

American Dissident Liner Notes

Margaret Bonds (1913-1972)

Troubled Water

Margaret Bonds occupies a unique place in American classical music. Born in Chicago in 1913, her mother was a musician and her father, Monroe Alpheus Majors was a doctor who also authored the first-of-its kind anthology *Noted Negro Women: Their Triumphs and Activities* in 1893. Bonds composed her first piece at the age of eight after she had been taking piano lessons for several years. At the age of 16, she entered Northwestern University, where she was forced to study in the basement due to the hostile and racist environment towards people of color. She obtained her Bachelor's and Master's degrees in 1933 and 1934 respectively. While still a student, she became the first Black person to perform with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra. During this period, Bonds studied piano and composition with Florence Price who became one of her greatest influences and mentors.

Of her time at Northwestern, Bonds recalled: "I was in this prejudiced university, this terribly prejudiced place — I was looking in the basement of the Evanston Public Library where they had the poetry. I came in contact with this wonderful poem, 'The Negro Speaks of Rivers', and I'm sure it helped my feelings of security.

"Because in that poem he [Langston Hughes] tells how great the Black man is: And if I had any misgivings, which I would have to have — here you are in a setup

where the restaurants won't serve you and you're going to college, you're sacrificing, trying to get through school – and I know that poem helped save me.” Bonds later set the poem for chorus and piano and developed a lifelong friendship with Hughes.

Troubled Water is Margaret Bonds's best-known instrumental composition. It had previously been the third movement of Bonds' *Spiritual Suite* — a symphonically-conceived set of three piano pieces based on African American spirituals — before it was published as a stand-alone piece in 1967. In its original guise, it was a piece for piano with audience participation called *Group Dance based on the Negro Spiritual "Wade in the Water."* The audience was invited to sing the well-known spiritual “Wade in the Water” just before the reprise while the piano played the opening ostinato. In this album, it is presented in the piano-only 1967 version. Despite the lack of voices, Bonds' solo piano version of *Troubled Water* serves as a magnificent arrangement of one of the most beautiful and powerful Black spirituals.

Frederic Rzewski (1938-2021)

The People United Will Never Be Defeated!

The People United Will Never Be Defeated! is based on Sergio Ortega's protest song *¡El pueblo unido, jamás será vencido!* with lyrics by the Chilean folk group Quilapayún. It was one of the most famous songs of the New Chilean Song Movement, a revolution that occurred in the popular music of the country during Salvador Allende's Popular Unity Government. After Augusto Pinochet's CIA-backed coup

ousted Allende in 1973, the song gained worldwide popularity as a universal protest song against injustice.

As the pianist Ralph van Raat notes, “it was no surprise that Ortega and the politically left-wing Rzewski impressed and inspired each other greatly when they met in Italy a few years later [after Ortega composed *¡El pueblo unido, jamás será vencido!*], resulting in Rzewski’s own vision of this emblematic song.” This meeting came at a time when Rzewski’s compositional style was undergoing a notable shift. After his foray into the collective, experimental, and theatrical compositions of the mid-60s with Musica Elettronica Viva (MEV), the group that he co-founded, Rzewski stated that the “time for great gestures and monumental deeds” was finished, ceding to a “time for slow and quiet work.” He moved to New York City in 1971 after having lived in Rome and other European cities for nearly a decade.

Rzewski’s rationale for this was two-fold: first he needed to provide a steady income for himself and his family and second, he felt it was a time to reflect on MEV’s radical music and politics. The “storms of the sixties [having] momentarily subsided,” Rzewski channeled his political beliefs into notated compositions (albeit with optional improvisation in many of them) rather than the free improvisation and radical collective music that had characterized his time in MEV. As a result, Rzewski’s New York period marks one of his most concentrated periods of political compositions. According to Bernard Gendron, Rzewski composed 23 pieces during this time “of which approximately 60% are political in semantic content.”

Thus was Rzewski’s mindset when, in 1975, he composed *The People United Will Never Be Defeated!*. The piece comprises Ortega’s theme and 36 variations written in

six cycles, each in disparate musical styles. After Ursula Oppens' premiere recording of the piece in 1978 for Vanguard, it quickly became one of his most famous compositions.

Rzewski summarizes the piece as “a series of six cycles, each of which consists of six stages, in which different musical relationships appear in order: (1) simple events; (2) rhythms; (3) melodies; (4) counterpoints; (5) harmonies; (6) combinations of all these. Each of the larger cycles develops a character suggested by the individual stage to which it corresponds, so that the third cycle is lyrical, the fourth tends toward conflict, the fifth toward simultaneity (the fifth is also the freest), and the sixth recapitulates, in such a way that the first stage is a summary of all of the preceding first stages, the second a summary of the second stages, and so on.”

Rzewski also employs a variety of techniques and styles that span the gamut of Western music, from medieval discant to Lisztian virtuosity to improvisatory jazz-like fantasies to mid-20th century variations that evoke Boulez and Glass; the evolution of music itself and the struggles the performer must surmount mirror the evolution of humans and the struggles they must traverse in order to overturn authoritarian regimes.

Rzewski constantly reinforces the narrative of the struggle by introducing theatrical techniques, including slamming the keyboard lid, producing a short vocal cry, and whistling. In addition, his directions to the performer include “relentless, uncompromising,” “in a militant manner,” “struggling,” “with determination,” and “like a cry.”

Rzewski concluded his description of the work with, “Two songs, aside from

the theme itself, appear at various points: the Italian revolutionary song ‘Bandiera Rossa,’ in reference to the Italian people who in the 70s opened their doors to so many refugees from Chilean fascism, and Hanns Eisler’s 1932 antifascist ‘Solidaritätslied,’ a reminder that parallels to present threats existed in the past and that it is important to learn from them. After the sixth cycle, the pianist is offered the option of improvising a cadenza The extended length of the composition may be an allusion to the idea that the unification of people is a long story and that nothing worth winning is acquired without effort.”

Rzewski

Winnsboro Cotton Mill Blues

Winnsboro Cotton Mill Blues was written in May 1979 and serves as a thrilling capstone to the North American Ballads. The piece clearly harks back to Henry Cowell with its preponderance of tone clusters, but it is also influenced by Luigi Nono’s *La Fabbrica Illuminata* written in 1964 for voice and 4-channel surround sound. In that piece, Nono intertwines the noise of factories and workers’ voices with pre-recorded and live soprano. Like Bonds, Rzewski takes a pre-existing song as his point of departure. Here, it is *Winnsboro Cotton Mill Blues*, the 1930s industrial protest song about working in a textile mill.

For background: textile mills were constructed in and around Winnsboro, South Carolina beginning in the late 19th century (originally restricted to white workers despite the majority Black population). The song developed after the Winnsboro mill

had been converted to a tire manufacturing plant, which reflected the widespread expansion of the auto industry and the loss of textile jobs to cheaper labor markets.

The song utilizes grim irony to draw attention to labor's relation to capital:

When I die don't you bury me at all

Hang me up on the schoolroom wall

Place a bobbin in my hand

So I can keep on a-workin' in the Promised Land

Rzewski's setting begins with a rapid semitone motive (G-flat and F) in the lowest register of the piano. This motive begins to incorporate more notes and gradually evokes the atmosphere of a cotton mill as the pianist begins to play tone clusters in both hands and then "with forearms . . . both black and white notes."

Following a stunning climax, in which the pianist allows the cacophony of the preceding music to resonate for an extended period with the sustaining pedal depressed, a lyrical blues section provides a gorgeous respite. After the blues reaches its zenith, the incessant din of the cotton mill returns and leads into a virtuosic contrapuntal section that is characteristically Rzewskian. Finally, the piece arrives at the triumphant iteration of the full tune in all its glory. Instead of an exultant ending, however, the evocation of the mill machines returns in shocking fashion and thoroughly overwhelms the tuneful protest song. The piano as machine appears to win in the end.