

Dialectic Form in Frederic Rzewski's
The People United Will Never Be Defeated!
By James O'Callaghan

Frederic Rzewski is an American composer now living in Belgium, born in Massachusetts in 1938. He began playing piano at an early age, and studied composition at Philips Academy, Harvard and Princeton. Some of his notable teachers there include Roger Sessions, Walter Piston, and Milton Babbitt. He was fully immersed, like many students in the post-WWII period, with the doctrine of integral serialism. In 1960, a trip to Italy saw him studying with Luigi Dallapiccola, and it was around this time that Rzewski began a successful career as a touring virtuoso pianist. He played predominantly contemporary repertoire with an improvisational bent. He became involved with avant-garde collectives, such as Musica Elettronica Viva, which he co-founded with Alvin Curran and Richard Teitelbaum. The ensemble remains relatively active to this day. An important friendship with Cornelius Cardew resulted in the two composers shying away to some degree from their atonal education, in favour of employment of folk melodies and secular or socialist themes.¹

The bulk of Rzewski's music maintains a strong relation to Marxist, socialist, and anarchist concerns, serving as his dominant thematic vehicle for musical expression. Stylistically, his works have been diverse, with a focus on process-based minimal techniques, improvisation, graphical or textual notation, serial composition, extended technique and use of text and speaking instrumentalists, pseudo-romantic harmony, and the arrangement and setting of socialist folk songs. Some works have focussed more dominantly on individual elements of this broad pallet, but Rzewski tends to tightly weave these heterogeneous techniques together in his works. He remains an exceptional pianist and many of his works are for solo piano and are frequently performed himself. His first internationally successful composition was 1971's *Coming Together*, which was scored for an indeterminate ensemble of “speaker and instruments”. This work is one of his most significantly process-oriented minimal pieces, and also one of the first which is explicitly political; setting the text from a journal of a prisoner written just before the Attica riots earlier that year.

¹ Cardew's shift to this language of composition is perhaps more radical than Rzewski's, who retained much of his avant-garde and even some of his serial and atonal techniques, fully integrating the two, instead of moving from one to the other.

Four years later, Rzewski was commissioned by pianist Ursula Oppens to write a companion piece to Beethoven's *Diabelli Variations*. Rzewski fittingly chose to write 36 variations on the Chilean worker's song, *¡El pueblo unido jamás será vencido!* by Sergio Ortega and Quilapayún. The composition, whose title is simply an English translation: *The People United Will Never Be Defeated!*, adheres nominally to the Variation form, with the theme presented at the beginning and end, and variations in between of essentially equal length in measures. The basic formal outline of the piece places variations into groups of six; the last of each group recapitulating material from each of the previous variations in its group. Fittingly, the last set of the six recapitulates materials from each of the previous recapitulations. The work strongly established Rzewski's stylistic pallet, containing the majority of the techniques and styles which he employed previously and has since. Only notably missing is the use of indeterminate and process-based writing, which is not particularly suited toward the form. However, the piece does carry a strong improvisational element and the use of optional materials thus retains a sense of indeterminacy which Rzewski utilizes purposefully and tastefully within the format.

With such a broad variety of techniques and compositional and harmonic languages, *The People United Will Never Be Defeated!* has met with occasional critical reaction suggesting polystylist incoherence. Defenders of the work have provided many attempts to understand the work within a coherent linear framework. In either case, it is celebrated as a technically demanding and important work of 20th century piano repertoire. I intend to negotiate the discussion of form in the piece by providing the suggestion that its coherence lies in a *dialectical* rather than linear format. As a socialist work of art, it is especially fruitful to examine its structure with Marxist concepts. Relatedly, the work is an excellent example of how musical material can carry semantic as well as abstract information, and I will discuss how this relates to dialectic form and highlights Rzewski's innovation in this field.

Dialecticism is perhaps a very broad concept and it is sometimes difficultly applied to artistic form. In its loosest sense, it refers simply to a dialogue, suggesting a kind of binary. In Western tradition, it began as a mode of argument in Greek philosophy, where two opposite viewpoints were expressed in order to discuss a particular concept. A development on this idea came from the German philosopher Hegel, who

attempted to describe the physical world and history as dialectic and the result of a process of contradictions. Karl Marx was an ideological heir of Hegel's who expanded on his views of dialecticism in describing historical materialism; famously employing the framework of dialecticism to describe class struggle. It is from these developments in dialectical thought that the term finds its home most commonly today, and perhaps also the best lens through which to understand Rzewski's music as dialectic; particularly with attention to how his use of form relates to the political themes of his work.

Understanding how dialecticism can be reified as musical form is perhaps more problematic. In one sense, the development of Western music has been revealed many nominally dialectic forms: the contrast between tension and release, common structures such as the rondo or sonata which employ binary themes pitted against each other, and so on. However, traditionally these concepts exist within a framework of linear development. Truly dialectical music replaces dependency on linear development as the bearer of meaning in the work with movement and meaning through contrast and contradiction.

One of the most explicit ways this can be accomplished, and indeed a particularly evident technique in *The People United...* is through contrast in organization of pitch material. Ortega's theme is essentially in D Minor, and moves harmonically through a sort of vernacular tonality.

Thema Original Authors : Sergio Ortega / Eduardo Carrasco
 ♩ = 106 With determination This variations by : Frederic Rzewski

¡El Pueblo unido ja - mas se - ra ven - ci - do! The people united will
 ne - ver be de - feated!
 ne - ver be de - feated!

Example 1. Theme

This provides Rzewski with his initial harmonic structure and something against which to work in

A larger contrast is presented with the arrival of the third variation which is grounded more in an atonal realm. The basic groundwork for the pitch material in this section is derived from a symmetrical hexachord whose intervals are: 1, 3, 1, 3, 1. Using Forte's method of labelling pitch class sets, this chord is called 6-20, and in Janecek's it can be referred to as 13131(3). This chord is symmetrical, and is probably derived from the melody of the *El Pueblo* theme, which prominently features minor thirds and minor seconds in its construction. The properties of this hexachord are also distinct in that available within it are three of the four basic triads: major, minor and augmented. Rzewski takes advantage of this property to create a dialogue between atonal and tonal languages. The first part of the third variation involves a dialogue between a transposition of the hexachord arranged melodically, and then a diatonic triad culled from it. Certain pitches are allowed to linger until only those which make up the triad are left resonating. Once this is achieved, a new transposition of the hexachord is put in motion and the process is repeated. The effect is the literal opposite of what is sensed in the first two variations; a sense of tonality emerges from atonal material (as opposed to a sense of atonality emerging from tonal material). Below is a brief analysis of the first four bars of the variation, explicitly revealing the dialogue between tonal and atonal material.

Var.3
Slightly slower, with expressive nuances (♩ = ca.88)

p 1 *legato, sustaining some notes (besides those indicated) ad lib beyond notated durations.*

AbM AM GM7 Gm C#m

Example 3. Analysis of pitches in Variation 3

For reference, here are the hexachords as they occur in the measures above, rearranged into 'correct' order.



Fig. 1. Hexachords in Variation 3

The analysis above groups the material into separate zones of pitch organization. The uncoloured regions are the 'native' atonal pitch organization centred on the 6-20 hexachord. The green regions represent areas where diatonic chords emerge. The red regions illustrate notes which do not necessarily fit into either language, resulting most likely from Rzewski's care for melodic content over the restrictive structures of following a pitch class rigourously. It is interesting to note, however, that they tend to centre around the break points where the tonal language emerges. This diagram makes Rzewski's dialectical arrangement of pitch organization clear. Within the first two bars, The conversation between the two languages is very transparent. First an atonal melody is presented, followed by a tonal chord, and back and forth and so on. As the variation continues, the dialogue becomes a bit more complex, but is continuous throughout. For example, the inclusion of diatonic chords becomes less periodic, as can already be seen in bars 3 and 4. And inconsistencies begin to develop in the pitches used from the hexachords. The first two notes of the region labelled '8' are each transposed up a minor third from the first two notes of the hexachord proper. Intervallically, this choice is related to the pitch class, but Rzewski begins to rescind the necessity to present the hexachord in its complete form, while also increasing the repetitions of certain notes within the pitch class. The effect of this is that the music meanders away from its atonal character with certain pitches becoming more prominent. This is simply another way in which Rzewski engages in dialogue between the tonal/atonal dichotomy.

While it is evident that Rzewski's use of harmonic contrast is operating fully on many layers of the piece (between variations, within variations, within single bars, etc.), it is not the only manifestation of

dialecticism in the piece. A more imaginative form of conflict is presented through the juxtaposition of thematic material.

The nature of the variation form typically depends on transformations of known material. In this piece, Rzewski has fully taken advantage of this property in order to unleash its communicative potential. For many, *El Pueblo* is a recognizable tune, and it strongly recalls its associations with revolutionary and labour movements. Already Rzewski has used abstract means (melody) to convey concrete ideas, through its associations. Rzewski has often discussed his attraction to using music for conceptual, rather than formal, aims. “[My generation was] taught that the most advanced music was abstract, serial formalistic music, which had a kind of universal validity, and that the audience was not important. Now I think the new question we're coming up with... is precisely the first question, *Who* is the audience, who am I trying to speak to, and what am I trying to say. Am I working for the bourgeois public? Am I working for the Rockefeller... or the banks or the students?”² This question has lead Rzewski toward the use of folk themes, which perhaps have the ability to communicate to a larger audience. In his own words, “they have a way of sticking in the ear that twelve-tone-rows don't!”³

One way in which he has employed thematic dialogue in the piece is in the interface between recognizability and non-recognizability of the theme. This process involves negotiation with the theme as *text*⁴ and its foil as fragmentation of text. Throughout the variations, the theme appears in more or less recognizable form several times. Sections in which the theme is presented more closely to the original tend to occur in the first of the groups of six after a significant period of their absence. The first time this occurs in full is in Variation 13, where the return to D Minor is very evident, having been absent in the 12 variations preceding it. This entire section of six variations (the third) essentially remains in D Minor, acting as the sort of fulcrum for the harmonic structure of the piece. Variation 19 exhibits another unveiling of the theme in its near-nude form, rounding off this middle section. The theme doesn't appear in such full recognizability for very long again until the restatement at the very end. Thus the meta-structure of the piece

2 Rzewski, quoted in Driver, *Review*. 25.

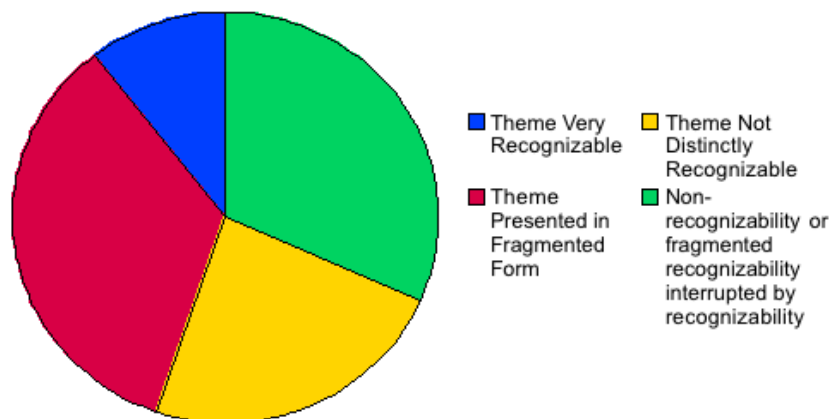
3 Rzewski. Personal interview. 6 Mar. 2008.

4 I refer to 'text' not literally as words, but in the postmodern sense, as an organized system of signifiers.

is a clear dialogue of ABABA, where A is recognizability and B non-recognizability. This structure is not a literal organization of material in a rondo form, but rather a sort of outline of the semantic dialogue, which happens to share properties with the rondo form. It is important to keep in mind that the 'B' sections are much longer in this case.

Within their expanse, however, are many micro-dialogues between recognizability and non-recognizability of the theme. To simplify how this is accomplished, I will suggest that the negotiation of 'theme' vs. 'not theme' is arranged in four different ways: Sections where the theme is very recognizable, sections where it is not distinctly recognizable, sections where the theme is presented in highly fragmented form (quasi-recognizability), and sections where fragmented recognizability or non-recognizability are interrupted or interpolated with brief moments of distinct recognizability. Of course, any assessment of how recognizable the theme is will be subjective to some degree, but my assessment will be illustrative, at least in a loose sense, of how Rzewski accomplishes different means of dialogue in this manner. Whether pedants will quibble over the exact degree of recognizability is not relevant.

Fig 2. Distribution of forms of recognizability of the *El Pueblo* Theme



The sections in which the theme is distinctly recognizable have already been discussed; they are the opening and closing exposition, and the two 'fulcrum' points in the middle. Let us then outline some of the other negotiations with recognizability as they appear in the piece. Fragmentation of the theme is a common way that Rzewski transforms the material. A particular portion of the melody, for instance, will serve as the

basis for the variation, and that fragment will be elaborated on in some way. Or the entire melody will be present, but in a radically transformed way. The first two variations, as briefly discussed during my harmonic analysis, serve as good examples of this, where the transpositions into extreme and non-linear registers and inclusion of chromaticisms abstracts the melody considerably. The effect on the listener is that the relationship with the melody is evident, but it is somehow detached. This is perhaps a manifestation of Bertolt Brecht's *Verfremdungseffekt*, or 'alienating effect', where the listener becomes self-aware due to abstraction from the material, thereby countermending responses of immersion and catharsis.⁵

This effect is even stronger in the other form of negotiation between theme and non-theme which is characterized by 'interruptions'. This technique more evidently uses means of juxtaposition to develop dialogue and contrast. A dominant section of music, which features little or highly abstracted relation to the theme will be briefly 'interrupted' by inclusion of a short section of highly recognizable material.

Example 4. Juxtaposition of thematic and abstracted material in Var. 31



This process becomes more frequent as the piece nears its end. Above is an example from Variation 31,

⁵ I will discuss in detail how techniques of Brechtian theatre manifest more prominently in other features of the work later in my analysis.

where highly abstracted material is interpolated with material that is more immediately recognizable from the theme. I have highlighted the sections where the melody of the theme is strongly visible in blue. In them we can see features of the melody clearly laid out in the same or very similar rhythmic and intervallic patterns. In the second highlighted measure this is supremely clear. The melody raises a fourth and then returns. Then from that fourth, raises a minor third and returns. Then up a fifth, and then this fragment severs. The accompanying lyrical fragment is 'The People United Will Nev--'. After it is severed, more radical abstractions of the intervals derail the contiguity of the theme, until it returns again, fragmented from a later section, two measures later, and then is once again curtailed. This presents a very clear example of how Rzewski negotiates the use of the theme in a very dialectical manner. Discussions of the programmatic relevance of this dialogue are up to interpretation, but it is very tempting to relate this dialectical use of form with Marx's dialectical analysis of class struggle, due to the semantic content of the theme.

Finally, there are sections which are so abstracted that the theme seems entirely alien. Some of these are the result of extreme transformations of pitch and rhythm, so that upon intense analysis their relationship with the original theme can be heard, but arguably this is something which is not at first an audible process. These sections of high abstraction, which occur roughly once in each of the six 'sections' of six variations, are necessary to provide a higher degree of contrast, and act as another player in the dialectic structure of the piece. The section which is home to variations most abstracted in this manner is the fourth, which follows directly after the third 'fulcrum' section which remains close to recognizability. Rzewski wisely places the most extreme contrasts against each other so that the dialogue can be heard. The arc of the dialogue can be seen by representing the arrangements of these different levels of abstraction.

Fig 3. Arrangement of various degrees of theme recognizability in the piece

1. F F N I N I	
2. F F N F F I	V = Very recognizable
3. V F F N I I	F = Fragmented
4. V N N F N F	I = Interrupted
5. I I F N F I	N = Not recognizable
6. I I I F N I	

Once again, while specific individual designations into one category or the other may be contended, what

this reveals is that the piece has a clear semantic arc. The first two sections are dominated by 'fragmented' recognizability, with the third veering closer to the recognizable. The fourth, beginning with a recognizable variation which caps off the third section, is habituated predominantly with the abstracted material. The last two sections house the most sections organized by interruptions. Within the sections, one can see micro-arcs which reflect this larger arc as well. Typically, the fourth or fifth variation in a group exhibits the greatest departure from the dominant type of abstraction used. For example, in the fourth section, the fourth variation interrupts the pattern of non-recognizability with a variation of fragmented recognizability, and conversely, in the third section, the fourth is the only one which strays dramatically from recognizability.

In some cases where the music strays considerably from recognizability of the theme, it is not because of an abstraction away from the theme, but because of an inclusion of another quote. Besides the quotation of the main theme, the piece is home to two other quotations of different socialist folk songs from a similar time. They are *Bandiera Rossa* (Red Flag) by Carlo Tuzzi and *Solidaritätslied* (Solidarity Song) by Bertolt Brecht and Hans Eisler. In both cases, where these quotations emerge it is in dialogue with the *El Pueblo* material. This first occurs in Variation 13.

Example 5. Interpolation of *El Pueblo* theme and *Bandiera Rossa* quote in Variation 13

The image shows a musical score for Variation 13, consisting of two systems of piano music. The first system is highlighted in light blue and the second in light red. The score includes dynamic markings like 'p' and 'pp', and tempo instructions like '72 or slightly faster' and 'mp'. It features complex rhythmic patterns with triplets and ornaments.

The variation begins with a very close recapitulation of the *El Pueblo* theme, marked by ornamentations which relate to those used in the *Bandiera Rossa*. As mentioned previously, this section marks a distinct return to the thematic material presented clearly, and a consistent return to the D Minor of the theme. In the

third measure, however, Rzewski begins to interpolate the quotation of *Bandiera Rossa*. (Highlighted in red above.) Because of how it is arranged, the two themes sound like they could be one and the same, but the melody's shift to the *Bandiera* quotation is distinct. This, then, is another strong instance of how juxtaposition contributes to dialectical form; but in this case, it is less one of contrast, but of comparison. Rzewski is relating the two different materials together, suggesting a commonality: juxtaposing a Chilean folk-song with an Italian one, perhaps suggesting the international nature of the worker's struggle. Later in the piece, the same technique is used with the German song, *Solidaritätslied*.

Example 6. Juxtaposition of *El Pueblo* material with *Solidaritätslied* material between Var. 25 and 26

The image displays a musical score for piano, divided into two main sections. The top section, on a light blue background, is marked "like a question" and "poco rit." with a tempo of $\text{♩} = \text{ca. } 72$. It features dynamic markings of *ppp*, *mf*, *p*, and *cresc.*, and includes an 8-measure phrase. The bottom section, on a light yellow background, is labeled "Var. 26" and "In a militant manner" with a tempo of $\text{♩} = 168$. It features dynamic markings of *f*, *p*, *mf*, *dim.*, *ff*, and *fff*, and includes a 3-measure phrase. The score is written in treble and bass clefs with various musical notations such as slurs, accents, and dynamic markings.

Rzewski's performance directions set this comparison up better than I could. "Like a question" vs. "In a

Militant Manner” establishes a clear relationship between the two ideas. Var. 26 begins with a bit of an abstraction of the material from *Solidaritätslied*, though it can easily be supposed that the climatic chords are culled from the chorus section. The melody that follows in parallel thirds, however, clearly harkens to the verses of the song. Rzewski's use of recognizable folk material creates a veritable tour-de-force of international socialist anthems. Because he shifts through these and abstracted materials through means of discrete juxtaposition, he creates a language of dialogue, rather than development. The entire piece is a sequence of unique (but related) material which describes conflict rather than linear movement.

A final means with which Rzewski negotiates the idea of dialogue is in that between composer and performer. Rzewski has been known for his penchant and skill for improvisation, and the element of improvisation and optional material permeates much of the work. Here, the importance of a performer's *choice* is highlighted, an important aspect of dialectical thought. It is perhaps with greater significance that Rzewski had included a quotation of a Brecht-penned song, as this perfectly mirrors his notion of epic theatre and *gestus* in performance. Within *gestus* is the notion of transformation of thought; the decision-making process. This emphasizes the idea of contradiction and binary; options are available and decisions between them are to be made, as opposed to having been 'fated'. Dialectical thought rejects the Aristotelean notion of an object's *telos* or path, wherein movement is determined from the object's nature. Brecht and other dialectic artists instead chose to interpret a Galilean view of *telos*, wherein an object is affected by its environment and may change. This perfectly reflects the contrast between linear development in musical tradition, with dialectical form. Brecht had a device that he would use in rehearsals called the 'not/but' technique which would highlight the decision making process and contradiction in thought. For example, an actor might say, 'It was not great, but amazing'. This was typically done in rehearsals, as opposed to in performance, to guide the actor through the process of decision. In the language of quantum theory, this is akin to a particle in a state of superposition, where both positive and negative components are contained. Upon performance, this superposition collapses, and it settles on one or the other. This is not necessarily because of chance, but perhaps as a result of something in its environment. And so, Rzewski's music exists in an un-collapsed state until it is performed. In a passage such as this:

The image shows a musical score for two staves. The upper staff is a vocal line with notes and rests. Above the staff, there are performance instructions: "(optional) whistle" with a small triangle pointing to a note, and "f (optional) short x vocal cry" with a small 'x' pointing to a note. The lower staff is a piano accompaniment with notes and rests. Dynamic markings are present: "mf" and "p" on the first measure, and "pp" on the second measure. The score is divided into measures by vertical bar lines.

Example 7. Use of optional material in Variation 11

there exists a contradiction. The whistle, for instance, is both a part of the music and not part of the music. It is not until the performer decides to perform it or not that the superposition collapses and it becomes one or the other. Pertinently, the act of incorporating extended technique such as this vocal material contributes to the alienating effect. It brings attention to the performer's presence and his or her agency. And so, the audience is forced to accept them as a performer, and not experience the music cathartically in the realm of abstract immersion.

It is through these techniques of contradiction and contrast that Rzewski accomplishes his dialectical structure. The format highlights the socialist program of his music by representing class struggle as musical contrast. Through the juxtaposition of disparate harmonic languages, different texts, and through a language guided not by an unbending fated path, but by decision and dialogue, Rzewski has commanded the principles of dialectical form, and manifested a language that creates coherence out of conflict.

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