



36 Variations on ¡El pueblo unido jamás será vencido!
The People United Will Never Be Defeated

Frederic Rzewski
(1938-2021)

Matthew Phelps, *pianist*

Matthew Phelps is a sought-after pianist, conductor, and organist in Nashville, TN. As a founding member of the Elliston Trio, he has performed nationwide in repertoire ranging from Mozart to Joan Tower. As a soloist Phelps is known for performing Frederic Rzewski's monumental "The People United Will Never Be Defeated." His performances of Rzewski's music led the composer to ask Phelps to produce a new edition of his last major piece, "Ages," which Phelps premiered in 2021 and will record this summer. He has performed recitals for the Nashville Cathedral Arts Series, Steinway Society of Nashville, Nashville Symphony's On Stage series, Music at 990 Series. Wright State University, the University of Dayton, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, and Xavier University. He has appeared numerous times on Nashville Public Radio as a soloist and chamber musician, along with Cincinnati Public Radio and NPR.

Phelps is the Minister of Music at West End United Methodist Church in Nashville, TN. In addition to his work at West End, he is the founder and artistic director of the professional chamber choir Vocal Arts Nashville and the artistic director of Collegium Cincinnati. At West End, he conducts the Chancel Choir and performs major concerts with orchestra. While at West End, Phelps has put the church at the forefront of Nashville's sacred and classical music scene. Of West End's Christmas Concerts, the Nashville Scene wrote: "In a season overloaded with dedicated repertoires, West End United Methodist Church reaches beyond the standard hymns and carols for an afternoon of festive selections that skirt Christmas norms." Phelps' performances have been described as "beautifully prepared" (Mary Ellen Hutton, Cincinnati Post), "beautifully shaped" (David Katz, Chief Judge of the American Prize), and "moving and deeply meaningful." (Walter Bitner, On the Podium)

Phelps is also well known as a conductor of choral and orchestral music. In his position at West End UMC, he has conducted critically lauded performances of Brahms' Requiem, Bach's Christmas Oratorio, and works ranging from Telemann to Morton Laurdisen. With Vocal Arts Nashville, he has conducted all six Bach Motets and a repertoire ranging from Dufay to Esenvalds. Under his direction, Vocal Arts Nashville produced its first recording, *O Love, The Music of Elaine Hagenberg*, this past spring. At Collegium Cincinnati, he leads a professional choral and instrumental ensemble known for early and new music performances, including an annual performance of Handel's Messiah, considered the beginning of Cincinnati's Christmas concert season. He has had regular engagements with the Nashville Concerto Orchestra, the Mozart Birthday Festival Orchestra, and the Nashville Ballet and has guest-conducted choirs and orchestras nationally.

Phelps received his degrees in conducting from the College-Conservatory of Music at the University of Cincinnati, where he studied with Earl Rivers, Stephen Coker, and Mark Gibson. He studied piano with Elisabeth Pridonoff and Jackson Leung. He has served on the faculties of Xavier University and Lipscomb University. He has recorded two albums, one as a pianist featuring music by Haydn, Liszt and Rachmaninoff and a second as conductor of Vocal Arts Nashville—*O Love: The Music of Elaine Hagenberg*. He has the rare distinction of winning awards in three separate disciplines (piano, organ, and conducting), including the 2015 American Prize in Choral Conducting.

Program Notes

“The People United Will Never Be Defeated,” is arguably Rzewski’s most famous work. It consists of 36 variations on the Chilean Socialist Protest Song of the same name. The song was written in 1970 by Sergio Ortega celebrating the mobilization of working-class people and the rise of the Allende government in Chile. The song became the anthem of the Chilean resistance after the 1973 U. S. backed Chilean coup that put Pinochet in power. Over time, the song has become a symbol of social struggle and has been used in various protests around the world, including the “White Night Riots” in San Francisco and the “Keep Families Together,” protests in Washington D.C.

Rzewski composed the piece in the fall of 1975, fulfilling a commission by pianist, Ursula Oppens. Oppens premiered the piece on February 7, 1976 at the Kennedy Center, and recorded the piece in 1979 for which she received a GRAMMY® Award nomination for Classical Record of the Year.

Rzewski wrote the song in honor of the Chilean struggle, and included other songs generally considered sympathetic with leftist politics, including the Italian socialist song, “Bandiera Rossa,” and Berthold Brecht’s “Solidarity Song.” The piece is divided into six sets of six variations. Each set of variations contains five distinct variations, followed by a sixth variation that contains elements of the previous 5, acting as a summary of the set.

Rzewski uses all styles of 20th-century composition including serialism, song form, romantic and esoteric harmonic language, minimalism, and various extended techniques including slamming the piano lid, whistling, (which unfortunately I cannot do) groaning in pain as if being struck, catching harmonics with the pedal after a note has been played, and humming.

As in all of Rzewski’s works, improvisation plays an important role. Throughout the work, Rzewski leaves room for the unknown, marking parts of the score with the instruction, recklessly, and one moment in the score “accurately,” implying that the accuracy of the rest of the score can be called into question. The climax of the work comes after the 36th variation where Rzewski requests the pianist perform an improvisation of at least 5 minutes. While Rzewski does mark the improvisation optional, one is left to think that without the improvisation an important aspect of the piece has been discarded. After the improvisation, the composer brings the theme back for a last iteration, as Bach does in the Goldberg Variations. He follows it with a fiendish coda that requires the pianist to leap around the keyboard, drawing on any last bit of energy the person has not expended over the last hour.

The length, difficulty, and emotional trials of the piece are meant to display the struggle for change. The piece exhausts the pianist, and one cannot help but wonder where you started and how it ended. Like all change, the journey often feels endless. For the pianist and the audience alike, the journey of “The People United Will Never be Defeated,” can be a struggle, but in the end, the struggle gives way to a small feeling of triumph. As with all change though, nobody knows how long it will last before the struggle returns.

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