

PRESENTS



Frederic Rzewski, piano

A Tour de Force: Piano Series Event

Saturday, May 16, 2009 • 8 pm

Sunday, May 17, 2009 • 2 pm

Studio Theatre, Mondavi Center, UC Davis

There will be one intermission.

Post-performance Q&A

May 16 Moderator: Jeremy Ganter, Associate Executive Director and Director of Programming,
Mondavi Center, UC Davis

May 17 Moderator: Don Roth, Ph.D., Executive Director, Mondavi Center, UC Davis

The artists and your fellow audience members appreciate silence during the performance. Please be sure that you have switched off cellular phones, watch alarms, and pager signals. Videotaping, photographing, and audio recording are strictly forbidden. Violators are subject to removal.



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FREDERIC RZEWSKI, PIANO

Nanosonatas, 5 & 6

Frederic Rzewski

Intermission

The People United Will Never Be Defeated!

Rzewski

36 Variations on ¡El Pueblo Unido Jamás Será Vencido! (1975)

Thema: With determination

Variation 1: Weaving; delicate but firm

Variation 2: With firmness

Variation 3: Slightly slower, with expressive nuances

Variation 4: Marcato

Variation 5: Dreamlike, frozen

Variation 6: Same tempo as beginning

Variation 7: Lightly, impatiently

Variation 8: With agility; not too much pedal; crisp

Variation 9: Evenly

Variation 10: Comodo, recklessly

Variation 11: Tempo I, like fragments of an absent melody, in strict time

Variation 12

Variation 13

Variation 14: A bit faster, optimistically

Variation 15: Flexible, like an improvisation

Variation 16: Same tempo as preceding, with fluctuations; much pedal — Expansive, with a victorious feeling

Variation 17: L.H. [left hand] strictly: R.H. freely, roughly as in space

Variation 18

Variation 19: With energy

Variation 20: Crisp, precise

Variation 21: Relentless, uncompromising

Variation 22

Variation 23: As fast as possible, with some rubato

Variation 24

Variation 25

Variation 26: In a militant manner

Variation 27: Tenderly, with a hopeful expression — Cadenza

Variation 28

Variation 29

Variation 30

Variation 31

Variation 32

Variation 33

Variation 34

Variation 35

Variation 36

Optional Improvisation

Thema (reprise)

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PROGRAM NOTES

Nanosonatas

Frederic Rzewski

(Born April 13, 1938, in Westfield, Massachusetts)

Frederic Rzewski on *Nanosonatas*:

In the summer of 2006, a young Japanese—actually Okinawan—friend of mine, Hideyuki Arata, a scientist and amateur pianist, sent me an article he had published in the *American Journal of Applied Physics*, at the end of which he gives me credit for “our valuable discussions on nanomolecular motors,” together with a letter in which he informed me that my name would “now live forever in the annals of science.”

I thought I should send him something in exchange, so the idea of a “nanosonata,” about two minutes long, technically somewhat demanding but not requiring a lot of practice, seemed right. I had a commission to write a new piece for Milton Schlosser in Edmonton, Alberta, and I liked the first nanosonata, so I thought that if I strung together, say, seven of them, it would fill the bill.

Then a second commission came along from the Hanover Society for New Music, in Hanover, Germany, for the young pianist Igor Levit. By that time the first seven were mostly written, and again I found the results good. So a second group of seven seemed appropriate. *Book Two*, although it is a continuation of the first book, is quite different from it: *Book I* is more an aggregation of individual pieces different from each other. *Book II* is more internally coherent.

For a while I thought of doing one more book, thinking of Schoenberg’s *Dreimal sieben Gedichte*. But by 2007, things had changed. The war in Iraq was still going on. Several pianists had asked me to write something having to do with it. I started work on *Book III*, imagining a series of “war dances.” But I was unhappy with it and put it away for a year. By the time it was finished in late 2008, it turned out to be a mixed bag of warlike explosions and sober reflections on classical tradition. No. 18 quotes both Mozart’s A-minor Rondo and Haydn’s G-minor sonata. A group of magpies gathered in a tree outside my window and for half an hour sang up a storm. I tried to write down what I heard, and did No. 20, “Magpies.”

At the end of 2007, Sarah Cahill asked for something on the theme of peace. I did *Book IV, Peace Dances*. In both *Books III* and *IV* various traditional songs appear, like “We Shall Overcome” and “Die Mohrsoldaten” (“Peat-Bog Soldiers”), from the German concentration camps of the 1930s. *Nanosonata 27* is an arrangement of the spiritual “Same Train.” No. 28, “It Can Be Done,” written for Elliott Carter’s 100th birthday, refers to Pete Seeger’s recently (at age 89) recorded song “Take It from Dr. King,” which begins with the words, “Don’t say it can’t be done...”

I wrote *Book V*, the most abstract of the series, in the summer of 2008. Although it contains no quotes and does not have a particular theme, it is inspired by the spirit of Shostakovich, who has always been my favorite composer.

In September 2008, I wrote a piece for my son Noam, who was about to turn 18. A month later, it was the turn of my daughter Noemi, on her 27th birthday. Then my son Jan, who was 38 in

November. I realized I had fathered seven children, including my son Nicolas, who died in 1963 at age six weeks. I decided that *Book VI* would be a series of portraits of all of them, in the order of their birthdays, ending with daughter Esther, who will be 13 in July 2009. One evening we were talking about the story of the rat-catcher of Hamelin, also known as the Pied Piper. I asked her what kind of music he could have played to lure all the children from their families. “Easy,” she said. “Something that makes people get up and go, like this.” And she sang a tune which I wrote down, which became (modified somewhat) the theme for No. 42.

Book VII, still incomplete, is a series of short melodramas, based on text fragments of various sources (Delacroix, Dickens, Milton...).

The basic idea of a nanosonata is a form in which different elements come together as they do in a sonata, but do not develop. Instead of developing, they are left hanging, something like the characters that frequently appear in Tolstoy, who are described in a few words in a way that makes it clear that a whole book could be written about them, but isn’t. A nanosonata should seem too short. It seems to be going somewhere, but that’s it; it stops. It did, of course, go somewhere, but we will never know, we went somewhere else. It is just a record of a fugitive moment.

None of these sonatas succeed in doing what they set out to do. They are all imperfect. Some come closer than others, but always as a curve approaching a limit. There is an overall form (7 x 7), but this is purely abstract. Some books are simply collections; others (*Book V*, for example) seem to have unity. This unity is illusory. In the end, everything becomes melody.*

*My friend Christian Wolff taught me this, when we were both students at Harvard in 1956-58. He pointed out that as time passes, it provides automatic continuity, so whatever “form” one tries to impose on it is trivial.

—Frederic Rzewski
April 2009

The People United Will Never Be Defeated!, 36 Variations on ¡El Pueblo Unido Jamás Será Vencido!

Frederic Rzewski

Notes by Dr. Richard E. Rodda

Frederic Rzewski is one of modern music’s great iconoclasts. Rzewski (r’ZHEFF-skee), born in Westfield, Massachusetts, on April 13, 1938, had an excellent and thoroughly conventional education—piano lessons as a boy in nearby Springfield with Charles Mackey, a pupil of the celebrated Russian virtuoso Josef Lhévinne; undergraduate study at Harvard with Randall Thompson and Walter Piston; a master’s degree from Princeton, where his principal teachers were Roger Sessions and Milton Babbitt. Rzewski went to Italy on a Fulbright scholarship in 1960 to study with Luigi Dallapiccola in Florence, and he has since lived mostly in Europe.

He became known as a first-rate pianist in avant-garde music during those years (Nicolas Slonimsky, in his authoritative *Baker’s Biographical Dictionary of Musicians*, assessed, “He is a granitically overpowering piano technician, capable of depositing huge

boulders of sonic material across the keyboard without actually wrecking the instrument.”) and also taught at the *Kölnner Kurse für Neue Musik* (Cologne Courses for New Music) and became closely involved with such noted classical and jazz modernists as Karlheinz Stockhausen, Christian Wolff, John Cage, David Tudor, Steve Lacy, and Anthony Braxton. In 1966, in Rome, he formed the pioneering live electronics and improvisation group *Musica Elettronica Viva* with Alvin Curran and Richard Teitelbaum.

Rzewski lived in New York City from 1971 to 1976, but then went back to Europe, where he joined the faculty of the Conservatoire Royal de Musique in Liege, Belgium, a position he held until his retirement in 2005. He has also lectured at Yale, the University of Cincinnati, SUNY/Buffalo, California Institute of the Arts, University of California, at San Diego, Mills College, Royal Conservatory of the Hague, Hochschule der Künste in Berlin, and Hochschule für Musik in Karlsruhe.

Rzewski's music is dynamic in impact, original in concept, and diverse and distinctive in personality—some of his works (*Les Moutons de Panurge*) incorporate improvisation; some use 12-tone technique in novel ways (*Antigone Legend*, *The Persians*); some employ experimental and graphic notation (*Le Silence des Espaces Infins*, *The Price of Oil*); some are powerful soundscapes (*Piano Piece No. 4*). A profound social consciousness informs many of his compositions. *Winnsboro Cotton Mill Blues* is based on a 1930s workers' protest song from South Carolina; *The People United Will Never Be Defeated!* is a tribute to the Chilean struggle against the repression of the Pinochet government in the mid-1970s; *De Profundis* quotes from letters that Oscar Wilde wrote while he was imprisoned for homosexuality; *To the Earth* is intended to convey what he called the “sense of fragility” of our planet; and *The Triumph of Death* uses texts from Peter Weiss' play based on the 1964 Frankfurt trial of former prison camp guards.

Soon after Salvador Allende's election as President of Chile in 1970, the country began its descent into economic chaos and strong-armed socialism. Civil unrest became common and led to the *coup d'état* in 1973 by General Augusto Pinochet, who then subjected Chile to his own dictatorial rule for the next 17 years. (He was arrested in Britain in 1998 for human rights violations and indicted after he returned to Chile in 2000, but was never convicted before his death in 2006.) The Chilean composer Sergio Ortega (he had written Allende's election campaign song) recalled a seminal event during the tumultuous days of summer 1973: “One day in June, three months before the bombing by Pinochet's military coup, I was walking through the plaza in front of the Palace of Finance in Santiago, Chile, and saw a street singer shouting a well-known Chilean chant for social change: ¡*El Pueblo Unido Jamás Será Vencido!* — *The People United Will Never Be Defeated!* I couldn't stop and continued across the square, but his incessant chanting followed me and stayed in my mind.

“The following Sunday, after the broadcast of the television show *Chile Says No to Civil War*, which I directed, we went with a few artists to eat at my house outside Santiago. Upon arrival, I sat down at my piano and thought about the experience in the plaza and of events at large. When I reproduced the chant of the people in my head, the chant that could not be restrained, the entire melody exploded from me: I saw it complete and played it in its entirety at once. The text unfurled itself quickly and fell, like fall-

ing rocks, upon the melody. The song was performed in public two days later by the group Quilapayun in a heavily attended concert in the Alameda.” *The People United Will Never Be Defeated!* (the phrase is attributed to the Colombian politician Jorge Eliécer Gaitán, who was assassinated in 1948) became not only a rallying cry for Chileans, but has been taken up, with local variants, by protest movements as far afield as Iran, Portugal, Ukraine, and the Philippines.

Frederic Rzewski, with his finely tuned social awareness, not only knew Ortega's song but also understood its cultural implications. When pianist Ursula Oppens commissioned him in 1975 to compose a companion to Beethoven's *Diabelli Variations*, he settled quickly on *The People United* as his theme: “I wanted to write a piece that she could play for an audience of classical-music lovers who perhaps knew nothing at all of what was happening in Latin America. By virtue of listening to my piece for an hour, they might somehow get interested in the subject. I really was trying to reach the audience by using a language they would not find alienating.” He succeeded. Oppens premiered *The People United Will Never Be Defeated!* on February 7, 1976, on a piano series at the Kennedy Center in Washington, D.C. celebrating the American Bicentennial and recorded the work for Vanguard. The disc received a Grammy nomination and was named “Record of the Year” by *Record World* magazine and won for Rzewski his first wide recognition.

The People United Will Never Be Defeated! is not only a staggering *tour de force* for the virtuoso pianist and a work with a strong social commitment, but it also embodies a vast yet meticulous musical architecture that warrants comparison with Bach's *Goldberg Variations* and Beethoven's *Diabelli Variations*. In his liner notes for Ursula Oppens' epochal 1978 recording, American avant-gardist composer and long-time Rzewski ally Christian Wolff wrote, “The musical logic is not an arbitrary, formalistic exercise, but is integral to the content of the music. For example, in a detail: the melodies of the songs that are quoted are not just dropped into the music but emerge from its fabric; they derive, in the sequence of their pitch intervals, from the developing variations of the opening *El Pueblo* song. [In addition to *The People United*, Rzewski also quoted the Italian revolutionary song *Bandiera Rossa* in Variation 13 and the East German composer Hanns Eisler's *Solidaritätslied* in Variation 26.]

“The opening song is set in 36 bars, which are followed by 36 variations and then an expanded repetition of the song setting. Throughout the variations there is a continuous cross-referencing of motifs, harmonic procedures, rhythms, and dynamic sequences. These in turn are contained within the organization of the variations. The variations are grouped in six sets of six. The sixth variation of a set, itself in six parts, consists of a summing up of the previous five variations of the set, with a final sixth part of new or transitional material. (It has been suggested that the first five variations of a set make up the fingers of a hand, and the sixth unites them to make a fist.) This procedure is followed rigorously throughout the first four sets of six variations; each of the variations is 24 bars, the first five of a set subdivided equally into 12 plus 12 bars, and the sixth recapitulating each previous variation in four bars plus a final four bars of new material. In the fifth set of variations, there is some expansion at the third variation; cadenza-like material appears and the articulation of individual variations is less self-contained, though the sixth variation of the set again clarifies by uniting what preceded. Finally, the sixth set

of variations becomes a gathering together of elements of all the preceding 30 variations—the overall structure of the piece is thus a reflection of the structure of its constituent parts.

“In this sixth set, the first variation draws together, in units of four bars each, elements of the first variation of the first set, the first of the second set, the first of the third, and so on. The second to fifth variations of this last set proceed similarly. In the sixth variation of the set, the 36th and last of the entire piece, the preceding five variations are summed up, even as they had been a summation of the preceding 30 variations. Elements of each variation are now compressed into a fraction of a bar. Technically this is a kind of ‘stretto,’ the procedure in a fugue that brings the entrances of individual voices closer and closer together, though here the voices (or elements of individual variations) are not overlaid but compressed and juxtaposed in increasingly rapid sequence. The effect is of extraordinary intensification, which, by virtue of the logic of repetition, is also both clarification and unification. The movement of the whole piece is towards a new unity—an image of popular unity—made up of related but diverse, developing elements (not to be confused with uniformity) coordinated and achieved by a blend of irresistible logic and spontaneous expression.”

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FREDERIC RZEWSKI, PIANO

Born in Westfield, Massachusetts, in 1938, Frederic Rzewski first studied music with Charles Mackey of Springfield, and subsequently with Walter Piston, Roger Sessions, and Milton Babbitt at Harvard and Princeton universities. He went to Italy in 1960, where he studied with Luigi Dallapiccola and met Severino Gazzelloni, with whom he performed in a number of concerts, thus beginning a career as a performer of new piano music. Rzewski's early friendship with Christian Wolff and David Behrman, and (through Wolff) his acquaintance with John Cage and David Tudor, strongly influenced his development in both composition and performance. In Rome in the mid-1960s, together with Alvin Curran and Richard Teitelbaum, he formed the MEV (Musica Elettronica Viva) group, which quickly became known for its pioneering work in live electronics and improvisation. Bringing together both classical and jazz avant-gardists (like Steve Lacy and Anthony Braxton), MEV developed an aesthetic of music as a spontaneous collective process, an aesthetic which was shared with other experimental groups of the same period (for example, the Living Theatre and the Scratch Orchestra).

The experience of MEV can be felt in Rzewski's compositions of the late 1960s and early 1970s, which combine elements derived equally from the worlds of written and improvised music (*Les Moutons de Panurge*, *Coming Together*). During the 1970s, he experimented further with forms in which style and language are treated as structural elements; the best-known work of this period is *The People United Will Never Be Defeated!*, a 50-minute set of piano variations. A number of pieces for larger ensembles written between 1979 and 1981 show a return to experimental and graphic notation (*Le Silence des Espaces Infinis*, *The Price of Oil*), while much of the work of the 1980s explores new ways of using 12-tone technique (*Antigone-Legend*, *The Persians*). A freer, more spontaneous approach to writing can be found in more recent work (*Whangdoodles*, *Sonata*). Rzewski's largest-scale work to date is *The Road*, an eight-hour “novel” for solo piano. *The Triumph of*

Death is a two-hour oratorio based on texts adapted from Peter Weiss' 1965 play *Die Ermittlung* (*The Investigation*). The *Scratch Symphony* for orchestra was performed at the Donaueschingen festival in 1997.

Rzewski has recorded *The People United*, *North American Ballads*, *Squares*, the *Sonata* and *De Profundis* on hat ART records; *Four Pieces* on Vanguard, and *Bumps*, *Andante con Moto*, and *The Turtle and the Crane* for Newport Classic. *The People United* has also been recorded by Ursula Oppens, Stephen Drury, Marc-André Hamelin, and Yuji Takahashi, and the *Ballads* by Paul Jacobs and Kathleen Supové. *Song and Dance* is recorded on Nonesuch, *Coming Together* on both Hungaroton and Opus One, and *Antigone* and *Jefferson* on CRI. *Mayn Yingele* is recorded by Oppens for Music & Arts. Anthony de Mare has recorded *Sonata* and *De Profundis*, and *Wails*, *Spots*, and *Crusoe* are recorded by the Zeitgeist group. *Night Crossing*, a CD of music for one and two pianos with Ursula Oppens, is available from Music & Arts. Evelyn Glennie and Stephen Schick have recorded *To the Earth*, while Lisa Moore has recorded *Piano Piece No. 4. Rzewski Plays Rzewski*, a box-set of seven CDs of piano music performed by the composer, was released by Nonesuch in 2002.

From 1983 to 2003, Rzewski was Professor of Composition at the Conservatoire Royal de Musique in Liège, Belgium. He has also taught at the Yale School of Music, the University of Cincinnati, the State University of New York at Buffalo, the California Institute of the Arts, the University of California at San Diego, Mills College, the Royal Conservatory of the Hague, the Hochschule der Künste in Berlin, and the Hochschule für Musik in Karlsruhe.

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