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INTERMISSION

RZEWSKI **The People United Will Never Be Defeated**
(36 Variations on "El Pueblo Unido Jamás Será Vencido")

Polonaise in C-sharp Minor, Opus 26

FREDERIC CHOPIN

Born February 22, 1810, Zelazowska Wola

Died October 17, 1849, Paris

The *polonaise*—as its name implies—is of Polish origin, but that title does not begin to suggest how deeply this form is embedded in the national character. In triple time, it was originally intended as ceremonial music and could be sung or danced as part of festive processions. By the eighteenth century, it had become a dance form, but Chopin took it a step further in his fifteen polonaises for solo piano. He had left Poland at age 20, never to return, and as an anguished exile he watched the suffering of his homeland under Russian subjugation. While his polonaises do not have explicit programs, it is clear that this form had unusual meaning for him and that he invested it with an emotional intensity rare in his music. Was Chopin pouring out his feelings about his native country in this music? He insisted that all his music was abstract and should be understood only for itself, but his audiences—particularly his audiences in Poland—believed his polonaises to be expressions of nationalistic sentiment.

Chopin composed the two polonaises of his Opus 26 in 1834-5: they were the first examples of the form he had written since moving from Poland to Paris four years earlier. The brusque opening gesture of the *Polonaise in C-sharp Minor*, which Chopin marks *Allegro appassionato*, leads to more lyric material in the characteristic polonaise rhythm. The middle section slows down a little (Chopin nevertheless marks it *con anima*), and the melodic line makes an unusual excursion into the left hand before the return of the opening material and a surprisingly quiet close.

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The mazurka was originally an old country dance from the village of Mazovia near Warsaw (its residents were referred to as Mazurs), and as a boy in Poland Chopin heard and saw it danced. That dance was in triple time, with the accent sometimes (but not always!) on the second or third beat; in its original form the mazurka was danced by groups of couples who would separate and return, and it was sometimes accompanied by a bagpipe. Chopin fell in love with this rough country dance, and his approximately sixty mazurkas span his career: he wrote the first at 14, the last in the year of his death. What most appealed to Chopin was the raw, wild quality of this music, and in his own mazurkas he transformed that rough dance into the vehicle for some of his most sophisticated music.

After Chopin’s death in 1849, his publisher Fontana gathered a number of his individual compositions for posthumous publication. The four mazurkas of Opus 68 were entirely separate works, composed over a 22-year span. The brief *Mazurka in C Major, Opus 68, No. 1* was composed in 1829, when Chopin was nineteen years old. Marked *Vivace*, it is full of rhythmic energy, from the driving pulses of the opening through the dotted rhythms of the main section and right on to the sudden close.

The four mazurkas that make up Chopin’s Opus 67 were composed as individual works between 1835 and 1849. The *Mazurka in G Minor, Opus 67, No. 2* is one of Chopin’s final compositions—he wrote it in 1849, the year of his death. Chopin’s biographer Herbert Weinstock calls this piece “a sketch” and regards it as unfinished: Chopin’s first effort at music that he would have revised had he lived longer. The brief mazurka is in the expected three-part form. Its wistful beginning, which Chopin marks *Cantabile*, leads to a more vigorous second subject. An unusual touch is that the bridge back to the opening material is played by the right hand alone.

Chopin wrote the exceptionally attractive—and almost unknown—*Mazurka in A Minor* in 1840, and it was brought out the following year by the small publishing house Chabal in Paris. Chopin inscribed the manuscript “To his friend Émile Gaillard,” who was one of his pupils; Gaillard later gave up the piano and became a banker. There is something fresh, original, and appealing about the brief *Mazurka in A Minor*. The opening section, an *Allegretto* in which the melodic line moves seamlessly between the hands, is full of harmonic surprises, while the remarkable second section is performed throughout with the right hand playing octaves. The opening material returns, then Chopin concludes with a masterstroke: the music winds down over a long trill in the right hand as the left offers an entirely new idea, and the music suddenly vanishes in front of us.

The *Mazurka in A Minor, Opus 67, No. 4*, which dates from 1846, has an unusual structure: Chopin offers the expected first and second themes, but instead of closing by reprising the first, he instead offers an entirely new episode in A major, then recalls both opening themes. This mazurka has been much admired. Chopin arrived at this version after much revision, and many scholars believe that he would have published the music in this form if he had lived.

Polonaise in A-flat Major, Opus 53

Chopin’s last polonaise, the *Polonaise in A-flat Major*, is one of his grandest works: exciting, dramatic, and harmonically adventurous. Composed in 1842, it is somewhat in the manner of the

“*Military*” *Polonaise*, but this one is even more powerful, more dynamic. One feels this from the first instant, where the ominous, muttering runs create a sense of expectancy and of power tightly restrained. That power bursts out when this polonaise does begin to dance, but this is not the polite dance of the ballroom—this one explodes across the keyboard, driven along by thunderous runs, trills, and complex chording.

A series of arpeggiated chords leads to the center section (sometimes compared to the pound of horses’ hooves): here the rapid left-hand octaves accompany a stirring right-hand melody that has been compared to trumpet calls (and it is easy to understand how this dramatic music can call forth such dramatic interpretations). This center section—quite lengthy and itself divided into further subdivisions—leads to a return of the fiery dance from the opening section, but now Chopin abbreviates this dance and drives the polonaise directly to its exciting close.

The People United Will Never Be Defeated (36 Variations on “El Pueblo Unido Jamás Será Vencido”)

FREDERIC RZEWSKI

Born April 13, 1938, Westfield, Massachusetts

In 1975 Ursula Oppens, that great champion of contemporary music, asked American composer Frederic Rzewski for a piece to go on the same program with her upcoming performance of Beethoven’s *Diabelli Variations*. Working very rapidly across September and October 1975, Rzewski composed what has become a modern keyboard classic, a set of variations on the Chilean protest song “El Pueblo Unido Jamás Será Vencido.” The story of the original theme, Rzewski’s variations, and their place in the piano literature is a very interesting one.

First, a word about Rzewski. He studied at Harvard and Princeton with some of the greatest composer-teachers of the twentieth century, including Walter Piston, Roger Sessions, and Milton Babbitt before going to Italy, where he studied with Luigi Dallapiccola. In Italy, he became interested in electronic music and in improvisation and performed with various ensembles in Europe for some years. Rzewski has taught in Belgium, the Netherlands, and London and in the United States at Yale, Cal Arts, the University of California at San Diego, and other universities. A first-class pianist, Rzewski has been animated throughout his career by a commitment to social justice, a passion that has shaped much of his music.

When Ursula Oppens asked for a piece to go with the *Diabelli Variations*, Rzewski responded by composing what might be considered a twentieth-century counterpart to Beethoven’s masterpiece. Beethoven’s *Diabelli Variations* happened almost by accident. The Viennese publisher Anton Diabelli had written a theme and asked for a single variation on it from fifty composers, and these were to be published as a collaborative work. Beethoven was at first uninterested in the project—he called Diabelli’s theme a *Schusterfluck*: “a trifle.” But the more Beethoven looked at the theme, the more interested he became, and he eventually wrote 33 variations on it, a set of variations that spans an hour. It is an extraordinary musical journey, as Beethoven found unexpected promise in that “trifle” and turned it into great music.

Rzewski did much the same thing. For his theme he chose the song “El Pueblo Unido Jamás Será Vencido!” (“The People United Will Never Be Defeated!”) by the Chilean composer and teacher Sergio Ortega. Ortega (1938-2003), a strong supporter of Salvador Allende, had composed Allende’s campaign theme song “Venceremos.” During a period of gathering political turmoil in Chile in June 1973, Ortega

heard a phrase –it would become the title of the song–shouted repeatedly at a rally in Santiago. Very quickly, Ortega set that slogan to music, and his song found immediate international success–it has been adopted for leftist (and other) causes all over the world in the forty years since its creation. In the meantime, a coup deposed Allende in September 1973, and Ortega fled to France, where he lived for the rest of his life.

Rather than beginning with a “trifle,” as Beethoven had, Rzewski instead took as his theme a piece that was already famous, and it should be noted that that theme is in fact Ortega’s complete song, which spans about ninety seconds. That song is quite powerful, and it has several distinct components: its firm beginning (Rzewski marks this “with determination”) is followed by a haunting melodic response which itself incorporates elements of the very beginning, and these ideas develop across the span of the song. For Oppens, Rzewski composed a set of 36 variations on Ortega’s song, and these stretch out to about fifty minutes in performance. In that other great set of keyboard variations, the *Goldberg Variations*, Bach arranged his variations in groups of three, of which the third is always a canon based on an interval one step larger than in the previous group. Rzewski set himself similar challenges: he grouped his 36 variations in six groups of six, and in his own program note for this piece the composer described the sequence of variations within each of these six sets: “1 simple events, 2 rhythms, 3 melodies, 4 counterpoints, 5 harmonies, 6 collections of all these.” These variations generate a huge range of music: some sing, some dance, some weave together complex contrapuntal strands, some shout, and some whisper, as Ortega’s stirring melody is extended and transformed across a long musical journey.

The appeal of this music comes from many sources: from Ortega’s stirring song itself, one of those powerful melodies that stay to haunt the memory. From Rzewski’s endless and imaginative transformations of that song. And from the challenges the pianist must overcome. This music demands a Herculean effort from its performer, who must unleash great torrents of sound one moment and wispy delicacy the next, project the most innocent tunes alongside heroic declamation, and keep the original theme in hand throughout. At the end of the 36th variation, Rzewski offers pianists the opportunity to improvise a cadenza if they so choose, and he then concludes these variations–as Bach had, 250 years earlier–with a simple reprise of his fundamental theme.

Program notes by Eric Bromberger