she became a certified midwife by age 18. Such women were usually called "grandma," but since she was so young, the title was softened to "aunt." As a Kentucky coal miner's wife, Aunt Molly understood oppressive poverty and inhuman working conditions. She lost her son, husband, and brother to life in the mines. Aunt Molly was discovered in the early thirties during the violent mining strike in Harlan County, Kentucky. A group of writers, including Theodore Dreiser and John Dos Passos, combed the area interviewing residents to gather information about the strike and its impact on the workers. Aunt Molly not only told them her story, she sang it in the form of a blues ballad. The committee was greatly impressed and invited her to New York City to sing and raise money for the striking miners. When the strike was over and the National Miners' Union collapsed, she stayed on in the big city as a singer and activist.

*Dreadful Memories* is her painful account of infant mortality among the mining folk. She comprehended how the mining industry perpetuated generations of exploitation
and poverty. Some of her most painful experiences came to her while practicing midwifery in Harlan County in the early thirties. She recounted a period of several months in which she midwived to thirty-seven mothers who lost their children at birth or shortly thereafter due to starvation.\(^7\) The effect of such widespread infant mortality among impoverished families inspired her to write the text to *Dreadful Memories*. The melody is borrowed from a hymn tune commonly known as *Precious Memories* (example 6-1). Her text dwells on the starvation of the miner’s children, contrasting their deaths with the bejeweled wives of the coal company’s operators.

In all of its simplicity, her poem discusses innocence, suffering, loneliness, and the painful burden of memory as an extension of her experience in poverty. Rzewski evokes this emotional situation through several stylistic quotations that symbolically portray aspects of this text and the experience of the people of Harlan County.

From the relatively simple theme, Rzewski derives three basic motivic divisions. Practically all of the music in the first movement flows out of these brief intervallic structures. The composer fragments and recombines these divisions in contrapuntal and homophonic textures. Rzewski does not necessarily employ each fragment in its entirety. Throughout the work he often merely alludes to motives through use of their prominent intervals or incipits. A table of the major motivic divisions of the theme is presented below (example 6-2).

The first division, which is labeled X, consists of two repeated notes followed by an interval of a second and a third. Following the repeated notes, these intervals can either ascend (measure 1) or descend (measure 2). Viewed from another perspective, the

\(^7\) Shelley Romalis, *Pistol Packin’ Mama: Aunt Molly Jackson and the Politics of Folksong* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1999), 190
Example 6-1: *Dreadful Memories*, after Aunt Molly Jackson

Dreadful memories! How they linger;
How they pain my precious soul.
Little children, sick and hungry,
Sick and hungry, weak and cold.

DREAD·FUL MEM·RIES, hoe they linger, how they pain my precious soul,
Little children, sick and hungry, sick and hungry, weak and cold.
Little children, cold and hungry, without any food to eat at all, They had no clothes to put on their bodies, they had no shoes to put on their feet, DREAD·FUL MEM·RIES,
how they linger, how they fill my heart with pain.
Oh, how hard I've tried to forget them, But I find it all in vain.
Little children, cold and hungry
Without any food at all to eat.
They had no clothes to put on their bodies;
They had no shoes to put on their feet.

Refrain:
Dreadful memories! How they linger;
How they fill my heart with pain.
Oh, how hard I’ve tried to forget them
But I find it all in vain.

I can’t forget them, little babies,
With golden hair as soft as silk;
Slowly dying from starvation,
Their parents could not give them milk.

I can’t forget them, coal miners’ children,
That starved to death without one drop of milk,
While the coal operators and their wives and children
Were all dressed in jewels and silk.

Refrain:
Dreadful memories! How they haunt me
As the lonely moments fly.
Oh, how them little babies suffered!
I saw them starve to death and die.\(^8\)

second measure is an intervallycally inverted form of the first. The basic motive spans the interval of a fourth. The following melodic divisions also possess important intervocal cells that Rzewski manipulates throughout the movement.

The intervals in the motivic grouping, labeled Y, reflect a similar construction to those of X. This time, however, the shape descends and then rises. This sequence of intervals features two descending seconds and a descending fourth, which is then

\(^8\) Ibid, 190-191.
EXAMPLE 6-2: *Dreadful Memories*, motivic divisions

followed by an ascending fourth and third. The motive finishes by falling a second. In contrast to the first motive where the first and last notes are identical, Y descends an interval of a second from beginning to end.

The third melodic division, labeled as Z in the example, outlines the descent of a third. Its melodic contour fills in the space between the outer notes of that descending interval. This motive group derives properties from X and Y. The last three notes of Z represent a temporal diminution of the first three notes of Y. These three notes also relate back to the initial third of the opening measure.

All three motives display a sense of balance between rising and descending intervals. Throughout the work these contours are fragmented and layered. Each motive can easily be broken down into or identified by their two distinct halves or individual sequence of intervals. These intervals are temporally compressed or expanded at various
times, suggested by the final three notes of Z when compared to the first three of Y. A cross-relation such as this also expresses a motivic inter-connectedness that pervades the work.

There are two other important intervallic features that Rzewski employs in his setting of the tune. He makes use of the distance of a sixth between the last note of the X motive and the first note of Y to join ideas throughout the movement. The minor second that outlines the uppermost notes of the accompaniment in measures one through four also factors in as a basis for deriving and controlling dissonance. Both of these more discreet intervals will provide a basis for alteration of the X, Y, and Z motives later in the work.

The movement opens with a quotation that evokes the folksy simplicity of the text (example 6-3). Rzewski sets the borrowed melody over a rocking and gentle accompaniment. The melody floats lithely in the uppermost voice supported by the shifting emphases of the accompaniment. The feeling of delicate balance between the two hands is bolstered by the diatonic harmony that pervades the opening passage. The contrast between the melody and the accompaniment is reminiscent of a lullaby.

In this setting of the tune, Rzewski conjures up notions of innocence and naivety. A tonal context is securely established in the key of A-flat major. With no real chromatic issues to resolve, Rzewski could repeat the tune much like it would be sung, passing through all stanzas of the text until it is finished. The resemblance to a lullaby is unmistakable. Symbolically, this sense of tonal security and stability evokes an ideal peace, or at least the hope for such a thing. The strophic melody and rocking quality of the accompaniment infuse the music with an unmistakable sense of nostalgia.

The inherent qualities of these basic materials are exploited in many ways that relate back to the folk song allusion. The rising and falling melody, with tones that emphasize the dominant from beneath and the mediant from above, is perfectly complemented by the rocking accompaniment. The accompaniment seems to cycle out of phase with the melody, gently shifting its emphases on the second eighths of the beats.

Rzewski follows the opening with a second statement of the theme. While the undulating accompaniment continues, the right hand crosses the left to play the melody with some characteristic rhythmic alterations. This statement leads to another verse. This time, however, the melody is embedded in the middle voices of a chordal progression (example 6-4). X and Y are both traceable one octave lower than they were
first presented at the opening. They are replaced in their original register by melodic contours that derive from their intervallic structures. In measure nineteen Rzewski presents his first simultaneous layering of the primary motives. The $Y$ motive, placed in the middle voices of the chords, is counterbalanced by $X$ ascending in the uppermost voice. This is perfectly timed so that the highest note of $X$ coincides with the lowest note of $Y$. The first dissonance of the work also appears immediately following this point. On the downbeat of measure twenty, a grace note $B$-natural lends a folk-like inflection to the interval of a diminished fourth.

**EXAMPLE 6-4: Dreadful Memories, mm. 16 to 20. © 1980 by Zen-on Music Co., Ltd., Tokyo. All Rights Reserved. Used by permission of European American Music Distributors LLC, sole US and Canadian agent for Zen-on Music Company Ltd., Tokyo.**

The layering of motives in measure nineteen is a beautiful gesture on Rzewski’s part that fulfills two functions. First, it lends harmonic support and balance to the melody, which is placed in the tenor voice. Second, it foreshadows and gives a basis for the contrapuntal style that Rzewski subsequently uses in this movement. An organic development of the motives begins at this juncture where the melody symbolically
backtracks over itself. This doubling up of the motives culminates in the dissonance on the downbeat of measure twenty.

The melodic interval of a sixth that connects the final note of X with the first note of Y in the original melody bridges the diatonic and homophonic serenity of the first twenty-four measures with a tonally ambiguous, contrapuntal variation (example 6-5). This section lasts for ten measures, culminating in a stretto of independent voices. The harmony is expressive and sounds conflicted. Rzewski dispenses with the key signature

at this point. Each voice entry tonicizes a different home key, thereby creating harmonic instability through the combination of the basic motives. The vagueness of tonal center is accentuated further by wide spacing of the voice entries.

Rzewski's writing style in this passage contrasts greatly with the homophonic opening. The sparse and diffuse texture negates the uniformity and centeredness of the theme in A-flat. Rzewski, obviously, intends a stark change of character. The contrast of simplicity and idealism implied by the opening theme set against the more learned or aristocratic linear writing style suggests a symbolic relationship. The juxtaposition of such starkly contrasted writing styles is not to be taken for granted in light of the composer's penchant for cultivating symbolic relationships in his music. The manner of eliding the folk song into the more contrapuntal section reflects contrasting aspects of the extra-musical association.

The ways that Rzewski contorts this melody vividly depicts the souring of sentiment. The lullaby-like opening could imply the sense of innocence or idealism that gives way to a symbolic loss of these qualities. The nostalgic setting of the hymn tune also evokes notions of faith. Cast in relief to the assuredly diatonic opening, the contrapuntal section represents an evolution from memory into reality. The remainder of the movement focuses on this same conflict between motivic simplicity and tonal convolution. Rzewski wishes to contrast these musical characters in a way that evokes the real life victimization of the lower classes by capitalist industry.

Following this initial exposition, Rzewski returns to the key of A-flat. The music returns to a simpler, homophonic texture again (example 6-6). The writing style here evokes the plucking of a banjo, an instrument chosen to represent a class distinction.
This quintessentially American sound is derived from a composite of the intervals of the X motive. The interval of a second is filled in here by half steps.


**Tempo: a little faster than Tempo I**

![Musical notation](image)

Signified by a change in texture, this section gives way to another variation in measure forty-one. Here a bold statement of the transfigured theme is set in octaves beneath a strumming accompaniment. The key signature changes at this point, implying a modal shift. The sense of tonality, however, is still strong. The melody, which changes registers through the next four measures, is composed out of a mixture of intervals from the main quotation. The relationship back to the theme is immediately audible. This brief transition closes in measure forty-four with a figure in the right hand that derives from Z.
The sixteenth note activity in the accompaniment converts into a quick-moving secondary line that smoothly switches back and forth between the high to the low registers of the instrument (example 6-7). This line derives its intervallic structure from the descending portion of Y. Simultaneously, Y is altered to fit into the 12/8 meter and is presented in its entirety in the left hand. The motivic grouping is presented in a chordal structure that is composed of parallel tritones and major seconds. This harmonic structure derives from the intervallic relationships between the notes on the downbeat of measure 20. Using the original and derivative forms of Y simultaneously harkens back to the final phrase of the opening section in which Rzewski first layered the basic motives.


Rzewski composed this passage using invertible counterpoint. Inversion of the voices occurs every measure between bars 45 and 48. The time interval shrinks further,
at first into two beats, and then into smaller units. The section abruptly opens into another widely spaced variation of linear counterpoint (example 6-8). The juxtaposition of contrasting textures recalls the transition from the theme into the first variation. This time, however, the writing is more dramatically fleshed out and multi-layered. The motives are set in many combinations, which are used against themselves at the same time as they are supporting each other.

Example 6-8: *Dreadful Memories* mm. 52-55. © 1980 by Zen-on Music Co., Ltd., Tokyo. All Rights Reserved. Used by permission of European American Music Distributors LLC, sole US and Canadian agent for Zen-on Music Company Ltd., Tokyo.

(Tempo I, or a bit slower)

In this section, the rhythmic features of the motives are transformed as well (example 6-9). In measure sixty, Y is presented in a manner that momentarily suggests a
relationship to the accompaniment of the original theme at the opening. This motive is used here to accompany an altered form of Z.


![Musical notation]

A chorale-like passage then closes this section (example 6-10). Based on the hymn tune *Precious Memories*, the stylistic reference also evokes a religious tone. This texture alludes to the original function of the melody that Aunt Molly borrowed. Z underscores a combination of itself with X in the upper voices. Though the writing implies no specific tonal center, the passage comes to rest on a on a G-sharp cadence. Through an enharmonic respelling, this G-sharp recalls the key of A-flat from the opening of the movement.

A brief transition leads into another section that resembles the banjo folk music. The next eleven measures alternate between folksy and contrapuntal styles (example 6-11). Whereas the earlier portion of the work compartmentalized these two styles, and the middle part showed an evolution from one style into the other, this section juxtaposes them in brief alterations. Rzewski presents the familiar materials in a sardonic manner.

The banjo music and the learned counterpoint now sound like parodies of themselves, each exhibiting an exaggeration of their original characters.

This passage closely resembles the techniques that Rzewski employed in his *Variations on No Place To Go But Around*. The contrasting treatments of the quoted motivic material are presented in close proximity resembling a working out of conflict. The alternation of textures in measures 66 through 76 evokes the feeling of an argument. It is an argument that neither side wins. The discussion is interrupted by an extreme change in texture and a return to modality.

For the final variation, Rzewski invokes the character of the lullaby again. This time, however, the rocking accompaniment is absent and is replaced by a sustained chord and a repetitive pattern in 10/8. The melody is truncated to the intervals of the Y group.

only. The repetitive pattern, which appears in measure eighty-one, derives from the descending shape of Y. It is a literal repetition, over and over, of the second, third, and fourth notes of the motive. The melody which appears over this repeated pattern also derives the same intervals from Y, now presented in parallel thirds. The balance of rising and falling motives that was present at the opening is absent here, now replaced by a melodic line that only descends.

The final sonorities are tonally ambiguous (example 6-12). The gesture is toward an enharmonic respelling of a B-flat major triad with the inclusion of a minor sixth sitting one half step above the fifth of the chord. The fifth disappears after one beat and the final sonority of the movement is that of an augmented chord. This crucial fifth is literally
plucked from the chord, which closes the movement with an unexpected harmonic shift that is scarcely audible. The listener is left in doubt of the actual final tonality.


In the framework of this modally ambiguous section, Rzewski strips the piece of any sense of closure. One gets the impression that the symbols of trust and innocence, represented by a secure sense of tonality at the beginning, are undermined by the chromatic instability. We are left with the idea that even in the middle of harmonic stasis, there is no foundation upon which we may rely, such as that of a stable tonic
chord. This is an important observation as the composer deliberately focuses attention at various points on specific tonalities.

References to starving children and the horrors of Appalachian poverty in the original source explain the dichotomy of innocence and its “destruction” in the piano piece. The treatment of the theme, both motivically and harmonically, evokes a sense of transformation through struggle. The theme of innocence is fragmented and violated by the redressing it gets throughout the course of the movement. In relation to the original text written by Aunt Molly, the piano piece serves as an analogue to the loss of that innocence in the world of the proletariat. The contrapuntal style of the work evokes the complex psychology of memory by exploring multifaceted aspects of the motives. The effect of the final sonorities of the piece leaves us with an impression of the original simplicity transformed and corrupted.

**WHICH SIDE ARE YOU ON?**

In the second movement of the set, Rzewski draws inspiration from a folk source very similar to that of *Dreadful Memories*. Again, he borrows a melody from the repertoire of mining protest songs. As in first movement, the quoted theme is parsed down to motivic components that are layered and combined in a kaleidoscopic fashion. As is true in all the movements of the *North American Ballads*, the borrowed theme exercises a symbolic influence over the musical content and form.

The quoted tune in the second movement, *Which Side Are You On?*(example 6-13), originates from the same geographical region as *Dreadful Memories*. The song is excerpted from the writings of a woman named Florence Reese. Like aunt Molly
Jackson, Florence Reece was a native of impoverished Harlan County, Kentucky. The seat of conflict surrounding the miner’s strike in the early thirties, Harlan county was literally a war zone between local officials and advocates of the miner’s union. Inspired by the plight of the unionists and their utterly degrading treatment by local authorities she wrote *Which Side Are You On?* Like Aunt Molly, Mrs. Reese borrowed a melody from her hymnal. Her text is set to a Baptist hymn titled *Lay the Lily Low*. Setting a new text to the familiar hymn tune, no doubt, ensured acceptance by the down-and-out people of Harlan County. The words were rousing, calling all to take a stand for the miner’s union. At the same time, the symbolic hymn tune conveyed the notion that God was on the side of the workers. Her text is as follows:

Example 6-13: *Which Side Are You On?*, by Florence Reese

\[\text{Militantly} \]

\[\text{Come all of you good workers, good news to you I'll tell of how the good old} \]

\[\text{Chorus} \]

\[\text{union has come in here to dwell Which side are you on?} \]

\[\text{Which side are you on? Which side are you on? Which side are you on?} \]
Come all of you good workers,
Good news to you I'll tell
Of how the good old union
Has come in here to dwell.

Chorus:
Which side are you on?
Which side are you on?
Which side are you on?
Which side are you on?

My daddy was a miner
And I'm a miner's son,
And I'll stick with the union
Till ev'ry battle's won.

They say in Harlan County
There are no neutrals there;
You'll either be a union man
Or a thug for J. H. Blair.

Oh, workers can you stand it?
Oh, tell me how you can.
Will you be a lousy scab
Or will you be a man?

Don't scab for the bosses
Don't listen to their lies.
Us poor folks haven't got a chance
Unless we organize. 9

The melody and chorus comprise two eight-measure phrases. The verse is composed of four intervallic sequences (example 6-14). Three of these structures are very similar in melodic design. The first full measure of X is identical to the first full measure of Y. Differences between these two groupings lie in the intervals of their upbeats and terminations. Z also resembles X, with the exception of its repeated notes and the descending major second at the end.

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Example 6-14: Which Side Are You On? motivic divisions:

\[ W \]
\[ Y \]
\[ X \]
\[ Z \]

The verse and chorus share many of the same features. The chorus intervallically derives from the last two bars of the verse melody (Z). Rhythmically, it resembles the body of each of the above fragments minus the anacruses and after beats.

Essentially, the most important motivic material derives from Y and Z. Rzewski generates melodic figures that feature seconds and thirds in the music from Z. Motives X and Y are presented with interchangeable intervals of seconds or thirds as their upbeats. The two motives are more readily distinguished by their endings than by any other feature. X finishes by ascending a fourth and Y is terminated with a repeated note. Repeated notes followed by fourths are distilled from W. In context of what precedes or follows these intervallic figures in the piano piece, one may identify either Y or Z as the direct source for melodic structure. Consistent with the approach in the previous movement, all of the material that is used derives some sort of prominent feature from the quoted theme.

Instead of opening with a direct quotation of the theme, as he did in the first movement, Rzewski presents a collage of the motives. The movement, therefore, begins with the first variation instead of the theme. Rzewski closes the movement with an imposing and militaristic presentation of the melody in its original form. Emerging from
the variations into the theme, the composer evokes the spirit of the final lines of Florence
Reese’s text: “Us poor folks haven’t got a chance, unless we organize.” At the finale of
the movement, the diverse assemblage of motives coalesces into an idea made whole.
Through such a reversed process, Rzewski communicates that the roots of unity lie in the
collective soil of individual identities.

The contrast between the finale and the opening variation beautifully illustrates
this message. Since the vast majority of material derives from the theme, it is best to
begin discussion of the music from the end of the work, rather than the beginning.

Rzewski’s setting of the theme is unabashedly militaristic (example 6-15). He
boldly casts the quotation in parallel octaves and sixths, which the pianist must play
fortissimo. There are many accented weak beats thrown in for musical punctuation.
Through the placement of the accented octaves, Rzewski covers all registers of the
instrument. The octaves at first surround the theme and then travel on each side of it
evoking the question posed by the piece’s title phrase.

In stark contrast to the finale, the first variation, which opens the movement, is
disjointed and lacks a sense of central gravity (example 6-16). Here, all of the motives
are presented in opposition. Rzewski commences with the individual voices spaced
widely across the keyboard. As early as measure three, the rhythmic complexity builds.
Motives begin entering on weak divisions of the beats. This casts all of the basic ideas
out of synchronicity. A middle voice enters in measure four that has trouble deciding
‘which side’ it is on, so to speak.

Rzewski’s first variation is remarkable for its method of presentation. All of the basic motivic material from the theme is revealed. Following this introduction, the basic motives become more consistent in texture and rhythmically stable. The following variations, however, do not consistently exploit thematic fragmentation. Variations between measures fifteen and thirty-three explore a more conjunct presentation of the

Spirited \( \frac{\text{d} = 96-100}{8} \)

motives. The chorus of the quoted theme is presented in its entirety in measures 22 through 25 (example 6-17). The ascending and descending gestures are presented in a call and response type of pattern that Rzewski places on different sides of the keyboard. Rzewski follows the chorus with a canonic variation that uses the theme in its entirety (example 6-18). After the verse melody is presented over a countersubject derived from
Y, the chorus is presented again. The melody is inflected with expressive grace notes and is supported by open fifths and sevenths. Evocative of the folk round, the music is reminiscent of the vocal and instrumental styles of Appalachia.


This variation reflects back to the presentation of the theme and closing section of *Dreadful Memories*. Contrasted to the chaos of the opening variation, the canonic organization must, of course, serve some sort of symbolic association. Canon, literally, means rule or law. This musical evocation, by extension, also represents unification. This is the first appearance in the work of the theme in its entirety. It is significant that Rzewski implements this convention to bring order to the dismembered quotation.

The canon only restrains the musical activity for eight measures. Measures 34 through 50 exhibit a resurgence of wide registration, rhythmic complexity, and capricious changes of character. As with the earlier canon, Rzewski simplifies the surface texture by returning to a harmonically stable center. At measure 51 he introduces the key of G-sharp minor (example 6-19). The music is now homophonic in texture, rather than contrapuntal. The diminutions in the melody conjure up a pastoral and impressionistic image.

The insistent repetition of the low G-sharp creates harmonic stasis, lending the passage a meditative quality. As the melody becomes more ornamental, it evolves back into a contrapuntal texture. The passage of intense fragmentary writing that follows, proves to be nothing more than a fantastic digression from the meditation of the G-sharp minor section. The contemplative quality returns at 71 with the melody freely executed above a pedaled tremolo that evokes the sound of a dulcimer.

A pattern becomes evident at this point in the movement. It is the alternation and balance between intensely scattered counterpoint and more harmonically focused textures. This alternation produces a global impression of conflict and instability. The section that follows the pastoral variation most fully embodies this turbulence, at times escalating to violence. A trill in measure 89 evokes the sense of an alarm. This is reminiscent of variation 24 of *The People United Will Never Be Defeated* where the same effect is employed. The tension breaks in measure 92 with a sequence of ascending and descending figures that derive from the chorus of the quoted theme (example 6-20). As he had done earlier in the work, Rzewski tosses the materials from one register to the next. The performer must literally throw him or herself from one side of the instrument to the other in order to execute the passage.

This passage that derives from X is developed through an obsessive minimalist section. Rzewski places two-note fragments of the chorus amidst the repetitions. Conflicting with these bits of the theme, the incessant repetitions evoke a sense of defiance and resistance. Comparable only to the variation in G-sharp minor, this passage is firmly rooted upon a bedrock of tonal stability. Also similar to the pastoral section,

this variation is also meditative. Differently though, the meditative quality, here, evokes a sense of gathering strength.

After the prolonged and obstinate repetition, the music breaks off into a major section of improvisation, which the composer offers as an option to the performer. Should the performer choose to improvise, Rzewski provides some guidelines. These suggestions are rather symbolic. He lays them out as follows:

1. Improvisation should begin as a sudden radical change, with no “transition.”
2. Begin by alluding in some way to the tonality of B minor. This may be brief. End with a rather long section in C mixolydian.
3. Improvisation may use techniques employed in the written music...or not, but in any case should represent a different “side” of the same form (many different tonalities in the first part, one tonality in the second).
4. Improvisation, if played, should last at least as long as the preceding music.
5. If no improvisation is played, pass immediately to the finale.\(^{10}\)

The composer's ideas of "radical" change and of a harmonic progression to simplicity imply the possibility of unity sparked by revolution. This transformation may be expressed by any means possible with the performer playing potentially anything to convey this. Not only does Rzewski grant the performer such enormous license, he states that the performer should be permitted an equal amount of time to symbolically work out the conflict that is implied by the main theme.

Quoted earlier, the finale to which the performer passes, regardless of the improvisation or not, is firmly rooted in the key of B minor. The ending flavor is unabashedly militaristic and powerful. Evocative of Rzewski's pro-labor stance, the final statement of the theme presents an idea that is finally made whole.

**DOWN BY THE RIVERSIDE**

*Down By The Riverside* is probably the best known of the four tunes that Rzewski borrows for the *North American Ballads*. This traditional spiritual is also commonly identified by the text of its first line, *Going To Study War No More*. Rzewski began work on this movement in early February of 1979. The work originally was intended to be premiered at that year's Festival of Political Song, which was held in Berlin. The symposium focused that year on the music of Vietnam. Rzewski was originally called upon to compose a piece based on a Vietnamese tune, but instead wrote this setting of

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Down By The Riverside. He selected the tune for its relevance as a protest song in the Vietnam War era (example 6-21).

Example 6-21: Down By The Riverside

Goin' to lay down my sword and shield, Down by the river-side,

down by the river-side down by the river-side, Goin' to lay down my sword and shield Down by the river-side, and study war no more.

Chorus

I ain't goin' to study war no more, I ain't goin' to study war no more, I ain't goin' to study war no more, I ain't goin' to study war no more.

Goin' to lay down my sword and shield,
Down by the riverside, down by the riverside, down by the riverside,
Goin' to Lay down my sword and shield,
Down by the riverside, and study war no more.

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Refrain:
I ain't goin' to study war no more
I ain't goin' to study war no more
I ain't goin' to study war no more

Goin' to put on my long white robe,
Down by the riverside, down by the riverside, down by the riverside,
Goin' to put on my long white robe
Down by the riverside, and study war no more.

Goin' to talk with the Prince of Peace,
Down by the riverside, down by the riverside, down by the riverside,
Goin' to talk with the Prince of Peace,
Down by the riverside, and study war no more.\(^{12}\)

The pacifistic flavor of the text was attractive to many war protesters who appropriated the tune for demonstrations, sit-ins, and marches. The civil rights movement also adopted it, especially fond of the fact that the song was originally a spiritual. Tunes like *Down By The Riverside* or *Which Side Are You On?* were commonly fitted with texts proper to a specific occasion. For example, the Freedom Riders, an interracial group who sought desegregation of interstate bus systems, sang a version called *Down On The Freedom Line*.

From this melody Rzewski derives six basic ideas that form the basis of the movement (example 6-22). These ideas exhibit many rhythmic and intervalllic similarities. Every one of the six melodic ideas presents the basic rhythmic motive of two sixteenths followed by a sixteenth rest followed by syncopation across the beat.

The X motive presents this rhythm twice consecutively in the same measure. The rhythm is presented in augmentation across the first and second beats of measure three. This is linked to a presentation in the smaller, more frequently used form

consisting of subdivisions of sixteenths. X is divisible into two parts. The first consists of the pickup to the downbeat, the descending sixth, and an ascending step. The second half includes the intervals of a third, which ascends from the last note of the first half, and three rising steps which land on a syncopation.

Example 6-22: Down By The Riverside, motivic divisions

\[ X \]

\[ Y \]

\[ Z \]

\[ A_1 \]

\[ A_2 \]

\[ B \]
The descending consonant interval of a sixth plays a prominent role throughout the movement. It is repeatedly pronounced in passages of counterpoint where it links fragments of motives and alludes to passing tonalities. Rzewski’s prominent use of sixths firmly establishes this interval in the foreground of the listener’s consciousness. Until the end of the first page, all of the melody is presented in parallel sixths. Many of the variations on the tune also feature voices that move in an identical manner.

The Y motive derives its shape from X. The first four notes of Y are intervallically identical to the pickup to the downbeat in X. The rhythm in Y is altered and prolonged. The three descending notes that conclude the basic motive of Y are taken from the end of X and inverted.

Motive Z finishes off the music of the verse. Like X and Y, it is initiated by a pickup of repeated notes. The motive is most readily recognizable for its stepwise descent of a fourth that ends on a syncopation.

The chorus presents three more motives that, although derivative of the verse, are distinctly used in the ensuing variations. The first, indicated as A, reverses the descent of a fourth that closed Z. It then presents the basic rhythmic motive on the downbeat. This rhythmic motive is appended with three repetitions of the same notes. The second half of A alludes to the same ascent and repetition of the first half, but it concludes by descending back to the tonic.

This phrase is concluded by a third component, labeled B. It combines elements of A in the chorus and Y in the verse. The motive focuses around the intervals of a third and second. The tail of this unit is identical to the end of Y. In the following repetition
of the first phrase of the chorus, the final descent of the melody resembles the descending fourth of Z.

Rzewski displays derivations of the thematic material from the very first measure of the movement (example 6-23). X is embedded in the short, repeated accompanimental pattern that underscores the entire verse and chorus. The style of this pattern recalls an energy and swing that is reminiscent of gospel music. Rzewski foreshadows his usage of derivative motives throughout the work in this gesture. By doing so, the ascending strain of X, which was set with the words "war no more" in the song, is planted in the listener's subconscious from the very beginning.


After the complete presentation of the theme, Rzewski embarks upon a fantasia-like section that employs each of the basic motives (example 6-24). In absence of a key signature, the section opens with a stretto that emphasizes X. Rzewski presents a clearly tonal scheme in the stratification of this motive. Each individual traceable layer of the head motive from measure 18 to 21 reinforces a specific tonality. The uppermost voice
of measures 18 and 19 is cast in D major. The next voice lower, which moves in parallel sixths, is presented in F major. The entrance of X on the second sixteenth of beat two in measure 19 reinforces the tonality of B-flat major. This entrance on B-flat is repeated on the downbeat of measure twenty in the up-stemmed notes of the bass clef. This particular entrance melds into motive A from the chorus. An octave presentation of Y in G-flat major underlies the passage from measure 19 to 20. The simultaneous combination of motives in measures 19 and 20 is developed further, incorporating motivic material from the chorus as well.

Rzewski indicates that this section is to be played with a sense of fantasy. The numerous dynamic shifts and subtle changes in texture demand a sense of timing and tonal control that allows for clear and deliberate entrances of the motives. Without the sense of improvisation that the composer demands, the music will sound clouded and overly complicated. This sense of improvisation and flexibility permits the composer's fantasy to develop a beautiful arch that comes to rest at measure 35 in the key of E-flat.

Like the opening of the piece, a repetitive pattern evolves (example 6-25). The intervals of the accompaniment derive from the X motive. The figure serenely floats in a pattern of 5/8, now stripped of its rhythmic angles. Rzewski layers a middle voice over the left hand pattern that is also derived from X. The effect at first is that of a temporal canon. The uppermost voice consists of smaller figures from X. These ornamental figures relate intervallically to X. The intervals of the upbeat of the primary motive are inverted crossing the bar line from measure 37 to 38. The descending figure in the uppermost voice of the following measure is a reversal of the ascending intervals of X. The effective layering of the X motive at this juncture creates a calm that contrasts greatly with the preceding section of counterpoint. The return to a peaceful attitude is signified by the return to tonality in measure 37.

This section of harmonic stability is eventually undercut by a stretto of the verse melody (motives X, Y and Z). The fragments of the theme are layered across many registers of the piano. This stretto, much like the first contrapuntal section of the movement, is firmly tonal, although not focused around one particular center. Rzewski abandons the key signature where the contrapuntal texture is suddenly interrupted by a dissonant, chorale style passage (example 6-26). This presentation recalls a solemn

![Music notation of Down By The Riverside, mm. 37-39.](image)

*Con pedale (m.s. sempre pp)*


![Music notation of Down By The Riverside, mm. 45-48.](image)

gospel style. The four-voice texture harkens back to the religious tradition from which the tune is borrowed.

Further stretto of the motives follows this passage. The counterpoint emerges from the lower registers of the chorale. The ensuing ten measures graphically present all of the motives in violent conflict. What began earlier in sweet harmony, implied by the interval of a sixth, now is transformed into militaristic and ponderous chordal structures.
(example 6-27). The strength of these blocks of sound bear down so heavily on the instrument that they turn into explosive clusters that outline the shape of the ascending termination of X.


This explosive passage halts and opens into a peaceful recollection of the section in E-flat from the middle of the piece. This time the tonality is centered in E major. After this one measure allusion, a series of descending chords passes through the three- and four-note descending motivic fragments. The music comes to rest on an F minor seventh chord. Rzewski indicates that an improvisation may be played at this point. The improvisation, much like the one in *Which Side Are You On?*, should last about as long as
the preceding music. The improvisation should emerge into a stretto of X cast in C major which is written into the music by the composer.

In the next section, the gospel character reemerges. This time, however, the music is composed in the manner of Baroque passacaglia (example 6-28). The right hand executes figures that are derived from the theme and set in ragtime rhythms over a walking bass line. This bass line does not derive from the quoted folk song. It underscores the activity in the upper registers with two repeated four-bar phrases. The incorporation of this fundamental line serves two purposes. First, it reinforces the original character of the tune by evoking the popular style of an African-American spiritual or blues. Secondly, it unifies a larger process through which the original quoted melody is revealed.

Rzewski scores this passacaglia section in four voices. Although the melody of *Down by the Riverside* is written out in the tenor voice, it is not to be played until the repeat of the section. For the first pass through, the performer doubles the bass line in octaves. This doubling of the lowest line distributes the writing across seven octaves on the piano. With the bass line reaching down as far as the lowest A on the instrument and the right hand filling in the slower bass durations with sixteenth notes in the upper registers, the effect is arresting. The distance between the layers of counterpoint is accentuated by the extremely quiet dynamic marking. As the music proceeds through the sixteen measures to the repeat sign, the dynamics escalate in preparation for the entrance of the borrowed tune.

With the entrance of the folk song on the repeat, the gaping tessitura is bridged. The effect is symbolic of a greater unity that evokes the peace movement of the sixties.

There is a sense of power in the growing dynamic that conjures up the spirit of *We Shall Overcome*, but in a much more spirited and grassroots manner. Thinking back to the melody’s religious origins, it is also evocative of a coming together in the religious sense.

Looking at the passage motivically, it is another example of Rzewski’s immense contrapuntal skill. The theme is transformed into many different shapes that bear a striking resemblance to the original motives. As the theme progresses in the middle voice of the texture, its motives are reflected in rhythmic diminution and augmentation surrounding it. Following the tenor voice through the above quoted example from the score, permutations of the motives are quickly found at a glance.
The mood of religious fervor is broken in measure 83, where the music slips to a
deepest cadence (example 6-29). Over this chord, Rzewski indicates that a short
improvised cadenza may be played. The cadenza returns to the score in another stretto,
which again fragments the theme. The effect is rather bracing as the preceding passage
emphasized unity so heavily. This stretto emphasizes the bass line feature of the previous
passacaglia. This time, however, it is derived from the X motive. Through measures 83
and 84, fragments of X, now presented like head motives, announce the entry of each
voice in varying degrees of rhythmic augmentation and diminution. Motives from the
chorus are layered in measures 85 through 87. The harmony comes to rest on a first
inversion dominant seventh chord that is widely and unevenly spaced across two octaves.
Above this sonority, what seems to be a recollection of the tune based on X dissolves in
the upper register of the piano.

Rzewski’s setting of *Down by the Riverside* is evocative of many social
movements that flourished in the sixties. Flashes of violence are heard which are
intended to allude to the war in Asia and the domestic unrest that accompanied it in
America. Throughout, as in the preceding movements, there are also moments of idyllic
beauty and sensuousness that represent a distant ideal from which contemporary society
has been separated. The movement ends on a note of social realism in which the ideal of
peace or unity is dismantled to reflect the reality of war and tension. We are left with the
grim thought that this struggle for unity is futile as the melody, the symbol of the social
movement, is broken up at the end and left to waft away in the upper registers of the
piano like smoke drifting off from an extinguished fire.

A short improvised cadenza may be played over this chord.

**THE WINNSBORO COTTON MILL BLUES**

The fourth and final movement of Rzewski’s masterpiece is based upon the tune *Winnsboro Cotton Mill Blues* (example 6-30). This is the largest and most imposing movement of the set. The title melody derives from a tune called the *Alcoholic Blues*. Bill Wolf, an instructor at the Southern School for Workers in the thirties, first transcribed the *Cotton Mill* version after hearing a student sing it. The text primarily discusses the greed of industry brass and the seemingly relentless hours of performing the menial task of spooling cotton. The second and third verses imply that there was little
rest for the mill workers. So little in fact, that there would be no time off, even for their own deaths.

Example 6-30: *Winnsboro Cotton Mill Blues*

Old man Sargent, sitting at the desk, the damn’ old fool won’t give us a rest.

Chorus

He’d take the nickels off a dead man’s eyes to buy Coca-Cola and Eskimo pies. I got the blues, I got the blues, I got the Winnsboro cotton mill blues.

Lor’dy, Lor’dy, spoolin’s hard; You know and I know, I don’t have to tell, you work for Tom Watson, got to work like hell. I got the blues, I got the blues, I got the Winnsboro Cotton Mill Blues.

Old man Sargent, sitting at the desk,
The damn old fool won’t give us a rest.
He’d steal the nickels off a dead man’s eyes,
To buy Coca-cola and Eskimo pies.
Chorus:
I've got the blues, I've got the blues,
I've got the Winnsboro cotton mill blues.
Lordy, Lordy, spoolin's hard,
You know and I know,
I don't have to tell,
You work for Tom Watson, got to work like hell,
I've got the blues, I've got the blues,
I've got the Winnsboro cotton mill blues.

When I die, don't bury me at all,
Just hang me up on the spool-room wall;
Place a notter in my hand,
So I can spool in the Promised Land

When I die, don't bury me deep,
Bury me down on Six Hundred Street;
Place a bobbin in each hand
So I can doff in the Promised Land.13

More so than in the other movements, the music progresses through clearly
defined sections that are either blended by short transitions or suddenly juxtaposed. The
same element of parsing motives from a borrowed melody is present. The intense
harmonic development and linear writing that is so prevalent in the first three movements
is reserved for an intense stretto and an expressive blues in the latter portion of the
movement. This time, however, the fragments are rhythmically and melodically
developed through repetition in the sense of direct minimalism. The music is otherwise
free of complex methods of quotation exhibited in the previous movements. Instead, the
composer employs music that freely relates to the theme by alluding to many of its
distinguishing features. Thematic derivations come from the following set of motives
(example 6-31).

13 Edith Fowke and Joe Glazer, Songs of Work and Protest (New York: Dover
Publications, 1973) 74-75.
Example 6-31: *Winnsboro Cotton Mill Blues*, motivic divisions

From the twenty-three-measure theme Rzewski extracts seven important motivic ideas. The first four of these derive from the verse melody. Motive W is based on a simple descending triad. This basic shape pervades much of the melodic structure of the
song. The most recognizable form of this motive in the piece begins with two repeated quarter notes, which then descend the interval of a fifth by thirds. Not only does this motive have harmonic implications, the initial repetition of the opening pitch serves the basis of all subsequent repetitions of pitch.

This repetitive quality is exploited in motive X, which also features the interval of a major second. Y closely relates to W, incorporating stepwise motion that fills in the descending interval of a third. Z is derives from motive X. It also features the stepwise motion of Y.

The next group of motives derives from the chorus of the tune. Motive A, includes the triadic descent of W. This fragment opens with a chromatic slide of three half steps that decorate the skeleton of W. In actuality, A is a more elaborate form of W. There are two versions of this motive that differ according to their terminal rhythmic and melodic features.

B features a combination of steps and thirds as well. This fragment, however, does not allude to W, but is employed to accentuate the fluctuation of mode that is associated with the blues. The first measure focuses on the intervals of a minor third and major second. In the second measure, the minor third is expanded by a half step making it major. A final motive, C, fulfils a function similar to that of B with its ambiguous major/minor tonal qualities.

Although these motives are crucial to the content of the movement, Rzewski abstains from presenting them at the beginning of the music as he does in the three preceding movements. Instead, he begins the work with impressionistic and minimalistic gestures that slowly reveal the basic materials.
The first section of the work presents a mechanical droning in the bass of the piano, which evolves into overwhelming clusters of sound (example 6-32). Rzewski begins with an alternation of the notes G-flat and F. This G-flat is a respelling of the lowest tone of the last chord in *Down By The Riverside*. In alternation with its neighbor, the composer immediately focuses the tonal center of this movement on F. Tone clusters grow from this alternation that are produced by the palms and forearms (example 6-33). The deafening drone graphically evokes the sounds of a cotton mill implied by the title. Rzewski indicates the sounds to be played “expressionless” and “machinelike” with a constant rhythmic intensity. In short, this music is not to sound in the least bit human.

The stratification of sonority in this opening passage is quite remarkable. The alternation of clusters in the lower part of the piano is tempered by the emergence of an important line in the right elbow. This highest voice, as in example 6-32 above, begins so subtly that it is almost imperceptible. The elbow groups are perceived by the ear at first as permutations of this complex tonal color. With each new measure, the clusters repeat and are altered in a formal process that builds from measure 9 to 24. The process for building up this layer recalls the additive processes of *Coming Together* and *Attica*.

As in the above example, the first elbow cluster is placed on the fourth beat of the measure. It lasts for the duration of one sixteenth note. In the next measure, the same cluster is repeated followed by another on the second eighth of the fourth beat. In the following measure, these two repetitions are divided by the insertion of a new cluster in between them on the fourth beat. This new cluster spans a wider interval than the previous pair. It displaces the original pair of clusters so that they each individually fall upon the second eighth of the second and third beats. The new cluster is then doubled on

Expressionless, machinelike
marcato, non legato, con grande precisione ritmica, e con intensita costante


upper clusters with forearms; N. B.
both black and white notes
both eighths of the fourth beat, separating the original pair further by an additional eighth note. The process evolves by continually introducing new ever-widening clusters on the fourth beat and then doubling them.

Eventually, Rzewski stops the intervallic expansion of this process when the top notes reach E natural in measure 19. This pitch lies outside of the pentatonic scale that defines the expansion of the clusters. At this point, Rzewski begins to expand the repetitions of the clusters that fall across the center of the measure out to the bar lines. As the interior repetitions come to occupy more space in the measure, the dynamics also escalate (example 6-34).

The entire passage is generated as outlined in the following diagram (example 6-35). Each new letter that is introduced represents the top pitch of a cluster that falls on the fourth beat. All clusters are notated as originating from E-flat below middle C. Rzewski includes a note that the notation is to represent the general shape of the phrase and not specific pitches.

In measure 20 this process fills the measure to capacity. From this point on the newly introduced material at the center of the measure expands and begins to eliminate the material at the fringes. This process continues until the point at which there would be only one cluster, represented in the diagram by E natural, left repeating. This would occur at measure 25. Rzewski cuts the completion of this plan short. Instead, beginning in this measure he focuses on paring down the intervallic scope of the repeating clusters. He does this while continuing repetitions on each sixteenth subdivision of the beats. Over the next eight measures he splits the process of contracting the intervals into several different divisions of the beats in 6/4 meter.

Example 6-35: *Winnsboro Cotton Mill Blues*, diagram illustrating the additive process of measures 9 to 24.
For the first four measures of this process, he reduces the clusters in the right hand by a half step every three beats and every three eighths in the left hand. Looking at these measures from a distance, a greater process surfaces. The right hand descends a half step in this measure. The left hand’s ascent by four half steps is a diminution of the entire right hand’s descent in the same measure (example 6-36). The left ascends one half step between beats one and three and between beats four and six. In the left hand, the last three beats act as a transposition of the first three.


The process is then accelerated through measure 30. In measure 29 (example 6-37), the half step reductions now occur three times per measure in the right hand. In the left hand an ascent of a half step is transposed three times, forming a pattern.

The final two measures of this section consist only of half steps in alternation. At this point, it is as though the entire process has reduced the music down to its elemental building block. This passage emphasizes the pitches that surround C. In

relation to the opening, this C acts as the dominant to the tonic F established as the tonal anchor at the beginning.

The harmonic seconds in each hand reduce further down to single pitches in alternation that emphasize this dominant. This marks the beginning of a new section. Here the left hand slowly, through altered repetitions, develops an accompanimental pattern that emphasizes the last sixteenth of the first beat in a two beat grouping. This pattern underlies the following 30 measures. As it repeats, its dynamics grow to a ferocious level indicated by the composer as *fortississimo*. Behind this droning bass pattern an expressive melody emerges and disappears. The next eight measures resemble the same effect of the top layer of clusters in measures nine through 24. Rzewski is careful to remark in the music that the dynamics create an unexpected balance.
N. B. Great care must be taken to keep the left hand at a constant (extremely loud) level, while maintaining at the same time the expressive variations in the intensity of the right hand melody, which is therefore sometimes hardly to be heard.\(^{14}\)

Above the roar of the bass pattern the quoted tune emerges for the first time (example 6-38). It is presented in a simplified manner passing through the verse melody and the chorus. The melody is expansive over the smaller note values of the ostinato pattern. The tune and accompaniment both firmly establish the key of F major.


Rzewski claims that his inspiration for this passage came from the movie *Norma Rae*, which won an academy award in 1979.\textsuperscript{15} The film portrays Sally Field as a factory worker turned union activist. Her character initiates a protest against the industry leaders in hopes of improving working conditions in her plant. Throughout the film, the actor’s voices must overcome the din of machinery to be heard in the factory. Much like the emergence of the melody from behind the bass ostinato in the piano piece, this is an allusion to the tribulation of the proletariat worker. Rzewski’s allusion to the film’s soundtrack is brilliantly prepared and executed in the score, revealing the essence of the music.

Needless to say, this expressive melody does not last for long. After the statement of the first chorus it disappears and is replaced by an ostinato that compliments the pattern in the left hand, which has been repeated non-stop since measure 38. The right hand pattern is identical with the left except that it is transposed up a minor ninth. Transposition at the minor ninth derives from an expansion of the minor second that opens the work. The head motive of the *Winnsboro Cotton Mill Blues* is quoted as a counter-motive to the repetitions in both hands of measures sixty through sixty-two. The chromatic shape of the repeated patterns begins to spread across the instrument through additional voices in measures 65 and 66. The top voice in this texture quotes the beginning of the theme.

Rzewski continues to build this intensity through a jarring entrance of chordal structures (example 6-39). Both hands play chords that span a ninth from the root on top. A fifth is included in the chord that alludes to the same interval in the bass ostinato

pattern and the head motive of X. The ninths continue the parallel intervals from measures 59 to 67. The right hand in this passage outlines the shapes of the major triad derived from the head motive. The left hand outlines triads as well, but in a manner that is less clearly defined than the right hand.

Through these seven measures both hands converge and separate. At measure 75 the hands begin to dwell on repetitions that last for six measures. Reminiscent of the opening, the left hand alternates between G# and A in the lowest octave. The right hand begins an alternation of a fifth with a third. This third lies inside the fifth and eventually fills it in with a cluster. The section culminates in a shatteringly loud passage that exploits the extreme ranges of the keyboard. We then hear a distorted reverberation that howls on through what is notated as a grand pause. The strings resonate with the distorted sound of many overtones.

Finally, a change in character relieves the incessant sixteenth note activity. Rzewski marks the beginning of this new section *tranquillo* and *espressivo* in contrast to the *machinelike* and *expressionless* indications on the first page. Set in B-flat major, this section is a meandering blues that emphasizes both the major and minor third of the scale. Rather than write in a homophonic texture, which is characteristic of the blues style, Rzewski layers the voices in a contrapuntal texture (example 6–40). The voices derive many features from the quoted theme, but do not strictly adhere to their motivic roots. The sensuous quality of the blues here exploits many layers and voice interchange is common. In all of the four movements of the *North American Ballads* this is the section of the greatest freedom. In a way, it is a written out improvisation. Rzewski, in a letter
to Paul Jacobs, conveyed that this section could be replaced by an original improvisation.¹⁶


\[
\text{Un poco meno mosso} \quad \frac{\text{a}=54-56}{\text{Un poco meno mosso}}
\]

The rhythmic drive that is so pervasive throughout the first 80 measures of the movement is replaced here by a constant swinging of quarters followed by eighths in compound meter. This rhythm underscores the entire section up to measure 105 in which a continual progression of sixteenth notes starts up again. In measures 108 to 112 Rzewski again contrasts the expressive right hand over rhythmic alternations (example 6-41). This passage alludes to the earlier section in which the dynamic shapes of the tune emerged from the incessantly repeated bass ostinato. It also foreshadows the escalation

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of conflict between the expressive and more impersonal elements that have been at work in the piece.

The verse melody appears for the first time in its original form at measure 113 over the minor seconds in the bass. It is presented in G-flat major, which is tonicized by the left hand. The chorus of the tune is interrupted by an intensely developmental stretto. In this section of diffuse counterpoint, the composer combines a chromatic three-note ascending (Y) motive with a falling triadic motive (X) (example 6-42). The stratified motives are played against themselves at varying rates of speed by means of rhythmic augmentation and diminution. This is accompanied by unexpected changes of mode, which allude to the harmonic style of the blues.

Intricately layered and balanced across the keyboard, this section serves as a major preparation for the coda of the movement. In effect, this is the most intense use of stretto in the four movements that make up the complete set. Throughout, the distinguished motivic fragments are heard in conflict with elements that evoke the
mechanical sounds from the first half of the piece. Chordal structures recall the more
toccata-like climax that preceded the blues section. The effect here is similar to the
earlier climax in that it escalates to the point of saturation and then breaks off to a new
texture.

The theme finally appears in its entirety, rooted firmly in the key of F major
(example 6-43). It is supported by a figure in the left hand that was first employed as the
ostinato in measures 39-67. As mentioned earlier, the effect is similar to Rzewski’s
presentation of the theme in Which Side Are You On? in which the borrowed tune is first
fragmented and then presented whole.

Example 6-43: Winnsboro Cotton Mill Blues, mm. 136-139. © 1980 by Zen-on Music Co., Ltd.,
Tokyo. All Rights Reserved. Used by permission of European American Music Distributors LLC, sole US and
Canadian agent for Zen-on Music Company Ltd., Tokyo.
Unlike the second movement of the set, Rzewski does not end with the quotation. The tune ends on the last sixteenth of measure 174, only to be buried under an avalanche of clusters played in the upper registers of the piano by both forearms (example 6-44). It is a violent juxtaposition in which the human element is devoured by the churning of the machine. The effect is absolutely frightening!


These clusters thin out to cover the interval of a fifth in each hand. The right hand plays on white notes while the left hand plays on the black keys, which is a reversal of the opening measures of the movement. The blocks of notes are then rolled upwards beginning in measure 149. In measure 152 these clusters outline the head motive of the tune evoking the last line of its text, “so I can doff in the Promised Land” (example 6-45). Following this, the clusters shift up to the edge of the keyboard and chug to a stop on the highest note.
Most striking about the movement is not, however, the more conventional design or the ways that Rzewski manipulates or transforms the theme. It is striking for its appreciation of the piano’s sonic potential. In this movement, the piano is simply not
treated as a piano. Rather, it is transformed into an engine with cylinders and pistons that obstinately manufacture a drone that is overwhelming and inescapable. This infernal toccata frames a very human blues, which emerges from the piano’s magnificent roars. It is the dichotomy between the impersonal and the more expressive elements the impact the listener so greatly.

Regardless of its association with the preexisting melody and text, this movement conveys an unmistakable message with its alternations of expressive and mechanistic sounds. The concept of struggle between the two is evident in passages where arching melody emerges from behind churning minimalist repetitions. With its seemingly relentless drive and meandering passages of blues, Rzewski evokes a threatening situation. These starling contrasts symbolize the human element being taken by force and assimilated into the clangor of capitalist industry.

Rzewski captures the characters evoked in the original text in many ways. He communicates both monotony and brutality through the use of violent clusters and domineering repetitive patterns. He employs the blues as the expressive soul of the down and out African-American worker. In the context of the worker’s ballad, this is the music of poverty. As the composer suggests, for the worker, there is no escape from the machinery of capitalist enterprise.
CHAPTER SEVEN

CONCLUSION

Taken as absolute music or political artwork, Rzewski’s *North American Ballads* represent one of the greatest achievements in twentieth-century American literature for the piano. He manages to evoke the very landscape from which he draws his inspiration through an eclectic combination of styles and compositional techniques. Rzewski’s evocation of American life is more critical and realistic than nostalgic. Poverty, social conflict, violence, and inhuman working conditions are still perpetuated in this country through social imbalance, which favors the upper classes of American society. Addressing these matters of political importance, there is little to be nostalgic about. Rzewski employs nostalgia in the piano works as a symbol of what is lost in the haze of our American dreams.

Rzewski manages to pique the attention of his audience through familiar stylistic references and the manipulation of motivic ideas that retain a familiar shape even through the most complex passages of writing. The basic melodic fragments are employed in these works as quickly identifiable and meaningful ‘hooks’ by which the listener may measure the development and transformation of ideas and associations. The success of the pieces is inextricably bound to the web of associations that Rzewski has created between musical and political elements in the score. For example, by associating the pacifistic melody *Down by the Riverside* with violent palm clusters conjures a sense of social injustice. This sense of injustice links the listener’s thoughts to unfortunate moments in recent American history, such as the Kent State Massacre in 1971 or race riots during the process of desegregation. These images resonate in the consciousness of the
American people through the consistent perpetuation of racism and class inequality.

While Rzewski does communicate optimistic ideals in the work through stable tonality and simple melodies, he also chronicles the scars of our nation through the more realistic tone of his modern counterpoint.

An architecturally impressive and meaningful form emerges through the experience of listening to the set as a whole. Although each movement stands on its own when performed separately, Rzewski connects the set through harmonic relationships, which obviously reflects an attempt on the composer's part to unite the four movements under one political message.

With the exception of the first large section of the *Winnsboro Cotton Mill Blues*, all of the movements focus around the alternation of distinctly opposed characters. These characters are not explored in a binary sense, but are revealed through a spectrum of references back to one primary idea. The set begins with a tone of optimism and innocence and concludes with sarcasm and violence. As opposite ends of the same continuum, Rzewski wishes to convey that in American society there is a relationship between a highly coveted ideal and the price that is paid for it.

Rzewski's personal stance on the relationship between capitalism and oppression is conveyed through a chain of associations expressed by musical devices. This chain of associations expresses the contradictions of freedom and capitalism represented by the "American dream" through symbolic form. The "dream," symbolized by the secure sense of tonality, is lost early in the first movement. Throughout each of the subsequent movements, Rzewski chronicles attempts to recapture this ideal through alternation of solidly tonal sections and passages of atonal writing. In the end, he reveals that this
dream is merely a mirage or something elusive that has never really existed. The dream is only a sarcastic joke that assaults the ears in blocks of sound at the end of the last movement.

Rzewski’s sense of social critique reflects a commitment to what he calls “humanist realism.” This concept relates back to his address at the International Theater Festival in Parma in which he outlined the responsibility of the artist as one who must reflect social reality and, therefore, alert others to danger when present. This is a notion to which Rzewski dedicates the majority of his piano music from the seventies. In both the Variations on No Place To Go But Around and The People United the composer is explicit in his message of social transformation.

The compositional skill with which he has wrought his works negates any sense of question as to its worth as music. The craftsmanship and artistry of relationships in the works attest to their greatness and to the sensitivity of his political perception. It is unfortunate that his work may carry with it the stigma of “political” as the music transcends topical relevance. Regardless of one’s opinions on the greater climate of world politics, there is much that one could find in these compositions that is truly artful and brilliant.

For reasons such as this, Rzewski’s works have enjoyed continual performances since they were written. Composers of similar political tendencies, such as Christian Wolff and Cornelius Cardew, have had much more difficulty generating support from artists and audiences than Rzewski. Their music does not exhibit the sensitive balance of artistry and meaningful content that Rzewski has so carefully cultivated. In his music, he has managed to mitigate the best qualities of a wide range of styles into one complex
language that strikes his audience as relevant and provocative. His style bridges a major gap for that audience between the complexity of serialism and the simplicity of folk music. Through his aesthetic, he has exhibited the ability to elevate mundane materials to a level where they are transformed into meaningful and expressive forms that communicate his complex perspective. This is not achieved through programmatic allusions in the sense that there is a direct narrative behind the music, but through a well-honed manner of conveying complex refractions of the thoughts that consume him.
VIII
MOTIVIC ANALYSIS
OF
FREDERIC RZEWSKI'S
NORTH AMERICAN BALLADS

I
DREADFUL MEMORIES

DREAD - JUL MEM-RIES, how they linger, how they pain my precious soul.

Little children, sick and hungry, sick and hungry, weak and cold.

Little children, cold and hungry, without any food to eat at all, They had no clothes to put on their bodies, they had no shoes to put on their feet.

DREAD - JUL MEM-RIES, how they linger, how they fill my heart with pain, Oh, how hard I've tried to forget them, But I find it all in vain.
NORTH AMERICAN BALLADS
For Paul Jacobs

1. Dreadful memories
(After Aunt Molly Jackson)

\[ J = \frac{92}{96}, \text{with a steady swinging pace; afterwards generally flexible tempi throughout.} \]

Frederic Rzewski
14-15 Nov. 1978
II
WHICH SIDE ARE YOU ON?

Militant

Come all of you good workers, good news to you I'll tell of how the good old

Chorus

Union has come in here to dwell Which side are you on?

Which side are you on? Which side are you on? Which side are you on?
2. Which side are you on?
(After Florence eese)

Spirited \( \text{\textit{}\( j = 96/100 \)\textit{}} \)

Frederic Rogowski

© 1982 by ZEN-ON Music Co., Ltd.
Slightly faster; molto leggero
(J. = ca. 88)

Accompaniment displays X, Y, and Z motives (the tail of X is omitted)

PP slow back to original tempo

 Derived From

Y X Z

Y X Z
play each bar twice
(sustain last chord of each bar)

marcato
(dimin.)

X

Y

Z
Optional free improvisation, subject to following conditions:

1. Improvisation should begin as a sudden radical change, with no "transition." That is, there should be no ambiguity about where the written music ends and where the improvisation begins. The manner in which this sense of a leap to a different kind of order is evoked is left to the interpreter. A few simple limitations, however, apply:

2. Begin by alluding in some way to the tonality of B minor. This may be brief.

3. Improvisation may use techniques employed in written music (polytonal transpositions of theme, etc.) or not; but in any case should represent a different "side" of the same form (many different tonalities in the first part, one tonality in the second).

4. Improvisation, if played, should last at least as long as the preceding written music.

5. If no improvisation is played, pass immediately to the finale.

Addendum
Possible ending for improvisation:

R.H.: every 2 or 3 bars, one of these figures, in any octave; for a minute or two; in any order.

III

DOWN BY THE RIVERSIDE

Goin' to lay down my sword and shield, Down by the river-side,

down by the river-side, down by the river-side, Goin' to lay down my

sword and shield Down by the river-side, and study was no

more. I ain't goin' to study was no more, I ain't goin' to study was no

more, I ain't goin' to study was no more I ain't goin' to

study was no more.

X

Y

Z

A1

A2

B
3. Down by the riverside

Frederic Rzewski
Feb. 3-4, 1979

©1982 by ZEN-ON Music Co., Ltd.
Lo stesso tempo, ma con rubato e flessibile quasi una fantasia

poco rit.

f dimin.
N.B. If improvisation is played, it should be about as long as the preceding written music.
Surrounding figures derive from primary motives.
A short improvised cadenza may be played over this chord.
IV

WINNSBORO COTTON MILL BLUES

Old man Sarge, sit-tin' at the desk, the devil's old fool won't give us a rest.

Chorus

He'll take the six-kicks off a dead man's eyes to buy Co-ca Cola and Eskimo pies - I got the blues, I got the blues, I got the Winnsboro cotton mill blues.

Lor-dy, Lor-dy, screw-lin' hard; You know and I know, I don't have to tell, you work for Tom Watson, got to work like hell. I got the blues, I got the blues, I got the Winnsboro Cotton Mill Blues.
4. Winnsboro cotton mill blues

Frederic Rzewski
May 1979

Expressionless, machinelike
marcato, non legato, con grande precisione ritmica, e con intensità costante

G" = ENHARMONIC RESPELLING OF THE LOWEST TONE
OF THE LAST CHORD IN "DOWN BY THE RIVER"
upper clusters with forearms; N.B. *Beginning of Additive Process (Example 6-33)*
both black and white notes \textit{ppp}

N.B. If the pitches of the upper (arm) clusters are given precisely, they are not necessarily to be so precisely executed, and still less are they to be clearly heard: they are intended rather as a subtle coloration of the underlying drone.
N.B. Continue to play upper clusters with right forearm; gradually change (as smoothly as possible) to flat of hand, then fingers.
N.B. Great care must be taken to keep the left hand at a constant (extremely loud) level, while maintaining at the same time the expressive variations in the intensity of the right hand melody, which is therefore sometimes hardly to be heard.
Many allusions to thematic material, but not strict.
IX

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X
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Tabakrauch, 1954
Preludes, 1956
Poem, 1958
Study, 1960
Study II (Dreams), 1961
Falling Music (Amplified Piano and Tape), 1971
Variations on No Place To Go But Around, 1974
Variations on The People United Will Never Be Defeated!, 1975
Four Pieces, 1977
Squares, 1978
North American Ballads, 1979
Eggs, 1986
Septangle, 1986
The Turtle and The Crane, 1988
Mayn Yingele, 1988
Short Fantasy on “Give Peace a Chance”, 1989
Bumps, 1990
Sonata, 1991
Ludes, 1991
Andante con moto, 1992
De Profundis, 1992
A Life, 1992
Fougues, 1994
Turns (The Road, Part I), 1995
Tracks (The Road, Part II), 1996
Tramps (The Road, Part III), 1997
Stops (The Road, Part IV), 1998
A Few Knocks (The Road, Part V), 1999
Traveling With Children (The Road, Part VI), 1999
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A Machine, 1984
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XI

FREDERIC RZEWSKI

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