

# A Formal Analysis and Historical Perspective of Frederic Rzewski's *The People United Will Never Be Defeated!*

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## Introduction

This study examines *The People United Will Never Be Defeated!* (1975) composed by Frederic Rzewski (b. 1938) through a formal analysis, and explores the social and political context from which the piano work emerged, providing an analytical overview and the historical background of the work.

Frederic Rzewski, a prominent American composer-pianist, composed a number of piano works successfully combining the styles of both traditional pianism and the contemporary avant-garde. His largest-scale piano work is a set of the thirty-six piano variations on “¡El Pueblo Unido Jamás Será Vencido!” (*The People United Will Never Be Defeated!*), a Chilean revolutionary song by Sergio Ortega and the folk group known as Quilapayún. This massive set of piano variations, over fifty minutes in length, continues the tradition of the keyboard variation sets from other periods in music history such as J. S. Bach's *Goldberg Variations*, Beethoven's *Diabelli Variations*, and Brahms's *Paganini Variations*.

In *The People United Will Never Be Defeated!*, Rzewski incorporates varied compositional techniques and styles of the twentieth-century including serial techniques, minimalist techniques, and improvisational elements as well as Romantic sounds in an intricate and highly organized formal plan. He manages to maintain a certain unity through the lengthy work, creating a landmark in the history of keyboard variation form.

The present study analyzes the theme and variations to discover how the composer integrates the varied musical elements into the work, and also explores its social and political background. In order to understand this composition, one must be aware of a significant link between music and politics during the Chilean revolution of the 1960s and 1970s. To date, research concerning Rzewski's *The People United Will Never Be Defeated!* and his other piano works is limited. Further study will help pianists and pedagogues become more aware of Rzewski's piano works and will motivate them to perform a greater variety of twentieth-century music.

## Biography

A native of Westfield, Massachusetts, Frederic Anthony Rzewski (b. 1938) is one of the major American composers and pianists of the second half of the twentieth century. He started playing the piano when he was three, and began formal lessons at the age four. He has studied composition with Walter Piston at Harvard University from 1954-58, and with Milton Babbitt and Roger Sessions at Princeton University from 1958-60. Composers such as Arnold Schoenberg, Anton Webern, John Cage, Pierre Boulez, and Karlheinz Stockhausen strongly influenced his development in both composition and performance (Rzewski 1990). While studying at Harvard, Rzewski gained a strong appreciation for the music of J. S. Bach. After having completed his study at Princeton University, he went to Italy on Fulbright Fellowship, studying composition with Luigi Dallapiccola from 1960 to 1961 (Pollack 1992).

In the 1960s, Rzewski became well known in Europe as a performer of new piano music by

composers such as Boulez, Stockhausen, Cage, Sylvano Bussotti, Mauricio Kagel, Morton Feldman, and Christian Wolff. In the mid-1960s, he actively performed live electronic music and group improvisations throughout Europe and the United States as one of the founding members of *Musica Elettronica Viva* based in Rome. The group developed a concept of music as a spontaneous collective process, blending elements of traditional notation with improvised music (Melton 1997). Rzewski's compositions of the later 1960s and early 1970s show the influence of *Musica Elettronica Viva*, combining elements derived equally from the worlds of written and improvised music. At the same time, he began employing additive melodic formulas in his works.

During the 1970s, he experimented further with forms in which style and language are treated as organic elements—the best known example is *The People United Will Never Be Defeated!* He expresses his ideas:

During the time I was living in New York (1971-76), I became more and more concerned with the questions of language. It seemed to me there was no reason why the most difficult complex formal structures could not be expressed in a form which could be understood by a wide variety of listeners. I was also concerned with what appeared to me to be a crisis in theory, not only in music but in many different fields, including science and politics: the absence of a general theory to explain phenomena and guide behavior. I explored forms in which existing musical languages could be brought together. A series of variations for solo piano, *The People United Will Never Be Defeated!* was the main expression for these ideas at the time (Rzewski 1990).

By this time, Rzewski began to show his interest in social issues and to address the social and political themes in his music. The mixtures of musical and non-musical elements profoundly influenced his compositions. The composer wanted his music to carry a message to the audience, which resulted in expressing a socio-political agenda through his music. He believes that the power of music could change people's lives. During the time he composed *The People United*, Rzewski had strong political beliefs and was connected to the political movements around him.

After completing this work, he became professor of composition at the Royal Conservatory in Liege, where he taught from 1977 to 2003. Rzewski has also taught at Yale University, the University of Cincinnati, State University of New York at Buffalo, and other universities and conservatories in the United States and Europe. He explored new ways of using twelve-tone technique but did not address political issues in his works of the 1980s. Rzewski's approach in recent works is more spontaneous and free. His other important piano works include *Four Pieces* (1977), *Squares* (1978), *North American Ballads* (1979), and *De Profundis* (1992).

He currently resides in Belgium and performs extensively in Europe, the United States, and Canada. He has written more than thirty works for keyboard and over sixty works for voices, chorus, and various types of instrumental ensembles.

### Historical Perspective

From 1970 to 1973, Salvadore Allende was in power in Chile; he commanded the first freely elected Marxist regime in the West even though he was no Marxist. He attempted to nationalize some of Chile's domestic and foreign-owned industries, primarily the copper industry, in order to solve political and economic problems. Allende also raised wages and reformed social services which made the lower class happy and angered the middle and upper classes. American businesses and corporations were also

unhappy about the situation: the regime had enemies in its own country and abroad—the U. S. government suspended aid and demanded repayment of debts.

A right-wing party under General Augusto Pinochet took power in a bloody coup on September 11, 1973, using jets to bomb the presidential palace. Allende was killed in the coup, and as many as 80,000 people were tortured or murdered after the event. Pinochet's government maintained power for the next decade and a half.

Before the coup, a large number of Chilean people united to oppose Pinochet in order to defend Allende's government through public demonstrations. A composer, Sergio Ortega, heard a street singer in Santiago shouting "*¡El Pueblo Unido Jamás Será Vencido!*" (*The People United Will Never Be Defeated!*), a popular chant for social change in Chile. He composed a song from this chant:

One day in June, 1973, 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, "The people united will never be defeated"—a well known Chilean chant for social change. I couldn't stop, and continued across the square, but his incessant chanting followed me and stuck in my mind.

On the following Sunday, after the broadcast of the show "Chile Says No to Civil War," which I directed for Channel 9, 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 the 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 falling rocks, upon the melody. In their enthusiasm some of my guests made suggestions that were too rational for the situation I was composing in. Out of courtesy I pretended to accept, but arranged myself to leave the text in its symptomatic landscape.

The song was performed in public two days later by the group Quilapayun in a heavily attended concert in the Alameda (Ortega 1994).

The song became an anthem for the Chilean Resistance, and continued to be sung and played throughout South America as a song of resistance. It was also very well-known in certain European countries, especially in Italy where many members of Allende's government were in exile. This is where Frederic Rzewski originally heard the song when he was living in Rome in the early 1970s, and the composer wrote a set of the thirty-six piano variations based on the song.

Dedicated to Ursula Oppens for a bicentennial celebration of the United States in Washington, D. C., Rzewski's *The People United* was written to send a political message. It might be seen as appropriate to celebrate the United States' revolution with a revolutionary song. The ironic twist to the political nature of the work was the fact that the CIA attempted to destabilize the Allende regime by directing millions of dollars to the opposition by means of the press, politicians, and trade unions. In the Chilean coup, the United States played a role of the villain—Rzewski ironically used the Chilean revolutionary song in order to cry for the enemies of the United States.

The following is an English translation of the text of the song by Elena Hammel and Maria Letona.

Arise, sing, for we will triumph

flags of unity advance  
come marching with me and behold the  
blossoming of your song  
and your flag the light of a red dawn  
announces the life to come.

Arise, fight, the People will triumph  
the life to come will be better  
let us win our happiness  
and in a clamor a thousand voices  
of combat rise and recite a song of liberty  
with decisiveness the nation will be victorious.  
And now the People rise in the fight  
with a giant's voice they cry  
The People United will never be defeated,  
The People United will never be defeated (Ortega 1994).

Rzewski's *The People United* is astonishing in its formal plan which will be examined in the next part. The piece's recapitulative nature gives the variations an impressive sense of unity similar to the feelings of Chilean people who united to defend the Allende regime.

### Formal Analysis

Following the theme of *The People United*, there are thirty-six variations equally divided into six sections of six variations: the work is a series of six sections, each of which consists of six variations, also called stages. Section One includes Variations One to Six; Section Two includes Variations Seven to Twelve; Section Three includes Variations Thirteen to Eighteen; and so on. In six stages, different musical relationships develop systematically: 1) simple events, 2) rhythms, 3) melodies, 4) counterpoints, 5) harmonies, and 6) combinations of all of these.

Stage One is described as simple events in which points of isolation exist, Stage Two produces pulse and rhythm, Stage Three includes elements of melody, legato, lyrical, and expressive qualities, and Stage Four contains contrapuntal material which shows complexity with conflict. In Stage Five, there is more freedom in which harmonies and simultaneous attacks are employed. Then, Stage Six is a recapitulation of the previous five stages.

Six variations in each section follow these six stages: Variations One, Seven, Thirteen, Nineteen, and Twenty-Five correspond to Stage One; Variations Two, Eight, Fourteen, Twenty, and Twenty-Six correspond to Stage Two; and so on. Each section of the work also develops a character suggested by the individual stage to which it corresponds: the second section is rhythmic; the third is lyrical; and so forth. Figure 1 indicates the structure of *The People United*, and the length of the variations and the overall tonal plan for this work are shown in Figure 2.

	STAGE 1 Simple	STAGE 2 Rhythms	STAGE 3 Melodies	STAGE 4 Counterpoints	STAGE 5 Harmonies	STAGE 6 Combinations
SECTION 1 Simple	Var. 1	Var. 2	Var. 3	Var. 4	Var. 5	Var. 6
SECTION 2 Rhythms	Var. 7	Var. 8	Var. 9	Var. 10	Var. 11	Var. 12
SECTION 3 Melodies	Var. 13	Var. 14	Var. 15	Var. 16	Var. 17	Var. 18
SECTION 4 Counterpoints	Var. 19	Var. 20	Var. 21	Var. 22	Var. 23	Var. 24
SECTION 5 Harmonies	Var. 25	Var. 26	Var. 27	Var. 28	Var. 29	Var. 30
SECTION 6 Combinations	Var. 31	Var. 32	Var. 33	Var. 34	Var. 35	Var. 36

Figure 1. Structure of *The People United Will Never Be Defeated!*

Variation	Key	Length (measures)	Variation	Key	Length (measures)	Variation	Key	Length (measures)
Thema	Dm	36	Section 3			Section 5		
Section 1			13	Dm	24	25	Dm	48
1	Dm	24	14	Dm	24	26	Am	52
2	Am	24	15	Dm	24	27	Em	116
3	Em	24	16	Dm	24	28	Bm	56
4	Bm	24	17	Dm	24	29	F#m	14
5	F#m	24	18	Dm	24	30	C#m	72
6	C#m	24	Section 4			Section 6		
Section 2			19	Dm	24	31	G#m	24
7	G#m	24	20	Dm	24	32	Ebm	24
8	D#m	24	21	Dm	24	33	Bbm	24
9	Bbm	24	22	Dm	24	34	Fm	24
10	Fm	24	23	Dm	24	35	Cm	24
11	Cm	24	24	Dm	24	36	Gm	27
12	Gm	24				Thema	Dm	66

Figure 2. The Length of the Variations and the Overall Tonal Plan for *The People United Will Never Be Defeated!*

The theme has a four-measure introduction and an eight-measure coda. Without the introduction and the coda, the melody of the theme is twenty-four measures long. Throughout the first four sections and most of the sixth section, each variation is also twenty-four measures long. The fifth section is different from the other sections: none of the variations is twenty-four measures long, and a sense of freedom prevails. This work concludes with a sixty-six measure recapitulation of the theme. Rzewski's overall tonal plan serves to divide the work into three large parts: the first two sections rotate through the circle of the fifths; the third and fourth sections remain in D minor, forming the middle part; and the fifth and sixth sections return to the earlier progression through the circle of the fifths. The last statement of the theme returns to D minor.

This work's organization is extremely elaborate and complex. Pianist Stephen Drury has referred to it as "an hour-long metaphor in musical form" (Drury 1994). He explains this thoughtful composition as follows:

Through his use of variation form, Rzewski creates an aural image of "*The People United*" – individuals in all their diversity coming together, bit by bit, to form a unity . . . As in fractal geometry, the large form of the piece reflects both the form of the theme and the form of each of the variations. The complete version of the theme heard at the beginning is 36 bars long, and is followed by 36 variations. Leaving off the four-bar introduction and the eight-bar coda . . . the melody of the theme is 24 bars long, made up of six phrases of four bars each. The variations are also 24 bars long, and the 36 variations fall into six groups of six variations each (Drury 1994).

As previously mentioned, the theme is based on a Chilean revolutionary song, "*¡El Pueblo Unido Jamás Será Vencido!*" (*The People United Will Never Be Defeated!*), composed by Sergio Ortega and Quilapayun. The song has tremendous recognition in Chile because of its association with socio-political upheaval (Madsen 2003). The theme of Rzewski's *The People United* is extremely simple and thirty-six measures long—thirty six is a significant number for this thirty-six variations. The composer prefaces the theme with a four-measure introduction, marked *ff* and "With determination," as shown in Figure 3.

Thema  
♩ - 106 With determination

Original Authors: Sergio Ortega / Eduardo Carrasco  
This variations by: Frederic Rzewski

The image shows a musical score for the theme of 'The People United Will Never Be Defeated!'. It consists of two systems of music. The first system is a piano introduction in D minor, marked 'ff' and 'With determination'. It features a four-measure introduction and an eight-measure coda. The melody is written in a single line, and the bass line is written in a single line. The lyrics are: '¡El Pueblo unido ja-más se-rá ven-ci-do! The people united will'. The second system continues the melody and bass line, with the lyrics: 'no-ver be de-feated!'. The tempo is marked 'mp'.

Figure 3. *The People United Will Never Be Defeated!*, Thema, mm. 1-7.

Following the introduction are two twelve-measure statements of the theme written in D Minor. The structure of the statement consists of three four-measure parts in the form ABB. The B part is written in

interesting harmonic movement around the circle of the fifths, beginning on G and moving through C, F, B-flat, and E for a return to D through A. This becomes a unifying strength for the entire work. The thematic section includes elements to be explored further in the following variation such as the twelve-measure varied repetition of the theme and progression through the circle of the fifths.

Then, Variation One breaks the theme into single notes, dispersed throughout the range of the keyboard in a quasi-serialist manner. Rzewski maintains the one-part texture throughout this variation by weaving the melody and bass line together, allowing only one note to be heard at a time as seen in Figure 4.

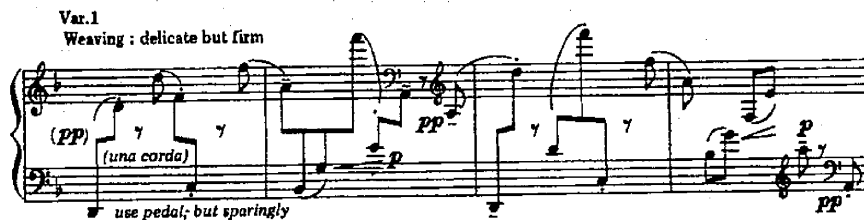


Figure 4. *The People United Will Never Be Defeated!*, Variation 1, mm. 1-8.

Increased rhythmic activity is employed in Variation Two through the accenting of the second half of beats (Fig. 5).



Figure 5. *The People United Will Never Be Defeated!*, Variation 2, mm. 1-4.

Variation Three achieves a lyrical, expressive characteristic by using atonal language as shown in Figure 6.

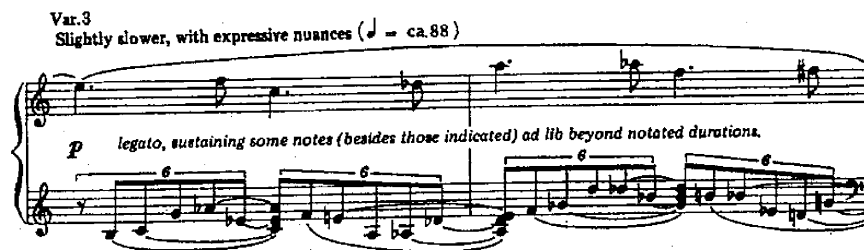


Figure 6. *The People United Will Never Be Defeated!*, Variation 3, mm. 1-2.

In Variation Four, Rzewski uses increasingly complex techniques of counterpoint and writes descriptive instructions including “like a cry” and “struggling” in order to express conflicting characteristics (Fig. 7).



Figure 7. *The People United Will Never Be Defeated!*, Variation 4, mm. 1-2.

In Variation Five, Rzewski employs an extended piano technique of playing chords with staccato and catching the remainder of the sonorities with the pedal (Fig. 8).

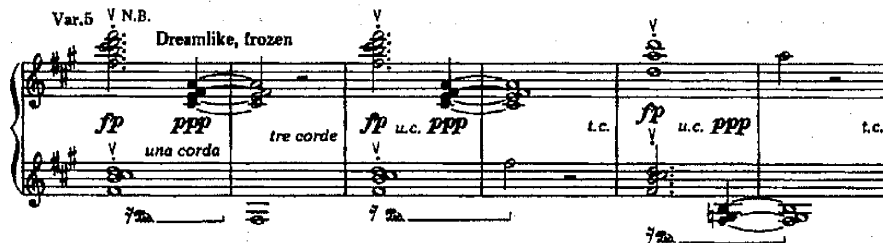


Figure 8. *The People United Will Never Be Defeated!*, Variation 5, mm. 1-6.

Variation Six is a summary of the first section which compiles elements from each of the previous five variations: four measures from the first variation, four measures from the second variation, four measures from the third, and so on, with a concluding four-measure cadence. For measures from one to four of Variation Six, Rzewski uses a same musical pattern as Variation One. Measures from five to eight correspond with Variation Two.

Figure 9 indicates the beginning of Variations One to Five and their corresponding segments in Variation Six.

Variation 1. mm. 1-2.



Variation 6. mm. 1-2.





Variation 2. mm. 1-2.

Var.2  
With firmness

*p* Lightly

Variation 6. mm. 5-6.

*p*

Variation 3. m. 1.

Var.3  
Slightly slower, with expressive nuances ( $\text{♩} = ca. 88$ )

*p* legato, sustaining some notes (besides those indi

Variation 6. m. 9.

Slower ( $\text{♩} = 88$ )

*p*

Variation 4. m. 1.

Var.4  
Marcato  
picking up speed

*pp*

Variation 6. m. 13.

Tempo

*mf*

Variation 5. mm. 1-4.

Var.5 V.N.B.  
Dreamlike, frozen

*pp* *ppp* *pp* u.c. *ppp*

*una corda* *tre corde*

Variation 6. mm. 17-18.

*f* *pp* *una corda* *f* *tre corde* *pp* u.c. *ppp*

Figure 9. *The People United Will Never Be defeated!*, Beginnings of each variation in Section One with the comparison of Variation 6.

As previously examined, each section also develops a character suggested by the individual stage to which it corresponds. As an example, the third variations from all sections are to be examined here, namely Variations Three, Nine, Fifteen, Twenty-One, Twenty-Seven, and Thirty-Three.

Variation Three is a simple and lyrical one as shown in Figure 6. In Variation Nine, the third variation of Section Two, the composer uses a lyric quality in the right hand and a rhythmic character with its erratic sub-divisions of five in the left hand (Figure 10).

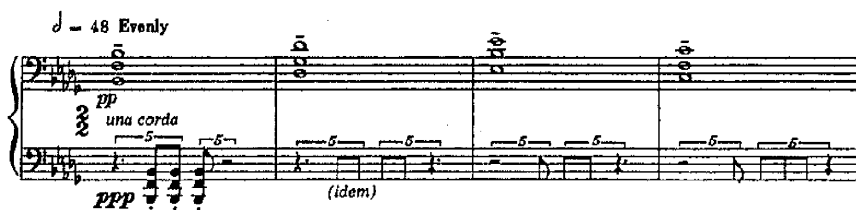


Figure 10. *The People United Will Never Be Defeated!*, Variation 9, mm. 1-4.

Variation fifteen, the third one of Section Three, focuses on melody by using homophonic texture. With the marking, “Flexible, like an improvisation,” this variation sounds highly improvisatory because of its rhythmic freedom as indicated in Figure 11.



Figure 11. *The People United Will Never Be Defeated!*, Variation 15, mm. 1-2.

The fourth section of variations is extremely virtuosic, employing non-stop drive of perpetual motion and tremolos. Variation Twenty-One in the fourth section uses sixteenth notes in perpetual motion, almost like an etude. The entire variation continues in this pattern with both hands as shown in Figure 12.

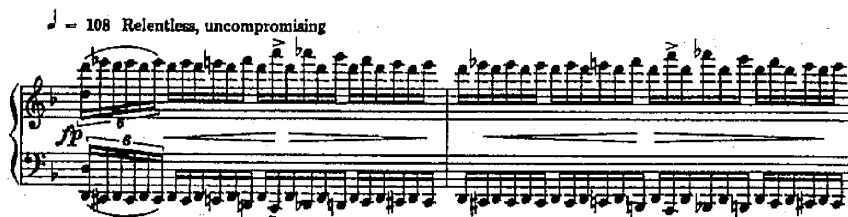


Figure 12. *The People United Will Never Be Defeated!*, Variation 21, mm. 1-2.

Then, there is more freedom in the fifth section. Rzewski breaks away from the twenty-four measure variation form used previously in sections one to four. Variation Twenty-Seven, the third variation of the Section Five, is the longest variation of the entire work. The composer employs a cadenza with the marking, “*quasi una cadenza; repetitions (or omissions) of figures may be carried ad lib.*” This is the first opportunity for the pianist to improvise freely. Figure 13 shows the ending of this variation, a driving minimalist section in 22/8 (divided 6+5+6+5).

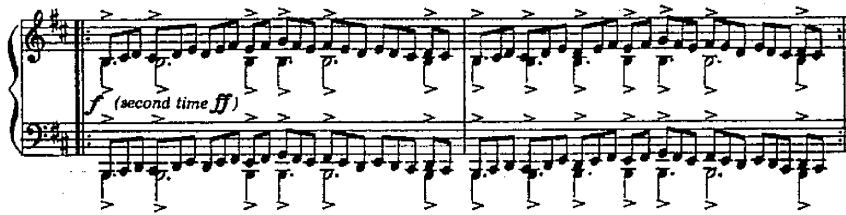


Figure 13. *The People United Will Never Be Defeated!*, Variation 27, mm. 115-116.

Variation Thirty-Three in Section Six recapitulates the third variations from each of the previous five sections: it includes four measures from Variations Nine, Fifteen, Twenty-One, Twenty-Seven, and Thirty-Three. The last four measures of the twenty-four measure variation summarizes the previous twenty measures by representing each half of a variation in two beats (Variations Nine, Fifteen, Twenty-One, Twenty-Seven, and Thirty-Three) (Fig. 14).

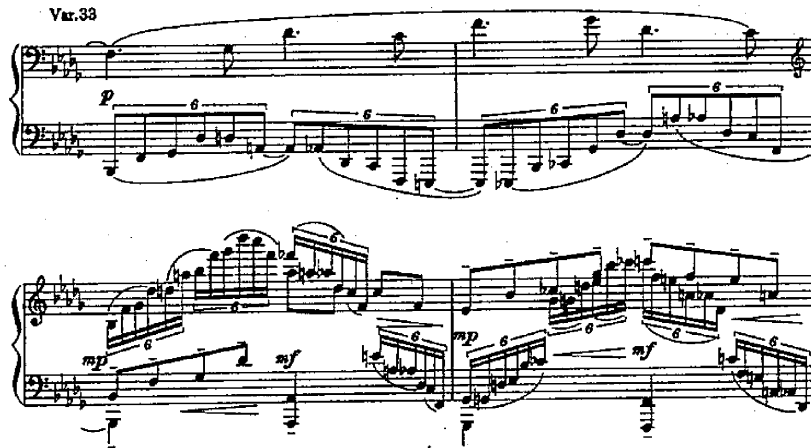


Figure 14. *The People United Will Never Be Defeated!*, Variation 33, mm. 1-4

Section Six recapitulates the previous five sections in a skillful manner. Variation Thirty-One, the first variation in the sixth section, is a summary of all the preceding first stages and based on four measures taken from the first variation in each of the previous sections (Variations One, Seven, Thirteen, Nineteen, and Twenty-Five). Variation Thirty-Two, the second variation from the sixth section, summarizes four measures from the second variation in each of the previous sections (Variations Two, Eight, Fourteen, Twenty, and Twenty-Six). Variations Thirty-Three to Thirty-Five continue this process by summarizing the third, fourth, and fifth variations from each section.

The sixth one of the sixth section, Variation Thirty-Six, summarizes the summary variations in each section—Variations Six, Twelve, Eighteen, Twenty-Four, and Thirty. Figure 15 shows the beginning of Variation Thirty-Six, where we can see the parts from Variations One to Four in the first three measures—the first four measures of the variation are derived from Variation Six. The composer includes

parts from all of the previous variations, Variations One to Thirty-Five, in the final variation. The idea of recapitulating every aspect of the work is an impressive unifying method.

The image displays a musical score for Variation 36, divided into four sections: Var. 1, Var. 2, Var. 3, and Var. 4. Below the main score, four smaller excerpts provide detailed performance instructions for each variation:

- Var. 1:** Weaving : delicate but firm. Performance instructions include *(pp)*, *(una corda)*, and "use pedal, but sparing".
- Var. 2:** With firmness. Performance instruction is *p* "Lightly".
- Var. 3:** Slightly slower, with expressive. Performance instruction is *p* "legato, sustaining some".
- Var. 4:** Marcato picking up speed. Performance instruction is *pp*.

Figure 15. *The People United Will Never Be Defeated!*, Variation 36, mm. 1-3 with the comparison of the beginning of Variations One to Four.

At the end of Variation Thirty-Six, there is an optional improvisation which may last up to five minutes at the performer's discretion. This improvisation leads into the final statement of the theme which is a sixty-six-measure recapitulation. Thus, Rzewski achieves an incredibly elaborate formal plan for the entire work.

### Conclusion

*The People United Will Never Be Defeated!* is a piano work that expresses both musical ideas and political ideas through its formal structure. Clearly the momentum from the first stage to the sixth stage represents how the Chilean people united to oppose the new power. At the first stage, individuals exist independently; at the second stage, they start moving in every direction and establish relationships with other people. In the third stage, the people begin advancing in a certain direction; at the fourth stage, conflicts among people emerge. In the fifth stage, the people become united, and finally, the sixth stage describes "the people united." Rzewski employs his formal plan to convey his message of unity which is implied in the Chilean revolutionary song, "*¡El Pueblo Unido Jamás Será Vencido!*"

This examination of *The People United* reveals the complexity and diversity of the work and how this complexity is related to the power of uniting the diverse groups of people and the violence of tyranny—this work expresses human struggle and triumph through its formal structure. The individual variations contain diverse musical elements and forms including atonality, imitation, toccatas, jazz-influenced improvisation, Romantic virtuosity, serialism, minimalism, and extended piano techniques such as clusters, harmonics, whistling, shouting, and slamming the keyboard lid. Rzewski unifies these elements through a highly structured formal organization. Even though this work is

incredibly difficult to perform both technically and musically—similar to other masterworks for keyboard such as the Bach *Goldberg Variations* and the Beethoven *Diabelli Variations*—*The People United* is a wonderful gift from the twentieth century and a landmark in the history of variation form. The present study has also aimed to introduce Rzewski's piano works to pianists and pedagogues, give them the opportunity to perform his pieces, and experience the variety of twentieth-century music.

#### Appendix: Solo Piano Works by Frederic Rzewski

1953	Chain of Thought
1954	Tabakrauch
1956	Preludes
1958	Poem
1960	Study
1961	Study II (Dreams)
1971	Falling Music for amplified piano and tape)
1974	No Place To Go But Around
1975	People United Will Never Be Defeated!
1977	Four Pieces
1978	Squares
1979	North American Ballads
1986	Eggs
1988	The Turtle and the Crane Mayn Yingele
1989	Short Fantasy on "Give Peace a Chance"
1990	Bumps
1991	Ludes Sonata
1992	Andante Con Mote De Profundis
1994	Fougues
1995	Turns (The Road, Part I)
1996	Tracks (The Road, Part II)
1997	Tramps (The Road, Part III)
1998	Stops (The Road, Part IV)
1999	A Few Knocks (The Road, Part V) Traveling with Children (The Road, Part VI)
1999-02	Final Preparations
2002-03	The Big Day Arrives (The Road, Part VIII)
2003	Jonny Has Gone for a Soldier
2003	Cadenza
2003	Dust

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