

**Musicking, or Politicking?: Understanding Political Music Through the Life and
Work of Frederic Rzewski**

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Introduction

How can one maintain an art at its most advanced and difficult form, and at the same time communicate this form to large numbers of people who are more or less unprepared for it?... The best way to attack this problem today, it seems to me, is not to consider it as an ‘either/or’ but as a ‘both/and’ situation. It is not necessary to lower the level of one’s art in order to reach masses of people! It is merely necessary, in one way or another, to gain control over the already existing means of communication.¹

-Frederick Rzewski

Frederic Rzewski is, among many other things, a significantly polarizing musical figure. To many, he is primarily familiar as the composer of his best known work, *The People United Will Never Be Defeated!*—a set of variations based on a Chilean folk song,² cast by Rzewski in the piano virtuoso tradition.³ The work has been described as a “recognized masterpiece,”⁴ has been recorded at least eleven times,⁵ is “the subject of many scholarly articles and PhD dissertations,”⁶ and, as Bernard Gendron candidly points out, also “gets much play on YouTube”⁷—which, one supposes, may be as telling a signal as any of the work’s continuing relevance.

For John Rockwell, former *New York Times* critic and author of *All American Music*, Rzewski is notable for other reasons. Rzewski merits a mention in Rockwell’s book, but only in spite of what Rockwell calls a lack of musical “personality” and an “extreme stylistic diversity [that] might be interpreted as a lack of compositional sureness, a failure of confidence in *any* of his chosen idioms.”⁸ That is as damning a critique of Rzewski the composer as one is likely to find, excepting perhaps Rockwell’s later quip that “nobody cares what [Rzewski] does, least of all ‘the people.’”⁹ If Rzewski is such an insignificant figure, though—an idea not entirely unsupported, especially given the still small amount of scholarly literature devoted to

¹ Frederic Rzewski, *Nonsequiturs: Writings and Lectures on Improvisation, Composition, and*

² Or a “Chilean socialist song,” so described by Sid Samberg in his article, “Rzewski as Shaman: The Search for the Source of the Power Behind *The People United Will Never Be Defeated!*,” *Contemporary Music Review*, Vol. 29, No. 6 (2010), p. 661

³ Paul Griffiths, entry for “Frederic Rzewski” in the *Oxford Companion to Music*, 2013

⁴ Bernard Gendron, “Rzewski in New York (1971-1977),” *Contemporary Music Review*, Vol. 29, No. 6 (2010), p. 570

⁵ *ibid.*, 570

⁶ *ibid.*, 570

⁷ *ibid.*, 570

⁸ John Rockwell, *All American Music*, New York, N.Y.: Da Capo Press, 1984, p.87

⁹ *ibid.*, p.120

him¹⁰ and the scant attention he sometimes receives even in books on the kind of experimental music making Rzewski has been known to engage in¹¹—then why does Rzewski appear in Rockwell’s musical anthology at all? Rockwell’s reference to ‘the people’ is a clue. According to Rockwell, “Rzewski is attempting to lead a rebirth of the long-dormant political spirit of American classical avant-gardism,” and because of this perceived mission, Rzewski—the thinker? the political musician? one cannot be sure exactly what is meant here—“raises so many issues that the fact that his actual music is only intermittently interesting becomes almost secondary.”¹² Despite these negatively charged words, Rockwell hits here on one of the central issues in the literature, one that plays a central role in Rzewski’s life and work.

The figurative ‘book’ on Rzewski is that he is indeed an “explicitly political”¹³ musician, one who has a “long-standing reputation as a politically-engaged composer.”¹⁴ He appears under chapter headings like, “The Dilemma of the Political Composer,”¹⁵ or the more poetic “Music is a Universal Human Right,”¹⁶ or, “A Life Drawn to Liberation,”¹⁷ and also, most concisely, “Politics.”¹⁸ It is no secret that Rzewski is, or at least has been “a committed and militant Marxist.”¹⁹ He himself once claimed, in what was apparently a hastily scrawled “manifesto,”²⁰ that to be an

¹⁰ Though there are a growing number of masters and doctoral dissertations about Rzewski and his work, many of which are important to this dissertation, there are surprisingly few peer-reviewed articles devoted to Rzewski: aside from brief reviews in newspapers and one quite recent special issue of *Contemporary Music Review* (2010), just a handful of articles address Rzewski’s output, most notably Larry Bell and Andrea Olmstead’s “Musica Reservata in Fredric Rzewski’s ‘North American Ballads’”: *The Musical Quarterly*, Vol. 72, No.4 (1986), p. 457.

¹¹ *Audio Culture: Readings in Modern Music*, ed. Christoph Cox and Daniel Warner, New York, N.Y.: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2004 and Michael Nyman’s *Experimental Music*, Second Edition, Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1999 are both examples of texts that devote little more than a page or two to Rzewski’s exploits.

¹² Rockwell, *ibid.*, p.84

¹³ Brian Eno, in the preface to Nyman, *ibid.*, p. xii

¹⁴ Christopher Fox, “Which Side Are You On?: Review of Rzewski Plays Rzewski: Piano works 1975-1999,” *The Musical Times*, OVI. 144, No. 1882 (2003), p. 65

¹⁵ Rockwell, *ibid.*, pp. 84-95

¹⁶ Amy C. Beal, writing in *Sound Commitments*, ed. Robert Adlington, New York, N.Y.: Oxford University Press, 2009, pp. 99-120

¹⁷ This is the title of a special issue of *Contemporary Music Review*, Vol. 29, No. 6 (2010), which is comprised of an introduction and eight articles devoted to Rzewski’s life and work.

¹⁸ Paul Griffiths, *Modern Music and After*, New York, N.Y.: Oxford University Press, 2010, pp. 203-209

¹⁹ Walter Pollack, *Harvard Composers: Walter Piston and his students, from Elliot Carter to Frederic Rzewski*, Metuchen, N.J.: Scarecrow Press, 1992, p. 379

²⁰ In an interview with Daniel Varela, 2003; URL:

<http://www.furious.com/perfect/rzewski.html>, Rzewski is quoted as having said, “The basic

“artist,” or to create, “means to be... responsible [sic] to reality.... to be able to communicate the presence of danger to others.”²¹ For the Rzewski of 1968, an “artist” could be defined as “a person who lays claim to a heightened state of perception.... He creates the *sense* of emergency in a state of tranquility where there is no threat to individual survival.”²² Rzewski’s basic framework in his manifesto construes the artist as a political agent, one who sounds a kind of alarm bell to wake the masses of people “content to relapse into a state of slumbering semi-awareness.”²³ His aim in this endeavor? To rouse people into being “open to the jowious [sic] pain of creation” that is usually found “only in moments of immediate threat to individual survival.”²⁴ According to this logic, the role of the artist in society is to shake people out of the complacency of ordinary life, reminding them of their agency and the possibility for “creation”—the creation, perhaps, of a new social order. Rzewski has always remained adamant that “revolution is inevitable,” even if “we cannot predict its form it would take,” whether “new forms of fascism, or some kind of religious fundamentalism,” or something better;²⁵ for Rzewski, no doubt, the composer’s role of opening up his listeners’ minds to creative possibilities can only help to turn that revolution towards better outcomes. “Their work,” Rzewski says of artists, “provides a model for the creative negation of an oppressive reality.”²⁶ Thus, through this “manifesto,” Rzewski explicitly links his artistic project to the task of somehow influencing the thought and action of his listeners, an aim that is undoubtedly infused with political meaning.

However tempting it may be to stop here and conclude that there is little remaining ambiguity about the politics of Rzewski’s music, a careful examination shows that the reality of the situation is much less clear. For one thing, Rzewski bears what has been described as a “sometimes-difficult” personality,²⁷ one which gives rise

idea of the text [the Parma manifesto]—remember, that was 1968—was that we are living in a time of very rapid transitions in which older models guiding behavior collapsed and were in crisis. So, there’s very little time to construct new ones.” Apparently, time was also so short that Rzewski’s “manifesto” was written in a single afternoon (see *The Parma Manifesto*, below).

²¹ Frederic Rzewski, *The Parma Manifesto*, in *Leonardo Music Journal*, Vol. 9 (1999), p. 78

²² *ibid.*, p. 78

²³ *ibid.*, p. 77

²⁴ *ibid.*, p. 77

²⁵ Varela, *ibid.*

²⁶ Rzewski, *Nonsequiturs*, *ibid.*, p. 192

²⁷ David T. Little, “The Critical Composer: Political Music During and After ‘The Revolution,’ Volume 1,” doctoral dissertation, Princeton University, 2011, p. 111

to the need for an analyst to interpret his writings and remarks rather carefully—even those that weren't scribbled down on a single afternoon over forty-five years ago. As a more recent example of Rzewski's sometimes-puzzling rhetorical output, consider that during a lecture on "Music and Political Ideals," Rzewski claimed he was not "especially qualified to deal with this topic;"²⁸ on another occasion, when Rzewski was asked if his music was political, he said, "No, I don't think so."²⁹ It is not immediately clear whether Rzewski was "deadpanning it" here, as one author has suggested,³⁰ or whether he had a more serious point to make.³¹ In any case, an early recognition of Rzewski's penchant for "shooting questions down"³² and for "confounding expectations"³³ serves to sharpen any analysis of Rzewski's writings, and it also helps to demonstrate that Rzewski's explicitly political "manifesto" of 1968 does little to settle the question of the nature and depth of the political content of his work.

When one attempts to more deeply understand how, when, and why Rzewski's music is labeled as "political," some significant complications arise, and not only because Rzewski's music has evolved in many diverse ways across the course of his career. One stumbling block is that some authors do not view Rzewski's output as fundamentally political, or at least do not view its political aspects as its most defining features. In fact, the characterizations of Rzewski's work are as diverse and eclectic as his music is multivalent. On the one hand, of course, lies the camp that

²⁸ Rzewski, *Nonsequiturs*, *ibid.*, p. 188

²⁹ Little, *ibid.*, p. 140; Little paraphrases Rzewski in this passage, but writes that these words are "essentially" what Rzewski said.

³⁰ Awn Kodhn, "Creating Sounds for a Nonsensical World: MUSIC REVIEW," *The New York Times*, May 3, 2008, p. B10

³¹ As will be discussed later in this dissertation, David Little makes the claim that Rzewski's remarks point towards a new form of political commentary, one called "culture jamming" (see Little, *ibid.*, p. 140).

³² Matthew Gurewitsch, in an article entitled "Maverick With a Message of Solidarity" from the April 27, 2008 *New York Times* (p. AR 29), describes an interview with Rzewski this way: "Toss him a question sure to prompt the self-important to pontificate – something about the extramusical associations of old songs, say, or the consultations of tragedy – and Mr. Rzewski shoots it down. 'I don't think I have any more to say about that,' he replies. Or, 'I think we're getting into deep waters here.' Politics is another subject that fails to coax him onto a soapbox. Yes, his scores are shot through with melodies associated with the left and often have titles to match. Yes, the blacklisted folk singer Pete Seeger was a culture hero of his. But Mr. Rzewski is a musician, not a pamphleteer. None but the naïve could imagine contemporary classical music as the lever for social upheaval. It was a teaching job that brought him to Belgium, not the state of the American nation. 'No philosophy,' he said recently. 'I had a family to support.'"

³³ Kyle Gann, as quoted in Little, *ibid.*, p. 111

focuses on “Mr. Rzewski’s long-standing concern for the relationship between art and politics,”³⁴ as briefly but emphatically explored above. On the other, some authors have interpreted Rzewski’s music as having a “lasting appeal [that] remains musical, not political,”³⁵ as work which makes a “commentary on American musical modernism and postmodernism”³⁶ rather than a commentary on American society, and as an art with significance “beyond that of program.”³⁷ Alann Kozinn, for one, sees Rzewski’s music as a body of work defined by “an almost organic current of narrative tension that makes this music pure drama,”³⁸ thereby focusing more on the musical forces at work than on any political forces they may enlist. As he sees it, in Rzewski’s music “politics or style may catch the listener’s ear first, but virtually everything Mr. Rzewski writes, even his settings of workers’ anthems, is packed with vivid interplay”³⁹—a dramatic and musical interplay between players, instruments, and ideas that often coalesces into “a web of intricate counterpoint,”⁴⁰ a primarily musical achievement, with a contrapuntal and narrative fabric that constitutes the true “thread that runs through Mr. Rzewski’s work.”⁴¹

Non-political readings of Rzewski’s music such as these are furthered by his subject entry in the *Oxford Dictionary of Music*, which addresses his professional pianism and his “works involving dancers, film, tape, etc.,” but which makes not a mention of his politics⁴²—although one cannot be sure if this omission is a reflection of the editor’s view of Rzewski’s music or whether the dictionary simply did not want to venture into the difficult territory of music *qua* politics. There is at least one extant review, however, that interprets Rzewski’s *North American Ballads*, a work oft cited

³⁴ John Rockwell, “Avant-Garde: Rzewski,” *New York Times*, Jan 17, 1980, p. C23

³⁵ Robert W. Wason, “Tonality and Atonality in Frederic Rzewski’s Variations on *The People United Will Never Be Defeated!*,” *Perspectives of New Music*, Vol. 26, No. 1, 1988, p. 109

³⁶ Kathryn Woodard, “The Pianist’s Body at Work: Mediating Sound and Meaning in Frederic Rzewski’s Winnsboro Cotton Mill Blues,” BookBaby, 2011, p. 14 [or 78%, as it appears in my electronic format]

³⁷ Vanessa Cornett-Murtada, in her “Quotation, Revolution, and American Culture: The Use of Folk Tunes and the Influence of Charles Ives in Frederic Rzewski’s *North American Ballads* for Solo Piano,” doctoral dissertation, The University of North Carolina at Greensboro, writes, “For each composer [Ives and Rzewski], these [folk] tunes are sometimes used for programmatic content, but the sophisticated use of quotation takes these pieces to a level beyond that of program” (p. 105).

³⁸ Allan Kozinn, “Singing an Urgent Song of Attica,” *The New York Times*, Nov 13, 2005, p. A44

³⁹ *ibid.*, p. A44

⁴⁰ *ibid.*, p. A44

⁴¹ *ibid.*, p. A44

⁴² *Oxford Dictionary of Music*, entry for “Frederic Rzewski,” 2013

as an example of “heavily political music,”⁴³ as mere “Americana... à la Charles Ives,” featuring “blues and jazz passages with percussive sonorities reminiscent of Prokofiev [and] what sound like references to Rachmaninoff.”⁴⁴ This review contains not a single reference to anything political, not one mention of an extramusical goal. A reading of the piece grounded in score study and subsequent hearings is much more likely to interpret the “percussive sonorities” the critic references as a depiction of the “din of factory machinery”⁴⁵ rather than as references to Prokofiev, and the work’s “Americana” appears to be a politically charged quotation of a tune written for a labor strike.⁴⁶ Nevertheless, this reviewer demonstrates that Rzewski’s music can be and has been interpreted on musical grounds alone. Interestingly, Rzewski himself might approve of this analytical approach somewhat, as he has claimed that “his work should be understood ‘first and foremost as music; and then if one can enrich this musical discourse with extramusical ideas, then so much the better.’”⁴⁷

This author is by no means advocating for a view of Rzewski’s music as devoid of politics—far from it. Rzewski’s music does indeed seem to cry out for interpretation beyond the level of notes and rests; it would be difficult to imagine a satisfying reading of his work that did not enrich “musical discourse with extramusical ideas.” But it is important to recognize the vast amount of disagreement in the current literature *vis-à-vis* the importance and the nature of the political elements of Rzewski’s music. Even amongst the many interpretations that emphasize the political content of Rzewski’s work, there exists a broad sphere of differing opinion: where for Gerald Groemer, “Rzewski’s compositions are political only in a philosophically inconsistent and possibly counterproductive way,”⁴⁸ Seth Beckman sees no such issue, arguing instead that “Rzewski’s compositions are *not* overwhelmed by political baggage” (emphasis added), and that “when considered

⁴³ This particular quote coming from a review of the piece by Michael Dervan, writing in *The Irish Times*, Jul 24, 2003, p. B12

⁴⁴ Michael Kimmelman, *New York Times*, Nov 5, 1987, p. C18

⁴⁵ Kodhn, *ibid.*, p. B10

⁴⁶ See Monica Hershberger, “Frederic Rzewski’s *North American Ballads*: Looking Back to the Radical Politics of 1930s America,” doctoral dissertation, Michigan State University, 2011, pp. 50-52

⁴⁷ As quoted in Richard Steinitz, “‘Imperialist piano-thumping’ was one avant-gardist description of Frederic Rzewski this week—because of his new accessible style,” *The Guardian*, Nov 2, 1979, p. 11

⁴⁸ Gerald H. Groemer, “Paths to the New Romanticism: Aesthetic and Thought of the American Post-Avante-Garde as exemplified in Selected Tonal Piano Music,” doctoral dissertation, Peabody Institute of the Johns Hopkins University, 1985, p. 119

[primarily] for their musical content, they possess the potential to be poignantly descriptive works of art.”⁴⁹ Sid Samberg, for his part, reads Rzewski’s extramusical content as “shamanic ritual”⁵⁰ that ultimately transcends the ordinary political modes of interpretation applied to it, a sentiment shared by Andrew Love.⁵¹ Perhaps the most apt description of all comes from John Warnaby, however, who observes, “The abiding impression [here] is of a composer whose work embodies some intriguing contradictions.”⁵²

What might these contradictions be? Christian Asplund identifies a few of them: “unity and individuality, freedom and responsibility, peace and conflict, pessimism and optimism, idealism and realism, ethnicity and international fraternity, dialectic materialism and spirituality.”⁵³ These binaries are indeed intriguing, but, given the difficult relationship between music and politics, perhaps they are not surprising. As David T. Little writes in his formidable dissertation, “The Critical Composer: Political Music During and After ‘The Revolution,’” one sees “upon the most basic study of the subject [of music and politics] that it is... vast and complex.... [and that] a comprehensive study of this discipline would take a lifetime to complete.”⁵⁴ It may be, therefore, that any composer who wishes to make political music necessarily becomes comfortable with some level of contradiction. In any case, where Little takes it as his charge to investigate the relationship between music and politics very generally—at least insofar as that is possible within a dissertation’s stretch of lifetime—my aim here is rather more specific.

Andrea Bell and Larry Olmstead, in one of the oldest available musicological articles published about Rzewski, argue that “the political content of Frederic Rzewski’s music” actually “deflects discussion from traditional musical values and overlooks Rzewski’s successful blend of careful craftsmanship and engaging formal

⁴⁹ Seth Victor Beckman, “The Traditional and the Avant-Garde in Late Twentieth-Century Music: A Study of Three Piano Compositions by Frederic Rzewski,” doctoral dissertation, Ball State University, 1996, p. 36

⁵⁰ Samberg, *ibid.*, p. 661

⁵¹ Andrew Love, “Improvising Their Future: Shamanic Hope in Ives, Schoenberg, Cage, Cardew. Rzewski and Messiaen,” *Tempo*, Vol. 60, No. 237 (2006), pp. 24-32

⁵² John Warnaby, in a review of “Rzewski: Piano Works 1975-1999,” *Tempo*, Vol. 57, No. 224 (2003), p. 75

⁵³ Christian Asplund, “Frederic Rzewski and Spontaneous Political Music,” *Perspectives of New Music*, 1995, p. 434

⁵⁴ Little, *ibid.*, p. 4

presentation.”⁵⁵ Several recent graduate dissertations help to fill the music-analytical gap identified by Bell and Olmstead,⁵⁶ and part of the project of this dissertation will indeed be to contribute to the literature in that respect. However, it remains possible—and, indeed, perhaps even probable—that “the political content of Frederic Rzewski’s music” is in fact inextricably linked to his “successful blend of careful craftsmanship and engaging formal presentation,” and that the binary Bell and Olmstead draw between “musical values” and “political content” is, in this case, a false one. This very possibility is anticipated by Little, who writes, “The so-called political composer need not dutifully choose a side. These binaries of either/or are holdovers from a past era. The composer today seeks something more fluid, and must find his own path through the continuum extant between the poles of the dichotomy.”⁵⁷

To extend Little’s reasoning just a bit farther, one might say that the composer of any era can seek a fluid path through traditional binaries. Rzewski certainly seems to have done just that throughout his career, writing music which sometimes displays a very traditional focus on structure, counterpoint, and melody, but which nonetheless attempts to forge these more universalizable musical elements into cogent political statements. If Rzewski does indeed work as a pioneer on the boundary between music and politics, that would help to explain, among other things, his aversion to being understood as a particular kind of composer, political or otherwise: “I would prefer to avoid any kind of label,” he said in an interview with Richard Steinitz, “whether musical or ideological.”⁵⁸ In the case of Rzewski, it may indeed be that it is precisely the synergy of traditional musical materials with non-traditional political ideology that gives rise to his “engaging formal presentation,” the “pure drama” of his narrative

⁵⁵ Bell and Olmstead, *ibid.*, p. 449

⁵⁶ See Beckman, *ibid.*, Cornett-Murtada, *ibid.*; see also Kim Hayashi, “The Keyboard Music of Frederic Anthony Rzewski with Special Emphasis on the *North American Ballads*,” doctoral dissertation, University of Arizona, 1994; Sujin Kim, “Understanding Rzewski’s North American Ballads: From the Composer to the Work,” doctoral dissertation, Ohio State University, 2009; Jee-Young Shin, “Synthesis of Various Elements in Selected Piano Works of Frederic Rzewski,” doctoral dissertation, City University of New York, 2004; Robert Christian Paul, “Improvisation in Twentieth-Century Solo Piano Repertoire, as Represented in Alvin Curran’s First Piano Piece (1967) and Pieces Selected from ‘Squares’ (1978) and Four North America Ballads (1978-1979), by Frederic Rzewski,” doctoral dissertation, University of Miami, 2003; and Keane Southard, “The Use of Variation Form in Frederic Rzewski’s *The People United Will Never Be Defeated!*,” bachelor’s dissertation, Baldwin-Wallace College, 2009.

⁵⁷ Little, *ibid.*, 24

⁵⁸ Steinitz, *ibid.*, p. 11

threads. After all, as the quote at the outset of this introduction demonstrates, Rzewski himself views the relationship between music and politics as a “both/and situation,” arguing that “it is not necessary to lower the level of one’s art in order to reach masses of people.”⁵⁹

What, exactly, does Rzewski mean here? To what does his “both/and” refer? And how, ultimately, does he actually achieve a high art political music, if at all? Unfortunately, as may have been anticipated by the previous discussion of intriguing contradictions, fluid binaries, scholarly disagreement and analytical gaps, there has been surprisingly little clear, sustained discussion of this question in the current literature. Andrea La Rose characterizes the current state of affairs in Rzewski scholarship this way: “Discussions of the role of politics in Frederic Rzewski’s music generally stop at surface elements: the title of the work, the use of a particular song, and guesses as to what left-leaning audience the piece is directed at.”⁶⁰ And, while her words are slightly sharp-edged, La Rose’s critique appears to me to be fairly accurate. Indeed, part of the project of this dissertation will be to deepen the discussion of the role of politics in Rzewski’s music, moving beyond short sound bites and superficial surface observation. At the same time, this dissertation will also attempt to deepen the discussion of the “traditional musical values” of Rzewski’s work, remaining cognizant that Rzewski is a professional composer. The approach of this essay will be to first investigate the trends within the totality of Rzewski’s output through the lens of his own writings, the secondary literature, and some of the pieces themselves. Even biographical attention has been scant in the literature to this point, so this deep approach to understanding Rzewski as a thinker and a composer should help to enrich the current understanding of his music. Finally, armed with this understanding of Rzewski’s influences and his own views about the kind of music he is trying to write, sustained attention will be given to his “Winnsboro Cotton Mill Blues,” from the *North American Ballads*, a particularly interesting example of a Rzewski work that blends musical and political goals in a sophisticated fashion.

If the analysis of Rzewski’s political music in the current literature is unsatisfying, or at least inconclusive, then there are many interesting questions facing

⁵⁹ Rzewski, *Nonsequiturs*, *ibid.*, pp. 205-206

⁶⁰ Andrea A. La Rose, “Politics, Improvisation, and Musicking in Frederic Rzewski’s ‘Which Side Are You On?’ from *North American Ballads*,” doctoral dissertation, City University of New York, abstract; dissertation becomes available in full on May 15, 2014.

the still-curious analyst. Precisely which elements of Rzewski's music, for instance, mark it as political? Are there multiple possible interpretations of these elements? Is it Rzewski's personal beliefs that lead us to a politicized view of his music? Or is it the specific views he expresses in his writing? Could this perception be, instead, the result of the critical reception his work has received from others? Or perhaps the markings he places in his scores⁶¹ and the political implications of the melodies he quotes⁶² guide us to politicized interpretations? One might further ask, how can the discrepancies in Rzewski's own rhetorical output be accounted for, and might there be different approaches to politics displayed in different moments across Rzewski's career? Are any of Rzewski's individual pieces representative of his musical-political output as a whole, or are they all impossibly disjunctive? And does an understanding of Rzewski's music contribute to the ultimate, potentially infinitely intricate question of how politics and art intertwine?

This dissertation will touch upon all these questions, none of which have to this point been sufficiently addressed. The question it ultimately seeks to answer, however, is this one: how, if at all, does Rzewski seek to embed his political ideology within his musical structures? In other words, what is the shape, the topography, of the interface between his musical syntax and his political ideology? Do the musical features and the political features of his work correspond to one another, or support each other, or demand each other? Or are they instead insignificant additions to work primarily concerned with musical development? Can we discern the influence of politics on Rzewski's musical structures themselves, or is it solely outside context that gives them political import? This investigation will require a demystification of Rzewski's biography and his rhetorical output, as Rzewski's political ideas and their development must be understood in order to examine how he deploys these ideas in his work. The thorough nature of the present study sets it apart from the existing literature, and it is hoped that it will yield fruitful results that might ultimately help to shed light on the relationship between music and politics at large.

Rzewski should prove to be a particularly useful focal point in this regard. While many agree he is a "political composer," he has also been called a "neo-

⁶¹ Bell and Olmstead, *ibid.*, have argued that Rzewski's "performance instructions can be read as signposts directing the pianist to uncover subtle programmatic relationships in the way that a singer might discover *musica reservata* in a Renaissance motet" (p. 452).

⁶² *The People United Will Never Be Defeated!*, *North American Ballads*, and other Rzewski works consciously quote folk songs, as will be further explored.

romantic” composer⁶³—in fact, Gerald Groemer calls *The People United!* “a model of what the new romanticism is all about.”⁶⁴ John Rockwell echoes the sentiment, saying Rzewski has definitively “returned to romanticism,”⁶⁵ and Michael Nyman, less neutrally, offers the view that Rzewski “went haywire into folk-based Romanticism.”⁶⁶ Rzewski has also been repeatedly linked to Charles Ives,⁶⁷ John Cage,⁶⁸ and a diverse set of other composers,⁶⁹ and over his career his music has explored many genres, including the “Cageian aesthetic of the early 1960s, ‘minimalist’ possibilities of the early seventies... a combination of various avant-garde influences mixed with a unique tonal, jazzlike, improvisatory musical language, and a highly structured approach to a composition’s formal dimension.”⁷⁰ In other words, Rzewski’s music is undoubtedly “eclectic,”⁷¹ and since his individual pieces range in style so widely, there exists the possibility that one might find in his output a diverse set of attempts to implement one underlying political ideology, even if that ideology has been adjusted over the course of a lifetime. This possibility, along with the fact that Rzewski is a composer who has commanded respect even despite his politics,⁷² makes Rzewski a particularly intriguing test case for the kind of musical-political investigation that follows.

As David Little writes of musical composition itself,

The process of struggling with the dichotomy is an important one, as it is in this struggle that a composer might discover him- or herself. It is from the settling dust of these struggles that the most interesting compositions of the political repertoire have

⁶³ Hershberger, *ibid.*, p. 71, and Rockwell, “Avant-Garde: Rzewski,” *ibid.*, p. C23

⁶⁴ Groemer, *ibid.*, p. 114

⁶⁵ Rockwell, *All American Music*, *ibid.*, p. 84

⁶⁶ Nyman, *ibid.*, p. xvii

⁶⁷ Groemer, *ibid.*, p. 33; Beckman, *ibid.*, p. 102; Ronald Edwin Lewis, “The Solo Piano Music of Frederic Rzewski,” doctoral dissertation, University of Oklahoma, 1992, p. 5; Woodard, *ibid.*, p. 12 [or 65%]; Kimmelman, *ibid.*, p. C18; and Cornett-Murtada, *ibid.*, in its entirety

⁶⁸ Lewis, *ibid.*, p. 19, 30; *Oxford Dictionary of Music* entry on Rzewski; Little, *ibid.*, p. 111

⁶⁹ Including, among those not yet mentioned, Bach, Verdi, Wagner, Chopin, Liszt, Weill, Rochberg, Cowell, Crumb, Braxton, Shostakovich, Bartok, and even Mozart.

⁷⁰ Groemer, *ibid.*, p. 97

⁷¹ Groemer, *ibid.*, p. 97, Paul, *ibid.*, p. 34, Beckman, *ibid.*, p. 4, Lewis, *ibid.*, p. 5, Zuraw, “From Ideology Into Sound: Frederic Rzewski’s *North American Ballads* and Other Piano Music from the 1970s,” doctoral dissertation, Rice University, 2003, p. 1

⁷² A *New York Times* article by K. Robert Schwarz, “A Composer for the Masses Scales Down His Ambitions,” Oct 26, 1997, p. AR34, suggests that Rzewski’s difficulties finding a teaching job in the United States may have been a direct result of his perceived political radicalism. One champion of his music, the pianist Ursula Oppens, is quoted in the article as having said, “People wanted to make him [Rzewski] irrelevant, due in part to political opposition.”

emerged, and from which they will no doubt continue to emerge. These are works that *don't* fit neatly into either side of the dichotomy, that define their own way, and engage with political ideology on the composers' terms, rather than the other way around.⁷³

As will eventually be shown, there can be little doubt that Rzewski's works have all the markings of such a struggle with dichotomy—of an engagement with both political efficacy and artistic integrity, musical meaning and extramusical import. In much the same way Little suggests such a struggle is fruitful for the process of composition, this dissertation will attempt to “engage with political ideology on the composers' terms, rather than the other way around,” and to initiate this investigation knowing full well that the best and perhaps only outcome of such a line of inquiry will be the kicking up of difficult material; indeed, only “the settling dust of these struggles” will ultimately provide interest and lead toward clarity, even if a single ‘correct’ interpretive framework for Rzewski's music remains impossibly elusive—and perhaps even undesirable.

Rzewski writes, paraphrasing the French essayist Leon Bloy, that “the supposed tendency of art toward religion is that of a parabolic curve toward its asymptote.”⁷⁴ He points here towards the difficulty inherent in attempting to analyze music *vis-à-vis* any other discipline, a difficulty that will no doubt be evident in the pages that follow. Bloy's asymptotic model applies equally well to the relationship between art and politics, of course—as Rzewski reminds us, “art and politics are not the same thing,”⁷⁵ and they never will be. But that region where the parabolic curve inches ever closer to its asymptote—always approaching the infinite—can be very interesting, and no one has charted that territory as well as Rzewski has on the boundary between politics and music.

⁷³ Little, *ibid.*, p. 25

⁷⁴ Rzewski, *Nonsequiturs*, *ibid.*, p. 86

⁷⁵ *ibid.*, p. 192

Rzewski, the man: early life

I go back to America all the time. It's a totally different country to the one I grew up in. At the end of World War II, more than 50% of the population lived on small farms. Today it's more like less than 2%. Folk music was very big in the 50s, but that's disappeared. It's a different country in many ways. On the other hand there are certain constants that don't change. One of them of course is militarism. That certainly hasn't changed.⁷⁶

-Frederic Rzewski

Rzewski, described by a friend as a “poet-philosopher-agitator,”⁷⁷ known for being “well on the left side of the political spectrum,”⁷⁸ and undoubtedly a bit of a “radical,”⁷⁹ has been a resident of Europe for much of his adult life—“not really an expatriate or an exile, but [someone] who looks at his country through European eyes,” as Rockwell puts it.⁸⁰ Rzewski describes his American heritage as something impossible to “avoid” or “escape from,”⁸¹ and as a part of his identity, “for better or worse.”⁸² Whether or not this means he harbors particularly negative feelings about his nation is difficult to tell, although he has characterized his stance this way: “I would say like many Americans I'm not at all happy with what's going on. But what can we do about it?”⁸³

Given Rzewski's unconventional ideology and career trajectory, it may come as somewhat of a surprise that he had a very privileged upbringing, at least in educational terms. Born to pharmacist parents of Polish descent⁸⁴ in Westfield, Massachusetts in 1938,⁸⁵ Rzewski attended the prestigious Phillips Academy Andover for high school. Upon graduation in 1954, Rzewski went on to Harvard University (BA 1958) and then to Princeton (MFA 1960),⁸⁶ after which he was awarded a Fulbright scholarship to study with Luigi Dallapiccola in Rome.⁸⁷ That time with

⁷⁶ Rzewski, in an interview with Bob Gilmore, 2011; URL:

<http://www.paristransatlantic.com/magazine/interviews/rzewski.html>

⁷⁷ Alvin Curran, fellow member of MEV, writing in “From Via della Luce to The Road – A Short Story in Song Form,” *Contemporary Music Review*, Vol. 29, No. 6 (2010), p. 627

⁷⁸ Southard, *ibid.*, p. 20

⁷⁹ Ursula Oppens, as quoted in Schwarz, *ibid.*, p. AR34

⁸⁰ Rockwell, *All American Music*, *ibid.*, p. 92

⁸¹ As quoted in Gilmore, *ibid.*

⁸² *ibid.*

⁸³ *ibid.*

⁸⁴ *ibid.*

⁸⁵ Pollack, *ibid.*, p. 370

⁸⁶ Edward Murray, *Grove Music Online*, entry for Rzewski

⁸⁷ Little, *ibid.*, p. 112

Dallapiccola, followed by a brief stint in Berlin with Elliott Carter in 1963,⁸⁸ brought his formal education to a close—although Rzewski is on record as having said that he “mostly” learned from the friendships he formed “outside of school,”⁸⁹ several of which have continued on into his adult life.⁹⁰

Rzewski’s musical development at Harvard was formally the responsibility of Walter Piston, whom Howard Pollack credits for Rzewski’s training in “counterpoint, orchestration, and composition.”⁹¹ As Pollack notes, “Piston’s music was not at the ‘burning focal point’” of Rzewski’s interests,⁹² and Rzewski remembers not Piston but Randall Thompson as “one of the best teachers [he] ever had,” specifically citing his experience in Thompson’s counterpoint class at Harvard.⁹³ Counterpoint, it seems, has been an abiding interest of Rzewski’s ever since—“Counterpoint is what fascinates me,” he recently said in an interview. “I really love strict counterpoint, like Palestrina. At any moment there are only a few possibilities, and you can specify what they are exactly. It’s like the army, there’s a rule for everything!”⁹⁴ Complex contrapuntal fabrics and detailed formal paradigms are characteristic of much of Rzewski’s later music, including *The People United Will Never Be Defeated!* and *North American Ballads*.

However, complicating matters slightly—as is par for the course with Rzewski—is his aforementioned disavowal of the virtues of formal education and his insistence that his extracurricular friendships were more fruitful than his formal training. He has further explained these views, stating that Harvard and the other venerable institutions he attended were

⁸⁸ From a grant through the Ford Foundation; see Murray, *Grove Music Online*, *ibid.* Rzewski himself has corroborated this fact—see Gilmore, *ibid.*—and yet, Rzewski says he “never studied with Carter;” see Frank J. Oteri’s interview with Rzewski, 2002; URL: http://www.newmusicbox.org/assets/43/rzewski_interview.pdf. While it is clear that Carter invited Rzewski out to Berlin, it is entirely possible that the grant involved no formal or informal teaching.

⁸⁹ In an interview with Joan Arnau Pamies, 2010, p. 4; URL: http://www.sonograma.org/num_06/articles/sonograma06_Frederic-Rzewski-interview.pdf

⁹⁰ Including friendships with the composers David Behrman and Christian Wolff, both of whom likely had an important influence on Rzewski’s compositional development.

⁹¹ Pollack, *ibid.*, p. 371

⁹² *ibid.*, p. 371

⁹³ Oteri, *ibid.*

⁹⁴ Quotes from Ivan Hewett, “Frederic Rzewski Interview,” *The Telegraph*, Jan 14, 2010; URL: <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/music/classicalmusic/6987672/Frederic-Rzewski.html>

most importantly a place where I came together with people like myself and I think that's probably the most useful function of schools in general. It's not so much a matter of studying in the sense that information is transmitted from one generation to another, but it's where under the guidance of perhaps older people it's possible to link up with people who are doing things similar to what you're doing.⁹⁵

Although it would probably be a mistake to take Rzewski too literally here, especially given that this non-hierarchical perspective on his education conforms to some of his current, more general political beliefs, it is undoubtedly true that Rzewski's music turned out very differently than his teachers'. Given Rzewski's celebrated "mastery of everything he attempts,"⁹⁶ whether "carefully pinned large scale formal structure, sophisticated but audible variation procedures, pianistic effectiveness"⁹⁷ or "twentieth-century rhythmic and harmonic techniques such as clusters, rhythmic ostinatos, tempo layering and atonality"⁹⁸—whatever it may be—it does seem possible that much of his development was indeed self-directed. Nonetheless, Rzewski certainly learned excellent compositional technique during his school days, a technique which has underpinned his future work and imbued it, as Kathryn Woodard writes, with "the enduring structural characteristics of a Classical masterpiece."⁹⁹

There can be little doubt that figures other than Rzewski's major teachers helped him to acquire his compositional prowess, and it is possible to trace which people Rzewski may have importantly "linked up with" during his time at Harvard. Pollack posits that "associations with Claudio Spies and Christian Wolff proved much more satisfying" than Rzewski's relationship with his teachers,¹⁰⁰ a statement bolstered and evidenced by Rzewski's continuing friendship with Wolff.¹⁰¹ To Spies, Pollack attributes Rzewski's encounters with serialism, the subject of his undergraduate dissertation;¹⁰² Wolff, on the other hand, appears to have been responsible for Rzewski's exposure to Feldman and, crucially, Cage.¹⁰³ Along with Wolff and fellow classmate David Behrman, Rzewski "sponsored concerts more or

⁹⁵ *ibid.*

⁹⁶ Rockwell, *All American Music*, *ibid.*, p. 94

⁹⁷ Groemer, *ibid.*, p. 114

⁹⁸ Lewis, *ibid.*, pp. 82-83

⁹⁹ Woodard, *ibid.*, p. 457

¹⁰⁰ Pollack, *ibid.*, p. 371

¹⁰¹ Rzewski speaks to this friendship in his interview with Varela, *ibid.*

¹⁰² Pollack, *ibid.*, p. 371; the dissertation, concerned "largely with the philosophical implications of serialism from Schoenberg through Stockhausen," was entitled, "The Reappearance of Isorhythm in Modern Music" (*ibid.*, p. 371).

¹⁰³ *ibid.*, p. 371

less under Music Department auspices”¹⁰⁴ that featured music like Wolff’s: “startlingly far-out pieces that exploited a large array of chance techniques.”¹⁰⁵ Among the guests of these concerts were Morton Feldman and the pianist David Tutor.¹⁰⁶

Already, then, Rzewski’s musical education was diverse and significantly self-directed, including both the traditional teachings of his professors and the new, avant-garde aesthetics he learned from his peers—the latter of which became quite important in Rzewski’s later work and were “quite against the grain for this period at the University, where neo-classicism reigned supreme.”¹⁰⁷ Stylistic diversity has manifested itself in Rzewski’s music ever since, to the point where Rzewski has said, “I’ve spent my whole life looking for some kind of style that I can’t find. So yes, it changes all the time. I just decided a long time ago I don’t have a style.”¹⁰⁸ It is clear that Rzewski’s time at Harvard, both inside and outside the classroom, did indeed spur his stylistic growth, his musical independence, and his technical improvement. It probably also fostered, however indirectly, Rzewski’s self-directed experimentation with new compositional forms, something that seems to have remained important to him to the present day. It is less clear that important results came from his time at Princeton; little is written on the subject, and Rzewski, when asked if he had indeed studied with Roger Sessions and Milton Babbitt, replied, “Technically, yes”¹⁰⁹—the corollary to which seems to be, “Effectively, no.” Similarly, Rzewski’s time with Luigi Dallapiccola in Rome was unfruitful, though in this case Rzewski “regrets” that outcome and “attributes [it] to his own arrogance.”¹¹⁰

Though this dissertation is focused on Rzewski’s compositions, it is important to note that he is at least as well known for being a virtuoso pianist as he is for being a composer. In fact, in Beckman’s assessment, it is Rzewski’s life as a performer that “has brought him the most acclaim,”¹¹¹ and according to Steinitz, Rzewski is “one of the most phenomenal solo pianists of the contemporary

¹⁰⁴ *ibid.*, p. 372

¹⁰⁵ *ibid.*, pp. 371-372

¹⁰⁶ *ibid.*, p. 372

¹⁰⁷ Little, *ibid.*, p. 111

¹⁰⁸ Pamies, *ibid.*, p. 10

¹⁰⁹ Oteri, *ibid.*, p. 1

¹¹⁰ Little, *ibid.*, p. 112

¹¹¹ Beckman, *ibid.*, p. 3

repertoire.”¹¹² Where “little is known” about Rzewski’s music before 1966,”¹¹³ Rzewski actually became “almost as famous an interpreter of Cage, Wolff, and Stockhausen as Tutor” very quickly, by the mid-sixties, within the decade after Tutor had been invited to perform at Harvard by Rzewski.¹¹⁴ Nonetheless, surprisingly little has been written about Rzewski’s training as a pianist, and Rzewski has in fact suggested that he “didn’t practice that much,” never more than “two hours a day, and that was a lot.”¹¹⁵ Perhaps, much as was the case with his interests in chemistry, philosophy, and classics,¹¹⁶ Rzewski simply began by moving toward mastery in this discipline on his own. In any case, Rzewski’s virtuosity was a very important factor in his compositional growth from the sixties onward, and to this day Rzewski maintains that his relationship to the piano and his compositional process always “went together from the very beginning.”¹¹⁷

It is difficult to tell whether politics played an important role in these early years. Pollack writes that even in his high school days at Andover, Rzewski “protested McCarthyism,”¹¹⁸ but says little else on the subject. David Little summarizes his research into Rzewski’s political roots this way:

[Rzewski’s] parents... do not seem to have been especially progressive politically, and Rzewski’s earliest interests were strictly musical. Although today he doesn’t care to be called a “political composer,” he did have a unique early introduction to musical politics. As a boy he was exposed both [sic] the Marxism, modern music and—on some level—political music by his first serious piano teacher, Charles Mackey. An ardent Marxist, Mackey would “pepper his piano lessons with ideological examples”.... But although these political “seeds” were planted in Rzewski at an early age—he was around 13 at this time—it was not until much later that his works began to express explicitly political sentiments.¹¹⁹

It could indeed be the case that Rzewski’s political sentiments did not develop until later in his life. This hypothesis strengthened by Steinitz’s assertion, drawn from an interview with Rzewski, that the composer’s political awareness stemmed “from the student movement of the late sixties.”¹²⁰ Rzewski himself recalls an experience of

¹¹² Steinitz, *ibid.*, p. 11

¹¹³ Pollack, *ibid.*, p. 372

¹¹⁴ *ibid.*, p. 371

¹¹⁵ Gilmore, *ibid.*

¹¹⁶ *ibid.*

¹¹⁷ Oteri, *ibid.*, p. 6

¹¹⁸ Pollack, *ibid.*, p. 370

¹¹⁹ Little, *ibid.*, in a footnote on p. 111

¹²⁰ Steinitz, *ibid.*, p. 11; this view is also advocated in Zuraw, *ibid.*, p. 2

being “outflanked on the left by a supposedly uncultivated audience” during his time in Rome,¹²¹ which suggests not only that Rzewski had formative political experiences during his stay there, but also that his movement towards the left of center was not yet complete at that time. However, Christian Wolff has stated, “From the time I met [Rzewski] in 1956, he was very vocal in his viewpoints, which more often than not concerned left-wing politics.”¹²² If it is true that Rzewski “knew all about Marx before the rest of us had even read him,”¹²³ as Wolff claims, then Rzewski’s political views were at least partly entrenched by the time he arrived at Harvard. Whatever the case may be, if Rzewski was vociferously political before his stay in Rome, that ideology does not yet appear to have made its way into his music. The very fact that the biographical literature on Rzewski’s early life focuses primarily on his musical development, and not on his political views, is relevant to this discussion—indeed, it is entirely possible that Rzewski himself was also primarily focused on his musical craftsmanship during these early years, though of course that does not definitively mean he was not already thinking about melding the two.

It was in the early sixties, while Rzewski was ascending to fame as “a well-known performer of avant-garde piano works, especially in Europe,” that he began to “gain some notoriety” for his own compositions.¹²⁴ According to Pollack, there are four significant works from this period: *Three Rhapsodies for Two Slide Whistles* (1961), which “exhibited a Cagean interest in toy instruments,”¹²⁵ *Octet* (1961), which took influence from “intricate cueing games” in the music of Christian Wolff,¹²⁶ *Zoologischer Garten* (1965), Rzewski’s best known electronic work,¹²⁷ and *Nature Morte* (1965), a piece which Pollack suggests was influenced by both Boulez and Cage in terms of its instrumentation—Boulez, for the “novel” combination of instruments, including eight winds, violin, cello, electric organ, piano, harp, and “a vast percussion battery,”¹²⁸ and Cage for the prepared piano, the “tin cans, baby rattle,

¹²¹ Rzewski, *Nonsequiturs*, *ibid.*, p. 184

¹²² Schwartz, *ibid.*, p. AR34

¹²³ *ibid.*, p. AR34

¹²⁴ Pollack, *ibid.*, p. 372

¹²⁵ *ibid.*, p. 372

¹²⁶ Eric Salzman, as quoted in Pollack, *ibid.*, p. 372

¹²⁷ Pollack, *ibid.*, p. 372

¹²⁸ *ibid.*, p. 372

and toy horn” of the percussion battery, and the parts for transistor radios, phonograph, and vacuum cleaner.”¹²⁹

This period of Rzewski’s development is not often written about, but these pieces demonstrate an important point: Rzewski, though clearly experimental in his early compositional outlook, was not at first in any sense a ‘political’ composer. Instead, his earliest work evinces a Cagean interest in expanding the sound possibilities of concert pieces, emphasizing experimentation and musical curiosity. Remembering this fact helps to cast Rzewski’s subsequent work in a slightly different light, one more appropriate to the spirit of Rzewski’s art than the starkly political picture so often painted in the literature.

¹²⁹ *ibid.*, p. 373

Rzewski in Rome: MEV, and other music

“An art form which aims for highest efficiency in times of the highest urgency must be based on dialog. It must reject the possibility of the impartial observer, present but not involved in the communication process, as contradictory to the idea of communication itself.... Such an art form must be improvised, free to move in the present without burdening itself with the dead weight of the past.”¹³⁰

-Frederic Rzewski

The next significant phase of Rzewski’s musical life centers around MEV, or *Musica Elettronica Viva*, an avant-garde ensemble Rzewski helped to found in Rome in 1966.¹³¹ It is at this point that Rzewski’s compositional work “came to the fore,”¹³² and, perhaps not coincidentally, that he began “musical reflection on, and exploration of, the radical aesthetic and political themes” that came to be associated with him.¹³³ It is difficult to know exactly what precipitated Rzewski’s move towards composition and whether politics was in any way central to that decision; on the one hand, he has stated that he “became uncomfortable with just the idea of just [sic] being ‘Stockhausen’s piano player,’”¹³⁴ and he has also talked about the fact that the music of MEV, much of which he was responsible for writing, was “based on friendship.... communicated in the music.”¹³⁵ So there is certainly evidence to suggest that several non-political motivational factors were at work in this transition toward composition, both professional and personal. Furthermore, Rzewski is known for being an “accomplished improviser,”¹³⁶ and as “collective improvisation” was central to the mission of MEV,¹³⁷ the fluidity between performance and composition at this stage in Rzewski’s career may have increased the flow of musical and ideological ideas toward his compositional activity. Rzewski has observed that for him, group activity “tends to amplify all experiences, both the positive and negative ones,”¹³⁸ so it seems

¹³⁰ Rzewski, program notes for *Festival Internazionale del Teatro Universitario* (Parma, March 23, 1968), as quoted in Beal, *ibid.*, p. 99

¹³¹ Murray, *ibid.*

¹³² Pollack, *ibid.*, p. 373

¹³³ Gendron, *ibid.*, p. 560

¹³⁴ Rzewski, in the interview with Bob Gilmore, *ibid.*

¹³⁵ George E. Lewis, “Improvised Music after 1950: Afrological and Eurological Perspectives,” *Audio Culture*, ed. Christopher Cox and Daniel Warner, New York, N.Y.: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2004, p. 283

¹³⁶ Frank Abbinanti, “Proximity to Liberation,” *Contemporary Music Review*, Vol. 29, No. 6 (2010), p. 596

¹³⁷ Murray, *ibid.*

¹³⁸ Beal, *ibid.*, p. 129

possible that MEV's collective mission helped to accelerate his thinking about music, politics, and composition.

Not long before Rzewski founded MEV, he had actually considered giving up composition entirely. As he recounts,

One day in the early Sixties I said to Heinz-Klaus [Metzger] that I was thinking seriously of giving up composition. He looked at me sadly and said: If the problems of the world could be solved by giving up composition, then the world would be in a far better state. I kept on composing now with the idea that this meaningless activity might have some connection with the world.¹³⁹

This episode suggests two important conclusions: first, that Rzewski's fundamental interest in composition was established before he had the idea that it could be an activity "connected to the world;" Rzewski would not have come to see composition as a "meaningless activity," it would seem, if he had previously thought about it as importantly related to the philosophical and ideological tenants he held dear. Second, since Rzewski says he "kept on composing now" with a new outlook focused on connectivity, one can safely infer that much of his subsequent output was infused with and perhaps even motivated by this new outlook—an outlook in which compositions are connected to Rzewski's extramusical ideas and to his socially conscious ideology.

The mission and music of MEV certainly support the idea that these compositions were conceived with a strong connection to the outside world in mind. As David Bernstein writes, MEV initially "explored a form of free improvisation using live electronic music," but as it began to be increasingly "caught up in the whirlwind of radical politics shooting across Europe, MEV experimented with audience participation, brought its music into the streets, and performed in occupied universities and factories."¹⁴⁰ The political implications and left-wing ideology of these activities, focused as they are on the empowerment of the working class, are rather obvious; it should therefore come as no surprise that the MEV period was also the origin of Rzewski's "Parma Manifesto," the same "manifesto" discussed previously. In this text, Rzewski vocalized his belief that music, and specifically "improvised music," could help "to discover new forms of spontaneity and possibly save the human species from self-destruction."¹⁴¹ Rzewski still holds these beliefs today, as he has emphasized as recently as 2003, saying,

¹³⁹ Abbinanti, *ibid.*, p. 591

¹⁴⁰ Bernstein, *ibid.*, p. 535

¹⁴¹ Varela, *ibid.*

I think that these are not finished ideas and today.... when I see pictures of Israeli soldiers lying on the ground, covered of blood, [sic] I can't avoid asking myself why these soldiers do what they do. Or why the people of the other side do what they do. This [discovery of new forms of spontaneity, of relation to one another] is really necessary and I'm quite convinced that some kind of mature transformation of human behavior is absolutely necessary to save the species from self-destruction.¹⁴²

Here, then, Rzewski allows for the possibility that music making can serve as an important model for human behavior, one that may even prove necessary for survival. These views explain some of MEV's experiments with audience participation, among other things; after all, what better way to inculcate a socially transformative philosophy than to ask the audience to participate in its creation? Though Rzewski may sometimes "deadpan it" in his interviews, this quote seems to be far removed from that sort of attitude. It reads as an honest glimpse into the strong and radical beliefs Rzewski holds about the potential power of music.

Rzewski has unambiguously written that he believes the "free music" of the sixties was inextricably "connected with the many political movements which at that time set out to change the world: to free the world from the tyranny of outdated traditional forms."¹⁴³ He continues, writing, "Free improvisation was viewed as the possible basis for a new form of universal communication, through the spontaneous and wordless interaction of improvising musicians of different traditions."¹⁴⁴ At this period in his career, Rzewski believed collectively improvised music was a powerful tool which helped to quickly model new modes of relating people to one another in a time of "very rapid transitions, in which older models guiding behavior collapsed and were in crisis."¹⁴⁵ Therefore, for Rzewski the very act of improvisation was politically significant, as it was a way to pioneer new "mature" forms of human behavior and to cast off traditional social habits. The broadening of this practice to include the participation of audiences seems in some ways just a natural extension of this socially-minded ideology of improvisation.

Through MEV, which Rzewski co-founded with Alvin Curran and Richard Teitelbaum,¹⁴⁶ Rzewski was able to freely explore experimental improvisatory music. He was undoubtedly spurred forward by his own ideology of improvisation and by

¹⁴² *ibid.*

¹⁴³ Rzewski, *Nonsequiturs*, p. 56

¹⁴⁴ *ibid.*, p. 56

¹⁴⁵ Varela, *ibid.*

¹⁴⁶ Murray, *ibid.*

the energy of group activity, but there seems to have been another crucial factor in Rzewski's ideological development during this time: namely, the influence of the radical "hard liners" at the far left of Rome's student movement. Rzewski suggests that MEV sometimes played for this clientele "against our will," and the radicals do seem to have been a tough crowd—at concerts, even concerts of the kind of experimental music MEV engaged in, these students would apparently confront the performers with questions like, "Why are you guys trying to dish out this elitist stuff? We're only interested in people's music."¹⁴⁷ As Rzewski puts it, MEV therefore "had to have some kind of response."¹⁴⁸ Interestingly, this suggests that MEV's move towards overt political activism was not entirely ideologically motivated, but instead was in some capacity a very practical, almost necessary response to the politically charged environment in which MEV found themselves. In the present discussion, this is particularly relevant because it suggests that Rzewski's own compositional thinking, especially once removed from that politically charged environment, may well have moved slightly away from overtly political subjects; if that is indeed the case,¹⁴⁹ it is unfair to judge the entirety of Rzewski's subsequent output as patently political. Indeed, as David Little sees it, Rzewski was more or less "forced" to interact with "the political components of music" during this time period,¹⁵⁰ and though this interaction had a lasting impact on Rzewski's music, it by no means shaped his entire relationship to politics or political music. At the very least, a moment's pause is required before Rzewski is labeled as just a "political composer,"¹⁵¹ even if it remains true that he wanted his music to be connected to the world at large.¹⁵²

Some writers have tended to overly romanticize MEV's political mission during this period, rarely giving weight to the purely practical aspect of their stated political allegiances. Amy C. Beal, as just one example, writes that for MEV "free music—and freeing music and musicians—became an ideological as well as an

¹⁴⁷ Gilmore, *ibid.*

¹⁴⁸ *ibid.*

¹⁴⁹ It certainly seems to be—Gendron, writing on p. 565, *ibid.*, suggests that only "approximately 60%" of the 23 Rzewski works composed during his New York residency in the 1970s—ostensibly his "most concentrated period of political composition"—are "political in semantic content."

¹⁵⁰ Little, *ibid.*, p. 112

¹⁵¹ As is suggested in Rockwell, *All American Music*, *ibid.*, Kodhn, *ibid.*, Nyman, *ibid.*, and many other sources.

¹⁵² So, for example, did Beethoven, but his oeuvre is not categorized as political just because some of his major works—including the *Eroica* and the *Ninth Symphony*—were likely conceived as having some connection to political happenings in Europe.

aesthetic obsession.”¹⁵³ Considering the context, “obsession” seems a bit strong here, especially when one takes into account the group’s experience of being “outflanked on the left.” Beal does, however, allow for the hypothesis that it was only “gradually” that MEV “came to believe [in] music’s potential as a catalyst for revolutionary action”¹⁵⁴— a scenario that seems fairly likely given the fact pattern. In any case, while it is certain that MEV participated in “direct action events (protest, prison performances, benefits, etc.),”¹⁵⁵ it is difficult to know how central this was to Rzewski’s own thinking. Consider, for instance, this letter he wrote to John Cage, in which Rzewski reports,

We have been working in the direction of ‘audience participation.’ People *do* want to play. Some interesting evenings at our studio with twenty-five to thirty people playing. Some joyful noisemaking. Children too. We call it ‘Soup.’ Also we’ve been playing in factories and prisons.¹⁵⁶

The above letter reads rather tellingly, and it is significant that Rzewski even sought to reach out to Cage, the quintessential experimentalist, to report back on the activities of MEV. Here, improvisation and audience participation—experimental compositional elements not entirely foreign to Rzewski’s early work—appear to be central to Rzewski’s musical thinking, while the factory and prison work, which were no doubt politically important to Rzewski, seem less notable—almost an afterthought, even, in the rhetoric above.

While no conclusion can be reliably inferred from this one letter alone, much of Rzewski’s other writing appears to support the idea that experimentalism, rather than politics, was at the core of his mission with MEV, even when that experimentalism took on political significance. Rzewski has identified the “basic idea” of MEV as one of “interpreting the moment, rather than constructing repeatable programmes: creating meaningful rituals, not images: becoming involved with the process, the operation, and not the result of it, or its effects on people.”¹⁵⁷ Thus, we see that for Rzewski the work of MEV was about the concert “ritual” itself, about a new level of spontaneity and a new set of compositional and improvisational processes. He writes here that he was not primarily interested in the music’s direct

¹⁵³ Beal, *ibid.*, p. 107

¹⁵⁴ *ibid.*, p. 101

¹⁵⁵ *ibid.*, pp. 112-113

¹⁵⁶ *ibid.*, p. 112

¹⁵⁷ As quoted in Nyman, *ibid.*, p. 129

effect on its audience—an idea he has corroborated elsewhere¹⁵⁸—but instead the compositional and improvisational processes *per se*, and the ways in which they could function meaningfully, and perhaps politically, in and of themselves: as rituals, as processes, as models for human behavior, as he specifies in his “manifesto,” but definitively not as results-oriented propaganda.

Such a view of MEV’s output does not deny that much of their work was political to a certain degree. As co-founder Alvin Curran has written, MEV undoubtedly focused on “turning the hall and its audience into one roaring out-of-control piece of ‘people’s music,’”¹⁵⁹ and there were sometimes upwards of 300-400 audience members making noises along with MEV at their concerts.¹⁶⁰ Certainly the breaking down of traditional, “elitist” concert music hierarchies—something MEV’s improvisatory, participatory concerts unambiguously did, whether or not Rzewski is always forthcoming about that fact¹⁶¹—had an important impact on the audiences present and did indeed carry a more general political import. But it must be stressed that it was only by creating participatory musical structures that Rzewski and the other MEV musicians attempted, insofar as they made an attempt, to “liberate music making” and to “help intensify the struggle against elite institutions and their stronghold on culture.”¹⁶² The structure of the music was itself the radical element, with nothing extramusical attached—an interesting synthesis of music *qua* music and music *qua* politics.

This idea ties back into Rzewski’s belief that the process of improvisation itself is an inherently important act. Rzewski says, “improvisation tells us: ‘Anything is possible—anything can be changed—now.’”¹⁶³ In other words, just the act of improvisation leads to the development of some kind of political awareness, at least in

¹⁵⁸ See Schwarz, *ibid.*, p. AR34: Rzewski is quoted here as saying, “A composer can’t think about whether he reaches 15 people or 15,000, and especially not while he is writing the music.” See also Rzewski, interview with Bruce Duffie, 1995; URL: <http://www.kcstudio.com/rzewski2.html>; Rzewski is quoted here as saying that even some of his later work, like his piano music, is written not for the listening audience, but rather “for other pianists.” See also Curran, *ibid.*, p. 631, where Curran stresses Rzewski’s view that “new music *per se*” is importantly separate from “the socioeconomic forces that control the global music industry,” reinforcing the notion that for Rzewski, the music itself is of primary importance.

¹⁵⁹ Curran, *ibid.*, p. 628

¹⁶⁰ Pollack, *ibid.*, p. 377

¹⁶¹ Rzewski, in his interview with Oteri, *ibid.*, is quoted as having said “I don’t know... I can’t think of any examples where I’ve broken down any hierarchies.”

¹⁶² Beal, *ibid.*, p. 101

¹⁶³ Rzewski, *Nonsequiturs*, *ibid.*, p. 64

the sense of finding ways to change, or to develop new relations to other people. Rzewski explains, “This idea can also be found in many of the early anarchist thinkers: Kropotkin, for instance.”¹⁶⁴ Simply encouraging people to interact in new ways through improvisation can be profoundly productive in Rzewski’s mind because he believes “the world can be changed without having to change human nature,”¹⁶⁵ that “humans are perfectly all right the way they are.”¹⁶⁶ Thus, in Rzewski’s framework, the music of MEV performed a political function through the compositional-improvisational act itself, independent of any extramusical program or any measurable political outcomes.

This view of MEV’s output helps to explain Rzewski’s constant focus on musical structure, even in the context of collective improvisation. As Rzewski puts it,

Whatever structures we built were like musical instruments, flexible and maneuverable, and the music was in the playing of them. Composition became the preparation of schemes for improvisation, the construction of platforms of scaffoldings from which the performer could take off and fly, or to which he could return as a place of rest.¹⁶⁷

The “scores” for these early pieces sometimes feature text only, conceived as they were as concept pieces, as “scaffoldings” for improvisation. In an important sense, these pieces comprise nothing but a structure, “flexible and maneuverable,” that can be played. Pollack mentions three such early concept pieces from 1968:¹⁶⁸ *Street Music*, which involves “many performers” using portable sound sources and interacting with them in specified ways;¹⁶⁹ *Symphony*, which asks “several performers” to use their voices and “a few simple instruments” to produce just two sounds, “a low, continuous drone and a higher, ornamental melody;”¹⁷⁰ and *Plan for Spacecraft*, which deserves a bit of sustained attention, as it is the “best known work” of this bunch.¹⁷¹

In *Plan for Spacecraft*, a work comprised only of a text instructing players how to improvise, Rzewski creates a conceptual world where “each performer

¹⁶⁴ *ibid.*, p. 64

¹⁶⁵ *ibid.*, p. 64

¹⁶⁶ *ibid.*, p. 64

¹⁶⁷ As quoted in Asplund, *ibid.*, p. 433

¹⁶⁸ Pollack, *ibid.*, p. 377; some sources date *Plan for Spacecraft* to 1969, the date of its publication (see Rzewski, *Nonsequiturs*, *ibid.*, p. 326).

¹⁶⁹ *ibid.*, p. 377

¹⁷⁰ *ibid.*, p. 377

¹⁷¹ Paul, *ibid.*, p. 31

considers his own situation as a sort of labyrinth.”¹⁷² In other words, every musician “begins by making music in his own way.”¹⁷³ As Rzewski explains, “The result is chaos: a great tumult and confusion of sound.”¹⁷⁴ In this piece, the “object of the music-making is to escape from the labyrinth,”¹⁷⁵ overcoming the chaotic, individually focused music of the work’s opening. To do so requires the recognition of a “secret,” Rzewski tells his reader. “The secret... is that the way out is not forwards or backwards, to the left or to the right, but up,” he writes. “To go up it is necessary to fly. The musician must grow wings and enter into someone else’s labyrinth.”¹⁷⁶ According to the framework of the piece, this flight of collective music making either takes place immediately, “as if by magic,” or else it is “arrived at after a natural and necessary duration, through work”—the difference between “magic” and “work” in this conception being just “one of duration;”¹⁷⁷ either can ultimately result in an escape from the “labyrinth,” a successful transition to collaborative music-making. Though Rzewski is adamant that “it is possible to transform a negative condition [a lack of “magic” or initially unsuccessful “work”] into a positive one,” he leaves open the possibility that an escape from the labyrinth is “never found at all.” In this case, the result of the piece “will be acceptable as the first two, because of its excellence; but with the difference that it communicates sadness, whereas the others were Joyous.”¹⁷⁸ On its face, then, *Spacecraft* offers a vivid, but not terribly unusual framework for improvisation—players begin playing separate music, but seek to eventually transcend that initial condition by playing together—and transcendence, of course, is a musical goal that stretches back at least as far as the Romanics.

Still, there are seeds for extramusical meaning planted here. In this musical situation, individuals must learn to cooperate as an ensemble if they are to “escape” the labyrinth, or the chaos and confusion of the work’s opening sound mass. Analysts eager to point to extramusical meaning will quickly jump at the idea that this piece has a Marxist underpinning, emphasizing as it does the power and importance of collective action. This is a tenable reading, but it is important to recognize how general Rzewski’s language is throughout the text—the imagery of flight, for

¹⁷² Rzewski, “Plan for *Spacecraft* (1967),” International Improvised Music Archive

¹⁷³ *ibid.*

¹⁷⁴ *ibid.*

¹⁷⁵ *ibid.*

¹⁷⁶ *ibid.*

¹⁷⁷ *ibid.*

¹⁷⁸ *ibid.*

example, somewhat complicates any efforts to read this piece as simple political allegory. If escape from the labyrinth was directly correlated with, for example, an ideology of collective revolt against traditional power structures, why not call the piece “The People’s Revolution,” or some such name, instead of “Spacecraft?” A wealth of other diverse imagery appears in the rest of the text, as well. Attempts to unify the music may result in “magic;” or, instead, each performer remains an “atom,” in which case she must begin to “emanate feelers toward other atoms,” and a “giant molecule” can then take form “out of Nothing;” if such a thing happens, this scientific imagery gives way, and religious imagery results: Rzewski writes, “The spirit, endowed with grace, will ascend from the body... and become one with the atmosphere in vibration.” If that, in turn, comes to pass, then the music will transition from “occupied” space to “created” space, invoking political imagery; or, instead, there might first be a struggle, with “open war” and militaristic imagery abounding; or, contrary to all this, “silent hatred” might come over a performer, in which case the performer must “return to zero” and “identify with Nothing,”¹⁷⁹ enacting instructions with a Zen Buddhist flavor. If the group fails, in the end, to reach the transcendent goal of the piece, the performers must communicate that “the air is charged with stupidity, complacency, inaction, slavery; it is poisonous, and we have to be fully aware of its loathsomeness. The music which sets in now must necessarily be demonic, because demons are everywhere.”¹⁸⁰ In the final passage of the text, Rzewski likens an escape from the initial situation of the piece to an “exorcism,” which intensifies and complicates the other political, scientific, and spiritual imagery of the text. These disjunctive, or at least highly charged and diverse sets of imagery serve to make the piece indecipherable on some level—not incomprehensible, necessarily, but certainly inherently vague and difficult to parse.

As a result, the text for *Spacecraft* can and has been interpreted in a multiplicity of ways. No doubt its religious imagery inspires the likes of Sid Samberg and Andrew Love, who cast Rzewski as a shamanic figure.¹⁸¹ Howard Pollack, on the other hand, ignores the work’s complex imagery in favor of a simple explanation of its procedure, and as a result, he describes a failure to reach collective music-making as a “drift ‘into nothingness,’” a sterile phrase that hardly captures the poison, fire,

¹⁷⁹ *ibid.*

¹⁸⁰ *ibid.*

¹⁸¹ See Samberg, *ibid.*, and Love, *ibid.*

and brimstone of Rzewski's own description of a failure to launch.¹⁸² Michael Nyman reads this piece as one concerned with "the process of struggle"¹⁸³ and "liberation,"¹⁸⁴ and he definitively concludes that its intent is to liberate both the performer and the audience from "the shackles of elitism."¹⁸⁵ Christian Asplund differs from these authors, repudiating the possibility for simple interpretation by admitting that *Spacecraft* "seems fit to model any and all of the struggles, failures, and victories that human beings have experienced and will experience,"¹⁸⁶ being as it is "rich with analogy" and capable of supporting many different narrative interpretations.¹⁸⁷ Asplund's view comes closest to my own; the richness of this text seems to preclude attempts like Nyman's to reduce the piece's meaning to one specific, particular goal. And although Rzewski writes that the audience contributes to the process of this piece "either by producing sound, or by remaining silent," this is not a sufficient condition for presuming the piece is meant to liberate an audience, as Nyman does.

Nevertheless, it is still possible to be a bit more specific about the purpose of *Spacecraft*. Surely this work taps into Rzewski's desire to find new models for social behavior through music making and improvisation, as evidenced by its sustained focus on the relationship between the different performers in the ensemble—in fact, *Spacecraft* may be Rzewski's most direct musical exploration of the ideas set forth in the "Parma Manifesto." It is also notable in that its very structure is the conveyor of both its musical and potential extramusical meanings. On some level, *Spacecraft* clearly involves a breaking down of hierarchies within the ritual of the concert hall itself, but it appears to me to be an inherently experimental work. It models new kinds of relationships between performers, but in a way perhaps more similar to the work of John Cage than that of, say, Cornelius Cardew—it is more musically oriented than politically motivated, in other words, connected though it may be to diverse imagery from the world at large.

¹⁸² Pollack, *ibid.*, p. 378

¹⁸³ Nyman, *ibid.*, p. 129

¹⁸⁴ *ibid.*, p. 130

¹⁸⁵ *ibid.*, p. 130

¹⁸⁶ Asplund, *ibid.*, p. 425

¹⁸⁷ *ibid.*, p. 427. Asplund gives an example of such an interpretation, writing, "In our scenario of a group of individuals on the brink of opposing those who oppress them, they either find that the oppressor fights back, in which case they must struggle and sacrifice, or perhaps they find that the group will dissipates [sic], or that it never existed in the first place, or that they do not know how to proceed. In this situation they must go back and reaccumulate a consensus..." Asplund continues on in this vein, reading each juncture in the piece as specific to the sample narrative he constructs.

Spacecraft helps to demonstrate that issues of political interpretation are often quite complicated when it comes to Rzewski's output. Unfortunately, in the current literature, this complexity is often brushed aside, eventually hidden beneath a veneer of academic authority. While reaching concrete conclusions is, in some sense, the job of academic interpreters, assertions too narrow or confident can serve to oversimplify the character of Rzewski's output, fitting square peg to round hole and ultimately solidifying certain conjectural notions about the political goals of Rzewski's music. Ultimately, this process appears to have led to the hardening of preconceptions about Rzewski's compositional intent, particularly as it pertains to his politics. Rzewski's work is particularly rich and enigmatic, and the political goals of any one of his works are often quite difficult to discern, as *Spacecraft* demonstrates. It is important to remember that Rzewski's fundamental goal as an artist seems to have been, in all cases, to write—as he says—“good music.”¹⁸⁸ Even if “you can't exclude the possibility that [music] might have some influence on people's behavior,” he adds, “nobody knows” what kind of impact a work of art might have on an audience.¹⁸⁹ This truth seems to have been evident to Rzewski from the beginning of his artistic endeavor, and so it is important not to cast him as a primarily political figure or to bring political assumptions to the project of studying his work.

Beal concludes her discussion of MEV by writing,

In assessing MEV's activism during a period of just under three years, it would appear that their participation in direct action events (protests, prison performances, benefits, etc.) were [sic] more effective than the more experimental “research” (as Lacy described it) of pieces like *Soup* and *Soundpool*, which aimed to eradicate social boundaries by allowing all people to become musicians in whatever way they desired.¹⁹⁰

Such an assessment is problematic, however: to judge MEV's accomplishments under the rubric of political efficacy is to judge them by an external criterion, not one the musicians themselves held, and not one which seems appropriate to the music at hand. Furthermore, though this is not in any way to devalue the careful historical scholarship provided by Beal—who, to her credit, appropriately classifies *Spacecraft*, *Soup*, and *Soundpool* as “research” pieces—it bears mentioning that an approach to the evaluation of music that focuses on audience impact, even if the music in question

¹⁸⁸ Pamies, *ibid.*

¹⁸⁹ *ibid.*

¹⁹⁰ Beal, *ibid.*, pp. 112-113

has been labeled “political music,” appears somewhat short-sighted. Rzewski’s works are still, after all, attracting critical attention today, and many are still being performed. Might it not be the case that their inherent musical interest and their experimental nature have allowed them to outlive any specific political cause they may have been initially been inspired by? In the long run, such effects can, at least in theory, be as politically impactful as those that influence more people over a shorter amount of time. By remaining relevant beyond the date of their publication, works like these can gradually accumulate a significance far less temporary.

Beal claims that *Soup* and *Soundpool* were focused on audience impact because they “aimed to eradicate social boundaries;” in reality, however, these pieces seem quite unlikely to have been intended for such a result. While it is true that both pieces involve audience participation and that in *Soup*, “Rzewski invites the audience to bring instruments and play with MEV, whose members should try to ‘relate to each other and to people and act as naturally and free as possible, without the odious role-playing ceremony of traditional concerts,”¹⁹¹ it is important to recognize that such deconstruction of rituals in the concert hall does not inherently demonstrate a desire nor an attempt to “eradicate social boundaries” in the world at large. It is also important to remember that Rzewski was writing these works in a political climate very hostile to the aforementioned “odious role-playing” of traditional concerts, and he may well have played up his rhetoric due to contextual necessity. After all, Rzewski’s own musical life remained situated in the concert hall for many years afterwards, and he has shown no active antipathy to his role as a virtuoso performer in traditional concert settings.

Though scholars have often gravitated towards the political aspects of Rzewski’s music, several of his works have also escaped political analysis entirely. One such example is *Les Moutons de Panurge*, Rzewski’s first “real success”¹⁹² in the realm of composition. Written in 1969, the work shares some important characteristics with Rzewski’s other music for MEV: it has an indeterminate number of players, it invites audience participation, and it consists simply of a melody and a set of instructions, making it yet another example of structure *qua* music. The instructions in this score are very short, specifying only that players are to read the

¹⁹¹ Nyman, *ibid.*, p. 131

¹⁹² Pollack, *ibid.*, p. 377

notes from left to right in an additive pattern¹⁹³ and that they should “never stop or falter” and should “always play loud.” Rzewski instructs, “Stay together as long as you can, but if you get lost, stay lost.”¹⁹⁴ As it is somewhat difficult to read musical notation in this unconventional way, my own performance experience and others’ suggests that it is nearly “impossible” to play *Moutons* without getting lost at some point,¹⁹⁵ which is surely what Rzewski intended—the aural result is a heterophonic layering of musicians following a tune, combined with whatever noises the audience might be making. The audience in this work is “invited to make sound, any sound, preferably very loud,”¹⁹⁶ so Rzewski expects some chaos here: he writes, “The nonmusicians have a *leader*, whom they may follow or not.... Any variations are possible. Suggested theme for nonmusicians: ‘The left hand doesn’t know what the right is doing.’”¹⁹⁷

Asplund, though he includes *Moutons de Panurge* in his article on Rzewski’s “Spontaneous Political Music,” does not offer a specific political reading of the piece. He comes close, offering his own personal experience of playing the work:

After a time, quirky canons start to form.... You begin to recognize the beauty of the counterpoint you are producing and the boldness of your actions and you take pride in your exploit. Although you are not in the same place as other members of the ensemble, you realize you are going in the same direction at the same speed; you are playing with the same eighth-note pulse and you suddenly realize how undifferentiated this pulse is. It is not subdivided nor is it grouped into larger units, yet it is adhered to by all, including the nonmusicians.¹⁹⁸

Asplund seems to be reaching for a political reading here, sensing the possibility for extramusical meaning in the periphery, but unable to say anything definitive. It would be possible, of course, to extrapolate extramusical import from Asplund’s experience—perhaps the undifferentiated pulse represents a fundamental humanity, and the eradication of the distinction between musicians and nonmusicians Asplund implies might serve as a signal to break down other social barriers. However, Asplund likely avoids drawing political conclusions because none are sufficiently well

¹⁹³ Playing the first note, then the first and second, then the first through third, and so on.

¹⁹⁴ Rzewski, *Les Moutons de Panurge* (1969), score, *IMSLP*

¹⁹⁵ Asplund echoes this sentiment, going as far to say “it is impossible for an ensemble to stay absolutely together throughout the course of such a structure” (Asplund, *ibid.*, p. 424).

¹⁹⁶ Rzewski, *Moutons de Panurge*, *ibid.*

¹⁹⁷ *ibid.*

¹⁹⁸ Asplund, *ibid.*, p. 424

supported, and it is worth remembering also that Asplund's experience is a secondary reaction to the terse primary text of the work. Michael Nyman also avoids political interpretation of *Moutons de Panurge*, approaching the piece quite differently than Asplund. Nyman argues that the work is "making use of 'hidden resources' in the sense of natural individual differences (rather than talents or abilities) which is [an approach often] completely neglected in classical concert music."¹⁹⁹ Presumably, the "hidden resource" Nyman refers to is the sheer number of players in the ensemble able to play separate heterophonic lines, such that "individual differences" give rise to the resultant sound of the work. But Nyman limits his investigation to the novel musical structure of *Moutons*, finding enough in its inventive musical machinery to conclude his investigation without a discussion of politics.

This lack of political analysis is particularly interesting given that *Moutons de Panurge* seems to belong to the same general family of pieces as *Spacecraft*, *Soundpool*, and *Soup*: all call for audience participation, all consist of imaginative musical scaffolding, and all encourage audience participation, eschewing traditional concert hall hierarchies. Given this fact, and recalling how difficult it was, for example, to actually read specific political meaning into the structure of *Spacecraft*, might it not be reasonable to approach all of Rzewski's early MEV work as structural experimentation, sometimes inflected by politics, but fundamentally musically motivated? As Nyman demonstrates, these pieces are not devoid of interesting musical and conceptual features, so there is no need to force political readings upon them to generate meaning. Though Rzewski's relationship to his art at large is clearly informed by his politics, it might behoove the scrupulous analyst to read Rzewski's other MEV works in the way analysts have read *Moutons de Panurge*: as experimental music making first, and as a potential metaphor for politics only second.

This is not to deny, however, that Rzewski's music is importantly tied into his own personal ideology. Rzewski does seem to think that the improvisational and participatory elements of his music with MEV were both somewhat politically effective, just in and of themselves. Through them, Rzewski writes, "The musician takes on a new function: he is no longer the mythical star, elevated to a sham glory and authority, but rather an unseen worker, using his skill to help others less prepared

¹⁹⁹ Nyman, *ibid.*, p. 6

than he to experience the miracle.”²⁰⁰ Here again Rzewski demonstrates his interest in changing concert hall hierarchies. While it has been tempting to extend this reasoning one step farther to conclude that Rzewski is using the concert hall as a metaphor for broader society, he himself reminds us that “the politics of the art world tends to be fairly irrelevant to politics in general... [and] the kind of art which satisfies the political world is often pretty feeble as art.”²⁰¹ He maintains, however, that an “effective combination of the two, is nonetheless, theoretically possible.”²⁰² The Rzewski of the early MEV years might have believed his music to be this kind of effective combination—it is difficult to know—but his subsequent output demonstrates that he is even today still “perpetually searching” for an answer to the question of whether “art music and politics [can] successfully mix.”²⁰³

It was only later in his life, possibly jaded by the lack of ultimate social transformation beyond the sixties, that Rzewski explicitly hinted at the failure of MEV and movements like it to assist in any lasting sociopolitical change. He writes, “This movement had neither the time nor the resources to carry this research very far, precisely because its success depended upon changing the world, something that did not happen, and could not have happened at the time.”²⁰⁴ As has been made clear, Rzewski’s compositional goals, even during the MEV years, were not primarily to effect change in his audience, and so he is not necessarily commenting on the success of his own pieces. Interestingly, however, Rzewski leaves open the door for future social change with this remark—he does not definitively say such change “cannot happen,” and ultimately, he has not budged from his belief that music making can be an important part of sociopolitical development in the world. He writes, just a few lines later—this in the year 2000—that “if there ultimately is some kind of peaceful transition to more generous forms of social organization, music, and specifically improvised music, will play an important role in this process, as it has done in the past.”²⁰⁵ Surely, MEV is included in “the past” Rzewski refers to, and so the time spent here illuminating Rzewski’s views about the political import of MEV’s music will remain relevant to the examination of his future work. It has been shown here,

²⁰⁰ As quoted in Samberg, *ibid.*, p. 662

²⁰¹ As quoted in Little, *ibid.*, p. 113

²⁰² *ibid.*, p. 113

²⁰³ *ibid.*, p. 110

²⁰⁴ Rzewski, *Nonsequiturs*, *ibid.*, p. 56

²⁰⁵ *ibid.*, p. 65

though, that Rzewski does not offer one simple model for how music might influence politics, and while he certainly wrote music for MEV that in some ways expressed his personal political ideology, it would be a mistake to conclude that political impact was the primary source of motivation behind these works. The relationship between music and politics, for Rzewski, is more significantly more complex than that.

As Bernard Gendron observes, “Rzewski [during his time with MEV] produced a repertoire of political compositions that effectively reach out to audiences without abandoning the ideals of the avant-garde”—something Gendron calls a “signal achievement.”²⁰⁶ It is unclear whether he means early pieces such as *Spacecraft*, in which case this achievement that was earned through a novel and uncompromisingly avant-garde treatment of musical structure, or whether he might mean slightly later works, ones which are overtly political—Gendron does, after all, call *Jefferson*, written in 1970, Rzewski’s “first political piece,”²⁰⁷ which would seem to rule out the former possibility. Indeed, some of Rzewski’s later works during the MEV period, including *Jefferson*, *Coming Together* (1972), and *Attica* (1972), developed in a slightly new direction: Rzewski uses political texts in these pieces to directly tie extramusical semantic content to their musical materials. *Jefferson* references the Declaration of Independence,²⁰⁸ while *Coming Together* and *Attica* are both direct responses to the 1971 riot at the Attica prison in New York in which nine guards and thirty-one prisoners were killed by a government-ordered military strike; each work sets a text spoken by one of the prisoners.²⁰⁹ Rzewski wrote other pieces with political text during this period, as well: “Struggle (1973), with words by Frederick Douglass; Apolitical Intellectuals (1973), on a poem by Otto Rene Castillo, a Guatemalan poet tortured by the repressive [governmental] regime, and Lullaby: God To A Hungry Child (1973), on a poem by Langston Hughes.”²¹⁰ Yet even these works, which have irrefutable political significance by virtue of their text, are complicated syntactically: Alvin Curran notes that “text is never mere verbal transliteration of [Rzewski’s] composing or vice versa;”²¹¹ Ronald Lewis observes

²⁰⁶ Both quotes from Gendron, *ibid.*, p. 557

²⁰⁷ *ibid.*, p. 567

²⁰⁸ *ibid.*, p. 568

²⁰⁹ Pollack, *ibid.*, pp. 380-381

²¹⁰ Gendron, *ibid.*, p. 568

²¹¹ Curran, *ibid.*, p. 627

that often, “the music and the text are somewhat contradictory;”²¹² and Gendron writes that several critics have “worried” about the relation of Rzewski’s music to its political text as a result.²¹³ All the same, Gendron’s overall assessment is apt, as it places equal emphasis on Rzewski’s political ideology and his musical artistry.

These text pieces bridge the gap between the early MEV years and Rzewski’s next phase of composition, based around an aesthetic he calls “humanist realism.” But the legacy of MEV has remained important in Rzewski’s musical life through all of his periods of development. Bernstein writes that “Rzewski’s early experiences with MEV would ultimately lead him to a lifelong commitment to musical activism,”²¹⁴ a statement that is hard to argue with in broad form, though it has been shown that “musical activism” should not be taken to directly correlate with the concept of political activism. Gendron notes that several themes in Rzewski’s later music were clearly birthed during his time with MEV, including “the concern for communication with audiences in a non-elitist fashion, [and] the search for ‘the sounds of new voices,’ initially through the jazz avant-garde and the words of poets, activists, prisoners and later, in *The People United* and *North American Ballads* (1979), through folk songs or popular folk-like songs.”²¹⁵ MEV also seems to have shaped some of Rzewski’s specific views about music, such as his assertion that “a piece of instrumental music can easily assume political qualities simply because of the objective factors present in the environment at the time of its performance.”²¹⁶ Though written in 1983, this kind of assertion seems to come directly out of Rzewski’s experience in Rome, where the political environment of the time clearly and consistently affected the kind of music MEV was producing.

Indeed, the understanding of extramusical context that Rzewski seems to have honed during his time with MEV has clearly played a role in some of his later compositional endeavors—*The People United Will Never Be Defeated!*, for example, was written for a performance celebrating the American bicentennial, and Rzewski justified this choice by writing, “I had been commissioned to write a piano work which should, if possible have some bearing on the American Revolution. One of the basic themes of the American revolution is the right of the people to determine their

²¹² Lewis, *ibid.*, p. 68

²¹³ Gendron, *ibid.*, p. 569

²¹⁴ Bernstein, *ibid.*, p. 535

²¹⁵ Gendron, *ibid.*, p. 572

²¹⁶ Rzewski, *Nonsequiturs*, *ibid.*, p. 200

own destiny.”²¹⁷ It is not difficult to see how subversive Rzewski is being here, though; *The People United!* is based, as has been mentioned, on a Chilean folk song—a folk song associated with the democratically elected, Marxist Allende regime in Chile that was overthrown, possibly with help from the U.S. government, in 1973.²¹⁸ Rzewski, just by taking a cue from his MEV days and writing a piece precisely intended for “the objective factors present in the environment” at the time of *The People United*’s premiere, managed to turn a set of variations on a popular tune into a scathing and unmistakable political critique. As Gendron reminds us, however, “even in Rzewski’s political music... there are other important compositional issues at work, which have a life of their own,”²¹⁹ and it is in that spirit that this dissertation continues, turning a political and a musical lens onto later writings and works by Rzewski.

²¹⁷ As quoted in Steinitz, *ibid.*, p. 11

²¹⁸ For more information, see Jessica Lynne Madsen, “Music as Metaphor: A Study of the Political Inspiration Behind Frederic Rzewski’s 36 Variations on ‘*¡El pueblo unido jamás será vencido!*,’” doctoral dissertation, University of Cincinnati, 2003

²¹⁹ Gendron, *ibid.*, p. 566

Rzewski's humanist realism: melodic quotation and political intent

“[Through] the synthesis of newly acquired techniques with older traditions.... it becomes possible, for the first time, to speak seriously of a possible ‘world music,’ turning the ancient utopian idea of music as a ‘universal language’ into a reality.”²²⁰

-Frederic Rzewski

Rzewski, perhaps reacting to the shifting political climate of the 1970s, began to view his artistic project slightly differently after the early MEV years. Gendron characterizes this shift by quoting Rzewski, writing, “No longer a ‘time for great gestures and monumental deeds,’ it was now ‘a time for slow and quiet work, for the laying of careful plans, and the acceptance of longer durations.’”²²¹ During this period, Rzewski's ideals remained similar to those he had held with MEV, but he changed course significantly by starting to “explore improvisation and political themes primarily through the medium of composition”²²² rather than collective improvisation. Rzewski developed a new ideological paradigm for his music during this period, as well, which he has called his “realist,” or “humanist realist” approach. He defines this type of composition as a “conscious employment of techniques which are designed to establish communication, rather than alienate an audience.”²²³ Though establishing communication with an audience was by no means new to Rzewski's music at this point in his career, both the tools he used to achieve this communication and the audience he was communicating to changed significantly during the 1970s.

Rzewski's definition of “realism” as a conscious effort to communicate sounds simple, but it raises several questions. Rzewski makes some of these explicit at various points in his own writing, such as, “Can [new music ever] communicate with ordinary people? And if so, can it serve to heighten people's consciousness?”²²⁴ Rzewski's interest in “people's consciousness” here is telling, in that his “realism” is undoubtedly about not just communication, but rather a particular type of communication, one intended to raise awareness in his listeners—perhaps awareness about a political cause, or a disenfranchised group of people, or injustice inherent in a

²²⁰ Rzewski, *Nonsequiturs*, *ibid.*, p. 140

²²¹ Gendron, *ibid.*, p. 560

²²² *ibid.*, p. 560

²²³ As quoted in Rockwell, *All American Music*, *ibid.*, p. 89; Little, *ibid.*, p. 114, and other sources.

²²⁴ Rzewski, *Nonsequiturs*, *ibid.*, p. 196

given sociopolitical system.²²⁵ Rzewski is also genuinely interested in the broader question of “how is one able to communicate at all,”²²⁶ and he points out that

since the nineteen-sixties a number of composers in various countries have attempted to grapple with this question. Not merely in a theoretical way, but also practically: by trying to find different creative solutions to the problem in their own work.²²⁷

Rzewski’s own creative solution is very much bound up with his mission to bring a certain type of subject matter to the minds of his audience. Perhaps this is why Rzewski calls his style “realism,” instead of, say, “communicationalism”—he seems to be seeking, on some level, a way to speak to his listeners about the reality waiting for them outside the concert hall and the issues raised there. That mission is quite different to the idealistic agenda of, for example, Beethoven’s 9th, which is motivated by a distinctly non-realist and rather more utopian vision of brotherhood. As Rzewski has said, when “you are working in a political direction you give up [the] idea” of writing “music as something universal in the sense Beethoven’s 9th Symphony is supposed to be ‘universal.’”²²⁸ Instead, Rzewski allows the real world as he sees it to influence his art, often using specific events as creative springboards for new work.

Though Rzewski’s notion of “realism” is somewhat clear on its own, it has nonetheless been characterized in several different ways. Rockwell writes that Rzewski might as well call his aesthetic “‘socialist realism,’ although he has sometimes seemed to avoid that specific term, no doubt for fear of appearing unduly provocative”²²⁹—though one might note that Rzewski has not sometimes but instead *always* avoided that specific term, to my knowledge. Nonetheless, Rockwell believes it is Rzewski’s “compositional eclecticism,” or stylistic diversity, that marks his works from this period as distinctively “realist.”²³⁰ While Rzewski’s work is often eclectic, he has explicitly addressed the issue of style as it pertains to “realism;” he writes that communicating with an audience “doesn’t necessarily mean an exclusion

²²⁵ *The People United!* would fit the first of these categories very nicely, referencing as it did a very specific and current cultural event. *Coming Together* and *Attica*, using a prison riot as their subject, might fit under the second of these general rubrics. *North American Ballads* is a fairly clear demonstration of a piece concerned with the injustice of a sociopolitical or socioeconomic system, as it deals with the subject of black laborers under Jim Crow laws and factory workers in inhumane conditions.

²²⁶ Rzewski, *Nonsequiturs*, *ibid.*, p. 94

²²⁷ *ibid.*, p. 196

²²⁸ *ibid.*, pp. 429-430

²²⁹ Rockwell, *All American Music*, *ibid.*, p. 89

²³⁰ *ibid.*, p. 89

of what's called avant-garde style, by any means," but that, at the same time, "if one were to forbid oneself to use familiar styles in one's music, then one would be imposing a very serious limitation on one's ability to communicate."²³¹ Traditional music, writ large, plays a prominent role in Rzewski's "realist" work, including his famous *The People United Will Never Be Defeated!* and his *North American Ballads*—in all likelihood, it is his inclusion of traditional surface styles in these works that has led some authors to label him a "neo-romantic."²³² However, traditional styles are not the only ones to appear in these works. In fact, there is only one type of music Rzewski alienates from the concept of "realist" communication: he writes, "if one is seriously interested in communication, then I suppose statistically speaking that a rigorous, say formalistic, style such as the style of the serial composers and so on would be at a serious disadvantage."²³³

By writing in "traditional" styles—the kind of music Rzewski probably means when he references "the existing means of communication" between a composer and his audience²³⁴—Rzewski is able to engage his listeners and then, "when the lines of communication have been opened," to deliver some kind of political message "clearly and directly."²³⁵ Sometimes, the stylistic reference points in Rzewski's work are indeed Romantic, such as "Lisztian pyrotechnics;"²³⁶ sometimes they involve other traditional music, like the toccatas of J.S. Bach,²³⁷ and sometimes the surface of the music points to popular styles, instead, whether "bluesy rhapsodizing,"²³⁸ or "folksong simplicity,"²³⁹ or even the "expressions of repetitive patterns, ostinato pulses"²⁴⁰ characteristic of the minimalists, whom Rzewski was interacting with in New York during the seventies—he lived in New York City from 1970-1977, at a

²³¹ As quoted in Groemer, *ibid.*, pp. 97-98

²³² Rockwell, "Avant-Garde: Rzewski," *ibid.*, p. C23

²³³ *ibid.*, p. 98

²³⁴ See Rzewski, *Nonsequiturs*, *ibid.*, p. 206

²³⁵ Little, *ibid.*, p. 113

²³⁶ John Pickard, "Rzewski: *The People United Will Never Be Defeated!*; *North American Ballads* ("Down by the Riverside;" "Winnsboro Cotton Mill Blues"). Marc-André Hamelin (pno). Hyperion CDA67077," *Tempo*, New Series, No. 210 (1999), p. 47

²³⁷ Lewis, *ibid.*, quotes Rzewski as having said, "You know that Bach, especially in his organ chorale preludes, has a technique of motivic usage that is always somehow derived from the chorale melody. I was trying to use structures that were directly derived from the theme. I would apply classical contrapuntal techniques of augmentation, diminution, and transposition. [But] [t]he unusual metric relationships would perhaps be closer to Carter" (p. 69).

²³⁸ Pickard, *ibid.*, p. 47

²³⁹ *ibid.*, p. 47

²⁴⁰ Abbinanti, *ibid.*, p. 594

time when both Reich and Glass were also based there. The broadly appealing nature of these various styles Rzewski appropriates have undoubtedly helped broader audiences to engage with Rzewski's "realist" work. Stephen Eddins writes in a review of the *The People United!*, for example, that the piece "is undeniably one of the masterworks for piano of the late twentieth century, not only because of the intellectual and musical rigor of its structure, and its dazzling virtuoso qualities, but because it's so immediately appealing. This is a piece that general audiences, not only new music specialists, can easily fall in love with."²⁴¹

It is easy to overstate the importance of traditional styles in Rzewski's work, however—he himself stresses the importance of the "avant-garde" in his music, and as Frank Abbinanti points out, Rzewski is "more corrosive" to the traditional material he employs than, for example, the minimalists themselves, as he is focused more on "political gesture than the mere concoction of the beautiful object as we find in Reich Riley, and Glass."²⁴² Jee-Young Shin goes one step further, writing, "To call Rzewski a neo-Romanticist is to deprecate his extensive contributions to the development of twentieth-century music in general,"²⁴³ and her point is valid not only because the surface of Rzewski's music is more varied than the "neo-Romantic" label might suggest.

Style is by no means the only method Rzewski uses to attempt to achieve a communicative link with his audience. In fact, his other communicative compositional procedures are far more sophisticated than any simple reference to surface style could be. As Little identifies, one additional way

Rzewski facilitates this communication-without-artistic-compromise is through the use of text and quotation. This allows him to maintain accessible elements in his work on to which an audience can connect and rely, while at the same time spreading his proverbial avant-garde wings.²⁴⁴

Indeed, many of Rzewski's best known works from this period, including *Coming Together*, *Attica*, *The People United Will Never Be Defeated!*, and *North American Ballads* use one or both of these devices, connecting specific political events to the

²⁴¹ Stephen Eddins, in a review for allmusic.com, 2013; URL: <http://www.allmusic.com/album/frederic-rzewski-the-people-united-will-never-be-defeated!-mw0001407538>

²⁴² Abbinanti, *ibid.*, p. 594

²⁴³ Jee-Young Shin, *ibid.*, p. 2

²⁴⁴ Little, *ibid.*, p. 114

musical works in question by referencing politically charged text or by incorporating pre-existing, extramusically inflected melodic material.

The political import of text is self-evident; text has always provided composers with a semantically direct link to extramusical meaning. Rzewski's use of text is quite varied—in *The People United Will Never Be Defeated!*, the title and the first few bars of the score carry the text of the opening tune, but there is no guarantee an audience will link the text to the words, as they cannot see the score; in *North American Ballads*, no text appears in the score at all, even though the work references tunes with politically charged lyrics; in *Attica*, there is a “speaker declaiming texts taken from the letters of prisoners killed during the riots in the New York State Prison at Attica in 1971,”²⁴⁵ but this direct use of text is complicated by the “tranquil, almost nirvanic” C major of the piece, which sets a mood at odds with the text's violent and tragic subject matter.²⁴⁶ Thus, while text serves as a reference point that links Rzewski's pieces to precise political content, the text is often not immediately evident to the audience, and even when it is, Rzewski sets its words in a complex way. Many of Rzewski's “realist” works fall into the former category, however, where text is not explicit, but instead implied through the use of melodic quotation.

Musical quotation is quite a widespread and nuanced device in Rzewski's music, which is likely why Rzewski has drawn so many connections to Charles Ives. The most obvious political function of Rzewskian musical quotation has already been linked to the *The People United!*—namely, the ability of a musical quotation to directly associate a certain melody or musical idea with the words that once accompanied it,²⁴⁷ or the ability of musical quotation to function as “unspoken text,” as Little puts it.²⁴⁸ But for Gendron, Rzewski's desire to draw on musical quotation stems from another motivation, as well. He writes that Rzewski intended his music to be

²⁴⁵ Fox, *ibid.*, p. 66

²⁴⁶ Asplund, *ibid.*, p. 422. The same has been said of Rzewski's *Struggle* (1973), a piece that features music “so lovely” it has been said to “sugar coat the stern message of the text;” see Gendron, *ibid.*, p. 569.

²⁴⁷ In the first few bars of *The People United!*, Rzewski includes the text beneath the melody, so that the performer, at the very least, knows how to associate it with the melody. In addition, the words of the tune are in fact the title of the work, so the audience will be certain to have them in mind over the course of the piece. The tune itself is quite famous, as well—especially in Chile—thus increasing the likelihood that any given audience will make a direct association between the melodic material in the piece and the specific words and political ideas attached to the source tune.

²⁴⁸ Little, *ibid.*, p. 115

‘a symbol for the collective aspirations’ of oppressed people as well as ‘a powerful external expression of cohesion’ in political movements. In this conception, the primary function of political music is not to disseminate a didactic message to the masses in the hope of conversion, as it is oftentimes perceived, but to give expression to revolutionary longings or oppositional outrage among the progressive forces and the disaffected of society.²⁴⁹

For Gendron, then, Rzewski quotes existing melodies not just because of their politically specific semantic content, but also because of a philosophical belief in the importance of giving voice to revolutionary causes and disenfranchised citizens. If Rzewski did indeed intend for his music to “give expression to revolutionary longings or oppositional outrage”—though it must be cautioned here that those words are Gendron’s, not Rzewski’s—then choosing to use actual labor songs in his music, as he does in *The People United!* and *North American Ballads*, certainly helps his cause. He taps into preexisting vehicles for collective expression in a very real sense in these pieces, choosing tunes that have meant a great deal to the laborers who championed them.²⁵⁰ Rzewski most overtly seems to have aimed at this type of political expression in *The People United Will Never Be Defeated!*, whose theme is “a complete rendition” of a Chilean Nueva Canción written by Sergio Ortega and the Chilean folk group Quilapayún.²⁵¹

Quilapayún’s performances of the original song start with all the group’s members shouting several times, in unison, a chant—“¡El pueblo unido jamás será vencido!”—whose words happen to translate well into English, preserving their syllabic structure: “The people, united, will never be defeated!”. When Quilapayún performs the song live, the audience chants and sings along with the ensemble “in a powerful display of solidarity.”²⁵² Both the chant and the ensuing song itself served as important political tools in Chile under the repressive dictatorship of Pinochet, facts that help to illuminate how it has functioned as “a symbol for the collective aspiration of oppressed people.” As Madsen writes, “The scope of political power attributed to Nueva Canción,” the musical-political movement started by groups like Quilapayún,

²⁴⁹ Gendron, *ibid.*, p. 566

²⁵⁰ The case of *The People United!* is discussed below; in *North American Ballads*, Rzewski quotes a protest song that describes the Kentucky coal mine strikes of 1931, a song based on a Baptist hymn about the same set of labor strikes, an African American spiritual tune, and a traditional blues song describing abysmal working conditions.

²⁵¹ Madsen, *ibid.*, p. 11

²⁵² *ibid.*, p. 11

“is evident in its immediate silencing by all means available to the military after the coup” responsible for deposing Chile’s democratically elected president in 1973.²⁵³ During a time in which political dissidents were silenced and executed, this song served as a very popular and powerful expression of “revolutionary longings” and “oppositional outrage.”

Though simply importing a politically charged tune into the concert hall is not by any means guaranteed to produce a political result, Rzewski, as has been shown, deployed this piece very carefully, intended as it was for a performance during the American bicentennial. As Monica Hershberger observes,

“Rzewski’s message of political solidarity remains at the forefront in *The People United*.... Premiered just two years after Pinochet’s takeover, Rzewski’s setting provided a bold commentary on the precepts of American freedom and respect for democracy.”

Rzewski appears to have made every attempt to capture the energy of Quilapayún’s chant in the first few bars of his piece, bars which not only include both the English and Spanish text in the score, but which also feature bare, declamatory, fortissimo octaves, marked “with determination”²⁵⁴—there can be little doubt Rzewski sought to symbolize political solidarity with the people of Chile with this gesture, looking to convey the spirit of the Chilean resistance in a way that would ring powerfully through the halls of the Kennedy Center.

Though it is clear that *The People United!* was intended in part to give voice to the oppressed people of Chile, there is still some disagreement about its philosophy and its overall intent. On the one hand, it fits into the general framework Gendron lays out, as consistent with Rzewski’s broad belief in supporting revolutionary causes. On the other hand, it is possible to interpret this work as primarily attempting to communicate a very specific message—in this case, one might read *The People United!* as a direct attempt to protest the U.S. government’s possible involvement in the Chilean coup-d’état.²⁵⁵ In fact, Jessica Madsen’s reading of the work is exactly along these lines: she writes, “There can be no doubt that Rzewski intended *The People United* to be a work of political protest, designed to raise the social consciousness of its original audience and appeal to their faith in the democratic

²⁵³ *ibid.*, p. 11

²⁵⁴ Rzewski, *The People United Will Never Be Defeated!*, score, Zen-On Music, 1979, p. 2

²⁵⁵ Madsen discusses the “covert American involvement in Chilean economic and political affairs, which contributed to the violent overthrow of Chile’s democratically elected socialist president” (*ibid.*, p. iii) rather extensively in her dissertation (*ibid.*).

principles we treasure.”²⁵⁶ To bolster her claim, she interprets Rzewski’s variation structure rather creatively. She first explains the basic framework of the piece, in which “36 variations are arranged in six sets of six variations, with the sixth variation of each set recalling in order the musical material in the styles of the previous five variations of the set.”²⁵⁷ Each sixth variation, in other words, is a kind of “summary variation” that incorporates material from the first five. In addition, Madsen notes that “the sixth set of six variations... is itself constructed of musical material in the styles of the previous five,”²⁵⁸ so that the sixth set as a whole is a kind of “summary set.”

This formula requires that the very last of the variations, the sixth in the sixth set, be the “summary variation” of the “summary set.” Since it is modeled after the final variations of each of the first five sets, and each of the first five “summary variations” draw from all the material in each of the first five sets, the final variation of the work actually draws elements from everything that has preceded it. Here, then, is the payoff of Madsen’s reading: “the effect” of this final summary variation, she explains, “is one of compressing all the musical material of 35 variations into Variation 36, the final variation, a metaphor for ‘The People—United!’”²⁵⁹ For Madsen, then, all the action of the work can be directly related to Rzewski’s desire to protest, as its formal structure is deliberately designed to build up to one moment of politically and extramusically significant unity in which a unified variation structure metaphorically champions the power of a people united against oppression.

Though this reading of the work is quite elegant, it does not fully account for the political and musical richness of the piece. One piece of evidence that complicates Madsen’s reading is the fact that Rzewski actually imported this variation structure from an earlier work. As Gendron points out, this variation scheme actually emerged from a formal plan Rzewski devised for collective improvisation: his “Second Structure,” of 1972, “is constituted by a 6x6 grid, composed of six cycles, each having to do with a different dimension of time, and broken down into six stages.”²⁶⁰ Gendron analyses this structure in further detail, but in the present discussion the mere fact that Rzewski devised the formal scheme for *The People United!* well before the people of Chile were subjected to Pinochet’s dictatorship is significant, greatly

²⁵⁶ Madsen, *ibid.*, p. 10

²⁵⁷ *ibid.*, p. 118

²⁵⁸ *ibid.*, p. 120

²⁵⁹ *ibid.*, p. 120

²⁶⁰ Gendron, *ibid.*, p. 570

weakening the idea that the variation structure in *The People United!* was specially designed to constitute “a metaphor for ‘The People—United.’” As Keane Southard suggests, the *The People United!* is certainly concerned with “the idea of unification on a *musical* level” (emphasis added), and it “works incredibly successfully when looked at from a purely musical standpoint”²⁶¹ whether or not extramusical associations are brought into the picture. Rzewski himself has said that he sought to “explore forms in which existing musical languages could be brought together,” and that *The People United!* “was the main expression for these ideas”—lending credence to the notion that the intricate structure of the work was designed first and foremost to explore musical possibilities. Though Rzewski may indeed have been aware that his variation structure might support a metaphorical reading like Madsen’s, it appears to have been designed with purely musical function in mind, and so the scrupulous analyst must hesitate before ascribing to it too much political meaning. Perhaps, just as Rzewski’s pieces for MEV were scaffolds for improvisation, the political backdrop of a work like *The People United!* serves as a scaffold for Rzewski’s musical material, one which provides a background significance, but still allows the musical material to maintain a life of its own.

Rzewski’s inclusion of “the popular Italian protest song ‘*Bandiera rossa*’ and Hanns Eisler’s anti-fascist ‘*Solidaritatslied*’ at structurally significant places in *The People United!*”²⁶² further weakens the hypothesis that the piece was intended to communicate one specific political message. The inclusion of these protest songs seems to be a conscious effort to tie the plight of the people in Chile to the more general struggle towards independence throughout history, and while this connection on some level strengthens the cause of the Chilean revolutionaries, it simultaneously deepens the message of the piece, making it broad-based and less precisely political. Madsen identifies this link, saying, “As Rzewski wrote *The People United Will Never Be Defeated!*, he was thinking of the universal aspirations of people everywhere to freedom and independence.”²⁶³ *The People United!* cannot be read as simple protest music, then, as its message is significantly richer and more interconnected than a simplistic reading would allow.

²⁶¹ Southard, *ibid.*, p. 156

²⁶² Madsen, *ibid.*, p. 17

²⁶³ *ibid.*, p. 117

Seth Beckman has also warned against reading Rzewski's work as protest music, arguing that, in reality, it is precisely Rzewski's rejection of protest music that makes his work effective. Beckman writes,

Through the denial of sheer protest music, the composer acknowledges the importance of the whole human experience and moves towards social commentary as represented by both affirmative and negative actions. Rzewski, himself, finds this to be the more effective approach, for the reason that protest alone 'is a dangerously simple view of things, and many artists and intellectuals have looked for something more solidly based in real social movements'.... He believes that the successful political composer must recognize the unequivocal connection between a composition and its culture.²⁶⁴

Beckman does not explain what a recognition of this "unequivocal connection between a composition and its culture" might look like in musical terms, though one can presume it is linked to his concept of including both "affirmative and negative actions" in a work, however one might choose to take that notion. Beckman's insistence that "the importance of the whole human experience" is communicated by Rzewski's work is actually quite consonant with David Little's take on "humanist realism," as well—in Little's opinion, Rzewski uses his music to present diverse material to his audience, encouraging his listeners to investigate a given political issue but never presenting them with any one answer or particular point of view. Little writes,

Rather than preaching doctrine, Rzewski pursues communication on an emotional level. In this, the listener is invited to explore both emotions and related political issues on their own. It creates a different type of teaching piece—an evolution of the Brechtian *Lehrstück*—in which the audience is not force-fed so-called facts, but is invited to seek the truth on their own.²⁶⁵

There can be no doubt that Rzewski intends, on some level, to raise awareness in his audience about specific political issues. He says as much—about *The People United*, he explains, "I wanted to write a piece that [Ursula Oppens] could play for an audience of classical-music lovers who perhaps knew nothing at all of what was happening in Latin America.... I really was trying to reach the audience by using a language they would not find alienating,"²⁶⁶ presumably in order to bring the events

²⁶⁴ Beckman, *ibid.*, p. 52

²⁶⁵ Little, *ibid.*, p. 115

²⁶⁶ Schwarz, *ibid.*, p. AR34

in Chile to their attention. At the same time, even such a simple communicational goal as this one takes on a level of complexity in Rzewski's music, perhaps because of the truth-seeking, emotionally potent forces Little identifies, but perhaps also because Rzewski simply believes that the semantic content of a work depends on many factors, including context—the kind of broad context implied by an “unequivocal connection between a composition and its culture,”²⁶⁷ perhaps, or a connection to “real social movements”²⁶⁸ rather than idealized positions.

Rzewski, in a lecture given on music and politics at the University of Wisconsin in 1983, noted, “It becomes a confusing question, when we try to think how music, which we are accustomed to thinking of as a fundamentally abstract form of communication, how that can be a vehicle not only for feelings, but for ideas.”²⁶⁹ This “confusing question” is nonetheless one Rzewski must certainly have come to grips with, since it motivates a large amount of his musical output. However, ever confounding, Rzewski opts not to reveal his position explicitly: he concludes his line of thinking instead by saying, “Rather than draw a conclusion I would like now to ask you to submit some contributions to the discussion.”²⁷⁰ In any case, Rzewski certainly believes that in order to answer the question of how music can be a vehicle for ideas and not just feelings,

one has to examine, not only the immanent characteristics of a piece of music, one has to imagine a piece of music as consisting not only of notes or sounds, but as a process of communication, involving groups of human beings on a very basic level: of course involving the collaborative activity of composers, performers, and audience, but also as a larger process of communication which involves a much larger and more general context.²⁷¹

Precisely what type of context Rzewski means is not explored in great detail, but this notion of a large and general context certainly rings of Beckman's idea that Rzewski denies simple protest music in favor of something richer. Both Gendron and Little's readings also comport to such a view: Gendron's notion of giving expression to “the disaffected of society” and Little's concept of Rzewski's work as “bearing witness,” as music that seeks to “explore, document, or deconstruct a significant social or

²⁶⁷ Beckman, *ibid.*, p. 52

²⁶⁸ *ibid.*, p. 52

²⁶⁹ Rzewski, *Nonsequiturs*, *ibid.*, p. 200

²⁷⁰ *ibid.*, p. 200

²⁷¹ *ibid.*, p. 200

political event” while keeping “the composer’s specific (or explicit) opinion out of the mix”²⁷² each focus less on a specific political message than on the work’s broad engagement with a complex cultural context. In Gendron’s framework, Rzewski’s music voices, echoes, and amplifies the issues faced by entire segments of the population; in Little’s framework, Rzewski’s music intentionally includes enough complexity and ambiguity to allow the listener’s mind to bring contextual information to the music on its own. If there is one thing Gendron, Beckman, and Little agree upon, it is that Rzewski’s music engages with broader society at large, allowing for a depth and complexity of both musical and political interpretation.

Rzewski’s only further explanation of his notion of cultural context comes in a statement that finally brings the notion of musical quotation back to the fore. He writes,

A very good example, perhaps, a simple example of a way in which music functions as a political symbol without a text being present, is the case of certain well known songs. I don’t know how well you know the song “The International” for instance, but certainly it is and has been an extremely well known song that has expressed a symbolic function within a political context. Most people do not know the words to this song, but there are probably three or four times as many people who do know, who recognize the tune, the chorus. The tune is the carrier of a symbolic message. When you hear this tune you think of a whole context, a whole social and historical context, in which that tune has meaning. It doesn’t matter so much that you don’t know the words. It’s the music itself in this case that is the vehicle for meaning.²⁷³

Not unlike *¡El pueblo unido jamás será vencido!*, “The International” is a socialist song that has been widely used as a symbol of “resistance to oppression.”²⁷⁴ The song, sometimes spelled “The Internationale” in deference to its original French text, was originally “born of the Paris Commune of 1871.”²⁷⁵ Since then, it has acquired an exceptional status both for its lengthy historical lifespan and for its widespread significance across the globe—one online archive features translations of the song into 101 languages,²⁷⁶ for example, a testament to its ubiquity. It has served since its birth as a persistent anthem for socialist and communist causes, including one

²⁷² Little, *ibid.*, p. 131

²⁷³ Rzewski, *Nonsequiturs*, *ibid.*, p. 200

²⁷⁴ *Modern History Sourcebook* entry for “The Internationale;” URL: <http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/mod/INTERNAT.asp>

²⁷⁵ Tom Gill, *The Guardian, newspaper of the Communist Party of Australia*, Jun 3, 1998; URL: <http://www.webcitation.org/query?url=http://www.geocities.com/capitolhill/7078/inter.tx&date=2009-10-25+16:54:58>

²⁷⁶ [antiwarsons.org](http://www.antiwarsons.org); URL: <http://www.antiwarsons.org/canzone.php?lang=en&id=2003&infos=1>

dramatic recent use in 1989, its “repeated singing by the students in Tianamen Square.”²⁷⁷ Surely Rzewski uses “The International” as his example because of its rich history and its near universal familiarity. The idea that this tune “is the carrier of a symbolic message” is fairly clear in this case, as its historical background and consistent pro-labor political message give it recognizable political import for a large number of people. But what might be more important to Rzewski than “The International’s” ability to convey a particular political message is the fact that it has such a long and storied history.

Rzewski clearly believes the example of “The International” can be extrapolated out of its original context, and this fact helps to illuminate his stance towards the intersection of political music and broader cultural context as it pertains to his work. Rzewski, by citing “The International,” demonstrates his belief in the contextual power of musical quotation. “The International’s” power truly lies in its ability to tie each new political statement for which it is being sung to a long history of other such statements. In *The People United!*, of course, Rzewski manufactures just such a linkage by explicitly tying his quotation of *El Pueblo Unido!* to quotations of the *bandiera rossa* and Eisler’s *Solidaritatslied*, demonstrating his interest in the sweeping connections between different revolutionary movements throughout history. It is therefore natural that Rzewski would be interested in the rich extramusical histories of these tunes themselves, histories which lend his compositions a certain gravitas and link them, however obliquely, to a broad set of social and political issues. Importantly, Rzewski seeks to tap into the contextual power folk tunes whether or not these tunes are as recognizable or clearly politically charged as “The International” or *El Pueblo Unido!*, which suggests that one of his primary motivations for using quotation may not, in fact, be any specifically political semantic content such quotations can convey.

North American Ballads is an example of a Rzewski work that quotes folk tunes that by and large have fallen out of use, and therefore lack the immediate political charge of a tune like “The International.” It is clear, in this case, that Rzewski cannot expect an audience to recognize the political implications of these more obscure tunes on a first hearing, especially when the text does not appear even in the score. As Hershberger notes, many listeners do indeed miss the political

²⁷⁷ *Modern History Sourcebook*, *ibid.*

undertones of the piece—she writes, “for many listeners the *Ballads* resonated (and continue to resonate) not because of their political persuasion, but because they paint a poignant and distinctively American portrait.”²⁷⁸ To Rzewski’s credit, he admits that he does not expect a more politicized result, openly saying that he feels “more secure” when imagining he is writing for “other pianists” instead of for an audience; in the former case, he says, he has “a concrete idea of the destination of these strange black and white marks on pieces of paper,”²⁷⁹ and he appears to be comfortable with the idea of writing without an intention to transmit specific ideas to his audience even when those ideas were important to him during his compositional process.

Removing the question of the work’s ideological impact on an audience—which, as has been shown, was something Rzewski advocated even during the early MEV years of active audience participation—leaves a very different picture of Rzewski’s compositional goals than is often presented in the literature. What is common to his “realist” works is not a focus on transmitting political views to his listeners through “unspoken text.” Instead, Rzewski seems to want to infuse the broad cultural and historical legacy of melodic source material into the fabric of these pieces, perhaps for the performer, who then decides, as he puts it, whether and how “to translate the information into a form which is communicated to the listener.”²⁸⁰ As Gendron suggests, he does indeed seem to view political music “less as a didactic tool for conversion of the masses than as a medium for giving expression to ‘revolutionary aspirations’ and the ‘cohesion in political movements,’”²⁸¹ an expression he achieves by explicitly referencing melodic material with historical ties to the political content in question. Little, too, identifies this “almost Wolffian interest in counter-memory,” as Rzewski’s works “seek to preserve—or merely connect with—the charged history of the old left,”²⁸² again largely through musical quotation absent the specificity of explicit text.

In short, Rzewski’s “humanist realism,” though communicative, is more complicated than a simple attempt to inculcate certain political beliefs in an audience. His use of musical quotation is primarily intended to link his music on a conceptual level—and not necessarily for the audience, though he does not rule out that

²⁷⁸ Hershberger, *ibid.*, p. 71

²⁷⁹ Duffie, *ibid.*

²⁸⁰ Rzewski, as quoted in Duffie, *ibid.*

²⁸¹ Gendron, *ibid.*, p. 571

²⁸² Little, *ibid.*, p. 110

possibility—to broad sociopolitical movements, to the most general “revolutionary longings,” and to historical aspects of the fight for justice that remain relevant to him. *North American Ballads* is a case in point here, as the diversity of pre-existing tunes selected, including a protest song that describes the Kentucky coal mine strikes of 1931, a song based on a Baptist hymn about the same set of labor strikes, an African American spiritual tune, and a traditional blues song describing abysmal working conditions, all paint a clear political picture, but one that is nuanced and very general. Yes, all these tunes—like many of Rzewski’s other sources of musical quotation²⁸³—have a clear connection to one another and to a history of labor protest. But this is a broad history, and there is undoubtedly enough richness here that some ambiguity remains about how, for example, Rzewski’s historically evocative goals fit in with the explicitly communicative ideals of his “realism.” As Cardew points out, Rzewski’s “ambiguity can be either a strength or a weakness in performance,”²⁸⁴ but, in Little’s words, “from the perspective of communication—as opposed to revolution—this can be a major strength.”²⁸⁵ After all, a sensitive and musically evocative work with the markings of a complex historical and political paradigm may be better suited to a concert hall audience than a simplistic and bombastic piece of protest music. By presenting listeners with a range of different examples of political injustice in pieces like *The People United!* and *North American Ballads*, Rzewski allows the listener to connect the dots in whichever way they choose—here again recalling Little’s paradigm of Rzewskian realism as an emotive, inconclusive, almost meditative kind of communication. Little writes, “though there is certainly an official ‘truth’ to these pieces”—which one supposes is a reference to the “truth” of Rzewski’s own views, though I am not so certain Rzewski ever has just one truth in mind—“Rzewski allows the listener to arrive at this conclusion on her own, ever confident that she will.”²⁸⁶

Such an explanation has eluded other critics, many of whom have neglected the subtleties of Rzewski’s approach to political music. If Rzewski is indeed “far

²⁸³ Not just in *The People United!*, but also *War Songs* (2008), which features the 14th century *L’Homme Arme* and five other anti-war songs from different countries and eras (see Kodhn, *ibid.*). Even Rzewski’s *Four Pieces for Piano* (1977), which has been cited as an example of a Rzewski work with no extramusical connotations, uses a tune that appears to be original but which Rzewski “was convinced for some time... was a Chilean popular melody” (Shin, *ibid.*, p. 74).

²⁸⁴ As quoted in Little, *ibid.*, p. 115

²⁸⁵ *ibid.*, p. 115

²⁸⁶ *ibid.*, p. 115

more difficult to pigeonhole than many composers,”²⁸⁷ as Robert Wason points out, and a composer whose “diversity of . . . political approaches is rivaled only by his musical variety,”²⁸⁸ then perhaps it is not surprising that some authors have felt the need to shoehorn Rzewski’s output into more easily definable categories. Rockwell, for one, who has already demonstrated a distaste for Rzewski’s music and his political ideals, believes Rzewski “subverts his esthetic inclinations to his political opinions, and concentrates on winning over the middle class, because that is what he can do best.”²⁸⁹ But, as has been shown, Rzewski does not concentrate on “winning over” any audience. Furthermore, it seems to be a mistake to conceive of Rzewski’s “esthetic inclinations” as being “subverted” for the sake of political expression. Rzewski’s is a broad, subtle political engagement that invites interpretation rather than demanding allegiance, and his musical materials stand on their own, with inherent interest not dependent on political semantic content. Nonetheless, Rockwell, for some reason, accuses Rzewski of a “calculating patronization” of his audience and of producing “political art [that] is an art of condescension,”²⁹⁰ when in fact it has been shown that Rzewski’s most overt political act is simply to call attention to a certain political reality, as in *The People United!*, without at any point seeking to fling political platitudes down at his listeners. Does Rzewski have a personal political agenda? Surely he does, and his music supports it in its own way. But, much as Rzewski is quite coy about espousing his own personal political beliefs, his music supports a range of political interpretations, and, crucially, a wealth of musical interest, much of which cannot clearly be tied to political programs.

Rockwell’s final quip, that Rzewski’s is an art “of folly” because his music has not “made much of an impact on the working classes,”²⁹¹ is also fundamentally misguided. It has been shown quite clearly that Rzewski’s music is always intended as music, “first and foremost,”²⁹² with political implications serving as important, but secondary “enriching” factors in a fundamentally “musical discourse.”²⁹³ In fact, as Gendron points out, even of the pieces written during Rzewski’s New York residency—his “most concentrated period of political composition”—only “60% are

²⁸⁷ Wason, *ibid.*, p. 110

²⁸⁸ Little, *ibid.*, p. 110

²⁸⁹ Rockwell, *All American Music*, *ibid.*, p. 93

²⁹⁰ *ibid.*, p. 93

²⁹¹ *ibid.*, p. 93

²⁹² As quoted in Steinitz, *ibid.*, p. 11

²⁹³ *ibid.*, p. 11

political in semantic content.”²⁹⁴ Furthermore, it is important to remember that even within Rzewski’s political music, direct audience outcomes have never occupied a primary position of importance, and therefore notions of “patronization” and “folly” by virtue of a lack of audience impact really do not apply to Rzewski’s work as it was conceived. Perhaps the fact that some writers have emerged with such a polarized picture of Rzewski’s politics only serves to strengthen the idea that his work is deep enough to support a very broad range of varying interpretations, from the measured to the extreme.

Even some authors who fall closer to the center of this range of interpretation have sometimes failed to capture the complexity of Rzewski’s political music. Awn Kodhn, writing for the *New York Times* in 2008, provides a perfect example. In his estimation, “Rzewski is often at his best when putting his own gloss on older material,” and he cites “Winnsboro Cotton Mill Blues,” from *North American Ballads*, as a representative example.²⁹⁵ However, Kodhn next makes the same mistake as many other authors before him. He writes that “Winnsboro Cotton Mill Blues” successfully “makes its point forcefully because the song is known.”²⁹⁶ Though Kodhn does not say what he thinks the “point” of the work is, he nonetheless asserts that it is clear, and made forcefully, because the melodies quoted in “Winnsboro Cotton Mill Blues” are widely known.

The first issue with this argument is Kodhn’s confidence that the tunes in this work are recognizable, of course—Kathryn Woodard, a pianist who has gone on to write about “Winnsboro Cotton Mill Blues,” would disagree. She describes her first hearing of the piece as one in which “technological sounds... developed into recognizable styles such as the blues.”²⁹⁷ The broad thrust of Rzewski’s stylistic juxtapositions still generated intrigue for her in the absence of any knowledge of the specific tunes, but without the precise semantic content of identified melodies, it was not initially possible for her to come to decisive conclusions about the meaning of the work.²⁹⁸ Undifferentiated stylistic information on its own is not sufficiently detailed to automatically imply, for example, that the piece might be about unfair working conditions; one could simply hear things as Woodard did, such that “Winnsboro

²⁹⁴ Gendron, *ibid.*, p. 565

²⁹⁵ Kodhn, *ibid.*, p. B10

²⁹⁶ *ibid.*, p. B10

²⁹⁷ Woodard, *ibid.*, p. 2 [8%]

²⁹⁸ See Woodard, *ibid.*, p. 2 [8%]

Cotton Mill Blues” implies an extramusical narrative in which technological chaos gives way to the more human sounds of bluesy melodies. By the logic of such a reading, the work might be about the loss of human expressivity in the technological age, as just one example, and not about the plight of laborers at all. This possibility emphasizes the importance of Rzewski’s actual political ideology, since he would likely not be troubled by such a disconnect between his own thinking and the reaction of his audience: as has been shown, his music does not seek to communicate one concise political message, but instead to draw upon a nuanced extramusical backdrop to enrich his work—perhaps for the analyst, perhaps for the performer, and perhaps, since Rzewski is indeed interested in communicating with his audience on some level, for any listener interested in coming to more informed subsequent hearings of the piece.

The deeper issue with Kodhn’s analysis is that Rzewski sometimes does not try terribly hard to make a “point” at all. In most of his output, even in pieces like *The People United!* in which some specific political implications are quite clear, the political event underlying a Rzewski work is only one of many potential footholds for interpretation. Though the lens through which Rzewski views the world is always discernable in his political music, there is likely no single “official story” behind any of these pieces. *Attica* and *Struggle* work against their source texts with very consonant musical materials, *The People United!* is a work not only about Chile but also about the entire history of political injustice, from colonial America to fascist Germany, and *North American Ballads* includes a rather diverse set of texts about a range of labor issues. Are Rzewski’s general political leanings clear? Absolutely, and much of his work is concerned with a broadly Marxist take on inequality in one form or another. But that does not mean Rzewski’s music conveys any single hard and fast political message.

Kodhn’s assumptions are made explicit in his discussion of Rzewski’s *War Songs* (2008), which, as Kodhn notes, feature “six songs from different countries and eras as raw material for a rhythmically complex solo piano meditation on war.” He continues, “Mr. Rzewski miscalculated here: when the best-known strand is the 14th-century chanson ‘L’Homme Armé,’ listeners are likely to miss the points Mr. Rzewski’s juxtapositions are intended to make.” Having established that Rzewski’s interest in musical quotation is less about didactic point-making and more about contextual depth, however, it is easy to see where Kodhn has erred. Rzewski’s *War*

Songs is not a miscalculation at all—instead, it is a kind of culmination of the move away from political directness in Rzewski’s work, an endpoint of the trajectory that begins with *The People United!* and heads through *North American Ballads*, moving from a focus on political statement towards a focus on rich, slightly ambiguous, but still evocative extramusical background. *War Songs* perfectly exemplifies the contextual approach to melodic quotation explored here, infused as it is with six different anti-war songs, many relatively unknown to the listening population. If it is conceded that the detailed semantic content of Rzewski’s work is conceived “for pianists,” however, or at least not primarily for an audience of first-time listeners, it becomes much easier to understand *War Songs* not as a mistake, but rather as a logical extension of Rzewski’s experimentation with musical quotation.

Rzewski was still interested in politics *qua* politics during his “realist” period, as evidenced by his membership in the Musicians Active Collective and its “benefit concerts for the Chilean Solidarity Committee, the United Farm Workers, the Attica Defense Committee, and other causes,”²⁹⁹ but—as was the case during the MEV years—Rzewski’s direct political activism seems to have remained quite separate from his musical goals. In fact, his rhetorical output demonstrates that he had a significant interest in musical quotation *qua* musical quotation, as well, even devoid of the extramusical implications that have been discussed here. Rzewski gave an entire lecture on this subject in 1979, the same year as the publication of *North American Ballads* and only a few years removed from the composition of *The People United!*. Delivered at the *Hochschule der Künste Berlin*, the lecture was entitled “Melody as Face,” and in it Rzewski espouses his belief that the perception of melody is neurologically privileged. He notes that the perception of melody seems to take place “outside of time,”³⁰⁰ and that by 1979 there had indeed been “part of the brain... found that is specialized in the recognition of melodies.”³⁰¹ For Rzewski, that data and his own listening experience suggested that “a melody, in the most commonly understood sense of the word, is not simply a sequence of acoustic signals,” but rather “something like an abstraction of the human voice: a real person’s voice, free of symbolic connotations, with all its characteristic expressive inflections, translated into

²⁹⁹ Madsen, *ibid.*, p. 10

³⁰⁰ Rzewski, *Nonsequiturs*, *ibid.*, p. 134

³⁰¹ *ibid.*, p. 136

a formal system of fixed frequencies and conventional periodic rhythms.”³⁰² This notion of melody as human voice opens the door to significant extramusical interest; Rzewski’s belief that melody is linked to a “separate faculty for recognizing specifically human sounds”³⁰³ almost certainly underpins his widespread use of melodic quotation as a source of political context. After all, what better way could there be to communicate implicit text than with an implicit voice? What better way to give voice to oppressed people than by representing their “characteristic expressive inflections” in musical terms? An understanding of this view of melodic quotation significantly helps to decode Rzewski’s “realist” output, as will become clear.

Nonetheless, Rzewski continues by saying, “Behind every melody is a voice, and behind every voice is a face. This ‘facial’ quality of melodies, is responsible, I believe for their ability to linger in the mind.”³⁰⁴ This last point is a crucial one: Rzewski believes that

because of this special quality... the ability of the recognized feature [melody or face] to retain its identity even when removed from a context, from the rest of time or space—it should be possible to subject both types of figure, melody and face, to a considerable degree of abstraction and distortion, without losing recognizability: more than would be the case with ordinary noises or shapes.³⁰⁵

In other words, the special perceptual qualities of melody allow Rzewski to subject a given melody to significant compositional transformations without destroying its identity. For a composer interested in communication, this strictly musical-perceptual quality of melody is immeasurably valuable, as it allows sophisticated compositional procedures to be audible. With a perceptible melody involved in the compositional apparatus, Rzewski suggests, the distortions of the original material will actually be recognizable, and therefore both the melody and the distortional processes can remain accessible to listeners. The recognizability of distorted melodic material also allows Rzewski to achieve, as he says, “a peculiar dimension of depth, or distance, in a way not possible in, say, formal serial music, which abjures the use of folk- or other non-formalized material,”³⁰⁶ even absent a concern for audience. Thus, Rzewski’s interest in folk tunes is on some level fundamentally musical, even while these tunes also

³⁰² *ibid.*, p. 136

³⁰³ *ibid.*, p. 138

³⁰⁴ *ibid.*, p. 136

³⁰⁵ *ibid.*, p. 138

³⁰⁶ *ibid.*, p. 138

serve as a source of extramusical meaning. To ignore Rzewski's interest in the musical properties of quotation, even if they do help him to further extramusical goals, is to do a disservice to Rzewski—he is, after all, a composer and pianist by trade. He is not a professional political activist. Rzewski reminds us, “Music has a variety of purposes, and in some sense it eludes the question of purpose.... It provides the possibility of a purposeless action which seems to have a kind of utopian significance for people.”³⁰⁷ Ever conscious of music's significance, Rzewski still refuses to think of music, including his own music, as driven by an extramusical purpose—“good music” remains the goal, even if blissfully purposeless. And although Rzewski's earlier music often does seem purposeful, his later music explores some other possibilities.

³⁰⁷ Duffie, *ibid.*

Rzewski and the rubber duck: late career, and musical politics considered

“Music probably cannot change the world. But it is a good idea to act as though it could. The situation is hopeless, but you try to make the best of it. At the very least, you stand a chance of producing some good music. And music is always better than no music!”³⁰⁸

-Frederic Rzewski

Rzewski’s compositions from 1980 onward are less well known than his earlier material, partly because the scholarship simply has not caught up to Rzewski yet—even his best-known works from the seventies are just now attracting a young and growing set of scholarly articles and dissertations.^{309, 310} In some ways, Rzewski’s newer music resembles the old. He uses political text on occasion, and it is fair to say that his current output is still “rooted firmly in... the intersections of composition, improvisation, and politics... [of] his ‘post-1968’ period,” a period which coincides with Rzewski’s “realist” works.³¹¹ In sharp contrast to Rzewski’s earlier music, however, his more recent output is often quite esoteric. Kodhn, reviewing a concert of Rzewski’s music in Zankel Hall around the time of the composer’s seventieth birthday, describes the strange action in two of Rzewski’s recent pieces: *Spots*, comprised of thirteen one-minute pieces for any four instruments, performable in any order, which Rzewski hopes will be used as an “interruption” in the midst of some other work in the concert,³¹² and *Natural Things*, comprised of forty-nine “things,” sonic events which “have little in common except duration” and also include three spoken text fragments about the Haymarket massacre of 1886 in which striking workers were killed.³¹³ Kodhn writes,

³⁰⁸ Rzewski, *Nonsequiturs*, *ibid.*, p. 30

³⁰⁹ The following gives a slight flavor for Rzewski’s personality. When asked if it “depressed him” that he was still best known for pieces he wrote in the seventies, Rzewski replied, “Let me tell you a joke, maybe you know it. The composition teacher is trying to discourage the student: ‘What do you want to get into this for? It’s just one frustration after another. They never play your music, you never make any money. And it just goes on and on like that until you’re 50.’ And the student perks up and says ‘Then what happens?’ And the teacher says: ‘Then you get used to it!’” (Gilmore, *ibid.*).

³¹⁰ It bears a mention here that Rzewski puts a significant amount of his work on *IMSLP*, and so a study which sought to focus on an analysis of Rzewski’s recent music would find many materials immediately available.

³¹¹ Gendron, *ibid.*, p. 572

³¹² Rzewski, *Spots* (1986), score, *IMSLP*

³¹³ Rzewski, *Natural Things* (2007), score, *IMSLP*

‘Spots’ (1986), which opened the program, includes a movement in which a vigorous cello melody is supported by the rhythms of a bounced basketball. In others a player recites a weather report, and jazziness gives way to rhythmic and contrapuntal complexity.... Solemn as the subject of ‘Natural Things’ [2007] is, Mr. Rzewski allowed historical distance to temper the outrage.... Startling fortissimos – the players suddenly stamping, a percussionist kicking a large metal can across the stage – explode amid long, ruminative passages. Musicians pour bags of hard objects onto the stage, and recite fragments of protest speeches, sometimes through a megaphone, sometimes whispered with exaggerated articulation.³¹⁴

Rzewski’s experimentalism is back in the fore here, linking these pieces with Rzewski’s early output for MEV. Gone, it seems, are the “realist” efforts to communicate with audiences, replaced instead by a recognizably Cageian willingness to experiment with, for example, the “music” of a bouncing basketball or a kicked metal can. Interestingly, much as was the case with *Moutons* and *Spacecraft* earlier in this dissertation, here we find another example of a political Rzewski piece juxtaposed against an apolitical one of the same period, with many structural similarities between the two. *Spots* is apolitical, and *Natural Things* is political by virtue of its text, but both spring from a very similar creative impulse and approach to music making—both make music with household objects, both involve the recitation of text, both are stylistically diverse, and both seem heavily experimental in spirit. Where the rhetoric in Rzewski’s early MEV works like *Plan for Spacecraft* can be extremely charged and vehement, though, thereby offering fertile ground for extramusical interpretation, Rzewski’s note in the score for *Natural Things* almost downplays the importance of the work’s political text. Mention of the text comes only in the last paragraph of the written note, when Rzewski explains, “Since the first New York performance was planned for May 1, 2008, I decided to include three text-fragments... relating to the events of May 1, 1886 in Chicago.”³¹⁵ He gives a brief description of what the text fragments contain, but there is no language of transformation or revolution to be found here—only an “inclusion.” This muted rhetoric is telling of the shifting relationship between Rzewski’s politics and his music, one that has increasingly moved away from a focus on audience and inwards towards the composer himself, as Rzewski has most recently retreated from both the participatory improvisational structures of the MEV years and the communicative “realist” approach of his later compositions.

³¹⁴ Kodhn, *ibid.*, p. B10

³¹⁵ Rzewski, *Natural Things*, *ibid.*

Hershberger summarizes Rzewski's career trajectory beautifully, outlining the composer's working life since 1980. She writes,

With the exception of *Mayn Yingele* (1988), Rzewski has eschewed virtuosic excursions on politically informed folk tunes. Works from the 1980s such as *The Price of Oil* (1980), *To the Earth* (1985), and *The Triumph of Death* (1987-88) deal with political, social, and environmental issues but in a somewhat more experimental vein.... During the 1990s, Rzewski temporarily abandoned overtly political composition, concentrating on more abstract, absolute forms as demonstrated by his *Sonata* (1991), *Fantasia* (1999), and *Pocket Symphony* (1999-2000). However, by the early twenty-first century and onset of the "War on Terror," Rzewski had returned to musical-political activism. Works such as *Bring Them Home!* (2004), *No More War* (2005), and *The Fall of the Empire* (2007) all protested the actions of the Bush Administration.³¹⁶

The work *De Profundis* (1992) complicates Hershberger's picture somewhat, as it is a major work for speaking pianist based on "Oscar Wilde's bleak yet comforting testament from prison"³¹⁷ of the same name. It has clear ties to Rzewski's other anti-prison work, like *Coming Together* and *Attica*, and thus it is evident that Rzewski never abandoned political composition entirely. Yet the broad picture Hershberger sketches is important: it shows a clear turn away from "realism," an invigorated emphasis on experimentalism, a temporary near-hiatus on political composition, and only a very recent return to the taking up of political issues. The general trend here shows an increasingly diminished willingness on Rzewski's part to use music as a tool for sharing political ideology, the anti-Bush works notwithstanding. While it has been shown that Rzewski's work was never solely about politics, the broad arc of his career supports the idea that secondary literature has overstated the importance of the political elements of Rzewski's work.

One of the results of Rzewski's recent turn to experimental music has been, perhaps predictably, some significant bafflement from audiences. Consider, for instance, Peter Aspden's story about the 2006 Ravello Music Festival, where Rzewski's short piano work *Fantasia* (1999) and his "Mile 63: *Nowhere*," a segment of his epic piano work, *The Road* (2003),³¹⁸ were featured on a concert with works by Wagner, Beethoven, and Scarlatti. Aspden writes of Rzewski, "I had never heard of

³¹⁶ Hershberger, *ibid.*, pp. 72-73

³¹⁷ Gurewitsch, *ibid.*, p. AR29

³¹⁸ *The Road* was written over a large span of time, from 1995 to 2003, but *Nowhere* dates from 2003 (*IMSLP*). *N.B.*: As of the date of this dissertation, some of the movements of *The Road* are mislabeled on *IMSLP*, though most are still uploaded; some appear to have been uploaded labeled one number too low, such that the link for "Mile 62," for example, actually yields the PDF for "Mile 63."

the composer and neither, I would guess, had most of the audience;”³¹⁹ he seems to have had equally little idea that *Nowhere* is part of a larger work—a massive work, in fact, a five hour “novel” for solo piano³²⁰ divided into eight large parts, which themselves are divided into eight movements, or “miles.”³²¹ It seems Aspden was also unaware that *Nowhere* was dedicated to Jed Distler,³²² the pianist who was performing the work for Aspden at the Ravello festival.³²³ In any case, the following scenario appears equally—and rather unfortunately—possible regardless of whether such background context was provided to the audience. Aspden recounts the scene:

Distler explained that parts of the pieces would involve vocal interventions and some banging on the piano lid. We chuckled uneasily. He started to play. There was indeed much crashing and banging, some of it on the piano lid, some of it on the keys themselves.... There was more uneasy chuckling and then something more. Giggling. Not the carefree, relaxed giggles of holidaymakers revelling in the civilising effect of leisure and play, but real, uncontrolled giggling. Hysterics, in fact.... By the end of the pieces, a good third of the audience was laughing out loud.³²⁴

Aspden does not mention that the score also calls for the thumping, rubbing, and slapping of the pianist’s chest at several points, a fair amount of tongue clicking, kiss noises, and even a textual reference to a leaky toilet, all of which surely contributed to the audience’s hysteria. This list of performance instructions sounds outlandish, but it seems unlikely that Rzewski intended any of these effects to be humorous—in fact, the work appears to deal rather seriously with the subject of existential confusion. The text, fractured across the piece and deliberately made hard to understand by large pauses, non-verbal sounds, whistling, and loud noises, reads,

Nowhere, that’s where I am. Psh. Ah--[sigh]. And why not? And why not why ah-- [sigh] Tsu! Why be anywhere? Here is where I am. Tsu- Wh--[heavy breathing] Hmm-- In the middle of nowhere I sit down and look around me, Hmm-- oho[breathe, little or no voice] hmm-- oh oho hmm-- a grey mist, and, sometimes, hmm-- and, sometimes, a burst of sunshine. Here is where I want to be.³²⁵

³¹⁹ Peter Aspden, “The Last Laugh: A concert of Wagner, Beethoven, Scarlatti, and Rzewski Reduces the Audience to Helpless Giggles,” *Financial Times*, London, 2006, p. 46

³²⁰ Murray, *ibid.*

³²¹ Paul Griffiths, “A Pioneer’s Rear and Ranging Vision,” *New York Times*, 1998, p. B7

³²² As noted in the score: *Nowhere* (2003), *IMSLP*

³²³ As noted in Aspden, *ibid.*

³²⁴ Aspden, *ibid.*, p. 46

³²⁵ Rzewski, *Nowhere*, *ibid.*

The subject matter, and especially its presentation, represents a significant engagement with the question of identity and purpose, and, perhaps more than anything else, a feeling of disorientation. David Little posits that many of Rzewski's most recent works are about "disorientation,"³²⁶ which comports nicely to the present reading of *Nowhere*. Though Rzewski undoubtedly embraces the "absurd"³²⁷ here, and sometimes even the "crass"—as in *Rubenstein in Berlin* (2008), where the performer is instructed to use a whoopee cushion³²⁸—Rzewski is not being insipidly playful with these gestures. *Rubenstein in Berlin* is a good example of how these strange moments in Rzewski's late works are actually put towards the service of greater conceptual goals: the gesture with the whoopee cushion, for example, culminates in a passage where the speaker "discusses an attempted suicide," and so the violations of concert ritual in this case help to illustrate an immense disorientation and a damaged psychology.

Nowhere takes up a similar task. A vocal "cadenza" that appears near the end in which the pianist speaks the unaccompanied text, "Even though: the toilet still leaks | my back hurts | my friends have died | I failed to make the revolution | et cetera | and still I'm not | finished."³²⁹ The strange grammar here heightens the sense of disorientation, and this final section of text makes the general existential conundrum of the earlier section of the work painfully personal: the leaking toilet and aching back are terribly banal details that illustrate a decaying individual situation. The disappointment of the line, "I failed to make the revolution" is particularly interesting in this context—do we read this as a personal confession by Rzewski himself? And, if so, can we take this work to be representative of Rzewski's current mindset? Or, instead, could the failed revolution be a more general comment about the unchanged state of world politics? Could it serve as a more inert metaphor for the disappointment of old age? Or maybe it represents as all of these ideas, but mixed together in varying proportion?

There are many ways to read this piece, of course, and—as is not unusual when dealing with Rzewski—some ambiguity is certainly intended. Regardless of the extramusical content of the words in *Nowhere*, it is important to note that many of its

³²⁶ Little, *ibid.*, p. 144

³²⁷ *ibid.*, p. 145

³²⁸ *ibid.*, p. 145

³²⁹ Rzewski, *Nowhere*, *ibid.*

key features—its indeterminacy, as it specifies no exact pitch values; its incorporation of text and also of the sounds of the human voice and of whistling; and its making of music with non-traditional means, including the body, a chair, all parts of the piano, and bells—all tie the work very clearly to the earlier music in Rzewski’s output, especially the experimental works of his MEV days, but also the pianistic essays of his “realist” period.³³⁰ Though it is in some sense natural that a composer should continue to use similar techniques throughout his career, it is fascinating that so many of these compositional elements are so common throughout the very diverse periods of Rzewski’s output. This suggests two equally important and revealing conclusions. The first is that these musical concerns may actually be the foundation, the generative impulse for Rzewski’s compositional life. While his mode of relation towards politics and towards his audiences has clearly changed over time—from participation, to communication, to an esoteric withdrawal—his work has always expressed a concern for certain common musical elements, including stylistic diversity and formal experimentation, which continue to draw his interest and to merit further exploration in the form of new compositions. This take on Rzewski is somewhat controversial, judging from the literature—many interpreters of Rzewski’s life and music see politics as his source of creativity and as the crucial element of his compositional output, with the musical materials being, as Rockwell claims, “subverted”³³¹ in the service of a given political ideology. However, the steady drive to experiment is more consistently characteristic of Rzewski’s music than any other aspect of his oeuvre.

The second conclusion that can be drawn from the shape of Rzewski’s career is that the diversity of his output, combined with the retention of many basic musical features across these diverse styles, suggests quite strongly that Rzewski’s stance towards the relationship between politics and music is the primary, decisive means by which each of his creative periods is different from one another. If stylistic eclecticism, found text, avant-garde instrumentation, and formal experimentation are common throughout Rzewski’s entire oeuvre, it is the specific deployment of these techniques, and their relative weight, that somehow manages to so drastically differentiate the music of one Rzewski period from another. This balancing act between different compositional procedures seems to be intimately related to

³³⁰ *The People United!*, for example, features a celebrated variation in which the pianist is asked to whistle.

³³¹ Recall here Rockwell, *All American Music*, *ibid.*, p. 93

Rzewski's concern for politics and his corresponding approaches to the process of imbuing music with extramusical significance. During the MEV years, Rzewski held an idealistic view of the benefits of music-making—improvisation in particular—and so created improvisational structures reflective of his belief in the need for new modes of relation between people at large; in his “realist” work, Rzewski's politics moved toward the background, coexisting with musically conceived formal designs but providing social context through a process of melodic quotation; and in more recent years, Rzewski's diminished drive towards communication has allowed his avant-garde affinities to move to the foreground of the music, with political concerns included only in a very personal, often difficult-to-parse manner. This is a general picture, of course, and Rzewski's output is diverse enough that exceptions will always be found. But it is a valuable picture nonetheless.

I have started to suggest here that a “withdrawal” of sorts, a personal approach to political music relatively unconcerned with audience, is evidenced in Rzewski's later works. This non-direct, non-outcome-based aspect of Rzewski's ideology of political composition—though it has always to some extent defined Rzewski's approach to political music—has been significantly magnified in recent years. That magnification helps to reveal that Rzewski as a composer is centrally concerned with musical experimentation and new forms of musical structure, even if his structures are often connected in some way to politics. Rzewski has said he believes one of music's most important features is that it is “one of the few areas in which it is possible to perform wild experiments without running the risk of hurting someone,”³³² something Rzewski seems to keep in mind with each one of his pieces. At the same time, Rzewski's personal concern for political issues does also contribute to his creative process. “Good music,” by his definition, often—but not always—seems to need to be justified by some “connection with the world” at large, however oblique. Rzewski's personal ideological convictions are not the purpose of his music, however—his is definitively not a performative politics, even if certain of his works take specific political events as their motivation. It has been shown time and again in this dissertation that Rzewski's approach is not centered around the audience's political response to a given work, but rather is more nuanced and subtle—more personal,

³³² Rzewski, “Inner Voices,” *Perspectives of New Music*, Vol. 33, no. 1, 1995

more musically oriented, more concerned with drawing a broad connection with the history of social struggle than with inculcating an ideology in his listeners.

Rzewski's most recent output serves to underscore the idea that he is writing today not even for "other pianists," but increasingly, also, for himself. Many of his writings evince a deep curiosity about the nature of his mind,³³³ and this is reflected in his approach to composition, particularly as it pertains to an incorporation of "the discovery of the unconscious mind" into satisfying musical structure.³³⁴ He has explained that he is motivated to write when he "hear[s] voices that echo from the past, resonate in the present, or call from the future, sometimes as words, sometimes as musical sounds, sometimes as vague feelings of impulses only,"³³⁵ a statement which recalls his use of musical quotation as a way to broadly connect to social causes, both past and present. But he explains that, today, he looks at the world "and it makes no sense," so he tries "to write music that makes no sense"³³⁶—to "portray the mess that is inside my own head,"³³⁷ as he puts it, a statement that explains the lack of apparent logic in his increasingly avant-garde recent works.

Though it is very difficult, in my opinion, to read much of his late work as significantly political, attempts have been made to interpret it that way. Little, for example, suggests that Rzewski's newer, nonsensical style might be interpreted as "culture jamming," or "the practice of parodying advertisements and hijacking billboards [and other materials] in order to drastically alter their messages."³³⁸ Such a reading remains unconvincing, however—and presumably this is why Little labels it a "hypothesis"—because Rzewski has often created music that comments on the rituals of the concert hall. To say, as Little has, that Rzewski's recent work is intended primarily to make a political statement by commenting on its medium, using the existence of "a classical composition being performed in the concert hall—as the material to be détourned," or lifted out of its original context and transformed in its message,³³⁹ is to ignore the actual content of the work in question, effectively concluding that its semantic value is entirely external. This is definitively not the case, as the above reading of *Nowhere* demonstrates—Rzewski's music is

³³³ Many of the writings collected in *Nonsequiturs* demonstrate this point.

³³⁴ Rzewski, "Inner Voices," *ibid.*, p. 411

³³⁵ *ibid.*, p. 406

³³⁶ Kodhn, *ibid.*, p. B10

³³⁷ Lewis, *ibid.*, p. 45

³³⁸ Little, *ibid.*, p. 140

³³⁹ *ibid.*, p. 143

communicating within the confines of the concert ritual itself in recognizable ways, even if it is also unusual within that context. As Ursula Oppens has said, Rzewski is always seeking to “defy the limits”—but for her, this likens him to Beethoven, and not to a culture jammer seeking to transform corporate imagery.³⁴⁰ Oppens’ seems a more apt comparison, as it places a proper emphasis on Rzewski’s drive towards musical experimentation while still acknowledging his concern for the brotherhood of his fellow men.

As Rzewski himself has warned,

If you think that music can change human nature and that you are able to use it in a way that you think is the best for human nature... you come out with some dangerous stuff. For example, people who write the ‘wrong’ kind of music or the ‘wrong’ kind of poetry should be isolated because they have some kind of genetic disease. And, we all know where that goes. Perhaps it’s best to leave these questions to future generations. There may be some scientific research in coming centuries, which throw some light on that. But, until that happens, I think composers should stick to writing good counterpoint.

Rzewski’s own personal project has indeed been focused on, among other musical concerns, the writing of good counterpoint. And, as Rzewski says, “you never know whether structural details have any counterpart in meaningful existence. They’re fantasies.”³⁴¹ Given this outlook, it is surprising to see how much of the literature on Rzewski eschews these musical accomplishments in favor of a simplification of the political current in Rzewski’s work.

If this dissertation has so far served to illustrate the diversity of Rzewski’s approaches to politics and composition, the “blends of opposites”³⁴² in his output, and the ways in which it “continually transcends, subverts academic categories and imperatives,”³⁴³ it has already helped to deepen the picture of Rzewski found in the literature. If it has, furthermore, showed that Rzewski’s political approaches are as eclectic as his musical output, from “improvisation (*Selfportrait*, *Speculum Dianae*) [to] instruction-based pieces (*Spacecraft*), graphic scores (*The Price of Oil*), minimalism (*Coming Together*), populism (*The People United Will Never Be Defeated!*), and serialism (*Antigone-Legend*),”³⁴⁴ and that this diversity in is intimately related to the complex and diverse approaches Rzewski has taken to

³⁴⁰ As quoted in Gurewitsch, *ibid.*, p. AR29

³⁴¹ *ibid.*, p. AR29

³⁴² Asplund, *ibid.*, p. 434

³⁴³ Abbinanti, *ibid.*, p. 533

³⁴⁴ Little, *ibid.*, p. 110-111

infuse his music with political significance—then so much the better. Whether juxtaposing a seemingly innocuous musical structure with a dark political text (*Attica*), connecting a musical work emotionally to a broad sociopolitical history through the extensive use of melodic quotation (*North American Ballads*), or writing personal, often inscrutable avant-garde works with hints of the political (*Nowhere*), Rzewski's intellect is always churning, always seeking new ways to write "good music" that is "enriched" by extramusical meaning in some way. All the same, it is important to remember that Rzewski is sometimes making no political point at all. As Matthew Gurewisch recounts,

Once asked if commentators were right to call him a Marxist composer, [Rzewski] snorted, 'Harpo or Groucho or what?' The anarchic streak in his music is as much comic as it is political. Somewhere in his seven Cd box.... There is a cameo turn for a seriously vocal rubber ducky.³⁴⁵

Much as a cigar is, sometimes, just a cigar, a Rzewskian rubber ducky is, sometimes, just a rubber ducky, no political strings attached. Rzewski has indeed crafted improvisational structures with the potential for extramusical interpretation, compositions with a broad and emotive connection to the history of revolution, and avant-garde pieces with a Cagean flair for irrationality and experimentation, but it runs counter to the spirit of these works to try to definitively resolve their ambiguities. Perhaps it is our job, when listening to or studying Rzewski's works, to appreciate the richness of their complexities and their contradictions without trying to reduce them to simple teaching pieces. If Rzewski's politics is there on the page, it lies in the margins, both ever present and ever elusive.

³⁴⁵ Gurewitsch, *ibid.*, p. AR29

A case study: “Winnsboro Cotton Mill Blues”

“Programmatically re-creating the harsh rhythmic and arrhythmic sounds of an industrial mill, [‘Winnsboro Cotton Mill Blues’] is by turns harrowing and hypnotizing as the listener is drawn inexorably into a brutal maelstrom. When one is flung out into the world of the folk-like theme, the respite is only momentary, even illusory, as the mill continues to chug along in a background that is never very far away. This piece became one of the most popular in [Rzewski’s] repertoire for performance by many pianists and it’s clear why: it is both an awesome pyrotechnical display and a composition of deep passion and anguish.”³⁴⁶

–Brian Olewnick

If this dissertation has so far been critical of attempts to read direct political programs into Rzewski’s work, then it is only fair that it offers a model for how musical-political interpretation might successfully be done. The goal of this section will be to investigate the interface between the musical structure of “Winnsboro Cotton Mill Blues” and its political implications, all the while being sensitive to the Rzewskian compositional ideologies explored above. Great care will be taken to explicate the musical structures of the piece on their own terms, such that it might be possible to discern whether the work’s vivid extramusical associations might have had a decisive impact on its musical conception. Such a specific study can provide no all-encompassing conclusions, especially when considering a body of work as diverse as Rzewski’s, but it nonetheless will help to decipher how rigid or fluid the divide between music *qua* music and music *qua* politics may be in this work. “Winnsboro Cotton Mill Blues” should prove an interesting piece in this regard: its stylistic juxtapositions are unmistakable, yet its politics are not overt—as has been explored above, its source text does not appear in the score itself, so that politics hovers around the piece, but in such a way that its message remains multivalent.

It is unsurprising that “Winnsboro Cotton Mill Blues” has generated reviews full of vivid imagery and references to feats like “pyrotechnical display.”³⁴⁷ The piece makes use of a virtuosic technical language that demands the use of the performer’s “forearms”³⁴⁸ and “flat of hand,”³⁴⁹ also requiring dynamic expression ranging from

³⁴⁶ Brian Olewnick, in a review of *Winnsboro Cotton Mill Blues* for allmusic.com, 2012; URL: <http://www.allmusic.com/album/north-american-ballads-squares-mw0000980996>

³⁴⁷ Olewnick, *ibid.*

³⁴⁸ Frederic Rzewski, “Winnsboro Cotton Mill Blues” [score, attached as Appendix A], from *North American Ballads*; p. 52, b.9

³⁴⁹ *ibid.*, p. 54

*pppp*³⁵⁰ to *ffff*.³⁵¹ The work has even been described as “shocking”³⁵² in performance situations—Bell and Olmstead write that in one particularly dramatic passage,³⁵³ the sudden re-entry of forearm cluster chords makes it look “as though the performer has suddenly collapsed.”³⁵⁴ Extreme registral and textural variations add to the spectacle, demonstrating an almost “Debussian interest in the sheer sound potential of the piano”³⁵⁵ and enriching what some have already described as a “masterpiece.”³⁵⁶

The folk tune Rzewski references in “Winnsboro Cotton Mill Blues” describes “the bleak life of a mill worker in Winnsboro, South Carolina.”³⁵⁷ It came into being during a nationwide strike of textile workers in 1934,³⁵⁸ and its lyrics read as follows:

Old man Sargent, sitting at the desk,
The damned old fool won't give us no rest.
He'd take the nickels off a dead man's eyes
To buy a Coca-Cola and an Eskimo Pie.

CHORUS: I got the blues, I 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 got the blues, I 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 knotter in my hand,
So I can spool in the Promised Land.

This song fits well into the general political framework of the *North American Ballads*, as each of the work's movements reference source tunes about “the plight of the American working class.”³⁵⁹ In this case, the text laments a severe restriction of all breaks for workers, “even to go to the bathroom,”³⁶⁰ and comments on the corporate greed that has reduced these laborers to fixtures on the “spool room wall,” so that they may as well plan to spool “in the Promised Land,” as well. Though

³⁵⁰ *ibid.*, p. 63, b.155

³⁵¹ *ibid.*, p. 57, b.80

³⁵² Bell and Olmstead, *ibid.*, p. 457

³⁵³ Rzewski, “Winnsboro Cotton Mill Blues,” *ibid.*, p. 63, b.147

³⁵⁴ Bell and Olmstead, *ibid.*, p. 457

³⁵⁵ Pollack, *ibid.*, p. 388

³⁵⁶ Bell and Olmstead, *ibid.*, p. 457; see also Olewnick, *ibid.*

³⁵⁷ Hershberger, *ibid.*, p. 50

³⁵⁸ *ibid.*, pp. 51-52

³⁵⁹ *ibid.*, p. 57

³⁶⁰ *ibid.*, p. 52

Rzewski has commented as recently as 2002 that “still today non-union workers are making jeans in conditions similar to these in the same North Carolina factories,”³⁶¹ the text from this tune appears nowhere in the score, and the composition of this piece does not appear to have been set off by any particular political event. Instead, the work’s source tune serves as an ever-present springboard for musical development, silently singing a deep political background into the fabric of the music.

Bell and Olmstead’s is the oldest extant article on “Winnsboro Cotton Mill Blues,” and it is still one of the few published articles in the literature. At the core of their analysis is the idea that the “performance instructions [in the *North American Ballads*] can be read as signposts directing the pianist to uncover subtle programmatic relationships in the way that a singer might discover *musica reservata* in a Renaissance motet.”³⁶² For Bell and Olmstead, in other words, Rzewski’s political program for the *Ballads* is most evident in its performance directions. In some cases, it is hard to argue with their conclusions; as an example, Rzewski’s indication that the opening cluster chords of the piece be played in a “machinelike” manner certainly lends credence to the idea that they were indeed intended as a sonic representation of “the clangor of a cotton mill.”³⁶³ Issues sometimes arise, however, when Bell and Olmstead gloss over technical and musical issues in order to offer creative conjectures about the work’s extramusical content. For example, their entire discussion of the first four pages of the thirteen page score is as follows:

“The first page of the score of the ‘Winnsboro Cotton Mill Blues’ suggests that the performer play clusters in a machinelike manner. These clusters accomplish two ends: they create the clangor of a cotton mill and they introduce the black-and-white conflict that possibly governs a hidden program. Rzewski’s markings ‘Black notes only’ and ‘White notes only’ are reminiscent of the restaurant and drinking fountain signs in the fifties, which read ‘White People Only’ and ‘Colored People Only.’”³⁶⁴

The musical action at the outset of the work is more nuanced than such a short description could possibly capture, and while Bell and Olmstead open their paper by lamenting the way in which politically oriented analyses “deflect discussion from traditional musical values and overlook Rzewski’s successful blend of careful

³⁶¹ *ibid.*, p. 55

³⁶² Bell and Olmstead, *ibid.*, p. 452

³⁶³ *ibid.*, p. 455

³⁶⁴ *ibid.*, p. 455

craftsmanship and engaging formal presentation,”³⁶⁵ they themselves overlook much of the formal architecture of this work. Their analysis of Rzewski’s “black notes only” and “white notes only” indication is an example of the speculative nature of some of their conjectures—and in this case, Rzewski’s marking can be accounted for without an elaborate political framework.

Musically speaking, the alternation of black and white note clusters—as specified on p. 2, b.2 of the score (attached as Appendix A)—allows the pianist to articulate a chromatically saturated texture that builds on the first bar of the piece but also simultaneously retains the character of its basic motivic gesture, an alternation between F and G \flat .³⁶⁶ Without the alternation of black and white notes, that specific semitonal relationship might fade into obscurity in the texture, which would in this case become a far less differentiated group of chromatic half-steps. Technically speaking, the alternation of black and white note clusters physically allows the pianist to repeatedly play a chromatically saturated, nine-note cluster chord in semiquavers. Without the black-note-only, white-note-only variation Rzewski calls for, the pianist would have to use both hands on each semiquaver pulse in order to play all nine notes of each composite cluster chord (F, G \flat , G, A \flat , A, B \flat , B, C, D \flat , as found in b.4 and bb.7-24), which would quite quickly get tiring over the long durations Rzewski asks the pianist to produce them.

Rzewski, himself a pianist, is always aware of the performance process. Technical considerations should not be underestimated when considering his compositional intent, and the physicality of the performance process may in fact be an integral component of his semantic vocabulary. Kathryn Woodard has argued that “relationships between sound, body, and technology”³⁶⁷ are central to “Winnsboro Cotton Mill Blues,” since the forearm smashing required by the opening clusters of the work makes “the pianist’s role as ‘laborer’ clearer to the audience;”³⁶⁸ clear enough, she writes, that “anyone remotely familiar with the piano”³⁶⁹ can understand the effort the pianist must put in to play them. This performative effort illustrates the dehumanizing, “mechanical nature of the piano” in this context, and it underscores the

³⁶⁵ *ibid.*, p. 449

³⁶⁶ Rzewski, “Winnsboro Cotton Mill Blues,” *ibid.*, p. 51, bb.1-2

³⁶⁷ Woodard, *ibid.*, p. 2 [8%]

³⁶⁸ *ibid.*, p. 9 [48%]

³⁶⁹ *ibid.*, p. 9 [48%]

“repetitive labour” the pianist is required to put into the piece.³⁷⁰ According to Woodard, the recognizability of this pianistic effort “heightens”³⁷¹ the pro-labor political sentiments that already underpin the work, allowing the pianist to enact the struggle of menial labor and embody “the role of ‘worker’ from the [original] song’s lyrics.”³⁷² Woodard herself sometimes places undue emphasis on the performance process—for example, she writes that the work’s climax is constituted by “the struggle to find the melody and to find one’s voice... one’s self as a pianist,”³⁷³ while the scope of the work almost certainly extends outward from the pianist, existing as it does squarely within Rzewski’s period of communicative “realist” compositions. Nonetheless, it is important to keep in mind that the broader performance context of Rzewski’s compositions is crucial to their meaning, political or otherwise.

Howard Pollack interprets “Winnsboro Cotton Mill Blues” differently, arguing that it is as an almost “Ivesian” exercise in contrast.³⁷⁴ He writes that the piece creates an opposition between “harmonious, diatonic settings of [American folk] tunes” and more “dissonant, polytonal juxtapositions,”³⁷⁵ and indeed this movement does clearly juxtapose the chromatically saturated, “expressionless”³⁷⁶ precision of the opening material with the harmonious, “espressivo,”³⁷⁷ overtly bluesy material that appears later in the work. Woodard has suggested that these very obvious juxtapositions contribute to the creation of a “collage” that “heightens a sense of shared cultural and musical memory in the listener,”³⁷⁸ she further notes, citing Jonathan Kramer, that “collage and pastiche ‘encourage the perceiver to make his or her own perceptual sense of a work of art,’”³⁷⁹ thereby recalling Little’s framework for Rzewskian political communication. However, what is not as evident at first listen is that Rzewski actually takes great care to make “Winnsboro Cotton Mill Blues” a connected, unified whole, one with structural and thematic ties across its entirety. These connections reveal a kind of “motivic obsession”³⁸⁰ and a careful construction

³⁷⁰ *ibid.*, p. 7 [37%]

³⁷¹ *ibid.*, p. 14 [78%]

³⁷² *ibid.*, p. 6 [31%]

³⁷³ *ibid.*, p. 11 [59%]

³⁷⁴ Pollack, *ibid.*, p. 388

³⁷⁵ *ibid.*, p. 388

³⁷⁶ Rzewski, “Winnsboro Cotton Mill Blues,” *ibid.*, p. 51, b.1

³⁷⁷ *ibid.*, p. 57, b.86

³⁷⁸ Woodard, *ibid.*, p. 14 [78%]

³⁷⁹ *ibid.*, p. 13 [72%]

³⁸⁰ Bell and Olmstead, *ibid.*, p. 450

that this author considers to be more Beethovenian than Ivesian,³⁸¹ and that offers, in any case, important insight into the possible meanings—musical and otherwise—of this “Cotton Mill Blues.”

Though the unscrupulous analyst might be tempted to map out the structure of this piece only in terms of bar numbers,³⁸² a more careful examination reveals that it is actually organized across its different time signatures into discrete groups of twelve-beat units, usually eight per section (see Table 1). Several facets of the work support the idea that these twelve-beat units are the most natural way to understand its structure. To begin with, it is worth noting that every single one of the sections in the table below is marked by a clear culmination or initiation of musical events. Section A consists only of F and G♭ semiquavers, built on by chromatic clusters. Section B marks the moment a new musical process is initiated within that texture—this process features the gradual growth of forearm clusters. Section C then begins precisely where the process in Section B culminates: here, forearm cluster expansion gives way to a registral contraction which completes exactly halfway through the section (at b.33, marked by a time signature change into 2/4) and then gradually gives rise to an ostinato. The beginning of Section D coincides with the codification of that ostinato and with a time signature change (2/4 changes to 3/2); it is also marked by the very audible introduction of a new musical element, accented chords in the right hand of the piano. Section E, like Section D, coincides with a time signature change (3/2 to 6/2), and it marks the entrance of a blues melody in parallel major thirds. Section F, too, coincides with a time signature change (6/4 to 2/4); it marks the exit of the blues melody, features the start of a texture in which both hands play the semiquaver ostinato alongside triadic motivic material, and culminates in a *ffff* passage where the most extreme registers of the piano have been activated. Section G marks the moment music returns after this *ffff* climax; it features a time signature change (2/4 to 12/8) and contains the first downbeat of a suddenly bluesy texture. Section H marks the moment that bluesy texture ends, featuring a return to the movement’s initial tempo, a time signature change (12/8 to 4/4), and the reappearance of constant semiquavers.

³⁸¹ Of course, Rzewski has been compared to Beethoven before: as Pollack writes on p. 383 of *Harvard Composers* (ibid.), the “lofty architecture and stylistic diversity” of Rzewski’s *The People United Will Never Be Defeated* (1975) “readily suggested comparisons with Bach’s *Goldberg Variations* and Beethoven’s *Diabelli Variations*.”

³⁸² Sujin Kim does just this on p. 60 of “Understanding Rzewski’s North American Ballads” (ibid.).

Table 1: *The twelve-beat organizational units of “Winnsboro Cotton Mill Blues”*

<i>Section</i>	<i>Bars</i>	<i>Size (# of 12-beat units)</i>	<i>Basic Characteristics</i>
A	1-8	8	F, G \flat variation, plus chromatic clusters
B	9-24	8	Entry of forearm clusters
C	25-38	8	E \sharp saturation, gradual ostinato introduction
D	39-50	6	Sudden entry of chords over ostinato
E	51-58	8	Blues melody in parallel major thirds
F	59-87	8	Accented melodic fragments in ostinato, crescendo to <i>ffff</i> , rests
G	87-110	8	Overtly bluesy material
H	111-135	8	Renewed semiquavers a tempo, introduction of borrowed melody, motivic saturation
I	136-155	7	Return to simple melody, sudden ending

The section also introduces a simple triadic melody, then features an explosion of motivic elements across all across the keyboard. Finally, Section I marks the return of the simplest version of that triadic melody and features a sudden and dramatic ending in which the cluster chords return.

In this twelve-beat framework, then, every significant musical event is accounted for and neatly split into its own section, as is often clearly visible in the score—in fact, the sections coincide so well with Rzewski’s placement of textural and time signature changes that they are often quite easy to spot. Rzewski’s small-scale organization of his material also supports the idea that he has carefully constructed a twelve-beat organizational framework: for example, the musical material at the start of the work, which could have been metricized several ways, receives a 12/4 time signature. In addition, a majority of the piece’s systems, regardless of time signature, contain twelve beats.³⁸³ And finally, every single one of the bars Rzewski repeats

³⁸³ Thirty-three of the piece’s sixty-five systems are organized in this way. Though it is true that systems are traditionally organized for the sake of formatting, and without musical structure in mind, the persistent appearance of twelve beat units on the pages of this piece did have an effect on the thinking of this analyst.

multiple times in the work are organized into beat patterns of six or—more frequently—twelve.³⁸⁴

Equipped with an understanding of the twelve-beat formal units of the piece, it is now possible to decode some of the more initially puzzling features of its construction. Why, for example, does the overtly bluesy section (Section G) occur exactly where it does in the piece, seemingly out of the blue—or, at least, out of a long series of rests? And why are there precisely five bars of rest notated there instead of something simpler, like a fermata? Twelve-beat units are the key to discovering the answers to both these questions and to understanding the formal architecture of the piece as a whole.

A glance at Table 1 shows that Section G begins after forty-six twelve-beat units have already occurred.³⁸⁵ Since the piece in its entirety contains sixty-nine twelve-beat units,³⁸⁶ we can conclude that Section G initiates *exactly* two-thirds of the way through the piece.³⁸⁷ The precision of that ratio is rather astounding, and as a result, it is tempting to interpret this bluesy material as something of a “golden section” of the piece;³⁸⁸ thankfully, one need not evoke the intellectual lineage of that term in order to understand that such a precise entry point for the blues material endows it with a special significance. Indeed, its precise placement at this moment in the piece may very well help the listener to hear this material as a kind of a culmination, or at least a coloration, of the previous $2/3^{\text{rds}}$ of the work, a hearing that is only reinforced by the fact that the entire movement calls itself a “blues.” Whether or not the listener is affected by this precise ratio, though, the analyst must be. By placing the blues material at such a formally privileged place in the work, Rzewski calls attention to its importance and suggests that the blues, in its unadulterated form, is central to the action of this entire movement. There are clear political implications to the special placement of the blues within the work, though it is not so easy to come

³⁸⁴ The 6x repeats over semiquavers in bb.33-34 and bb.51-59, the 3x repeat over bb.63-64, and the 2x repeat over bb.60-63 create twelve beats each; the 3x repeats over semiquavers in bb.35-50 and bb.65-68 create six beats each.

³⁸⁵ Sections A, B, C, E, and F (five sections) all contain eight twelve-beat units (8×5), and Section D contains six twelve-beat units; $8 \times 5 + 6 = 46$.

³⁸⁶ Which can be deduced by adding all the numbers in the “Size” column of Table 1 ($8 \times 7 + 13 = 69$).

³⁸⁷ $46 / 69 = (2 \times 23) / (3 \times 23) = 2 / 3$

³⁸⁸ This will be a familiar term to many, written about as early as 1950 by J.H. Douglas Webster in his “Golden-Mean Form in Music:” *Music & Letters, Vol. 31, No. 3 (1950)*. On p. 239 of that article, Webster defines a golden section as an “emotional peak” that occurs “about 5:8” of the way through a work.

up with one specific narrative that fits the piece better than any other. Could the arrival of a fully bluesy texture at the two-thirds mark signify the importance of the humanity of the cotton mill laborers, who had hitherto been drowned out by the dissonance of the cluster chords? Could the blues here draw upon Rzewski's belief in the powerfully "human" element of folk melodies, reminding the listener that the laborers in question have an indefatigable humanity even in the face of dehumanizing conditions? The piece certainly speaks along these lines one way or another; part of its beauty is that it remains open to further interpretation, displaying very Rzewskian avoidance of political platitudes in favor of a more nuanced political approach. All the same, this precise formal ratio suggests that Rzewski was carefully considering his extramusical material while he drew up the plans for this work, lending credence to the idea that this formal structure could have been built specifically in the service of the political message of the work.

The precise formal ratio of the piece helps to explain other aspects of its form, as well, which displays that Rzewski was very careful in maintaining its mathematical exactness. The curious length of Section D is a case in point. Sections D and I are the only two which do not conform to the uniform ninety-six beat section length across the rest of the piece, and in the case of Section I, its truncated duration was clearly designed to compliment the fade-out effect Rzewski strives for at the end of the piece—in the final bar, Rzewski gradually slows down the semiquaver motion of the texture while simultaneously continuing a diminuendo all the way through *pppp*. One can assume from this gesture that Rzewski wants the listener to hear the ending as a sort of moving out of the room, as a fading out but not an ending in any final sense; perhaps the music—or the cotton mill, as it were—continues to churn on in the distance somewhere. This interpretation is strengthened by the fact that the piece's final note, C, has a dominant relation to the F at the base of the texture in first bar of the movement, and therefore the piece can be heard as a kind of a cycle, where the ending leads the listener's ear inexorably back to the beginning: one can imagine the last bar of the piece progressing from dominant to tonic, thereby beginning the piece anew again each time it "concludes." The fact that this final section fades out one twelve-beat unit before it should³⁸⁹ is just further evidence that Rzewski is seeking an unresolved ending, just one additional device he has used to add inconclusiveness to

³⁸⁹ Section I fades out after seven twelve-beat units, instead of the usual eight.

the piece's final bars. Politically, this cyclical non-closure can be read as a nod to the ongoing struggle for societal equality the work and its labor-oriented texts seem to orbit around. In any case, Section D, by contrast, has none of these musical reasons to have a shortened length, and we can therefore only understand its reduction in size in the context of the piece as a whole: if Section D had been ninety-six beats, like all the other sections, Section G would not have commenced a perfect two-thirds of the way through the work.³⁹⁰ It therefore seems likely that Section D was shortened in order to more perfectly position the emergence of the overtly bluesy music, strengthening the significance of that human musical material.

Similarly, the precision of Rzewski's rest notation from bb. 81-85—which, at first glance, appears superfluous, like a written out fermata—also serves to support the ratio of the overall structure. Using twelve-beat units, we find that these rests commence $7/8^{\text{th}}$ of the way through Section F, so that they themselves comprise a complete twelve beat unit, the final eighth of the section³⁹¹—except, in the sixth and final $2/4$ bar of this twelve-beat unit, a blues melody enters. Thus, precisely five bars of rest exist because they, plus the first bar of the blues material, exactly complete the previous ninety-six beat section of the work.³⁹² What makes that fact musically interesting, however, is the other discovery it illuminates: the blues material has actually smeared over into the previous section of the work, entering two beats before the formal architecture of the piece suggests it should appear. Every other section culminates exactly where the twelve beat units suggest each should, with no ambiguity; the fact that the pattern is broken here and only here is quite important, and this again suggests a deliberate decision on Rzewski's part.

One might at first assume Rzewski has the blues melody enter early simply as a pick-up gesture to the following section, since those notes do indeed prepare the downbeat that marks the beginning of Section G. However, the workings of the piece suggest a more significant role for this two-beat anticipation. Rzewski's notation reinforces the idea that the blues music, rather than just arriving early or with an

³⁹⁰ If Section D had been eight twelve-beat units long, both that section and the piece would have gained two twelve-beat sections. The resulting fraction for the starting point of Section G would have been $47 / 71$, a ratio which cannot be further simplified.

³⁹¹ Section F contains ninety-six beats, and the rests commence after eighty-four (12×7) of these beats have already been articulated. The rests comprise the final twelve beats of the section.

³⁹² Ninety-six beats is the customary section length in the piece, since eight twelve beat units add to ninety-six beats total ($8 \times 12 = 96$).

upbeat, has actually spilled over its designated section of the piece and into the music that has come before it. The first evidence to this effect is that the initial note of the blues melody in b.86 appears with a tie marking attached to no note in the previous bar, which of course consists only of rests. The tie therefore stretches back to some unseen source earlier in the work, suggesting that b.86 may not actually be the beginning of the blues tune after all. We find that Rzewski also places tie markings over the final notes in b.80 and over each subsequent bar of rest leading up to b.86, as well, and though these ties over the rests at first appear to indicate that the sonority of the earlier bars should be held through these bars of rest, that information is already conveyed by the pedal marking at the bottom of the system. These ties may therefore be present for another reason: indeed, examined in tandem with the tie in b.86, they appear to actually stretch farther backwards through the work. In other words, since these ties over the empty bars of rest are rather explicitly connected to the sourceless tie at the beginning of b. 86, they can be understood as a continuation of that tie. Taken together, these ties therefore extend the source of the first bluesy notes indefinitely backwards into the earlier sections of the piece. This conclusion is also supported by the fact that the key signature marking for Section G appears a full bar before any notes actually enter, in between two bars of rest, and by the fact that the blues melody slinks in while the sustain pedal is still holding the pitches of b.80; this pedaling creates a direct sonic elision between the sonority from b.80 and the blues melody, such that the harmonic overlap aurally implies that the blues tune emanates from somewhere within the sounds in the piece that have come before it.

In fact, the blues material can even potentially be understood as having gone on all along underneath the clangor of the earlier sections of the work. Rzewski's indication in the score at the outset of Section E supports this possibility: he asks the performer to intentionally obscure the bluesy melodies of the right hand in this section—the first such melodies in the piece—so that they are “sometimes hardly to be heard.”³⁹³ Because of that indication, it is not a stretch to suspect that those melodies might somehow be implied beneath the churning of all the piece's other various sections, as well, echoing, “hardly to be heard,”³⁹⁴ somewhere underneath the machinelike *marcato* of the constant semiquavers. As it turns out, there is plenty of evidence in the score to suggest that such a hearing of the piece—one in which the

³⁹³ Rzewski, “Winnsboro Cotton Mill Blues,” *ibid.*, p. 55, b.51

³⁹⁴ *ibid.*, p. 55, b.51

blues is always present—is actually the most coherent possible interpretation of this music.

The “hardly to be heard”³⁹⁵ melodies of Section E merit significant attention in this investigation, as they are the piece’s first bluesy melodic material. They enter in b.51 after being set up by the accented, bluesy seventh chords of Section D, and though they are marked *f*, they crescendo and decrescendo expressively in each and every bar of the section—all the way down to *p* in bb.56 and 57, and then further still to *pp* in b.58. No matter their dynamic level, though, they are always softer than the *fff* accompaniment, which Rzewski stresses must receive “great care”³⁹⁶ so that it remains “extremely loud.”³⁹⁷ Here too, then, are clear indications that Rzewski seeks to depict a human blues element submerged beneath relentless mechanic textures. Already covered by the *fff* of the left hand ostinato, these tune fragments are further obscured by their harmonization in parallel major thirds, which destabilizes any sense of their key center: the parallel major thirds introduce pitches foreign to the roughly diatonic scale one would expect from a blues melody,³⁹⁸ and they also create a disorienting combination of major and minor modes when combined with the often triadic melodies in the passage. For example, in b.51, the octaves of the tune outline a descending F-major triad (C, A, F), but the parallel major thirds of that passage also result in the sounding of an A \flat on the first beat of the bar (they sound A \flat , then F, then D \flat , in parallel with the F-major triad). Thus, on that first beat—the bar’s strongest beat—we unambiguously perceive the modality of the passage as F minor. But when the next note of the tune occurs, an A \sharp is sounded that is acoustically reinforced by its articulation in octaves, thereby shifting the modality of the passage to F major.

Both the minor third and the major third are specially emphasized in this instance, the first metrically, through its placement on the downbeat, and the second

³⁹⁵ *ibid.*, p. 55, b.51

³⁹⁶ *ibid.*, p. 55, b.51

³⁹⁷ *ibid.*, p. 55, b.51

³⁹⁸ The blues, as defined in the *Oxford Dictionary of Music*, has a “tonality predominantly major,” and the major (or Ionian) mode is one form of the diatonic scale (*Grove Music Online* definitively states in its entry for ‘diatonic’ that “the church modes are...diatonic”). The scalar qualities of the blues will be examined slightly more precisely in a moment; for now, it is more important to note that in the passage in question, the parallel major thirds introduce many notes foreign to a diatonic scale: in b.51, for example, G \sharp A \flat , and A \sharp all sound, forming a chromatic cluster that would not occur in any spacing of a diatonic scale, thus obscuring the traditional tunefulness of the source melody.

acoustically, through its octave doubling. The same exact effect takes place one bar later in a transposition of the opening melodic gesture in b.52, and it also occurs again each time a triad is articulated, which happens three more times in the section.³⁹⁹ In fact, the entire section is full of major-minor third conflict: since both the tune and its parallel thirds are major, the fifth scale degree of the tune is always sounded with a minor third with respect to the tonic (like the C, A \flat in b.51), and the third scale degree of the tune is always a major third with respect to the tonic (like the A \sharp in b.51). Thus, the superimposition of major and minor modalities occurs every time a third and fifth scale degree are articulated in the tune—which, of course, happens frequently in major mode tunes like the one in Section E.

The emphasis placed on the conflict between major and minor thirds in this section suggests the harmonic backdrop is more nuanced than simple bitonality.⁴⁰⁰ Since both minor and major thirds with respect to the implied key centers of these tunes are being sounded especially emphatically, it appears that Rzewski deliberately seeks to emphasize the coexistence of major and minor modes in this section. In the framework of a “blues” piece, that makes a great deal of sense: the blues is famous for its “blue notes,” or “the flattened 3rd and 7th” of a “predominantly major” tonality,⁴⁰¹ tones that frequently result in “minor third intonations... [that] sound over a C [or other] major triad.”⁴⁰² Thus, we find that the very device Rzewski uses to aurally obscure the bluesy qualities of the melodies in Section E also has the effect of structurally linking them to blues music, and even specifically to the blues material in Section G—after all, it is evident even from the very first two beats of the blues’ entrance in b.86 that blue notes abound in the Section G material: the first gesture of both the right and the left hands is to articulate first the minor, then the major third of the key in succession.⁴⁰³

The coexistence of minor and major thirds in Section E concretely illustrates that the influence of the blues material stretches farther back in the work than Section

³⁹⁹ In bb.54, 56-57

⁴⁰⁰ Technically, of course, the persistent voicing of chords with major third harmonizations results in each line of the tune being fully articulated a major third modulation away from the original key of the source tune. But the octave doublings in this passage do not apply to the major third transpositions, so it appears that true bitonality is not what Rzewski is aiming for.

⁴⁰¹ From *The Oxford Dictionary of Music* entry on “blues.”

⁴⁰² From *Grove Music Online*, entry for “blue note (i).”

⁴⁰³ In b.86, both lines sound D \flat and D \sharp , respectively, which are the minor and major third of the key as understood in reference to the B \flat in the bass of b.87.

E. Blues elements, as it turns out, stretch as far back as Section A, which features the “expressionless, machinelike,”⁴⁰⁴ chromatic texture with a “*grande precision ritmica*”⁴⁰⁵ and an “*intensità costante*,”⁴⁰⁶ in so many respects the antithesis of the consonant, “*poco meno mosso, tranquillo, espressivo*”⁴⁰⁷ blues music in Section G. As has been described, Section A consists only of F and G \flat semiquavers, built on by chromatic clusters, but there is also just one musical gesture in the section that does not fit that initial description. In b.4 and b.7, on the twelfth beat of both bars, an accented, staccato D and B \flat appear as a descending major third in the lowest register of the texture. Of course, a major third on its own is not distinctive enough to be considered “bluesy” in any meaningful way, but this gesture takes on new meaning when understood in the context of the piece as a whole. More accented, staccato notes of this very same type reappear in the same register of the texture in Section C of the piece, at b.33. The chromatic semiquavers continue here, just modulated up a fifth as compared to the opening bar of the piece, and the accented notes at the bottom of the texture still outline a descending third. In b.33, though, which repeats six times, the third descends from D to B \natural instead of from D to B \flat , and so a *minor* third is outlined this time through. We can read these bass notes, then, as a kind of foreshadowing of the overtly bluesy material to come—taken together, they articulate the kind of minor third, major third conflict that becomes explicit in the later blues tunes of Sections E and G.⁴⁰⁸

Having already uncovered major-minor modal conflicts in Sections A, C, and E, it will come as no shock that Section B of the piece also emphasizes such conflicts. Section B, as was described, is characterized by forearm clusters that gradually grow until they saturate the texture. Initially, these clusters ascend up a G \flat pentatonic scale—that is, the first forearm cluster, introduced in b.9, stretches from D \flat to G \flat , and each subsequent set of clusters adds a new top note to the cluster: first A \flat in b.11, then B \flat in b.13, then D \flat in b.15, and then E \flat in b.17, forming together the

⁴⁰⁴ Rzewski, “Winnsboro Cotton Mill Blues,” *ibid.*, p. 51, b.1

⁴⁰⁵ *ibid.*, p.51, b.1

⁴⁰⁶ *ibid.*, p.51, b.1

⁴⁰⁷ *ibid.*, p.57, b.86

⁴⁰⁸ In addition, Rzewski has stated that the tenuto markings over the final semiquavers in b.2 and b.5 of the piece are there because these semiquavers “come from the theme” (see Kim, *ibid.*, p. 118), further supporting the idea that blues motives occur even in the very earliest moments of the piece.

aforementioned pentatonic scale (G \flat , A \flat , B \flat , D \flat , E \flat). However, this pattern is broken in b.19, where an E \natural is introduced,⁴⁰⁹ at which point this new top note gradually dominates the texture.⁴¹⁰ In the resulting six bar process, a conflict between E \flat and E \natural is drawn out and emphasized, since E \natural is adjacent to E \flat on both the ascending half of the gesture and the descending half each time it sounds. Rzewski's articulation markings in these passages reinforce the idea that the conflict between E \flat and E \natural is being explicitly foregrounded: no note in the passage is accented until b.17, when the first E \flat enters, and for the rest of the section only E \flat and E \natural receive accents. This semitone conflict mirrors the major-minor clashes in other sections, here by sounding flattened and non-flattened sevenths with respect to the F at the base of the texture; this introduces major-minor modal conflicts at the seventh scale degree. What's more, the line articulated by these top notes also has inherently bluesy qualities: it contains a major third (B \flat) with respect its lowest note (G \flat) and spans a minor seventh interval (G \flat to E \natural , or F \flat), therefore conforming to the "predominantly major" with "flattened 7th" qualities that define blues music.

In this discussion it must be noted, for the sake of completeness, that Rzewski does write the following into Section B of the score: "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."⁴¹¹ Though this might at first seem to cast into doubt the validity of the precise pitch analysis conducted above, it remains the case that even if the bluesy contours described there "are not necessarily to be so precisely executed,"⁴¹² they may still provide a "subtle coloration"⁴¹³ of blues across this section of the work. That seems to be more or less what Rzewski is really after—as he has said, "You do not need to hear that melody [in Section B] very clearly, but if possible it should sort of come out of the machinery."⁴¹⁴ There is little doubt, then, that the audience is meant to hear some hints of the blues even in the chromatic "machinery"

⁴⁰⁹ E \natural appears instead of the next note in the established pentatonic pattern, which would have been another G \flat .

⁴¹⁰ E \natural is articulated more and more frequently until it becomes the top note of every one of the forearm clusters in b.24 (excepting the first).

⁴¹¹ Rzewski, "Winnsboro Cotton Mill Blues," *ibid.*, p. 52

⁴¹² *ibid.*, p. 52

⁴¹³ *ibid.*, p. 52

⁴¹⁴ In an interview with Sujin Kim, *ibid.*, p. 122

⁴¹⁵ of this section, so that the conflict between human tunefulness and dehumanizing industrial labor conditions is implicit in the work from its outset.

Sections A, B, C, and E all contain hints of a hidden blues, and Section D is no exception to this emerging pattern. The section not only features a left hand ostinato which sounds somewhat related to the blues because its outlining of a flattened seventh (F to E \flat) and a set of triadic right hand chords,⁴¹⁶ but also the kind of characteristic semitone relations found in other sections of the work. The chords in the right hand, for example, chromatically slink between D \flat , D \natural , and E \flat , thereby alternating between articulating a minor sixth, a major sixth, and a minor seventh with the tonic F at the bottom of the ostinato—a passage which is bluesy insofar as it outlines a flattened seventh and includes tones from both the major and minor scales based on F. The accents in the left hand ostinato further emphasize this bluesy mixture of modes, since they draw out the D \natural of each iteration of the pattern—a note from the major mode that otherwise might sound like a passing tone to the minor-mode D \flat because of its placement on the weakest semiquaver of the pattern.⁴¹⁷ Finally, it is worth noting that this ostinato later becomes directly linked to blues material: in Section I of the piece, it faithfully accompanies a straightforward blues tune, even going through a I-V-I progression.⁴¹⁸

The remaining sections of the piece all contain explicitly bluesy material: Section E features its obscured melody harmonized in major thirds, Section F contains accented melodic notes across its ostinato that directly foreshadow the triadic tune of Sections H and I,⁴¹⁹ and the rest of the sections are overtly bluesy in style—Section G with its *espressivo* blue notes and Sections H and I with their “*marcato*” tune,⁴²⁰ which actually happens to be the original “Winnsboro Cotton Mill Blues”

⁴¹⁵ *ibid.*, p. 122

⁴¹⁶ Because so much of the other material in the piece is heavily chromatic and dissonant, triadic harmony naturally sounds akin to the overtly bluesy music in Section G. Furthermore, these triads directly set up the blues melody in Section E by establishing its tonic—the Section D chords articulate that F minor tonic for three full bars, with a crescendo to *fff*—and so they can be understood as inextricably linked to the bluesy tune in the next section.

⁴¹⁷ The D \natural always appears on fourth semiquaver of the first beat (of two beats per bar).

⁴¹⁸ See Rzewski, “Winnsboro Cotton Mill Blues,” *ibid.*, p. 62, bb.136-144; the I-V-I progression initiates in b.136, where the bass note is F, reaches V in b.139, where the bass note is C, and returns to I in the following bar.

⁴¹⁹ *ibid.*, p. 56, bb.60-62 as compared to b.113 or b.136

⁴²⁰ As indicated in Rzewski, “Winnsboro Cotton Mill Blues,” *ibid.*, p. 60, b.111; the tune is initially articulated in b.113 and b.136.

Rzewski has titled this piece after.⁴²¹ The tune appears unaltered, in its entirety, in Section I of the piece,⁴²² and it is also the source of much of the material in Section G—bb.99-108 of the section feature a slightly embellished but very recognizable version of b.13-22 of the melody, for example (see Appendix C). The blues material therefore stretches across each and every section of this work in one form or another, so that the blues melodies of the later moments in the piece can be heard, covered and incipient, all throughout—the sound of oppressed workers, perhaps, echoing in the background of the work. In addition, on a musical level the stylistically diverse sections of the work display an impressive amount of interconnectedness, a feature that is only amplified by the “motivic obsession”⁴²³ that characterizes its ubiquitous blues material.

The reappearance of the melodies in Section E is a good illustration of the interconnectedness of the motivic material in this work. The triadic motive in bb.51-52, as just one example, is reminiscent of the “Winnsboro” blues tune that surfaces in Section F, accented in bb.60-63, and that reappears in Sections H (m.113) and I (m.135). The blues material in Section G frequently outlines such triads as well, albeit with ornamental “blue notes,” as in bb.86-87 where the right hand melody descends from F to D \sharp to B \flat , passing through an appoggiatura on D \flat between the F and the D \sharp . Each and every one of the subsequent phrases in Section E of the piece is also found throughout the later sections, so much so that it would fill far too much space to expound on every such connection in this essay. Luckily, these connections are, once mentioned, quite obvious, and it should be simple work for future analysts to uncover all the connections if they find the need—though it is worth noting, as a preface to such an exercise, that even much of the Section G blues material contains tune fragments from earlier in the work, even if these fragments often include several “blue notes” which initially obscure their appearance on the page. As one example, two of the three melodic lines in b.97—both of the lines in the right hand, the first of which initiates on a G \sharp on the second triplet-eighth of beat one, and the second of which begins on a G \sharp on the downbeat of beat two—are near-exact reiterations of the melodic fragment beginning on the second beat of b.54 (Section E) of the piece; in

⁴²¹ As printed in Kim, *ibid.*, p. 29 [included here as Appendix B]

⁴²² Compare Rzewski, “Winnsboro,” *ibid.*, pp. 62-63, bb. 136-146, right hand to Kim, *ibid.*, p. 29 [Appendix B]

⁴²³ Bell and Olmstead, *ibid.*, p. 450

b.54, the melodic contour moves from a D down an F major triad (C, A, F) to an Eb, where in b.97, both lines move from a G down a Bb major triad (F, D, Bb) to an Ab—a literal transposition, except that there are “blue notes” inserted into the b.96 (Section G) material.⁴²⁴ This particular fragment is from b.12 of the original blues tune,⁴²⁵ and it occurs in Rzewski’s piece in its original form in b.140 (Section I). As it turns out, scholar Sujin Kim has already produced a chart⁴²⁶ that traces the reappearance of motivic elements in the quite motivically saturated Section H of the piece, a chart included here as Appendix D; it should be useful as an illustration of just how tightly controlled this work can be. Unfortunately, Kim has missed several of the motivic ties present in her excerpt, so I have also included an amended version as Appendix E of this essay. This colorful appendix demonstrates the proliferation of bluesy contrapuntal voices in the later sections of this work, which may serve to represent the layering of many human voices. This motivic density, when interpreted alongside Rzewski’s view that melodies have a “human” quality, can serve to illustrate the sheer number of people who have been oppressed in situations like the Winnsboro cotton mill—and also, one might conclude, the people oppressed in all the various labor situations Rzewski invokes across the *North American Ballads*.

As Rzewski himself says, “I just feel that I can’t write music that has nothing to do with what’s happening in the world.”⁴²⁷ Much of the previous biographical and rhetorical analysis of Rzewski in this dissertation strongly cautions against hastily drawn political conclusions, and for good reason—the present literature often makes cut-and-dry political assumptions about Rzewski’s music that undercut the subtlety of his craft and ignore the musical sensitivity of his output. Nonetheless, “Winnsboro Cotton Mill Blues” is undeniably political, painting a program intended to draw attention to the humanity of laborers who toil in inhumane conditions. The blues here is the key to Rzewski’s extramusical concepts, as it seems to represent for him the voices of the unheard laborers in the deep background of the work. Rather typically, this Rzewski work contains extramusical content ambiguous enough to be interpreted in several creative ways, and it is worth noting here that the political program of

⁴²⁴ The melodic line that starts in the right hand on the second triplet-eighth of beat one features a grace note Gb before the F and an appoggiatura to Db before the D♯; the right hand line that starts on beat two features a Db grace note before its D♯.

⁴²⁵ See Kim, *ibid.*, pp. 29-30 [Appendix B]

⁴²⁶ Kim, *ibid.*, pp. 88-89 [included here as Appendix D]

⁴²⁷ In an interview with Sujin Kim, *ibid.*, p. 132

“Winnsboro” is decipherable only after close analysis—Rzewski is not on a soapbox; he is not preaching political ideology. Instead, his music invites its listeners to explore its connections to the world on their own terms. In the end, Rzewski probably hopes we will come to understand these issues as he does—in a coaching session for *The People United!*, for example, he told a pianist, “You’re supposed to *win!* It’s a long story and a hard fight, and there are some battles lost along the way, but in the end, you’re supposed to *win!*”⁴²⁸ And yet, as hopeful as Rzewski may remain that a united people will eventually triumph in Marxist fashion, it is clear that he does not write his music to win political battles in the concert hall. “Winnsboro Cotton Mill Blues” is a perfect case in point: it is politically motivated and carefully constructed in support of that motivation, but always subtle, always tasteful, somehow finding a way to speak both forcefully and generally about the broadest struggles toward justice.

⁴²⁸ Madsen, *ibid.*, p. 128

Conclusions

“Artists compromise their dreams: they subject them to the discipline of conscious life, force them out of their private hiding places and into the harsh light of daily social life, where other people can see and hear them, criticize them, and perhaps learn from them and use them. This is true of any art, and must be even more true of art in which that harsh world of social struggle is itself the concrete content of the dream.”⁴²⁹

- Frederic Rzewski

Rzewski is an admittedly difficult figure to come to understand. His music is diverse, his rhetoric can be contradictory, and his artistic philosophy willfully embraces complexity and ambiguity. His role as “poet-philosopher-agitator” on the boundaries between music and politics, composition and improvisation, and Europe and the United States have all contributed to his idiosyncrasy, and as such he occupies just a small niche in the current literature. But he is a deeply thoughtful musician with a formidable technique, a keen intellect, and a flair for experimentation, a socially minded composer whose work is always expanding the boundaries of what is possible in the concert hall. His music has much to offer, as the growing number of dissertations on his work testify, and his approaches to political music in particular are rich and brimming with potential usefulness.

This dissertation has, in part, set out to tell the story of Rzewski’s life and work with broad strokes, consolidating and slightly amending the picture painted in the existing scholarship. Rzewski’s creative life has been presented here in three main phases: first, Rzewski’s MEV period, focused on collective improvisation and structure *qua* music; next, his “realist” period, characterized by stylistic eclecticism and an extensive use of melodic quotation; and finally, his more recent esoteric period, characterized by an amplified avant-gardism and a recurring interest in musical disorientation. These three phases coincide with three distinct attitudes towards audiences. First, during the MEV years, Rzewski took a participatory stance, motivated by a belief in the power of improvised music to model new forms of social organization; next, during the “realist” years, he fostered a communicative approach designed to bring listeners’ awareness to certain political issues in the world at large; and finally, in the later esoteric years, his approach became more withdrawn, relatively indifferent to the reaction of audiences. Throughout all these periods, it has been shown that Rzewski placed significant emphasis on the formal and musical

⁴²⁹ Rzewski, *Nonsequiturs*, *ibid.*, p. 204

aspects of his work, avoiding facile political judgments in favor of a broad connection to the world at large. This dissertation has also sought to debunk the notion that Rzewski's music is motivated by political efficacy—though Rzewski remains ever optimistic that his music might affect its listeners, Rzewski's work is never results-oriented or propagandistic.

The other main aim of the present study has been to explore Rzewski's diverse approaches to political music, attempting to explicate both the ideology and the methodology behind various sets of Rzewski's pieces. Rzewski has by turn viewed the role of the political artist as a citizen with a heightened sense of perception and a duty to rally his fellow brethren to action, as in his early MEV days; as a communicator of sophisticated portraits of past and present political injustice, as in his "realist" work; and as a relatively detached, experimental figure, as in his work from the 1990s. At the same time, Rzewski's personal political ideology has remained largely consistent, as have his core musical values—his work evinces a committed Marxism throughout, with a steady focus on musical experimentation, stylistic diversity, and novel formal structure. Rzewski has also consistently maintained that music-making, and improvisation in particular, have inherent social value. These fundamental commonalities reveal that it is actually the slight shifts in Rzewski's political philosophy behind each of his different stylistic periods that so clearly distinguish one phase from one another, and therefore Rzewski's oeuvre ultimately offers a powerful example of the dramatic effect political ideology can have on the shape and impact of musical work.

This dissertation has demonstrated that Rzewski's work is a veritable catalog of idiosyncratic methods for infusing music with extramusical import, each motivated by intellectual sensitivity and musical integrity. Rzewski's models for the creation of sophisticated political music include concept pieces that model human interaction through musical role-playing and metaphor, as in *Plan for Spacecraft*, process music in which the unfolding of musical structure itself embodies a political message, as in Asplund's reading of *Moutons de Panurge*, and the recitation of political text in contrasting counterpoint to a disjunctive musical setting, as in *Attica*. He has pioneered the use of melodic quotation for political purposes, using found melodies in several ways: as a source of unspoken text and an anchor for political semantic content, as a link to broad cultural and historical extramusical contexts, and as a representation of the human voice, a tool for the expression of revolutionary

sentiments. Rzewski has come to these methods in various ways, having both designed structures for political purposes, as in the *North American Ballads*, and repurposed existing structures, as in *The People United Will Never Be Defeated!*. He is also always sensitive to performance context, acutely aware of the power of a thoughtfully deployed piece of political music—*The People United!* is a perfect example here, too, as its deployment at the American Bicentennial both clarified and intensified its political message.

The sheer diversity of Rzewski's political music makes him a valuable figure for further study, and already a few the Rzewskian ideas explored above can contribute meaningfully to the broader question of how politics and music can relate to one another. Rzewski's career demonstrates, for example, that it is possible to write political music that is not didactic. The rich ambiguity and the characteristic breadth of Rzewski's mode of political engagement allow him to address political topics in his music without preaching, without purveying a narrow ideology. In addition, the lasting critical success of Rzewski's "realist" work has shown that it is possible to write political music that remains relevant over long periods of time, potentially well beyond the lifetime of the initial political touchstone for a given work. Rzewski's music and his writings also show that it is possible to compose with materials simultaneously motivated by equal parts musical consideration and political ideology—both coexist quite comfortably in *The People United Will Never Be Defeated!* and *North American Ballads*, for example. Rzewski's views about the perceptual and the political advantages of melodic quotation help to clarify this point: while source tunes amplify extramusical meaning in Rzewski's work in a number of ways, they also possess some novel features on a purely music-theoretical level; Rzewski's interest in them encompasses both these elements. Ultimately, the present discussion has helped to illuminate the fluidity of the concept of political music, as Rzewski's version of "political music" is sometimes difficult to distinguish from the broader category of "program music," especially when his pieces do not at all focus on attaining direct political efficacy.

An investigation of the intersection between these two overlapping aesthetic categories might prove useful in future, and indeed, many other potentially compelling issues have been flagged in these pages, as well. Any one of Rzewski's aforementioned philosophical positions or methods of political engagement could serve as a productive platform for further study. There is a significant amount of room

for work on the subject of Rzewski's rhetoric and his political ideology itself; a future study might assess the intricacies and the validity of Rzewski's views on aesthetics from a philosophical standpoint, or, instead, work to thoroughly map of the development of Rzewski's ideological views in an attempt to discern whether he has actually implemented a consistent ideology over the course of his whole career. There remains a need for more music-analytical scholarship on Rzewski's music in general—further close-readings of the kind on “Winnsboro Cotton Mill Blues” above would undoubtedly help to uncover additional ways Rzewski has situated music and politics in his work, and they might help to answer the question of whether Rzewski's output is consistent enough to be examined as a unit or whether his pieces are better understood in isolation. Rzewski's late music—most of the music written after *North American Ballads*, in fact—is particularly understudied at present, and as it is all readily available on *IMSLP*, this issue could be quickly remedied. A study focused on the experimental aspects of this recent work, as just one example, might trace the ways in which Rzewski has expanded the boundaries of the concert hall ritual, attempting to understand how and why he has done so. Finally, some comparative studies assessing Rzewski's approach to political music in the context of other politically motivated composers would be very natural extensions to the project of the present dissertation, as well.

No matter what route future analysts might take, the outline of Rzewski's biography and political ideology in these pages should prove useful. The discussion of the role of politics in concert music will always be always ongoing, but it is hoped that the observations made in this dissertation have contributed in a meaningful way. As is abundantly clear at this juncture, Rzewski—both as a composer and a thinker—has devoted his creative life to the question of how politics and art might successfully intertwine, and still the quality and diversity of his output is unparalleled. I have no doubt that Rzewski's example will prove fascinating and influential to many future composers, analysts, and listeners, and more importantly, I am certain that Rzewski will continue to experiment, quietly reaching towards an ever-elusive style, working always to combine politics and music in new and novel ways. In the end, his legacy will be one worth sustained discussion, special in its constant drive toward new kinds of political art and consistent in its uncompromising musical discipline and exhilarating experimental spirit.

Epilogue

“Communism is a very old idea, and it is not likely to disappear quickly. Change of some kind is inevitable. We have to be ready for anything. The potential for new forms of intolerance on a mass scale is as great as it ever was. But the beautiful nonviolent revolution is also more needed than ever.”⁴³⁰

-Frederic Rzewski

While Rzewski is largely considered a political composer, and it appears that his own personal ideology will remain radical to the bitter end, it is perhaps more useful to approach his music by considering it as the work of an experimentalist—as the product of an intelligently idiosyncratic approach to formal design informed by an important political bent. At the same time, as Ivan Hewett reminds us, “Lurking just under the surface of [this] ‘political’ composer is a passionate defender of old-fashioned musical discipline.”⁴³¹ While Rzewski is often compelled to connect his art to the world at large, he does so in a broad, generous, and open-ended way. It is certainly true that Rzewski has been involved in direct political activism over the course of his lifetime, but to conflate his personal political life with his priorities as a composer is to seriously misread his artistic intent.

Rzewski has managed to successfully create a music that exhibits both “aesthetic autonomy” and “topical directness,” a music that achieves a measure of universality while also conveying political ideas—and, therefore, a music that inhabits an aesthetic category some had claimed was not possible.⁴³² Rzewski himself identifies the issue here, writing, “Any art which is partisan, which takes sides, directs a specific message at a specific group of people, must necessarily give up, to a certain extent, its claim to universality.”⁴³³ But Rzewski has toed this line masterfully. He has succeeded in creating a high art political music through an uncompromising focus on musical form, bringing his formidable technique and intellect to bear on the process of constructing musical structures on which politics can hang, ever-present, but never oppressive. Both the musical and political aspects of Rzewski’s work take on a life of their own—they are designed to support one another, but they do not demand one another—and the resulting pieces are therefore ultimately enriched by their political programs instead of dependent upon them.

⁴³⁰ Rzewski, *Nonsequiturs*, *ibid.*, p. 66

⁴³¹ Hewett, *ibid.*

⁴³² This “core duality” of political music is explored in Little, *ibid.*; quotes from p. 11

⁴³³ Rzewski, *Nonsequiturs*, *ibid.*, p. 205

Rzewski's music is quite remarkable in this regard, but it is also by no means a completed project. Rzewski is, after all, "perpetually searching,"⁴³⁴ working in a wide range of styles with a wide variety of different approaches to the incorporation of political ideas. His individual pieces are always experiments, and therefore they are rarely exemplars. Considered on the broadest level, Rzewski is undoubtedly in some ways a "maverick,"⁴³⁵ a pioneer on a precarious frontier, undauntedly hacking his way through a dense underbrush in all sorts of different directions. Rzewski seems to be blazing his own trail, guided by an individual personal agenda, but I think he is also ever hopeful that we might eventually decide to strike out in one direction or another along these paths he has cleared. The territory Rzewski pioneers may indeed prove to be fertile ground for a new generation of composers, each of whom is facing a world as politically divided as ever—in fact, as of the writing of this dissertation, celebrated Pulitzer Prize winning composer William Bolcom has just composed a political song of his own, entitled "Aren't You Ashamed," in response to the U.S. Senate's failure to pass gun control legislation on April 17th, 2013.⁴³⁶ In the end, Rzewski's example may prove to be more valuable than we yet know.

Despite all the work he has done to successfully incorporate politics into his music, Rzewski remains quite evasive about the subject. In 2010 he was asked if he thought music could contribute to "social progress," and he responded, "I would say it's impossible to say.... I don't think anyone really knows what they're doing in this area."⁴³⁷ He followed with the remark, "It's very much a question of try and see."⁴³⁸ Rzewski has devoted much of his working life to this "try and see" approach, though; why is he not more forthcoming? Why, in the same interview, did Rzewski dodge a question—"Who is Frederic Rzewski?"—by saying, "This question is not for me to answer?"⁴³⁹ I believe Rzewski's approach to rhetoric actually reflects his approach to political composition: Rzewski does not view himself as a source of answers or a purveyor of political ideology, but rather as a source of questions, as a standing

⁴³⁴ Little, *ibid.*, p. 110

⁴³⁵ Gurewitsch, *ibid.*, p. AR29

⁴³⁶ See Norman MacAfee, "'Aren't You Ashamed?': William Bolcom's Angry Song on Senators' Defeat of Gun Safety Legislation," *Huffington Post*, Apr 22, 2013; URL: http://www.huffingtonpost.com/norman-macafee/arent-you-ashamed-an-gr_b_3127996.html

⁴³⁷ Pamies, *ibid.*, p. 6

⁴³⁸ *ibid.*, p. 6

⁴³⁹ *ibid.*, p. 10

invitation for further study, as an advocate for open-ended questions and rich ambiguity. Rzewski embraces “art at its most advanced and difficult form,”⁴⁴⁰ and the totality of his musical and rhetorical output suggests he is unfazed by the complexity of that art and its manifold implications. For him, when all is said and done, “music is always better than no music,”⁴⁴¹ and it can only be enriched by its “connection with the world.”⁴⁴² Can that music actually change the world in some meaningful way? Rzewski’s response is a hearty, “Who knows?”⁴⁴³—but, no matter the answer, Rzewski’s music offers a glimpse of a world “more generous,”⁴⁴⁴ and he’s not giving up on us yet.

⁴⁴⁰ Rzewski, *Nonsequiturs*, *ibid.*, p. 205

⁴⁴¹ *ibid.*, p. 30

⁴⁴² *Abbinanti*, *ibid.*, p. 591

⁴⁴³ *Pamies*, *ibid.*, p. 6

⁴⁴⁴ Rzewski, *Nonsequiturs*, *ibid.*, p. 65

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APPENDIX A:
Score, *Winnsboro cotton mill blues*

4. Winnsboro cotton mill blues

Frederic Rzewski
May 1979

$\text{♩} = 88/92$ **Expressionless, machinelike**
marcato, non legato, con grande precisione ritmica, e con intensità costante

1

2 (black notes only)
(white notes only)

3

4

5

8va
pp
8va

8va
mp
8va

8va
f
8va
c r e s c e n d o

upper clusters with forearms; N.B.
both black and white notes *ppp*

6/4
f
sempre
f
sempre
ppp
pp

ppp
pp
ppp
ppp
pp
ppp

(sempre come sopra)

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.

13

ppp p p ppp

ppp p ppp

This system contains measures 13 and 14. The music is written in bass clef with a key signature of two flats. It features a series of chords, each consisting of a bass note and a triad above it. The dynamics are marked as ppp (pianissimo) and p (piano). Slurs indicate phrasing over the chords.

15

ppp p ppp

ppp p ppp

This system contains measures 15 and 16. The musical notation and dynamics (ppp and p) are consistent with the previous system, showing a continuation of the chordal texture.

17

ppp mp ppp

ppp mp ppp

This system contains measures 17 and 18. The dynamics shift to include mp (mezzo-piano) in addition to ppp. The chordal structure remains the same.

19

ppp mf pp

ppp mf pp

This system contains measures 19 and 20. The dynamics include pp (pianissimo) and mf (mezzo-forte). The notation continues with the same chordal pattern.

21

pp f p f mp

pp f p f mp

This system contains measures 21 and 22. The dynamics include f (forte) and mp (mezzo-piano). The final measure of the system shows a change in dynamics to mp.

mp *f* *mf* *f*

N.B.

(black and white notes)

f *ff*

c r e s c e n d o - - - a - - -

ff

ff *f*

d i m i n u e n d o a

f *mf*

d i m i n u e n d o - - - a - - -

N.B. Continue to play upper clusters with right forearm; gradually change (as smoothly as possible) to flat of hand, then fingers.

33. (6x) *diminuendo* (6x) (3x) (3x)

mf *p*

37 (3x) (3x) *f* (3x)

f *L.H. sempre p*

41

L.H. gradually cresc. to f

46

f *L.H. cresc. to fff*

51

f *mf* *L.H. sempre fff*

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.

First system of musical notation. The right-hand staff (treble clef) contains chords and melodic lines with dynamic markings *f*, *mf*, *f*, and *mf*. The left-hand staff (bass clef) features a rhythmic pattern of eighth notes, repeated six times (*6x*) in two measures. A triplet of eighth notes is indicated in the right-hand staff.

Second system of musical notation. The right-hand staff has dynamic markings *mp*, *f*, and *p*. The left-hand staff has dynamic markings *fff* and *6x* repetitions. The instruction "L.H. sempre" is written below the left-hand staff.

Third system of musical notation. The right-hand staff has dynamic markings *f*, *p*, and *pp*. The left-hand staff has dynamic markings *f* and *pp*. A box on the right contains the instruction: "R.H. hardly audible at first, gradually cresc. to *ppp*" with a *6x* repetition. Below this, it says "2 *poco*" and "4 L.H. diminuendo to *f*".

Fourth system of musical notation. The right-hand staff has dynamic markings *f* and *f sempre*. The left-hand staff has dynamic markings *f* and *f sempre*. The system is divided into two measures, each with a *2x* and *3x* repetition bracket.

Fifth system of musical notation. The right-hand staff has dynamic markings *ff*. The left-hand staff has dynamic markings *ff*. The system is divided into two measures, each with a *3x* repetition bracket.

68

(3x)

ff

ff sempre

8

72

8

15

fff martellato

8

8

Ped.

76 (15)

(8)

(Ped.)

79 (15)

ffff

(8)

(Ped.)

86 *Un poco meno mosso* (♩. = 54/56)

p tranquillo, prestissimo

12

poco

(Ped.)

First system of musical notation, featuring a grand staff with treble and bass clefs. The music is in a key with two flats and a 4/4 time signature. It consists of two measures with various note values and rests.

Second system of musical notation, continuing the piece. It includes a *crescendo* marking above the bass line in the second measure.

Third system of musical notation, featuring dynamic markings of *f* (forte) and *mf* (mezzo-forte).

Fourth system of musical notation, featuring dynamic markings of *mp* (mezzo-piano) and *mf* (mezzo-forte).

Fifth system of musical notation, featuring a *mf* (mezzo-forte) dynamic marking at the beginning.

103

f *allargando un poco*

Musical score for measures 103-104. The system consists of two staves. The right staff has a treble clef and the left staff has a bass clef. The key signature has two flats. Measure 103 features a complex melodic line in the right hand with many accidentals and a steady eighth-note accompaniment in the left hand. Measure 104 continues this texture, with a dynamic marking of *f* and the instruction *allargando un poco*.

105

tempo (con pedale)

Musical score for measures 105-106. The system consists of two staves. The right staff has a treble clef and the left staff has a bass clef. The key signature has two flats. Measure 105 features a melodic line in the right hand with a dynamic marking of *tempo*. Measure 106 continues with a dynamic marking of *f* and the instruction *(con pedale)*.

106

ff *f* *ff*

Musical score for measures 106-107. The system consists of two staves. The right staff has a treble clef and the left staff has a bass clef. The key signature has two flats. Measure 106 features a melodic line in the right hand with a dynamic marking of *ff*. Measure 107 continues with dynamic markings of *f* and *ff*.

107

f

Musical score for measures 107-108. The system consists of two staves. The right staff has a treble clef and the left staff has a bass clef. The key signature has two flats. Measure 107 features a melodic line in the right hand with a dynamic marking of *f*. Measure 108 continues with a dynamic marking of *f*.

109

poco a poco riprendendo
diminuendo poco a poco

Musical score for measures 109-110. The system consists of two staves. The right staff has a treble clef and the left staff has a bass clef. The key signature has two flats. Measure 109 features a melodic line in the right hand with a dynamic marking of *poco a poco riprendendo*. Measure 110 continues with a dynamic marking of *diminuendo poco a poco*.

(♩ = 88/92)

4/4 *ppp marcato, come prima* *ppp leggerissimo*

cresc. p

p mf f mp f

2/4 12/16

3/4 4/4

(M.S.)

124

Musical score for measures 124-125. The piece is in 4/4 time. The right hand features a complex melodic line with many accidentals and slurs. The left hand provides a rhythmic accompaniment with chords and moving lines. Dynamic markings include accents (>) and a crescendo hairpin.

126

Musical score for measures 126-127. The right hand continues with intricate melodic patterns. The left hand has a more active role with frequent chord changes. A dynamic marking of *f sempre* is present in the right hand.

128

15

Musical score for measures 128-129. A dashed line above the staff indicates a 15-measure repeat. The right hand has a more melodic focus with slurs, while the left hand continues with a steady accompaniment.

130

Musical score for measures 130-131. The right hand features a series of chords and moving lines. A dynamic marking of *f* is present in the right hand.

132

15

Musical score for measures 132-133. A dashed line above the staff indicates a 15-measure repeat. The right hand has a very active melodic line. Dynamic markings include *ff* and *martellato*.

Ped. _____

15

f *p* *p brightly*
 (Ped.) *marcato*

mp *cresc.*

mf

p *mp*

mf *f*

146

2/4 *f* *fff*

8...
Ped.

149

15va

ff

15

N.B.

pp

(Ped. sempre fino alla fine)

150

15va

ff

15

pp

152

15va

ff

15va

ff

154

15va

pp

15va

pppp

pp *ppp* (Pedale tenuto fino all'estinzione del suono)

N.B. Roll clusters upwards:

and in succeeding bars:

APPENDIX B:

Original “Winnsboro Cotton Mill Blues”

Sujin Kim’s “Understanding Rzewski’s North American Ballads: from the Composer to the Work,” D.M.A. document for the Ohio State University, 2009, pp. 29-30



Figure 4.4: *Winnsboro Cotton Mill Blues*

Old man Sargent, sitting at the desk,
 The damned old fool won't give us no rest.
 He'd take the nickels off a dead man's eyes,
 To buy a Coca Cola and an Eskimo pie.

Chorus:

I got the blues, I got the blues, I 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 got the blues, I got the blues, I 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 knotter in my hand,

So I can spool in the Promised Land.

(Chorus)

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 (Fowke and Glazer, 74-75).

(Chorus)

APPENDIX C:

Section G, bb.99-108, melody circled;
compare to original tune, bb.13-22

First system of musical notation, featuring a grand staff with treble and bass clefs. The music is in a key with two flats and a 3/4 time signature. It consists of several measures with complex melodic lines and harmonic accompaniment.

Second system of musical notation, continuing the piece. It includes a *crescendo* marking above the bass line, indicating a gradual increase in volume. The notation is dense with many notes and rests.

Third system of musical notation, featuring dynamic markings *f* (forte) and *mf* (mezzo-forte). The music continues with intricate melodic and harmonic development.

Fourth system of musical notation, marked with a green bracket and the number '99' below it. It includes dynamic markings *mp* (mezzo-piano) and *mf*. Some notes in the treble clef are circled in yellow.

Fifth system of musical notation, continuing the piece with dynamic markings *mf*. The notation shows a continuation of the complex melodic and harmonic patterns.

f *allargando un poco*

tempo
(con pedale)

ff *f* *ff*

8
108
7

poco a poco riprendendo
diminuendo poco a poco
6/4

Figure 4.4: *Winnsboro Cotton Mill Blues*

Old man Sargent, sitting at the desk,
 The damned old fool won't give us no rest.
 He'd take the nickels off a dead man's eyes,
 To buy a Coca Cola and an Eskimo pie.

Chorus:

I got the blues, I got the blues, I 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 got the blues, I got the blues, I 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 knotter in my hand,

APPENDIX D: Sujin Kim's Motivic Chart

Sujin Kim's "Understanding Rzewski's North American Ballads: from the Composer to the Work," D.M.A. document for the Ohio State University, 2009, pp. 88-89

Figure 5.8 Thematic use of *Winnsboro Cotton Mill Blues* by Rzewski

The image displays a piano score for measures 117 through 122. The music is written in a 2/4 time signature and features a mix of dynamics including *p*, *mf*, and *f*. The score is divided into three systems, each with a measure number at the beginning: 117, 120, and 122. The first system (measures 117-119) includes a *pp* marking and a *f* marking. The second system (measures 120-121) includes a *3/4* time signature change. The third system (measures 122-124) includes a *(MS)* marking. The score contains various musical notations such as slurs, accents, and dynamic markings. Chord symbols 'A', 'D', and 'C' are placed above the staff to indicate harmonic structure. Boxed annotations highlight specific melodic and rhythmic motifs, with some boxes containing the letter 'A' or 'C'. A dashed line with the number '8' is present at the bottom of the first system, and another dashed line with the number '8' is at the bottom of the second system.

124

Musical score for measures 124-125. The system consists of two staves. The right staff has a treble clef and contains a complex melodic line with many beamed notes. The left staff has a bass clef and contains a rhythmic accompaniment. Chord symbols 'A' and 'C' are placed above and below the staves. There are several circled notes in the right staff, and some notes are marked with 'v' (accents).

126

Musical score for measures 126-127. The system consists of two staves. The right staff has a treble clef and contains a melodic line. The left staff has a bass clef and contains a rhythmic accompaniment. Chord symbols 'C' and 'A' are placed above and below the staves. A circled note is present in the right staff. The instruction 'f sempre' is written below the left staff.

128

Musical score for measures 128-129. The system consists of two staves. The right staff has a treble clef and contains a melodic line. The left staff has a bass clef and contains a rhythmic accompaniment. Chord symbols 'D' and 'A' are placed above and below the staves. A dashed line above the right staff indicates a first ending.

130

Musical score for measures 130-131. The system consists of two staves. The right staff has a treble clef and contains a melodic line. The left staff has a bass clef and contains a rhythmic accompaniment. Chord symbols 'A' and 'C' are placed above and below the staves.

132

Musical score for measures 132-135. The system consists of two staves. The right staff has a treble clef and contains a melodic line. The left staff has a bass clef and contains a rhythmic accompaniment. Chord symbols 'C' and 'A' are placed above and below the staves. The instruction 'ff' is written below the left staff. A dashed line above the right staff indicates a first ending. The instruction 'martellato' is written below the right staff.

APPENDIX E:

Revised Section H Motivic Chart

Altered version of Sujin Kim's "Understanding Rzewski's North American Ballads:
from the Composer to the Work," D.M.A. document for the Ohio State University,
2009, pp. 87-89

Figure 5.7 The original *Winnsboro Cotton Mill Blues*

The image shows a musical score for the blues song "Winnsboro Cotton Mill Blues" in G major, 12/8 time. The score is divided into five systems of music, each with handwritten annotations in various colors:

- System 1:** Measures 1-4. Labeled with "A" and "B" above the staff. A red bracket underlines the first four measures.
- System 2:** Measures 5-8. A red bracket underlines measures 5-6, and a green bracket underlines measures 7-8.
- System 3:** Measures 9-12. Labeled "CHORUS" and "C" above the staff. Three orange brackets underline measures 9-10, 11-12, and 13-14. A pink bracket underlines measures 15-16.
- System 4:** Measures 13-16. Labeled "D" above the staff. A purple bracket underlines measures 13-14, a red bracket underlines measures 15-16, and an orange bracket underlines measures 17-18.
- System 5:** Measures 19-22. Three orange brackets underline measures 19-20, 21-22, and 23-24.

Figure 5.8 Thematic use of *Winnsboro Cotton Mill Blues* by Rzewski

The image displays three systems of piano music, numbered 117, 120, and 122. Each system consists of a grand staff with a treble and bass clef. The music is annotated with various colored lines and boxes:

- System 117:** Features a treble clef with a *p* dynamic marking. The bass clef has a *f* dynamic marking. Annotations include red circles and lines connecting notes across staves, green circles around specific notes, and purple boxes around bass clef chords. Chord markings 'A' and 'D' are present above the treble staff. A measure number '(8)' is indicated at the start of the bass line.
- System 120:** Features a treble clef with a *f* dynamic marking. The bass clef has a *f* dynamic marking. Annotations include red boxes around treble clef phrases, purple boxes around bass clef phrases, and green lines connecting notes. Chord markings 'A' and 'C' are present above the treble staff. A measure number '(8)' is indicated at the start of the bass line.
- System 122:** Features a treble clef with a *f* dynamic marking. The bass clef has a *f* dynamic marking. Annotations include orange circles around treble clef notes, purple boxes around bass clef phrases, and green circles around treble clef notes. Chord markings 'A' and 'C' are present above the treble staff. A measure number '(8)' is indicated at the start of the bass line.

Handwritten musical score with annotations and chord markings. The score is divided into five systems, each with a measure number in the left margin:

- System 1 (Measures 124-125):** Treble clef contains notes with red and orange circles and boxes. Bass clef contains notes with orange boxes. Chord markings 'A' and 'C' are present.
- System 2 (Measures 126-127):** Treble clef contains notes with pink and green circles and boxes. Bass clef contains notes with pink and orange circles and boxes. Chord markings 'C', 'A', and 'f sempre' are present.
- System 3 (Measures 128-129):** Treble clef contains notes with purple boxes. Bass clef contains notes with purple and orange circles and boxes. Chord markings 'D' and 'A' are present.
- System 4 (Measures 130-131):** Treble clef contains notes with red and purple boxes. Bass clef contains notes with red and orange circles and boxes. Chord markings 'A', 'D', and 'C' are present.
- System 5 (Measures 132-133):** Treble clef contains notes with orange and pink boxes. Bass clef contains notes with green circles and boxes. Chord markings 'C', 'A', and 'ff' are present. Measure 133 is marked 'martellato'.