

The New Criterion

Dispatch June 28, 2021 12:45 pm

A political composer, but mainly a composer

by Jay Nordlinger

Roger Kimball has said that Walter Bagehot suffers from a disadvantage: People are unsure how to pronounce his last name. Therefore, they are hesitant to talk about him. (It's "Badget," as you know.) I say the same about Leonardo Sciascia—"Shah-shah."

Bagehot, the British writer, lived from 1826 to 1877. Sciascia, the Italian writer—Sicilian, specifically—was more recent: 1921 to 1989.

How about the composer Frederic Rzewski? Don't forget to take the "k" off "Frederick," yes. But what about the last name? It is "Zheff-ski," I believe. He was an American, whose parents were Polish immigrants. Rzewski spent most of his career in Europe. Over the weekend, he died at eighty-three.

I have written about him from time to time, mainly when reviewing Igor Levit, the Russian-German pianist, who has championed him.

Rzewski was born in 1938 in Westfield, Massachusetts. He had a "gold-plated education," as I once wrote: the Phillips Academy; Harvard; Princeton. He was a very, very bright kid, and man. Among his composition teachers were Walter Piston, Randall Thompson, Roger Sessions, and Milton Babbitt. Lot of intelligence—and a lot of talent—in that crew.

In 2017, I discussed an Igor Levit recital. Here are some lines from the relevant "chronicle":

According to our program notes at Zankel Hall, Rzewski "is often tagged as a political composer." Now why would that be? What are the taggers thinking? Rzewski has written pieces about Attica Prison, mill workers, war, and more. His magnum opus is *The People United Will Never Be Defeated!*, a set of variations for piano.

Rzewski was not shy about fusing his music with his politics, and his politics with his music. In fact, the opposite. At the same time, he remained a composer, rather than an ideologue, or an agitprop man.

In the Levit recital I have mentioned, the pianist played *Dreams II*, a Rzewski work comprising four pieces. It was inspired by a Kurosawa film, *Dreams* (1990). Let me quote again from that chronicle:

The fourth and final piece begins with “disarming simplicity,” as music-writers like to say. It brings us a Woody Guthrie song for children, “Wake Up.” But I soon heard something—something exciting—reminiscent of Mussorgsky’s *Pictures at an Exhibition*: specifically, the music that builds up to “The Great Gate of Kiev.” In the rest of his “Wake Up,” Rzewski is well-nigh Lisztian, calling on virtuosity and imagination, and also suggesting improvisation.

At this juncture, I might mention that Rzewski played every piano piece he wrote. He himself was a virtuoso, underrated as such. He played virtuosically well into old age.

Okay, that magnum opus—and I will quote from another piece of mine, on the general subject of politics and music:

Rzewski’s magnum opus is *The People United Will Never Be Defeated!*, a set of 36 variations. Levit has recorded this work to considerable acclaim alongside two canonical works: Bach’s *Goldberg Variations* and Beethoven’s *Diabelli Variations*.

The tune came from Chile in 1973 (“¡El pueblo unido jamás será vencido!”). It is an anthem of the Latin American Left. Two years later, Rzewski composed his variations, in solidarity. Speaking of solidarity, there are other tunes in these variations—including “Solidarity Song”, whose words are by Bertolt Brecht and whose music is by Hanns Eisler.

A curious fact about Eisler? He wrote the national anthem of East Germany—or the “German Democratic Republic,” as the Communists styled it.

The very notion of this work—the Rzewski “People” piece—is obnoxious to me. But . . . it is a commendable, admirable piece of music. The variations are interesting. They are various, as variations should be. They are unified (like the People?), they compel. In fact, *The People United Will Never Be Defeated!* is one of the best long works for piano in the modern era.

Where does that leave me? A little “conflicted,” as the shrinks say.

Yes, a little conflicted. Personally, I like a separation—a “wall of separation”—between music and politics, art and politics. One of the reasons “Hilton and Sam”—Hilton Kramer and Samuel Lipman—founded this magazine, back in 1982, was that arts and letters were becoming all too politicized. Yet other people have their own ideas and itches, and Rzewski forged an impressive career for himself. He has secured a place in music history.

Jay Nordlinger is a Senior Editor at *National Review*.

His podcast with *The New Criterion*, titled “Music for a While,” can be found here.