

Motivic Connections and a Sense of Jazz: Reflections on Variations 13-18

from *The People United Will Never Be Defeated!* by Frederic Rzewski

Composed in 1975 by the American composer Frederic Rzewski, *The People United Will Never Be Defeated!* (hereafter: *The People United*) contains thirty-six variations based on the Chilean song *El pueblo unido, jamás será vencido*. In the program notes, Rzewski says that the idea of the piece was to achieve a “synthesis of diverse stylistic elements”, similar to the way the Chilean song represents the ideal of the united social classes.¹ He mentions elements of folk, jazz, and serialism, as the influences that could be found in the composition.

The form of the variations derives from *Second Structure*, an improvisatory piece created by Rzewski in 1972 for his group MEV (Musica Elettronica Viva).² In *Second Structure*, a performer goes six times through the sequence of six stages.³ Hence, the variations are arranged into six sets; each set contains six variations (Table 1).

Set 1	Variations 1-6; Variation 6 is a summary of the set.
Set 2	Variations 7-12; Variation 12 is a summary of the set.
Set 3	Variations 13-18; Variation 18 is a summary of the set.
Set 4	Variations 19-24; Variation 24 is a summary of the set.
Set 5	Variations 25-30; Variation 30 is a summary of the set.
Set 6	Variations 31-36; Variation 36 is a summary of the whole piece.

Table 1. Overall form of *The People United*

¹ Frederic Rzewski, *Nonsequiturs: Writings and Lectures on Improvisation, Composition and Interpretation 1965-1994* (Köln, Germany: MusikTexte, 2007), 452.

² *Ibid.*, 454.

³ *Ibid.*, 144.

In traditional variations, the theme transforms linearly from the first variation to the last one. However, in Rzewski's piece there is a complex interdependency between variations, as shown in Figure 1. Some of the variations have a stronger connection to the previous ones, rather than to the theme. The last variation of every set is a summary of the whole set; Variations 31-35 summarize each first, second, third, fourth, and fifth variations respectively of the sets 1-5; Variation 36 summarizes the entire piece.

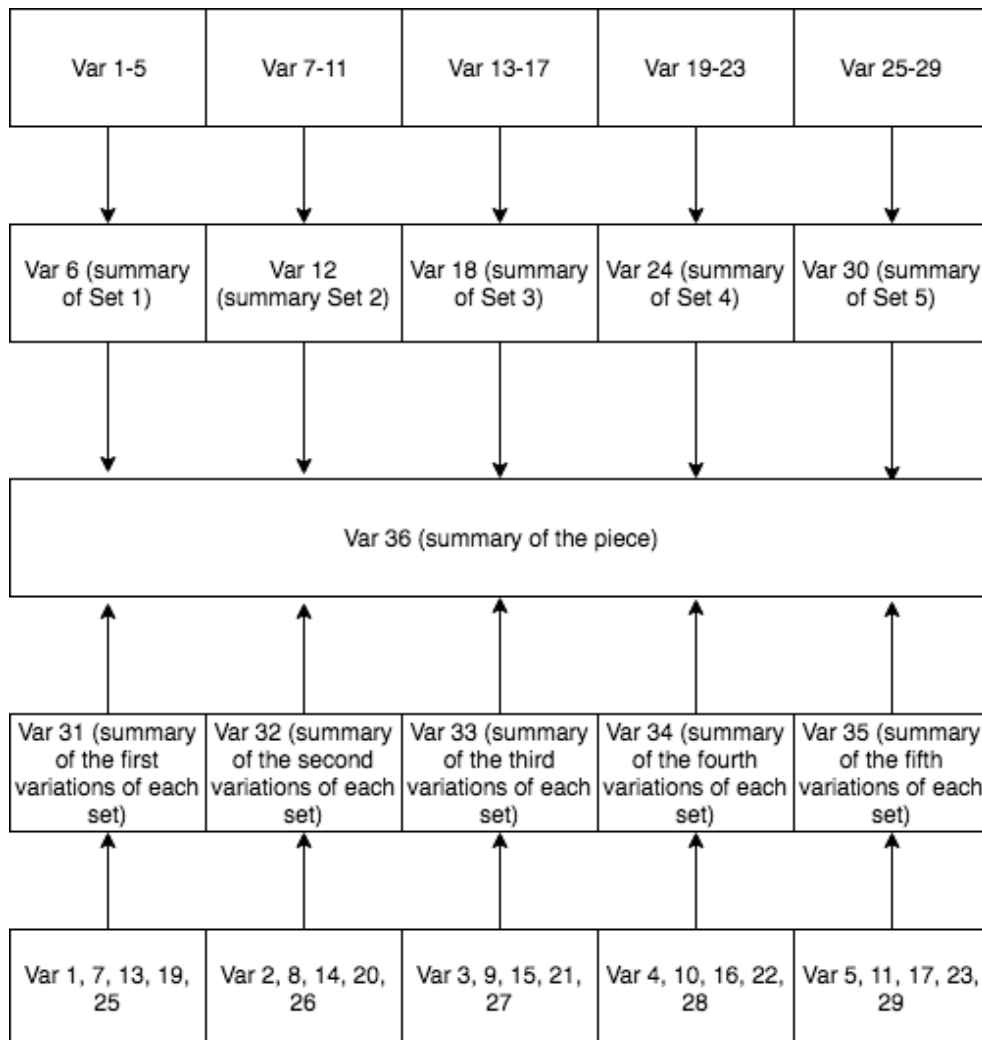


Figure 1. Interdependency of the variations in *The People United*

Sid Samberg compares Rzewski to a shaman who carries the theme through six cycles of “symbolic deaths and rebirths”.⁴ In some of the variations, it is hard to find even a distant echo of the theme. Rzewski says that he gets “as far away from it as possible”, but never does away with the theme.⁵ At several points, the composer follows the harmony of the theme, yet most of the time he changes it drastically.

“JAZZ STYLE” IN VARIATIONS

The architecture of the *The People United* allows one to analyze the sets of variations individually. Robert Wason observes that each of the six sets of the variations has a unique character. He refers to the third set (var. 13-18) as “jazz style” variations, but does not provide an explanation of this label.⁶ A closer analysis of this section is required to understand whether this set is built solely on jazz elements. While several scholars have studied Rzewski's *The People United*, there is a lack of a detailed discussion about Variations 13-18. This analysis will help to fill that gap.

According to Bernard Gendron, Rzewski collaborated in New York with such jazz musicians as Steve Lacy, Antony Braxton, Roscoe Mitchell, and George Lewis.⁷ A close study of *The People United* reveals some jazz traits. The triplets in the theme (Example 1) create a feel of swing pulse. In the interview with Southard, Rzewski mentions that he transcribed the theme

⁴ Sid Samberg, "Rzewski as Shaman: The Search for the Source of the Power behind The People United Will Never Be Defeated", *Contemporary Music Review* 29, no. 6 (2010), 661-72.

⁵ Frederic Rzewski in the interview to Keane Southard, "The Use of Variation Form in Frederic Rzewski's *The People United Will Never Be Defeated!*", 162-165.

⁶ Robert Wason, "Tonality and Atonality in Frederic Rzewski's Variations on *The People United Will Never Be Defeated!*", *Perspectives of New Music* 26, no. 1 (Winter 1988), 108-43.

⁷ Bernard Gendron, "Rzewski in New York (1971–1977)", *Contemporary Music Review* 29, no.6, 557-74.

from a recording by the group Quilapayun. It occurred later to the composer that the rhythm in the original song was dotted-eighths and sixteenths, instead of the triplets he used.⁸ So the use of this notation was mostly a happenstance.

Thema Frederic Rzewski

♩ = 106 With determination

ne - ver be de - feated! *mf*

mp

softer, legato

fp

Example 1. Theme (at the beginning of the piece), mm. 1-16.

As evidence of a “jazz style” presence in the third set of variations, one can see the syncopated rhythm in the beginning of Variation 13 (Example 2). The composer marks the end of the first and the third beat (tied triplets) with *tenuto*. That articulation of weak beats is

⁸ Southard, 162-165.

common for jazz. In the same example, the quarter notes in the left hand marked with *tenuto* create a long line, without accenting the downbeats. This also may be an element of jazz style.

Var.13
♩ = 72 or slightly faster

Example 2. Variation 13, mm. 1-3.

Truly, some of the harmonies in Variation 13 can be attributed to jazz music. A clear example is the E-flat major ninth chord on the downbeat of the m. 11 (m. 2 of Example 3). This Neapolitan chord appears before on the downbeat of m. 7 (Example 4), but with a different voicing.

Example 3. Variation 13, mm. 10-11.

Example 4. Variation 13, m. 7.

Another example of jazz harmony in Variation 13 is the third beat of m. 20 preceding the first cadenza (the second measure in Example 5). This chord is an inversion of D altered dominant⁹ chord which includes the pitches from the D altered dominant scale (Example 5a).

Example 5. Variation 13, mm. 19-20.

Example 5a. D altered dominant scale.

Rzewski repeats this chord in a different way again on the fourth beat in m. 24, just before the second cadenza (Example 6). Both times he marks this D altered chord with *fermata*. Also, the dynamics amplifies the importance of this chord: the composer uses *forte* in m. 20 and *sforzando* in m. 24.

Example 6. Variation 13, mm. 24.

⁹ An altered dominant chord in jazz is a chord that contains alterations of its fifth and ninth: flat 5, sharp 5, flat 9, sharp 9.

In his article, Sid Samberg describes the character of Variation 13 as “folk-like”. In mm. 4-8 (see Example 7), the composer uses the pitches of a D minor pentatonic scale (Example 7a) in the melody, creating a folk sound.



Example 7. Variation 18, mm. 4-6.



Example 7a. D minor pentatonic scale

Even though Variation 13 contains some folk and jazz traits, the third set of variations is not built only around them. Several important musical elements are developed in Variations 14-17, which will be discussed in the next section.

MUSICAL ELEMENTS AND MOTIVIC CONNECTIONS

One of the remarkable elements in the set 3 is the motive from *Bandiera Rossa*, an Italian song from the labor movement (Example 8). Rzewski says that he incorporates this song as a “reference to the Italian people who in the seventies opened their doors to so many refugees from Chilean fascism.”¹⁰ In the first cadenza (Example 5, at the end of m. 2), the composer does not quote the full motive, just the first four notes (“like distant bells”). In the second cadenza, at the

¹⁰ Rzewski, 454.

very end of Variation 13, the whole motive of *Bandiera Rossa* is used (Example 6). Dynamic contrast brings the listener's attention to this melody. It is also interesting to notice that the composer changes one note of the melody (G-sharp instead of G-natural, also marked with dynamics), employing the D Lydian scale, rather than simply the D major scale. This creates a very unusual sound palette, together with the previous D dominant altered chord.

A - van - ti po - po - lo al - la ris - cos - sa, ban - die - ra ros - sa, ban - die - ra
ros - sa, a - van - ti po - po - lo al - la ris - cos - sa, ban - die - ra ros - sa tri - on - fe - ra.

Example 8. A motive of *Bandiera Rossa*.

Yet another significant element that will be developed later in the third set is the embellishments in the melodic line at the beginning of Variation 13 (Example 2). The ornaments are becoming more complex later in m. 10 (see the second beat in the right hand in Example 9). The complexity of the rhythm continues in Variations 14-17. Example 10 shows the beginning of Variation 16 where the sophisticated rhythm goes between the two hands. So the ornamentation is developed into florid lines.

Example 9. Variation 13, m. 10.

Var.16
Same tempo as preceding, with fluctuations;
much pedal

pp *sempre una corda*

Example 10. Variation 16, m. 1.

Variation 14 starts with a new motive in the right hand that then repeats with the same rhythm, but the melody is transformed (Example 11). In m. 3, the melody now is heard in the lower register. A part of this rhythmic structure will appear again at the end of the variation (Example 12). That corresponds with the principles of repeatability and freshness, which composer describes in the Stage 2 of his piece *Second Structure* (See Table 2 in the Conclusion).¹¹

Another notable texture in mm. 3-4 of Variation 14 (Example 11) occurs in the right hand comprising the chords marked with *tenuto*. There is a question-response relationship between these two descending phrases. The top voice outlines a D minor pentatonic scale, which brings yet again the folk elements from Variation 13.

¹¹ Rzewski, 144-52.

Var.14
A bit faster, optimistically

(L.H.)

Example 11. Variation 14, mm. 1-4.

Example 12. Variation 14, mm. 21-24.

Starting from the very first measure of Variation 14, Rzewski uses groups of 32nd notes which sound like embellishments (Example 11). That makes a connection with the ornaments

from the previous variation. Looking closer at the pitches, one sees that the composer uses a fragmentation of the quote from *Bandiera Rossa*, dividing it into four parts; each part is repeated twice (Example 13). In mm. 7-8 of the Variation 14, Rzewski compresses the time by incorporating this quote again into two measures, instead of four (Example 14). Here the motive stays in F major, while the surrounding harmony changes. The harmony starts with the Neapolitan chord on the first beat in m. 7, then goes on to explore different areas, keeping the descending bass line E-flat, D, C-sharp, C-natural.



Example 13. Pitches from *Bandiera Rossa* divided into four parts

 Musical notation for Variation 14, measures 7-8. The score is in F major and 4/4 time. The piano part (treble clef) features a complex texture with multiple voices and dynamic markings of *mf* and *f*. The bass part (bass clef) features a descending line of E-flat, D, C-sharp, C-natural, with dynamic markings of *mf* and *f*.

Example 14. Variation 14, mm. 7-8.

Later in Variation 14, the motive from *Bandiera Rossa* starts transforming into different transpositions (Example 15). It appears again in Variation 15 (the third beat of m.17, Example 15a) and in Variation 16 (the third and the fourth beats in the left hand of m.19, Example 15b). Finally, the composer uses the motive in Variation 18 (Example 15c) that serves as a summary of Set 3.

A musical score for piano, consisting of two staves. The key signature has two flats (B-flat and E-flat). The music begins with a piano (*p*) dynamic. The right hand features a complex, arpeggiated texture with many beamed notes and slurs. The left hand has a more rhythmic accompaniment. A *cresc.* (crescendo) marking is present in the right hand towards the end of the passage.

Example 15. Variation 14, mm. 11-12.

A musical score for piano, consisting of two staves. The key signature has two flats. The music starts with a mezzo-forte (*mf*) dynamic. The right hand contains several groups of seven beamed notes, with a '7' written above them. The left hand has a steady accompaniment. A '5' is written below a group of notes in the right hand, and another '7' is written below a group of notes in the right hand towards the end.

Example 15a. Variation 15, m. 17.

A musical score for piano, consisting of two staves. The key signature has two flats. The music begins with a forte (*f*) dynamic, which increases to fortissimo (*ff*). The right hand features complex textures with many beamed notes, slurs, and accents. The left hand has a rhythmic accompaniment with some triplets. The number '3' is written above a triplet in the right hand, and '6' is written below a group of notes in the right hand.

Example 15b. Variation 16, m. 19.

A musical score for piano, consisting of two staves. The key signature has two flats. The music starts with a mezzo-forte (*mf*) dynamic, which then moves to piano (*p*), then forte (*f*), mezzo-piano (*mp*), and back to forte (*f*). The right hand features complex textures with many beamed notes, slurs, and accents. The left hand has a rhythmic accompaniment. The dynamic markings *mf*, *p*, *f*, *mp*, *f*, *p*, and *f* are written above the right hand staff.

Example 15c. Variation 18, mm. 6-7.

Probably, the most interesting trait of the piece, is the bass line. In the interview with Southard, Rzewski says that the bass line and the harmony in the variations are more important than the melody.¹² Originally, he uses a chromatic descending line in the theme (Example 16, m.1) with a D minor chord in the right hand, making the end of the second beat sound dissonant.



Example 16. The last line of the Theme.

Looking at the very first measure of Variation 13 (Example 2, m.1), one can notice that the chromatic descending bass line creates the same dissonance at the end of beat four. The left hand plays a D-flat major chord, while the melody remains in D minor. That creates a sense of polytonality. While the melody continues in a D minor scale for at least twelve measures, the left hand explores new harmonies at almost every beat. Later, Rzewski builds Variations 15-17 around the bass line (Example 17). In the second half of Variation 17, the composer brings that chromatic descending line to the upper register (Example 18), which correlates with the idea of transformation on the Stage 5 in *Second Structure*. The hints of the bass line appear again in Variation 18 (Example 19).

¹² Southard, 162-165.

Var.15
Flexible, like an improvisation
♩ = ca. 72

Example 17. Variation 15, mm. 1-2.

Example 18. Variation 17, mm. 13-14.

Example 19. Variation 18, mm. 9-10.

CONCLUSION

To summarize the points above, arguably the third set is completely in “jazz style”. Even though it contains the jazz ideas, still others musical elements are more developed during this set (the motive from *Bandiera Rossa* and the chromatic bass line). As the Rzewski says, the whole piece is a synthesis of different stylistic elements¹³, so the third set is not an exception.

Coming back to the question of the overall form of the piece, as well as the character of the third set within it, Wason suggests that *The People United* might be seen as a sonata form with the first and the second sets representing the first movement; the third set representing the slow movement; the fourth set being a scherzo part; the fifth and the sixth sets can being organized in the last movement.¹⁴ Since Rzewski based the form of the piece on the principles from *Second Structure*, it seems incorrect to simplify the beautiful architecture of the piece and the interdependency between different sets of variations to sonata form.

Given that Rzewski applies the principles from *Second Structure* to the Variations¹⁵, it is interesting to find the implications of those ideas in the third set (See findings in Table 2). Since this paper had the time constrains within one semester, it analyzes only Set 3 (Var. 13-18), but some of these implications can be found in other sets as well.

Summary of the ideas from <i>Second Structure</i> ¹⁶	Implications in <i>The People United</i> (the third set of Variations)
Stage 1: separateness, fragmentariness, uniqueness, exploration of the space	Variation 13: the idea of <i>Bandiera Rossa</i> comes from nowhere, but it is not developed in this variation; the descending bass line presents in the chords of the left hand, however it is not treated yet by the composer as an independent ground line.

¹³ Rzewski, 452.

¹⁴ Wason, 137.

¹⁵ Southard, 162-165.

¹⁶ Rzewski, 144-152.

Stage 2: repeatability, freshness, discovery	Variation 14: a rhythmic pattern that appears in the beginning comes again at the end of the Variation; the short motives from <i>Bandiera Rossa</i> are fragmented and used in different keys.
Stage 3: individuality, potentiality of conflict or growth, invention	Variation 15: the ground bass line becomes an important element of the piece; the ornaments in the right hand start to project cycle of fifths idea; the fifths appear in the bass line in some measures as well.
Stage 4: complexity, conflict, counterpoint	Variation 16: the melodic lines with the fifths and half-steps is becoming more complex; in the second part of the variation composer creates a conflict with the contrary motion between two hands
Stage 5: departure, transformation, simplicity	Variation 17: the bass line becomes slow; in the second part it goes up to the right hand; the melody is playing “roughly as in space”.
Stage 6: “cadenza in which the previous material is both dropped and brought back”	Variation 18: the composer brings back the hints of ideas from each of the variations 13-17.

Table 2. Parallels between the ideas from *Second Structure* and *The People United*

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