

The Commodification of Protest in the Reception and Performance Practice of Frederic Rzewski's *The People United Will Never Be Defeated!*

Lenny Sienczak

This essay explores how Frederic Rzewski's (1938–2021) *The People United Will Never Be Defeated!* (1975) exemplifies the absorption, recontextualization, and aesthetic transformation of protest under neoliberalism. Based on the Chilean protest song *¡El pueblo unido jamás será vencido!*, Rzewski reconfigures a collective anthem into a complex, virtuosic cycle for solo piano. By analysing performance practice, audience reception, and institutional framing, the essay examines how the work's political content is aestheticized and converted into cultural capital. Although the composition retains its original message of solidarity, its performance on concert stages and circulation via digital platforms illustrates how protest can be appropriated and neutralized. The work operates dialectically: It resists dominant structures while simultaneously serving them. Rather than offering a clear case of co-optation, *The People United* exposes the contradictions of political art under late capitalism—demonstrating how neoliberal systems transform protest into prestige, allowing audiences to consume resistance without political commitment.

Introduction

Frederic Rzewski (1938–2021) was a politically outspoken composer whose work frequently reflected Marxist ideals.¹ In 1975, he composed *The People United Will Never Be Defeated!* (hereafter *The People United*), a cycle of thirty-six piano variations based on the Chilean protest song *¡El pueblo unido jamás será vencido!*—an anthem of the Nueva Canción movement and sign of protest against the Pinochet dictatorship.² Premiered in 1976 by pianist Ursula Oppens (b. 1944) at the Kennedy Center, the work

¹ See Christian Asplund, "Frederic Rzewski and Spontaneous Political Music", in: *Perspectives of New Music* 33/1 (1995), pp. 419–441, here: p. 428. For more information on Rzewski's biography and works see Micheal Lee, Art. "Frederic Rzewski", in: *Musicians & composers of the 20th century*, Vol. 4, ed. by Alfred W. Cramer, Pasadena, CA: Salem Press 2009, pp. 1258–1260; or Edward Murray, Art. "Rzewski, Frederic", in: *Grove Music Online* [2022], <<https://doi.org/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.article.24218/>> (14.10.2025).

² See Marisol García, "Sergio Ortega" [2022], <<https://web.archive.org/web/20250725210737/https://www.musicapopular.cl/artista/sergio-ortega/>> (26.07.2025). For historical background, see Jonah D. Olsen, "No Hay Revolución Sin Canciones: State, Revolution, and Music in Chile and Cuba", in: *Journal of Latin American geography* 20/3 (2021), pp. 103–125; and for a slightly different approach on this topic Jessica Lynne Madsen, *Music as a Metaphor. The Political Inspiration Behind Frederic Rzewski's 36 Variations on "¡El pueblo unido jamás será vencido!" (The People United Will Never Be Defeated!), a Chilean Nueva Canción by Sergio Ortega and Quilapayún*, Dissertation, University of Cincinnati 2003, pp. 64–116.

fuses avant-garde techniques, jazz idioms, and folk influences to create a powerful representation of collective struggle. It openly refers to other leftist anthems, *Bandiera Rossa* and Bertold Brecht and Hanns Eisler's *Solidaritätslied*,³ making its political message unmistakable: this is music of resistance.

And yet, fifty years later, while the chant "¡El pueblo unido jamás será vencido!" continues to resonate in global protest movements, Rzewski's composition has become a showcase of pianistic virtuosity. This essay argues that *The People United* exemplifies the capacity of neoliberalism to absorb resistance. The work's political content is not ignored, but rather acknowledged, celebrated, and transformed into cultural capital, consumed without political commitment. Through the lenses of performance practice, audience reception, and institutional framing, this essay examines how the piece has been commodified within late capitalism. The result is not mere co-optation, but a more complex process through which political art becomes a medium for the performance of cultural distinction.

From Protest Song to Art Music: A Transformation Process

Rzewski's compositional choices transform the collective anthem into an individual showcase. The original song was designed for mass participation: simple, memorable, and easy for groups of protesters to perform. Composed in 1973 by the Chilean pianist and composer Sergio Ortega (1938–2003) in collaboration with the folk group Quilapayún, the song *¡El pueblo unido jamás será vencido!* emerged as a direct response to the political tensions in Chile during the final months of Salvador Allende's (1908–1973) socialist government.⁴ Its purpose was not merely artistic but also strategic: it served as a unifying chant intended for mass mobilisation. The song's structure reflects this aim: it is built on a repetitive and easily memorable melodic line set to a slogan-like refrain that protesters could instantly adopt. As Eileen K. Bolton and Martin Farías describe it:

"Fue escrita en ritmo de marcha para ser interpretada por el conjunto, en voces masculinas, guitarras y bombo. [...] En cuanto a "El pueblo unido", resulta de especial relevancia que el estribillo consiste en una consigna que no se canta, sino que se grita, lo que facilita la participación del público. [...] La consigna tiene un patrón rítmico característico, usado en varias canciones políticas en manifestaciones sociales: empieza con una idea (el pueblo), se repite con una variación de la idea (unido) y continúa con una frase a modo de respuesta (jamás será vencido) (Manabe, 2019, pp. 8–9). [...] Este estribillo ayuda a generar un tipo de práctica política participatoria, en el sentido propuesto por Turino (2008), vinculando a la audiencia de manera activa, ya que no se busca solamente presentar una performance artística, sino que llegar a la mayor cantidad de personas (Manabe, 2016, p. 11)."⁵

3 See Bryce Morrison, "Rzewski The People will never be defeated" [1999], <<https://web.archive.org/web/20250726163336/https://www.gramophone.co.uk/review/rzewski-the-people-will-never-be-defeated>> (26.07.2025).

4 See Madsen, *Music as a Metaphor* (like fn. 2), pp. 85–89.

5 "It was written in march rhythm to be performed by the ensemble, with male voices, guitars and bass drum. [...] As for 'El pueblo unido', it is particularly significant that the refrain consists of a slogan that is not sung but shouted, which facilitates audience participation. [...] The slogan has a characteristic rhythmic pattern, used in several political songs at social demonstrations: it begins with an idea (the people), is repeated with a variation of the idea (united) and continues with a phrase by way of response (never will be defeated) (Manabe, 2019, pp. 8–9). [...] This refrain helps

Following the US-backed coup that installed Augusto Pinochet (1915–2006), the song became an anthem for exiles, circulating across Latin America and beyond as a symbol of resistance against authoritarian regimes.⁶ Performed by community ensembles and street marchers, it falls under the category of participatory music, distinct from concert-based or professionally mediated forms.

By contrast, Rzewski's variations demand extensive technical preparation and interpretative sophistication, restricting the performance to professional pianists and so neglecting the work's participatory purpose, removing it from political action. The formal design reinforces this transformation: A 36-bar theme followed by 36 variations organised into six groups of six, each focusing on different musical parameters such as rhythm, melody, counterpoint, or harmony.⁷ While the variation structure provides order and direction, Rzewski also incorporates spaces for improvisation and employs techniques that depart from classical norms. At certain points, the performer is instructed to whistle, slam the piano lid, or "sing".⁸

The work blends multiple styles, including fugue, jazz, and minimalism, creating what critic Mark Swed has described as "elements from old music and new, popular and experimental".⁹ This stylistic diversity reflects Rzewski's vision of coexisting musical languages forming a musical argument for both diversity and solidarity.¹⁰ Although he embedded political references, he avoided prescriptive interpretation, allowing space for aesthetic openness alongside ideological clarity.¹¹ Some listeners might emphasise the political message, while others highlight the technical brilliance. The tension between political intent and aesthetic autonomy is precisely what both enables the piece's mobility across contexts

to generate a type of participatory political practice, in the sense proposed by Turino (2008), actively engaging the audience, as the aim is not only to present an artistic performance, but also to reach as many people as possible (Manabe, 2016, p. 11)." [translation by the author] Eileen K. Bolton and Martin Farías, "Un himno de los pueblos: 50 años de la canción 'El pueblo unido jamás será vencido'", in: *Revueltas* 4/8 (2023), pp. 41–66, here: pp. 49–50; Bolton and Farías reference Noriko Manabe, "Chants of the Resistance: Flow, Memory, and Inclusivity", in: *Music & Politics* 13/1 (2019), pp. 1–19, here: pp. 8–9; Noriko Manabe, "The Unending History of Protest Music. Responses to Peter Manuel's 'World Music and Activism Since the End of History [sic]'", in: *Music & Politics* 11/3 (2016), pp. 1–13, here: p. 11; and Thomas Turino, *Music as social life: the politics of participation*, Chicago, IL: Univ. of Chicago Press 2008.

- 6 The internationalisation and establishment of 'El pueblo unido jamás será vencido' outside Chile and Latin America is also addressed in Bolton and Farías, "Un himno de los pueblos" (like fn. 5), pp. 52–58.
- 7 See Reiko Ishii, "A Formal Analysis and Historical Perspective of Frederic Rzewski's The People United Will Never Be Defeated!", in: *Nigiiita Women's Junior College Research Bulletin* 43 (2006), pp. 71–84, here: p. 75.
- 8 See Frederic Rzewski, *The People United Will Never Be Defeated! 36 Variations on ¡El pueblo unido jamás será vencido!*, Tokyo: Zen-On Music Co., Ltd. and Coda Ediciones Musicales (SEEMA) 1979, Var. 11, Measures 13–24.
- 9 Mark Swed, "Listen to Rzewski's 'People United' and hear protest music that stirs the soul", in: *Los Angeles Times* 140, 15 July 2020, online: <<https://web.archive.org/web/20250725205509/https://www.latimes.com/entertainment-arts/story/2020-07-15/how-to-listen-frederic-rzewski-people-united-will-never-be-defeated>> (26.07.2025).
- 10 See Nicholas DiBerardino, *Musicking, or Politicking? Understanding Political Music Through the Life and Work of Frederic Rzewski*, Dissertation, University of Oxford 2013, p. 48.
- 11 See Madsen, *Music as a Metaphor* (like fn. 2), p. 199.

and makes it susceptible to co-optation. Rzewski was fully aware of this strategic ambivalence. In 1997, he explained his compositional approach:

"I wanted to write a piece that she [Ursula Oppens] could play for an audience of classical-music lovers who perhaps knew nothing about all of what was happening in Latin America. By virtue of listening to my piece for an hour, they might somehow get interested in the subject. I really was trying to reach the audience by using a language they would not find alienating."¹²

It is, as examined in this essay, in part this pedagogical intent—introducing unfamiliar political content through familiar musical language—paradoxically facilitated the very process of depoliticization. The work's duration and formal complexity demand the kind of sustained attention typically reserved for the concert hall rather than the kind of immediate, spontaneous response associated with protest contexts. While the original song fosters collective action, the variations encourage intellectual consideration and aesthetic appreciation. The virtuosic demands further institutionalise the work. Unlike the original song, which any protester could perform, Rzewski's variations require classical training and exceptional skill—cultural capital unevenly distributed across social classes. When critics later celebrate formal innovation while treating the political content merely as historical context, they are responding to contradictions already embedded in Rzewski's compositional approach. For instance, in his review on MusicWeb.com, Jens F. Laurson argues: "The intended (or unintended) political message takes a distant second place to the artistic quality with which it is conveyed."¹³ Another example would be Los Angeles times critic Mark Swed, who, in his review, praises the "jaw-dropping virtuosity", the emotional and imaginative range of the variations, the formal logic—how "virtues of an anthem [...] unite the many ways of making modern music as a model for uniting us as people".¹⁴ Yet the political dimension here functions more as a historic or even poetic metaphor than as a concrete social statement.¹⁵

Performance Practice in Context: Virtuosity and Branding

Since its premiere by Ursula Oppens in 1976, *The People United* has become a modern classic of the piano repertoire. Leading pianists such as Marc-André Hamelin (b. 1961),¹⁶ Stephen Drury (b. 1955),¹⁷

12 Robert K. Schwarz: "CLASSICAL MUSIC; A Composer for the Masses Scales Down His Ambitions", in: *New York Times* 146, 26 October 1997, Section 2, p. 34, <<https://web.archive.org/web/20250730183733/https://www.nytimes.com/1997/10/26/arts/classical-music-a-composer-for-the-masses-scales-down-his-ambitions.html>> (30.07.2025).

13 Jens F. Laurson, "Review: Rzewski: The People United Will Never Be Defeated!: NAXOS 8.559360" [2010], <https://web.archive.org/web/20251008154809/https://www.musicweb-international.com/classrev/2010/Feb10/Rzewski_8559360.htm> (08.10.2025).

14 Swed, "Listen to Rzewski's 'People United'" (like fn. 9).

15 See *ibid.*

16 See Marc-André Hamelin, *The People United Will Never Be Defeated*, CD, Catalogue-No.: CDA67077, Hyperion, England: Hyperion Records Limited 1999.

17 See Stephen Drury, *The People United Will Never Be Defeated*, CD, Catalogue-No.: NA 063, New Albion, San Francisco: New Albion Records Inc. 1994.

and most notably Igor Levit (b. 1987) have performed and recorded it. Levit's 2015 album,¹⁸ which placed Rzewski alongside Johann Sebastian Bach's *Goldberg Variations* and Ludwig van Beethoven's *Diabelli Variations*, won a Gramophone Award,¹⁹ securing *The People United's* status as a canonical masterpiece of the variation genre. Yet this institutional embrace carries a paradox: while the work gains wider exposure, its protest energy risks being neutralized.

As reviews increasingly praise the cycle's formal innovation and pianistic difficulty²⁰—celebrating Levit's "technical and idiomatic authority"²¹—they often overlook its political roots. This emphasis on technical brilliance over political substance reveals a deeper logic: resistance is transformed into a vehicle for prestige and performance capital.

To see how virtuosity itself becomes commodified, I now turn to the performances and the concert stage, where the avant-garde, political nature of the work is reframed as a sign of individual genius. This framing not only depends on technical mastery but also on the projection of artistic and political authenticity as a form of personal value. In his critique of "post-postmodernism", Jeffrey T. Nealon argues that authenticity in cultural production (whether it is music, art, or identity) has itself become a commodified trait.²² As he writes, "authenticity too is a commodity", rendering even the most resistant cultural gestures subject to marketing and circulation within capitalist frameworks.²³ According to this logic, performers become entrepreneurs of the self, selecting repertoire, image, and affiliations in order to maximise their brand value. Levit exemplifies this 'curated activist' model: a pianist whose programming choices (including Rzewski) simultaneously function as artistic statement and as instruments of personal branding. Reviews of his 2016 album, with headlines like "Exceptional pianist takes on Rzewski's demanding landmark anthem with Lisztian bravura",²⁴ reinforce both his technical mastery and his activist image. Within this framework, the inclusion of protest music like *The People United* operates less as political mobilisation than as a strategy of brand differentiation and aesthetic credibility.

Rzewski's open-ended cadenza, which invites pianists to improvise new statements of solidarity, further exemplifies this tension. These passages are often framed as moments of 'personal flair' rather

18 See Igor Levit, *Bach / Beethoven / Rzewski – Goldberg Variations / Diabelli Variations / The People United Will Never Be Defeated*, CD, Catalogue-No.: 88875060962, Sony Classical, Gütersloh: Sony Music Entertainment Inc. 2015.

19 See Gramophone, "Igor Levit wins Gramophone's 2016 Recording of the Year Award" [2016], <<https://web.archive.org/web/20250725205534/https://www.gramophone.co.uk/classical-music-news/article/igor-levit-wins-gramophone-s-2016-recording-of-the-year-award>> (26.07.2025).

20 See Swed, "Listen to Rzewski's 'People United'" (like fn. 9).

21 Jed Distler, "Igor Levit's 'Triple-Threat' Variation Tour-de-Force" [year unknown], <web.archive.org/web/20250725205831/https://www.classicstoday.com/review/igor-levits-triple-threat-variation-tour-de-force/> (26.07.2025).

22 See Jeffrey T. Nealon, *Post-Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Just-In-Time Capitalism*, Stanford: Stanford Univ. Press 2012, p. 49.

23 Ibid., p. 49.

24 Andrew Clements: "Igor Levit review. A technical challenge transcended" in: *The Guardian* 194, 21 July 2015, online: <<https://web.archive.org/web/20250725211055/https://www.theguardian.com/music/2015/jul/21/igor-levit-review-rzewski-pianist-wigmore>> (26.07.2025).

than as expressions of collective engagement.²⁵ In his article "On Improvisation", Rzewski himself offers a distinct perspective on the cadenza in *The People United* that underscores the limits of spontaneity. He asserts that "there is no such thing as a 'free' improvisation"—it always operates within rules and framework, functioning as a "controlled experiment with a limited number of unknown possibilities".²⁶ The improviser's task is to make unplanned events appear purposeful, redeeming accident through form. Thus, while the cadenza creates some space for spontaneity, it is not an act of unfettered freedom, but rather a moment of directed action within limitations. Paradoxically, this structure makes improvisation particularly susceptible for being framed as authorship—what appears as 'freedom' can be packaged as personal expression, aligning well with the processes of branding. Levit's cadenza, for example, which has accumulated nearly one million streams on Spotify, which is more than any other part of the work,²⁷ illustrates how improvisation itself can become a vehicle of commodified expression.

Mark Fisher expands this critique by arguing that even very alternative avant-garde works can be repackaged as elite cultural capital.²⁸ In this view, *The People United*—with its atonality, improvisatory freedom, and quotations of protest songs—becomes a 'safe avant-garde'. Its aesthetic difficulty reassures audiences of their cultural distinction while displacing the urgency of collective social and political transformation.

This distancing from political content is also evident in academic recital contexts. At a 2022 concert at Columbia University's Italian Academy, for instance, the pianist Emanuele Arciuli (b. 1965) performed *The People United* with great respect for its musical structure but explicitly downplaying its activist origins.²⁹ In an interview before the performance, he described the Chilean protest context as "impressive" but argued that the work's true value lies in its transformation into "pure music", drawing parallels with Bach's *Goldberg Variations*.³⁰ Arciuli stated that "political commitment, no matter how noble and beautiful, is not enough to make a masterpiece".³¹ His view problematically exemplifies a common institutional stance: acknowledging historical context while insisting on aesthetic autonomy. Yet Arciuli's position reproduces the liberal aesthetic ideology that separates form from politics, enabling institutions to

25 See Frederic Rzewski, "On improvisation", in: *Contemporary Music Review* 25/5–6 (2006), pp. 491–495, here: p. 494.

26 Ibid., p. 494.

27 See Igor Levit, *The People United Will Never Be Defeated! – 36 Variations on ¡El pueblo unido jamás será vencido!*, Spotify Album, Catalogue-No.: 88875140162, Sony Classical, Gütersloh: Sony Music Entertainment Inc. 2015, Track 37: "The People United Will Never Be Defeated! – 36 Variations on ¡El pueblo unido jamás será vencido!: Var. 36 – Improvisation", online: <<https://open.spotify.com/intl-de/track/1MrelMgjfNmCTWbmUMin0R?si=cc962bdc3f304d22>> (08.10.2025).

28 See Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism. Is There No Alternative?*, Winchester: Zero Books 2009, p. 9.

29 The concert programme is accessible online: Italian Academy, "Emanuele Arciuli, piano: 'The People United Will Never Be Defeated!' 36 Variations by Frederic Rzewski" [2023], <<https://web.archive.org/web/20250726115049/https://italianacademy.columbia.edu/events/emanuele-arciuli-piano-people-united-will-never-be-defeated-36-variations-frederic-rzewski>> (26.07.2025).

30 See Italian Academy: "New interview with pianist Emanuele Arciuli – before his March 1 performance" [2023], <<https://web.archive.org/web/20240623204834/https://italianacademy.columbia.edu/content/new-interview-pianist-emanuele-arciuli-his-march-1-performance>> (26.07.2025).

31 Ibid.

celebrate political content while avoiding its implications. By reframing political solidarity as impressive background to “pure music”, this approach transforms protest into abstract appreciation. This tendency to aestheticize protest raises the question of whether musical excellence and political commitment can genuinely coexist on equal terms.

Critics might argue that technical mastery does not necessarily depoliticise music, and that performers like Levit may embody both pianistic excellence and political commitment. But this misses the crucial point: the issue is not virtuosity per se, but the way it is foregrounded. When reviews (and even pianists as Arciuli themselves) openly prioritise technical authority and treat political content as secondary, the protest message is effectively rendered irrelevant.

This transformation of protest into branded virtuosity shapes both performance and reception. If performers present resistance as personal expression, audiences often complete the commodification process by consuming the political message without engaging in political action.

Audience Dynamics: The Illusion of Participation

If performers frame the work as virtuosic protest, audience reception often reinforces this transformation by absorbing its affective power without translating it into political action. Robert Pfaller’s concept of *interpassivity* shows the psychological dimension of passive consumption: Audiences experience an illusion of action through the aesthetic experience itself, thereby eliminating the perceived need for engagement in the real world.³² Mark Fisher illustrates this mechanism with the animated film *Wall-E* (2008),³³ which critiques consumerism and ecological collapse while paradoxically offering viewers a feel-good experience. As he writes: “A film like *Wall-E* exemplifies what Robert Pfaller has called ‘interpassivity’: the film performs our anti-capitalism for us, allowing us to continue to consume with impunity”.³⁴

In the concert hall, listening to *The People United* can similarly substitute for political participation. Attending and applauding the performance satisfies a desire for solidarity, enabling listeners to feel that they have fulfilled a civic duty simply by consuming the music.

Adult concertgoers may purchase recordings or stream the piece, even recognising Rzewski’s quotations of *Bandiera Rossa* and *Solidaritätslied*, but rarely connect them to contemporary social or political struggles.

Fisher extends this insight by situating it within the cultural framework of capitalist realism: Capitalism not only absorbs protest but also makes us complicit in our own passivity. When audiences leave a Rzewski concert “feeling inspired”, Fisher and Pfaller would ask whether that inspiration translates into action or merely reinforces a system that sells the *feeling* of resistance.³⁵ Post-concert discussions often revolve around the pianist’s touch or the work’s formal architecture, rather than its solidarity with those

32 Robert Pfaller, *Interpassivity. The Aesthetics of Delegated Enjoyment*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press 2017, pp. 58–60.

33 See Andrew Stanton, *WALL-E*, Blu-Ray, Catalogue-No.: JBLU WALL-E, Walt Disney, California: Walt Disney Studios Home Entertainment 2008.

34 Fisher, *Capitalist Realism* (like fn. 28), p. 12.

35 Ibid., pp. 12–13.

oppressed under Pinochet. From Fisher's perspective, this illustrates the ineffectiveness of an aestheticized rebellion that ends at the concert hall door.³⁶

Taken together, Pfaller and Fisher warn that the psychological satisfaction of consuming protest music can reproduce the very conditions it aims to oppose, ensuring they remain (unintentionally) intact.³⁷ Listeners who feel they have "witnessed" resistance in a recital may feel that they have done enough, effectively outsourcing their political imagination to the performance. This creates an illusion of participation: the emotional force of Rzewski's variations provides a temporary sense of solidarity but ultimately returns audiences to routines of consumption and spectacle.

Yet such critiques risk overgeneralisation. While Pfaller's concept captures a real dynamic, it cannot account for every listener. Some performances may indeed provoke genuine political curiosity or action.³⁸ Certain audience members, prompted by references in programme notes, may go on to learn about the Pinochet dictatorship or draw connections to present-day activism. In such cases, the concert experience becomes a catalyst rather than a substitute.

The issue, then, is not that music cannot inspire political action, but that it is often framed in ways that privilege aesthetic satisfaction over message (in this case, solidarity). This framing is sustained not only by performers and audiences but also by the institutions that canonise and circulate the work.

Institutional and Canonical Structures: from Protest to Commodity

In concert halls and contemporary music festivals, *The People United* is frequently presented as a symbol of political resistance, yet this association often proves to be short-lived. Programmes may acknowledge the Chilean origins of the work but quickly pivot to emphasising its technical challenges and innovative capability.³⁹ For example, the *MaerzMusik festival* described Rzewski's score as "carried by Sergio Ortega's iconic melody [with] a message which bears new relevance today"⁴⁰—without reference to Chile's historical context or contemporary resistance movements. Fisher would interpret this as capitalist realism at work: "radical" meaning is absorbed under the appearance of aesthetic relevance, never permitted to confront or disrupt.⁴¹

Moreover, the very act of programming the piece as a festival centrepiece—it was performed at MaerzMusik's opening concert—may generate the illusion of engagement while ultimately reinforcing

36 Ibid., pp. 8–12.

37 Ibid., pp. 8–13; and Pfaller, *Interpassivity* (like fn. 32), pp. 58–60.

38 See David Khan, "Interpassive Anti-aesthetic", in: *Continental Thought & Theory* 2/1 (2018), pp. 191–240 for his critique and thoughts about implications of the concept of interpassivity and reading Pfaller too literally.

39 See Berliner Festspiele, "MaerzMusik: Opening 2019" [2019], <<https://web.archive.org/web/20250726104956/https://www.berlinerfestspiele.de/en/maerzmusik/programm/2019/kalender/opening-2019>> (26.07.2025); and Italian Academy, "Emanuele Arciculi, piano" (like fn. 29).

40 Berliner Festspiele, "MaerzMusik Opening 2019" (like fn. 39).

41 See Fisher, *Capitalist Realism* (like fn.28), p. 8.

the institutional status quo. Lydia Goehr's concept of *museumification*⁴² adds another layer to this absorption. Rzewski's cycle, once celebrated for its collective spirit and improvisatory freedom, is now anthologised, archived, and analysed in scholarly journal. Goehr observes that the process of canon formation detaches works from the social condition that originally gave them force, transforming them into objects of study rather than instruments of change.⁴³

Critical discourse—in the form of reviews, scholarly analyses, or press releases—plays a central role in confirming this transition. Journalists tend to celebrate performers such as Levit for their technical brilliance and virtuosity, while scholars focus on the work's variation structure or intertextual quotations.⁴⁴ Rarely do these discussions extend beyond formalism to engage with the historical or contemporary contexts of the piece's protest origins. As a result, the work circulates within an ecosystem that privileges aesthetic mastery and intellectualism, effectively erasing its potential for concrete political engagement.

Across different performance contexts—with their respective audiences and institutional structures—*The People United* undergoes a multidimensional process of absorption: performance branding transforms avant-gardist protest into marketable virtuosity; audience interpassivity converts communal protest into an individualised, feel-good experience; and institutional museumification fixes radical art within a canonical archive, neutralising its living potential. Within conservatories, competitions, and masterclasses, the work has become a benchmark of pianistic excellence. Young performers often encounter it not as a politically charged composition, but as a vehicle for testing and demonstrating their technical skill and interpretative depth.

None of these mechanisms entirely erases Rzewski's political message. Yet taken together, they influence how the piece is experienced and determine the level of engagement it affords. If *The People United* began as a revolutionary gesture, it now stands at crossroads between solidarity and spectacle, intention and display, protest and product.

That said, not all institutional framings are necessarily co-optive. Certain festivals—particularly those with activist partnerships or pedagogical missions—actively seek to reconnect the work to its political roots.⁴⁵ Events incorporating guest speakers, survivors, activists, or thematic programming centred on social justice can reframe the music as part of an ongoing struggle rather than a relic of one.⁴⁶ In such contexts, institutions do not mute the work's message but amplify it.

42 See Lydia Goehr, *The Imaginary Museum of Musical Works. An Essay in the Philosophy of Music*, Oxford: Clarendon Press 1994.

43 See *ibid*, p. 173.

44 See, for example, Laura Melton, *Frederic Rzewski's The People United Will Never Be Defeated! An Analysis and Historical Perspective*, Dissertation, Rice University 1997; and Keane Southard, *The Use of Variation Form in Frederic Rzewski's The People United Will Never Be Defeated!*, Bachelor thesis, Baldwin-Wallace College 2009.

45 A good example for that is Los Angeles Philharmonics, "Power to the People! festival", [2022], <<https://web.archive.org/web/20250726123334/https://www.laphil.com/events/festivals-high-lights/53#>> (26.07.2025).

46 See e. g. Carnegie Hall, "Carnegie Hall Announces Schedule of Events for Voices of Hope Online Festival From April 16–30, 2021" [2021], <<https://web.archive.org/web/20251009115036/https://www.carnegiehall.org/About/Press/Press-Releases/2021/03/26/Carnegie-Hall-Announces-Schedule-of-Events-for-Voices-of-Hope-Online->

Contradiction as Political Strategy

Even though *The People United* has been absorbed into institutional frameworks, its presence there is not without friction. The narrative of neutralisation—or of protest becoming prestigious—risks oversimplifying the work's dynamic and unstable character. This very friction, however, may reveal a process more complex than simply co-optation: the sophisticated manner in which contemporary culture produces "safely rebellious" art that can simultaneously challenge and serve existing power structures.

Consider Rzewski's positioning. Educated at Princeton and Harvard, and later a prominent professor, he was well placed to move comfortably within elite academic and cultural institutions.⁴⁷ His adoption of the variation form offered both a familiar entry point into concert programmes and a vehicle for advancing his political message. Yet by 1997, Rzewski had become increasingly sceptical about the effectiveness of political music. Reflecting on shifting historical circumstances, he remarked:

"There's a big difference between 1997 and 1977. I have my own feelings about what's happening in the world, but I don't think I can express them musically with any great clarity as I could have 20 years ago. Things seemed simpler and clearer then. For one thing, there was a movement, there were large numbers of people who shared similar ideas, and one could feel that one was part of something larger than oneself."⁴⁸

This acknowledgement reveals the composer's growing awareness that political art requires not only individual commitment but also collective context—precisely what neoliberalism systematically erodes.

The work's technical demands naturally align it with elite-level performers and conservatoire curricula, while its explicit invocation of *El pueblo unido* lends it the credibility of committed protest music. In this sense, form and content reinforce one another: the cycle functions simultaneously as a serious artistic achievement and as a call to solidarity, without one cancelling out the other.

Here lies a deeper paradox in the operation of resistance under late capitalism. Performers such as Igor Levit, who present the piece as a gesture of solidarity rather than merely a vehicle of virtuosity, may not resist commodification so much as exemplify its evolution. Their political framing itself becomes part of the cultural product—the "authentic" interpretation that justifies both artistic seriousness and market value.⁴⁹ Performed in prestigious concert halls, such interpretations legitimise the institutional context while offering audiences the satisfaction of political engagement without demanding real commitment.⁵⁰ Meanwhile, the continued use of the original protest song in grassroots movements

Festival-3-26-2021/> (09.10.2025), which incorporated Music, Theatre, Films, Exhibitions, and Talks (e. g. about the role of art as a vehicle for social change).

47 See Murray, Art. "Rzewski, Frederic" (like fn. 1).

48 Schwarz, "A Composer for the Masses Scales Down His Ambitions" (like fn. 12).

49 On authenticity as commodity in neoliberal culture, see Nealon, *Post-Postmodernism* (like fn. 22), especially p. 49 where he states that "authenticity too is a commodity".

50 See Goehr, *The Imaginary Museum of Musical Works* (like fn. 42). Lydia Goehr underlines how institutional contexts shape and legitimize interpretations. See especially pp. 173–175 on the process of "museumification".

underscores the contrast between Rzewski's institutionalised variation cycle and lived, real-world political practice.⁵¹

Mediatisation and the Aesthetic of Protest

The People United's sixty-minute duration once demanded the kind of concentrated attention typically associated with serious musical engagement. Rzewski structured the cycle as an architectural whole: thirty-six variations, organised in six groups that gradually build intensity towards the climactic final variations and reprise. This formal design presupposes continuous listening, where the accumulation of musical ideas mirrors the development of political awareness. Yet digital streaming platforms alter this experience fundamentally by fragmenting the work into discrete tracks.

On Spotify, for example, most recordings of *The People United* appear as "Theme", "Variations 1–36" — each one as a different "track"—, and "Reprise" rather than as a unified composition.⁵² This seemingly neutral technical division carries both musical and political consequences. Listeners can skip to the most virtuosic passages—as mentioned earlier, Levit's improvised cadenza alone has garnered nearly one million streams—⁵³ while bypassing quieter, more reflective variations that underpin the piece's political argument.⁵⁴ Algorithms further reinforce this fragmentation by recommending "similar tracks" based on individual selections, dismantling Rzewski's carefully constructed musical journey.⁵⁵ This fragmentation and the reshaping of listening habits affect the perception of the work in specific ways. Rzewski wove the protest song's melody throughout the thirty-six variations—sometimes stated clearly, sometimes concealed in complex counterpoint, and sometimes reduced to rhythmic fragments.⁵⁶ However, when one listens to the variations in isolation or on *shuffle mode*, this transformational process, central to both musical and political argument, becomes invisible. Variations that are less tonal and that are composed in fugal or contrapuntal styles especially require sustained attention to appreciate how individual voices weave together to create collective harmony.

While Rzewski composed a fixed, notated piece intended for concert performance, the cultural context of its performance has changed. The original *¡El pueblo unido!* was meant for collective singing,

51 See as only one of numerous examples of the grassroots use Grassroots Global Justice Alliance, "El Pueblo Unido Jamás Será Vencido" [2022], <<https://web.archive.org/web/20251009122424/https://ggjalliance.org/curriculums/el-pueblo-unido-jamas-sera-vencido/>> (09.10.2025).

52 See Igor Levit, *The People United Will Never Be Defeated! – 36 Variations on ¡el pueblo unido jamás será vencido!*, Spotify Album, Catalogue-No.: 88875140162, Sony Classical, Gütersloh: Sony Music Entertainment Inc. 2015, online: <<https://open.spotify.com/intl-de/album/4pHar6YiC1aV-ptgFOJ6RPV?si=KgTnx-isPabNQGdohVyGw>> (09.10.2025).

53 See Levit, *The People United*, Track 37 "Var. 36" (like fn. 27).

54 See Madsen, *Music as a Metaphor* (like fn. 2); and Ishii, "A Formal Analysis and Historical Perspective" (like fn. 7).

55 On how streaming (and algorithms) shape listening habits and fragment musical works, see David Hesmondhalgh, "Streaming's Effects on Music Culture: Old Anxieties and New Simplifications", in: *Cultural Sociology* 16/1 (2022), pp. 3–24.

56 See Ishii, "A Formal Analysis and Historical Perspective" (like fn. 7); and Southard, *The Use of Variation Form* (like fn. 44).

whereas Rzewski's variations were conceived for solo piano in institutional settings. Today, studio recordings optimised for digital circulation reach audiences primarily through classical music platforms rather than political movements. The musical content remains unchanged, but the institutional framework of reception has shifted from the politically engaged new-music milieu of the 1970s to the mainstream classical repertoire. The history of *The People United's* recordings and its reception reflects this trajectory: Early versions, such as Oppens' recording from 1978,⁵⁷ were released on specialist new-music labels and were marketed to politically attuned audiences. More recent releases appear on major classical labels alongside canonical variation cycles, framing the work as a technical showcase rather than as a political statement. This shift in marketing profoundly shapes reception; it affects how listeners encounter the piece and how it is situated within a tradition of virtuosic piano literature rather than contemporary political protest culture.

The work's improvisatory elements suffer most acutely under this "regime" of digital circulation. These improvisatory spaces function as opportunities for pianists to insert their own spontaneous gestures of solidarity and to connect the Chilean struggle to present political contexts. On streaming platforms, however, once recorded, these improvisations are canonised, fixed as definite versions, and stripped of their intended function and political immediacy.

Algorithms reshape the way the work is received by "recommending" it alongside "challenging classical pieces" such as Bach's *Goldberg Variations* or Beethoven's *Diabelli Variations* rather than alongside protest music or Nueva Canción recordings. Such classifications reinforce its status as virtuosic repertoire while severing its ties to political music traditions. Listeners (and "Spotify-Users") encountering *The People United* through these recommendations tend to perceive it as a complex musical puzzle rather than as a political statement.

The duration itself poses further challenges for digital consumption, although specific listening data for classical works remains largely proprietary to streaming platforms. However, it is clear that Levit's improvised cadenza—released on Spotify as a separate, 'standalone' track—has accumulated significantly more streams than most individual variations. This musical fragmentation reflects broader changes in the circulation of political content through digital culture: sustained attention, essential for the musical and textual unfolding of political argument, conflicts with the rapid, fragmented consumption fostered by platform algorithms.⁵⁸

Within this digital ecology, *The People United* persists as political music but increasingly functions as a demonstration of pianistic skill. While the musical text remains unchanged, its cultural function shifts from an act of solidarity to an object of technical appreciation.⁵⁹

57 See Ursula Oppens, *The People United Will Never Be Defeated! (36 Variations On A Chilean Song)*, Vinyl, Catalogue-No.: CV 71248, Vanguard: New York 1978.

58 For an interesting empirical study on the "skipping behaviour" on streaming platforms like Spotify see Nicola Montecchio, Pierre Roy, and François Pachet, "The skipping behavior of users of music streaming services and its relation to musical structure", in: *PLoS ONE* 15/9 (2020), <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0239418>.

59 See Hesmondhalgh, "Streaming's Effects on Music Culture" (like fn. 55), pp. 15–18.

Resistance Amid Absorption

Has *The People United* been completely absorbed by neoliberal culture? The question itself may be misleading. Rather than asking if it has been absorbed, we should consider how it functions dialectically—as both resistance and absorption at once. While the work’s potential for genuine political engagement remains, it operates within constrained parameters. When artists emphasise its message explicitly, *The People United* can still challenge norms and expectations within the very institutions in which it is performed. In an interview, Oppens stated that the work “did make people think about what was happening”.⁶⁰ Levit’s 2021 performance at the Dannenröder Forst protest camp exemplifies this potential: a moment where concert-hall virtuosity intersected direct political action. Yet even this seemingly pure act of protest subsequently incorporated into his documentary *No Fear*,⁶¹ raising questions about where political commitment ends and cultural production begins.

Beyond the concert hall *¡El pueblo unido!* continues to serve as a recognisable anthem at public demonstrations across Latin America and elsewhere, showing that the music can inspire collective action rather than mere passive consumption. Yet grassroots movements largely bypass Rzewski’s complex variations, suggesting that political effectiveness and artistic sophistication may conflict with each other.

Ultimately, *The People United* is context-dependent, but not in the conventional sense. The work does not simply adapt to the different settings in which it is performed; it actively exposes the contradictions embedded within them. In the concert hall, for example, it highlights the limits of institutional political engagement. In protest settings, it underscores the gap between cultural symbolism and material action. On streaming platforms, it reveals how digital capitalism fragments and reconfigures resistant art into consumable form. Perhaps this instability is itself the work’s true political function. Rather than offering a fixed message of resistance, it stages the contradictions of political art under late capitalism. As Fisher and Pfaller remind us, the danger lies not in performing protest, but in allowing protest to be performed on our behalf. Music does not resist for us; unless we resist with it, even the most radical anthem risks becoming just another item on the programme.

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This essay was written in the context of the seminar “Music under Neoliberalism”, taught by professor Marc Brooks at the University of Vienna during the summer semester of 2025. The course examined how neoliberalism has reshaped musical life since the late 1970s—its effects on production, labour, institutions and aesthetics. The seminar, a mix of theory and discussion, offered a critical framework for understanding how economic systems influence music-making and its meanings today. It revealed new ways of thinking about how music can still act critically within the systems that sustain it.

60 Madsen, *Music as Metaphor* (like fn. 2), p. 201.

61 See Regina Schilling, *Igor Levit – No Fear*, DVD, Catalogue-No.: 210550, Berlin: zero one film 2022.