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## Piano Performance Technical Analysis of The People United Will Never Be Defeated by Rzewski

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### Abstract

The piano variations *The People United will Never be Defeated* by Rzewski contains many modern piano performance techniques and skills. The difficulties of these techniques and skills in these enormous variations are far beyond the boundaries of traditional piano performance techniques and skills. This analysis will give a specific classification for these modern piano performance techniques and skills in order to provide a more comprehensive guide for the piano performers.

**Keywords:** Piano, Techniques, Rzewski

### Introduction

*The People United Will Never Be Defeated* by Frederic Rzewski can be considered as one of the longest piano variations, which has grand and complex characteristics in compositional structure. It totally has 1 theme and 36 variations, every 6 variations are combined together as one group, and the last variation of each group reviews all the playing techniques and compositional characteristics of this group. Moreover, each variation of this epic piece has a different and primary technical challenge for its performance, and, the last variation of each group reviews all the characteristics of the previous 5 variations, not only in musical characteristics, but also in playing techniques. This combination of ideas applies equally to musical matters as well as technical ones (Deng, 2017). The below is a summary of pianistic technique schematic for each variation and set:

**Theme:** popular song

**Set one**

Var.1: tonal, wide jumps and octave displacement

Var.2: displaced accents and rapidly changing dynamics; bridge from tonal to atonal

Var.3: hexachords; awkward fingering patterns in arpeggios in both hands

Var.4: canonic; hexahedral sextuple running arpeggio passages; extreme difficulty

Var.5: individual *staccato* chords with dynamic contrast; difficult pedal/hand coordination

Var.6: summary of 1-5

**Set two**

Var.7: 2 against 3, wide leaps

Var.8: two-part counterpoint, awkward fingering patterns, as in variation 3

Var.9: left hand static and right hand is a slow chord progression with melody on top, soft playing for an extended period (*ppp*)

Var.10: atonal, hexachords, *glissandi*, palm clusters

Var.11: slam piano lid, shouting and whistling

Var.12: Summary of 7-11

**Set three**

Var.13: jazz blues melodic line, swung right hand melody, repeated chords in bass. Cadenza to join with variation 14

Var.14: pentatonic arpeggios; imitation between right hand and left hand

Var.15: rhythmically free and improvisatory; arpeggios as in variation 14

Var.16: hexachords; contrary motion between hands; rapid sequence of chords = very difficult

Var.17: rhythmic expansion and contraction of right hand while left hand static; each right hand part carries the instruction: "*each phrase like a sudden burst*"

Var.18: summary of 13-17

**Set four**

Var.19: irregular (fragmented) *staccato*; imitation between the hands

Var.20: tremolo; single line shared between the hands; *toccata*-like

Var.21: contrary motion; *ostinato* patterns

Var.22: based on variation 19, triplets extend what was in variation 19

Var.23: tremolo and *martellato*, *quasi toccata*

Var.24: summary of 19-23

### **Set five**

Var.25: expansion on variation 5; Webernesque; extreme dynamic contrasts

Var.26: hexachords combination of tonal and atonal, awkward fingering patterns

Var.27: climax of this piece, stormy and explosive, motoric and repetitive rhythm, *ostinato*

Var.28: based on variation 26

Var.29: bridge, slurs and *staccato*, very short duration; irregular metre

Var.30: summary of 25-29

### **Set six**

Var.31-36: summary of variations 1-30

## **Summary of the Main Pianistic Technical Requirements**

The section which follows analyses most of the pianistic techniques required to successfully perform *The People United Will Never Be Defeated*.

### **Wide leaps**

Example: Variation 1

Here, the technical issues are not simply of one kind but are the result of combinations of different requirements. This variation is difficult enough when played out of context, but in the context of a performance of the work, the pianist must also rapidly adjust from the playing of the theme (forceful and march-like) to immediately playing at the level of *pianissimo*. To achieve the *pp* with security, the keys must be depressed more slowly, but there is scarcely time for that because the tempo remains the same as for the theme (106 crotchet beats/minute). Because of the wide range of notes (octave displacements) and rapid exchange between right hand and left hands, the technical demands here are considerable. The issue is one of accuracy and the addition of extremely varied dynamics makes this a more difficult assignment. On occasion, some adjacent single notes must be played with different dynamics. In this, right and left hands are frequently required to cross, which increases the danger of inaccuracy. Rapid and precise sideways shifting of right and left hands is essential.

## Accents on the weak beats

Example: Variation 2

This technique appears in classical piano music occasionally, such as in Chopin's *Etude Op. 25 No.3*, Brahms's *Variations on a Theme of Paganini*, book 1, variation 3, and the *Two Romanian Dances* of Bartók. However, Rzewski pushes the technique to the limit in this variation by virtue of the large leaps involved and also by alternating accents in right and left hands. A further complication is that Rzewski's technique reverses the normal gravitational direction of accenting strong and weak notes. In this case, the weak beat is always louder, requiring a reversal of the physical action of the pianist's hand and fingers. This means that energy has to be applied to what is normally a release action. Moreover, the entire variation consists of this reversal of the normal physical action.

There is also a connection between the appearance of the music and the difficulty caused by the displaced accents. One technique which I found useful is to mentally remove the bar lines (by taking the bar line away it doesn't feel quite so unnatural), or to mentally shift the bar lines to the right by the margin of a quaver (similar in effect to removal of the bar lines).

## Awkward fingering patterns

Example: Variations 3, 4, 8 12 and 16

The most challenging passages in these variations is the passagework in semiquavers. These passages vary between duplets, quadruplets and sextuplets in both right and left hands, combining awkward fingerings and covering almost the entire keyboard. These variations are also extremely atonal in character, which makes relationships within the patterns of notes much harder to pin down. Without a tonal formula, the difficulty of these passages is increased several folds. The patterns therefore do not lie easily under the hand. An example from variation 3 will illustrate:



Figure 1. Variation 3, bars 13-16 (circles and square not in the original)

Some additional awkwardness relates to the large gaps between some notes (see squared section in bar 16). Often these are intervals greater than a fourth and

therefore involve considerable extension and contraction of the hand to execute properly. When this is coupled with the extensive range of notes that is being utilized, the difficulty level becomes severe. It is imperative that the pianist avoid an unnecessary waste of energy and to this end the softer dynamic requirements are actually helpful. The gradual increase of dynamics to *f* makes these passages progressively more testing. A further complication is the requirement for *legato*. Interspersed through this variation are the main melody notes usually written as crotchets or minims and passed freely from bass to treble clef and back again (see circles above).

This technique witnessed in these variations is not new: Bach, Beethoven, Chopin, Liszt and Rachmaninov all used the technique of a fixed part with a moving accompanying part. However, Rzewski's design represents a substantial evolution of the technique because it involves greater difficulties than anything written by his predecessors and greater difficulties than most pianists will have previously encountered in any repertoire. This type of technical difficulty also appears in Rzewski's *Winnsboro Cotton Mill Blues* (from *North American Ballads*).

### **Coordination of pedalling and hands: Catching the resonance in the pedal**

Example: Variation 5

In variation 5, Rzewski requires the pianist to play *staccato*, but also to catch the resonance of each *staccato* note with pedal. Note that, although marked *staccato*, these notes are written as minims and semibreves with a *staccato* marking over the top. The fingers cannot leave each chord until the desired pedal effect has been activated. This requires a very cooperative effort between fingers and foot and must be practiced a great deal in order to make the technique reliable. The action of fingers and pedal does not happen synchronously; rather, the pedal must follow the action of the fingers at a very short distance. This is almost like a physical "echo effect". If the pedalling occurs too early, the whole chord will be sustained instead of just its resonance. If it is too late, the resonance will have already disappeared. Such critical close coordination of fingers and foot can cause the pianist's hands and arms to become tense and so practice of this technique requires not only the coordination to be mastered but must also be coupled with relaxation of the muscles. Another aspect of this technique is that each chord will have two sound qualities. This is because of the relative dynamic of the played chord (*f*), and the softness of the resonance when caught by the pedal (*p*). This layered effect is built in to this music and is always marked in the score *fp* by Rzewski. The first is the real sound and the second is what can be called the resonance sound. Rzewski also takes care with the location of the pedal marking on the score and places it immediately to the right of each chord (see Figure 2 below). The same technique can be found in George Crumb's *Makrokosmos Vol. II: Gargoyles* (Crumb, 1973).

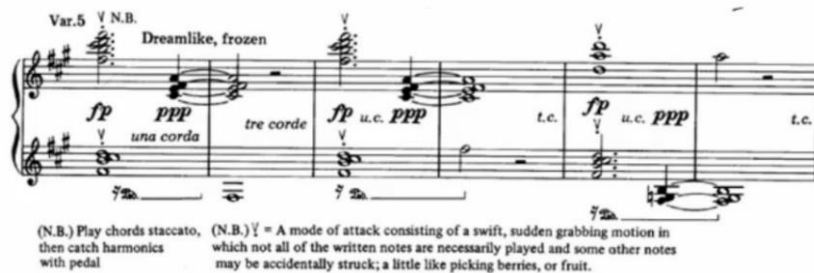


Figure 2. Variation 5, bars 1-6

### Coordination of Pedalling: gradually releasing the *una corda* pedal combined with extreme technical difficulty with repeated chords

Example: Variation 16

In the middle of this variation, Rzewski adds a new pedal skill, that of gradually releasing the “soft pedal” (*una corda*) to create a *crescendo* effect. In this instance, Rzewski has written a series of rapid chords in which he requires the dynamic level to increase from *pp* to *ff* and he clearly recognizes the difficulty this creates without the aid of the *una corda* pedal. A further consideration in the context of this moment in *The People United* is Rzewski’s recognition that the pianist will find it impossible to play this particular configuration of notes softly enough, particularly since there are many repeated notes contained within the chord sequence. The notes themselves constitute a great difficulty without the extra layer of *crescendo* which Rzewski requires. It is worth noting that Rzewski also indicates on the score that the pianist may “slow down if necessary”.



Figure 3. Variation 16, bars 11 and 12

It is helpful to the pianist to measure the gradual release of the *una corda* pedal, one useful way being to measure a slight raising of the pedal in increments of, say, eight demisemiquaver chords. Unless this or some similar approach is adopted, the pianist may find that the *una corda* pedal is fully released too soon to make the *crescendo* effective. Other ways of measuring the incremental release of the *una corda* pedal could be equally effective. For example, a method which follows the musical contours of the outer notes in the right hand would make musical sense. The gradual “staging” of the release will require the pianist to develop, through practice, some idea of where, when and how much release will be necessary.

It is also relevant to mention that the sound quality is also transformed as the pianist releases the *una corda* pedal. The real nature of the *una corda* on a grand piano is to engage/disengage the resonance of one of the strings. The resultant sound is quite different, not only in volume but in quality as well.

The gradual engagement/disengagement of piano pedals is not unique to Rzewski. For example, George Crumb also uses the gradual depression/release of the piano pedal in *Makrokosmos Vol. II*, No. 1, *Morning Music*. In this instance, Crumb uses the sustaining pedal to achieve a gradual transformation of sound quality and volume.

### **The wide skips combined with 2 against 3**

Example: Variation 7

In this variation there is a serious difficulty for the pianist, partly because of the 2:3 ratio of notes but with a number of additional complications which Rzewski gives to the pianist. One of these additional difficulties is that the location in each bar of the syncopation between right and left hands continually shifts through the addition of quaver beats so that it is very easy for the pianist to become disoriented. Adding to this confusion is the fact that the duplet and triplet units are frequently passed from one hand to another. Finally, the pitches themselves incorporate wide skips which utilize the entire piano keyboard. This displaces the hands of the pianist (in a physical sense) and makes the rhythmic units even harder to master. Also, sometimes the triplets and duplets interact in such a way as to confuse the pianist even further (see bar 1, variation 7 left hand part). A solution which I came up with was to write by hand continuous semiquaver triplets and to play the notes of this variation against this visual pulse. The visual pulse then acts as a guide to prevent rhythmic inaccuracies in performance. The problem, in a nutshell, is that the performer needs always to know exactly where the pulse is located and Rzewski has built in a very strong temptation for the performer to shift the pulse around or to confuse pulse with division of pulse. One of the most significant discoveries that I have made as a result of preparing this music for concert performance is the idea that technical difficulties can relate directly to one's inability to play in time and that rhythmic confusion can add greatly to one's physical discomfort at the piano. Conversely, rhythmic security can assist the pianist to overcome other technical problems. Because of this, it is

absolutely essential that the pianist solve the rhythmic difficulties as a first priority before tackling the problem of playing the correct notes. The rhythmic difficulties in variation 7 are at their greatest when there are fewer notes and more rests in the bar, such as in bars 1-6.



Figure 4. Variation 7, bars 1 and 2 (with rhythmic guidelines added)

From bar 17 the music becomes more disjointed in regard to the displacement of the notes all across the keyboard, and it is interesting to note that, at this point, Rzewski instructs the pianist to play "a little slower" to accommodate the wide skips with accuracy.

A final point relates to the need to maintain *legato* throughout (note Rzewski's slur markings) even though the notes are often far too wide apart to enable the pianist to join the notes with the fingers alone. Pedal has to be used very sparingly here because of the atonal harmonic context of the music.

### Soft playing for an extended period (*ppp*)

Example: Variation 9

In the first half of this variation the left hand chords repeat over and over a similar figure (each bar is subtly different) while the right hand plays an even more slowly unfolding part in which the chords themselves change. Because of the extremely soft dynamic levels, the technical requirement to play variation 9 successfully is to be able to play "inside the keys", that is, the fingers seldom leave contact with the keys so that the keys are depressed comparatively slowly.

Such soft dynamic levels are not uncommon in twentieth-century piano music, for example, the late piano works of the American composer Morton Feldman (Feldman, 1963). It is a relatively new (modern) piano skill to have whole sections of a work played at a continuously very soft dynamic level. Certainly, the assistance from the soft pedal is necessary and Rzewski indicates on the score to use the *una corda* pedal. An extreme example of extended soft dynamics is in the *pppppppp* of the Ligeti *Etude* No. 4 *Fanfares*, which I will also perform in my final recital.



## Playing clusters and *glissandi* with the palm of the hand

Example: Variation 10

In variation 10, Rzewski makes a distinction apparently for musical reasons, between single note *glissandi* and *glissandi* involving multiple notes (clusters). Accordingly, sometimes the pianist's hand has to be turned over (*glissando* on finger nails) and sometimes it is the right way up so that the *glissando* is played with the palm. The musical effect of one method compared to the other is subtly different, which seems to be what the composer is seeking. The palm *glissandi* comprise between three- and five-note clusters and are extremely dramatic (see Figure 5 below, bar 2).

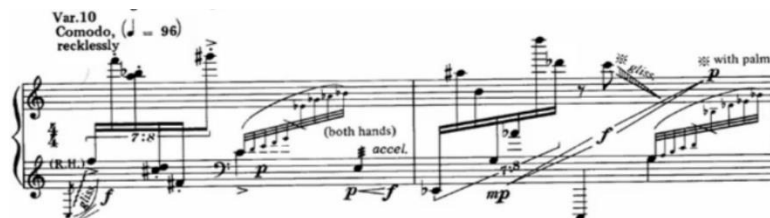


Figure 5. Variation 10, bars 1 and 2

In addition, bars 16 and 18 contain sudden palm clusters which explode from within the dramatic context of the music (see Figure 6).



Figure 6. Variation 10, bars 15-18

Sections of this variation also contain rapid and extremely varied dynamic shifts, for example, in bars 9-11 (in Figure 7).



Figure 7. Variation 10, bars 9-11

## **Slam keyboard lid, vocalization and whistle**

Example: Variation 11 and 35

Rzewski used three “external-to-the-piano” techniques in this variation:

**Slamming the keyboard lid** (Variation 11) NB. referred to as a rifle shot by Ralph Van Raat (Raat, 2008).

**Short vocal cry** (Variation 11 & 35) NB. the syllable for this is not specified by Rzewski - in performance the writer chose the syllable *ah!*

**Whistle** (Variation 11 & 35) NB. the pitch is given by Rzewski.

Slamming the keyboard lid appears to be a technique unique to Rzewski in this work and could represent a rifle shot which might be heard in a revolution. George Crumb uses vocalizations and whistling in a number of his works, for instance, vocalization in *Eleven Echoes of Autumn*; whistling in *Vox Balaenae (Voice of the Whale)* (Crumb, 1972). As is the case with *Makrokosmos Volumes I & II*, in *The People United*, Rzewski seems to be adding to the colour spectrum of the piano, though in Rzewski’s case the use of these devices is quite momentary.

The use of these three techniques adds an element of theatricality to the music and although such devices are not common in the music of Rzewski, indicating perhaps a strong orientation towards purely musical effects in his music, it has to be said that the occasions on which they do occur are certainly very memorable from a theatrical standpoint.

### ***“Slow down if necessary”***

There are a number of instances in *The People United* where Rzewski invites the pianist to “*slow down if necessary*”. Examples of this can be found in variation 4, 7, 8 and 16. In each of these cases it appears that Rzewski is telling the performer that the musical detail is of paramount importance and that he doesn’t want his musical intentions obscured by inaccuracies or omissions on the part of the performer. This instruction to the performer tells us quite a lot about what Rzewski values in his own music and although it is music of extreme technical difficulty, Rzewski places a premium upon musical qualities. It might be argued that Rzewski is engaged in two pursuits simultaneously, one technical and the other musical and in laying out the work in the way that he has, he is enticing the performer to approach this music with equal emphasis upon the technical development and musical values.

### **The sudden burst together with interesting rhythmic organization**

Example: Variation 17

Rzewski writes on the score “*RH: freely, roughly as in space, LH: strictly*”. He then added to the right hand part the comment “*each phrase like a sudden burst*”. For the first half of the variation the left hand is static while the right hand part has a varied

number of notes per bar. These roles are later reversed, with the right hand taking on the static role while the left hand manipulates the rhythm.

However, when the music is looked at from a performance perspective, there is an additional difficulty which must be overcome. This is the problem of making a “sudden burst” of sound in the active part, while at the same time maintaining a fixed dynamic level in the other, more static part. There are also sudden accents marked in the active parts and these are problematic in performance, partly because the rapid tempo makes it difficult to achieve the extremes of dynamic contrast called for by Rzewski and partly because the other part (hand) must remain at a static dynamic level. The accents can really only be made by the fingers alone. The problem is also one of sudden physical tension and the equally sudden release of tension. The best way to achieve this, for example in the first half of this variation, where the prevailing dynamic is *pp*, is to start with both right hand and left hand perfectly relaxed and then practice making the accents and *crescendo* in the right hand while maintaining relaxation in the other hand. This takes a great deal of concentration so that any tension which occurs as a result of the accents and *crescendo* is quickly released in order to ensure that both hands and arms return immediately to a relaxed state. An additional layer of difficulty is found in the changes from *legato* to *staccato*. The addition of *staccato* alternating with *legato* reinforces the idea that *staccato* is really only a letting go of the note rather than a particular type of downward attack upon the note. Note also that pedal cannot be used in this variation because the continuous quaver parts are quite chromatic.



Figure 8. Variation 17, bars 4–7

### The irregular *staccato* (fast tempo)

Example: Variation 19

As has been previously noted, variation 19 is the beginning of a new section which might equate to a development section in a sonata structure. Rzewski’s approach is to introduce different and new figurations at this point. This variation is also of considerable difficulty, which is brought about by a combination of fast tempo, a very

wide range of notes that encompass the entire keyboard, *staccato* articulation and the placement of accents in odd places such as on the final quaver of a bar or on some other off-the-beat location. The fingering patterns in this variation are also extremely awkward. The music is always *forte*. The existence of the accents requires a very deliberate approach by the performer because although the overall dynamic is *f*, there has to be enough sound in reserve to enable the pianist to make the required accents strong enough.



Figure 9. Variation 19, bars 1-6

This variation also requires that the performer develops an understanding of the fact that accents are not only made by the exertion of extra effort but equally are made possible by limiting to some extent the dynamic level of the surrounding notes. If one is going to have an accent on a certain note one must ensure that the surrounding notes are played in such a fashion that they do not obscure the accented note.

### Contrary-Motion and Rotation; Controlling Dynamics

Example: Variation 21

This variation is written in a very regular way with the right and left hands doing exactly the opposite from one another. This emphasizes in a very physical way a continuous rolling action between the outer parts of each hand (third, fourth or fifth fingers) and the inner parts (thumbs). In order to achieve the right effect and to manage this variation without undue muscle fatigue, one must gain an understanding of the fact that there are limits to the amount of volume that can be produced by the individual notes. Rather, one must rely upon the cumulative effect that the notes in combination will produce (together with the pedal). In essence, the pianist should play it all between *p* and *mf*, according to the *crescendo*/*decrescendo* directions. The accents which are marked on the score require an additional rotation motion so that the keys of the piano where the accents occur are approached from well above the key itself. See Figure 10, below:



Figure 10. Variation 21, bars 1-4

### Variety of dynamics combined with speed

Example: Variation 27

The technical characteristic of this variation is that of quaver running passages in both hands but with an extreme range of dynamic change, such as from *pp* to *ff*. The basic finger position has to be on top of the keys so that the fingers maintain their contact with the key surface virtually all of the time. The pianist must then develop sufficient skill to produce the required louder dynamics by limiting the extent to which the fingers are allowed to move away from the surface of the keys. It is realized that the louder sounds are produced by lifting the fingers higher off the keys but the extent to which this is done must be strictly regulated by the pianist.

*Crescendi* and *diminuendi* must be incorporated as well, but the adjustment to the fingers to accommodate these dynamic changes must be subtle and not overdone. The atmosphere must be stormy as this variation (the longest of the entire work) is the climax of the entire piece. To assist with achieving this effect, Rzewski also calls again for the *una corda* pedal to be used, instructing the performer to gradually release it for the dynamic shift from *mp* to *f*.



Figure 11. Variation 27, bars 61-71

## Summary

The pianist David Burge has summarized *The People United Will Never Be Defeated* in the following words:

*Technically, the work is of paramount difficulty. The widespread arpeggios of variations 16 and 18, the Chopinesque sextuplets of variation 21 (marked, correctly, "uncompromising" by the composer), the fast, exposed triplets in variation 22 and 24, and the long double-note passage at the end of variation 27 demand complete pianistic skills* (Burge, 1980).

For the author, the most challenging aspects of this work are:

Extremely awkward fingering patterns (unnatural patterns that do not lie easily under the hand).

Rapid chord playing such as on page 35.

Wide skips that cover the entire piano keyboard and must be performed with accuracy.

The stamina required to play a piece of this size and complexity.

The difficulty of switching rapidly from one characteristic to another and from one keyboard technique to another.

However, Rzewski's own video recording (Rzewski, 2008) of this variation represents an unusual phenomenon is that he never follows his own music markings during the performance. Perhaps this phenomenon shows that composer himself has absolute right to revise his composition under any circumstances. No matter what he does for this piece, there is nothing wrong with this master updating on the attractiveness of this variation.

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