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Narrative structure in the works of Frederic Rzewski

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NARRATIVE STRUCTURE IN THE WORKS

OF FREDERIC RZEWSKI

A Thesis

by

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ABSTRACT

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This thesis examines the compositional strategies Rzewski applies to affect his audience's expectations so that the experience of the work parallels the political and philosophical ideas within it. Employing musical narrative theory as a way to characterize the process of expectation that can guide the perception of musical meaning, I explore how Rzewski's pieces support or reject interpretation through a musical dramatic trajectory in ways that reflect the concepts behind the work to argue that: 1) Rzewski's early variation works follow a linear narrative whose sequence of musical transvaluation conveys dynamics of socio-political problems and suggest solutions through collective action; 2) Rzewski's improvisational compositions frustrate the development of expectations in an anti-narrative form paralleling his interest in the discontinuity hidden behind surface perception of reality; and 3) Rzewski's nonlinear narrative Iraq War variation pieces combine continuity and interruption to merge his anti-teleological perspective on life with war.

DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to my parents, David and Sherri, who instilled a love in me for asking questions and thinking for myself through their own example first. I will always treasure the many ideas and insights in so many directions we have shared together and that will continue to influence my perspective, and I look forward to many more fascinating discussions! Their love, understanding, encouragement, trust, and patience have enabled me to pursue music far beyond what I could have even dreamed was possible. The life and future I so love living is because of the incredibly selfless support they have given me.

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I wish to thank Dr. Justin Writer for such an engaging late-night theory class and for putting up with a certain opinionated and overeager student each week. I genuinely respect his persistence and commitment to laying a solid, clear foundation in music theory at all levels for the students at UTPA. I also thank Dr. Virginia Davis for her sincere attention and concern for each one of her students in her classes and her contagious enthusiasm for education research. I also appreciate the constructive help I have received from Dr. Shoko Kinsella, Dr. Andres Amado, Dr. Christopher Munn, Irvin Castillo, and Crystal Rodis during my time at UTPA.

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OVERVIEW

Born in 1938 in Westfield, Massachusetts, Frederic Rzewski first started trying to compose when he was five years old because he "liked the way notes looked on paper."[1] Now, over seventy years later, his compositions run the gamut of almost every modern style, from serialism, neo-romanticism, improvisation prose pieces, experiments with graphic notation, minimalism, electronic music, and more. Behind nearly all his works, however, Rzewski writes with a particular point in mind, composing in such a way that the structure of the work musically reflects a perspective on the idea that inspired it. Whether challenging contemporary examples of human injustice or exploring philosophical questions about the perception of reality, the themes in his music focus on the human condition while their form communicates aspects of that topic to the audience.

This thesis will examine the compositional strategies Rzewski applies to affect his audience's expectations so that the experience of the work parallels the concept within it. Employing musical narrative theory as a way to characterize the process of expectation that can lead to the perception of musical meaning, I will explore how Rzewski's pieces support or reject interpretation through a musical dramatic trajectory in ways that reflect the political or philosophical ideas behind the piece, drawing on Byron Almén's formulation of musical

[1] Rzewski, interview with Vivian Perlis, December 2, 1984. Oral History, American Music Series, Yale University, New Haven, Connecticut. In *Nonsequiturs*, ed. Gisela Gronemeyer and Reinhard Oehlschlägel (Köln, Musiktexte, 2007), 160.

narrative through transvaluation.[2] The three categories of linear narrative, nonlinear narrative, and anti-narrative I propose categorize Rzewski's work based on its ability to suggest and sustain a narrative interpretation; these categories are inspired by Michael Klein's discussion of narrative discourse.[3] Rzewski's political theme-and-variation pieces from the late 1970s and 1980s follow a sequence where the changes in style between episodes combine with other musical processes to suggest a sense of transvaluation cause-and-effect throughout the work that builds towards a central conflict. Rzewski uses this organization, which I will call *linear narrative*, to convey socio-political problems and suggest solutions through collective action, discussed in the first chapter through analyses of "Down by the Riverside" from the *North American Ballads* and *The Housewife's Lament*, which address the anti-war movement and feminism, respectively. In particular, Rzewski's approach to polytonality, one of his main techniques in these works, musically creates a metaphor for social organization. Before proceeding into the analysis, I will discuss the historical context and motivating factors behind Rzewski's turn to tonality and development of polytonality, focusing on his reaction against the structuralist side of the avant-garde and his experience with collective improvisation.

In contrast to the compositional strategies found in his 1970s works, beginning around 1990 Rzewski started to explore an improvisational composition method that intentionally emphasized discontinuity over continuity. Reflecting a unique take on improvisation, Rzewski found that he could study his philosophical interest in the "in betweens" of life, before ideas

[2] See Almén, Byron, *A Theory of Musical Narrative* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008) and the discussion of transvaluation as the motivating process for narrative development in successive chapters.
[3] Klein maps narrative discourse into a semiotic square of narrative, anti-narrative, neo-narrative, and non-narrative in his essay "Musical Story" in *Music and Narrative Since 1900*, ed. Michael L. Klein and Nicholas Reyland (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013), 3-21. I have based my categories only on the perception of cause and effect and the creation of plot, the main focus of my analysis of the processes behind Rzewski's work. This avoids broader issues in musical narrative that Almén, Klein, and others address such as musical agency, the perception of time, and the presence of a narrator. I briefly discuss the relationship between Klein's categories and my own in the introduction of each idea in the following chapters.

solidify into concrete thoughts, by applying the quick decision-making required in an improvisation setting to composition. By observing thoughts as they come without the natural filter that seeks to organize information into a "logical" sequence of events, Rzewski represents the discontinuities in perception, challenging the sense of teleological causality in thought and, by extension, in life. Musically, this creates an *anti-narrative* form that frustrates the development of expectations that could contribute to a sequence of transvaluation. Behind this form, Rzewski often employs complex structures which he fills with spontaneously-generated material to increase variety and spur the creative process while composing the piece. The second chapter will focus on the philosophical concepts behind Rzewski's approach to spontaneity and improvisation and observe these anti-narrative effects at work through an analysis of his set of 24 *Ludes*.

The last chapter will examine a hybrid of these styles found in his works centered on the Iraq War, which represent Rzewski's current approach to variation-based form. By combining sequences of meaningful transvaluation with ambiguous material and interruption, the *nonlinear narrative* form of these pieces reflects the parallels in Rzewski's views on war as an expression of his anti-teleological view of life. These similarities extend to important political, philosophical, and compositional connections between his *Sonata* from 1991, which alludes to the Gulf War, and his Iraq War-inspired *Knight, Death, and Devil* analyzed here. In addition, Rzewski's decision to first model *Knight, Death, and Devil* on his *10 War Songs* sheds light on his compositional process when writing polytonally for a large ensemble.

Through this narrative approach, this author seeks to bring to light some of the constancies running beneath Rzewski's highly varied style, reveal the close connection between his complex philosophy to his music, and draw attention to his lesser-known, post-1970s works.

CHAPTER II

RZEWSKI'S EARLY VARIATION WORKS AND LINEAR NARRATIVE FORM

One of the most striking features of Rzewski's music is its ability to communicate complex political and social ideas. Whether in the cycles of musical struggle and hope echoing the plight of the war-torn Chilean people in *Thirty-Six Variations on The People United Will Never be Defeated!*, or the strange fusion of music with machine alluding to the treatment of textile workers in *Winnsboro Cotton Mill Blues*, Rzewski engages his listeners with experiences that directly evoke the topic at hand. Although Rzewski's political works span a wide variety of compositional approaches, his modern take on theme-and-variations form remains one of the consistent methods he employs to convey a political or social message. Beginning with *The People United* in 1975, Rzewski combines political folk song with contemporary and Romantic-style piano techniques in a series of transformations that develop a perspective on the issue behind the piece through the music. Part of the power behind this strategy lies in its ability to evoke cause-and-effect relationships, which listeners interpret as a process representing a temporal element of the topic of the piece. These musical events form a sequence of transvaluation over the course of the work, creating a linear narrative that embodies the action of the conflict behind the work's political or social issue. By musically enacting the dynamics of the central problem through the work, Rzewski both communicates a particular viewpoint to his audience and suggests solutions through collective action.

In this chapter, I will first discuss the characteristics of linear narrative, and then examine the historical background that motivated Rzewski's shift in compositional style beginning in the late 1960s that gave rise to his approach to polytonality and theme-and-variations form. Then, through an analysis of two of Rzewski's variation works from this era, "Down by the Riverside," from the *North American Ballads*, and *The Housewife's Lament*, I will explore how Rzewski's arrangement of the styles and processes in each variation build a linear narrative that musically reflect the complexities in the topic behind both works.

Linear Narrative

In his 1970s and 1980s variation-based pieces, Rzewski follows a linear narrative approach where the sequence of episodes build up a musical conflict which is often (but not always) resolved by the end of the piece. [1] The contrasts in dynamics, style, rhythmic pacing, register, texture, and other characteristics work together to create a sense of relative weighting (markedness) between variations.[2] As oppositions form in the piece, these elements align into a hierarchy so that a listener interprets a shift between dominant characteristics as a transvaluation of the relative power of one over the other, following the musical narrative process outlined by Byron Almén based on the work of James Jakób Liszka.[3] These changes can either affirm and increase the current state of power, such as an additive build that expands a solo melody into multiple registers, or reverse positions within the hierarchy, like a change from coherent jazz to

[1] This corresponds to Klein's category of narrative and some parts of neo-narrative, where tonality or other musical processes suggest the perception of cause-and-effect into a musical plot or the creation of musical agency. Klein, "Musical Story" 4-5.
[2] Technically, following linguistic conventions, markedness is when a characteristic is not merely different but perceived as negative compared to the norm. Because the same type of relationship holds if the characteristic carries significant positive connotations as well, I will use the term "weighting" to refer to both the negative and positive "markings" of different elements. See Hatten, Robert. *Music and Meaning in Beethoven*. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995).
[3] See Almén, *A Theory of Musical Narrative.*

dissonant clusters. Thus, the listener interprets these shifts as reflecting the interaction between elements, where musical changes take on aspects of reaction or response. This process over time develops the conflict within the piece, which Rzewski constructs to parallel the political or social topic of the work. Typically, this sequence forms a progression to a climax where a final transvaluation determines the outcome of the struggle. Based on the negative, positive, or ambiguous end result, Rzewski imparts his perspective on the current state of the issue to his audience.

Unlike his later pieces, his variation works from this time period follow a path of transvaluation that build a fairly straightforward, goal-oriented dramatic trajectory. This is not to imply that every listener reaches the same interpretation (or imply that they need interpret the piece at all), but instead that the relative weighting behind each section follows standard conventions, and that changes between sections seem related to one another in a way that could be understood as cause-and-effect—unpredictable at times, but not disconnected from the context of the trajectory of the piece. Rzewski's combination of a tonal and post-tonal idiom allowed him to incorporate the familiar set of expectations associated with tonality with modern textural and process-based effects. However, this return to tonality, particularly in conjunction with an explicit political subtext, was a somewhat radical decision in the late 1960s/early 1970s art music scene. The next section will discuss how Rzewski's use of variation form to model social action and his style of polytonal counterpoint grew out of his experiences with collective improvisation and the artistic and political reactions of his time.

Historical Context: Collective Improvisation, Melody, and Folk Song

Beginning in the late 1960s, a number of artists associated with the avant-garde scene began to distance themselves from the apolitical stance of leaders like John Cage and Karlheinz Stockhausen, and instead sought to directly engage with the pressing issues of the time through their music. Between the Civil Rights movement, nuclear arms stockpiling, the space race, peace protests against Vietnam, and undercurrent of Cold War tension between capitalist and communist nations, these shifting ideological perspectives and rapidly changing social norms prompted a fundamental reevaluation of what "progress" in Western society should look like. In this era of heightened political awareness, composers like Rzewski, Luigi Nono, Cornelius Cardew, Christian Wolff, and others felt a sense of urgency for their music to contribute to these movements for social change. As Rzewski himself reflected on looking back at his attitude at the time, "[we were] convinced … that a potentially revolutionary situation existed in the United States, and indeed in the world. A vision existed of a nascent revolutionary culture, both peaceful and beautiful that would replace the old, patriarchal, acquisitive, and warlike one that had dominated the century."[4]

To model the social collaboration required to turn this revolution into reality, Rzewski, Cardew, and others turned to free, collective improvisation that bridged the gap between performer and audience, musician and non-musician. In 1966 in Rome, Rzewski helped found the Musica Elettronica Viva, or MEV, an experimental music group that incorporated live electronics with found objects and audience participation in group improvisation performances. Much like Cardew's Scratch Orchestra, the members of the MEV intended the act of improvising as an artistic political statement representing the ideal functioning of a communistic, non-

[4] Rzewski, writing in reference to the Kent State Shootings in 1970 that cut short an *MEV* tour in the US. Program notes to *Jefferson* (1970), written in 1997. In *Nonsequiturs* 444.

capitalist society.[5, 6] For example, in Rzewski's *Sound Pool* from 1969, a text piece designed to structure an improv session in the MEV, participants share a sound space through listening and supporting fellow musicians in the same way an ideal community would share resources and work towards a common good:

> *"Bring your own sound, and add it to the pool when you feel the moment is right. Don't take anybody else's instrument away from him. … The more people are playing, the less there is for each individual to do. The space belongs to everybody. … If somebody is playing something you don't like, stop what you are doing and listen to him for awhile, then try playing with him….If you are a strong musician, …help weaker players to sound better. Seek out areas where the music is flagging, and organize groups.… Most of the time accompany somebody else, in such a way that will make him want to accompany you.… In this agglomeration of individuals it is not important to be together all the time,… we may be able to achieve our purpose (good music) more efficiently by avoiding such uniformity—by "letting a hundred flowers bloom" … This music is not necessarily pleasant or unpleasant—although certainly it is our responsibility that it not be boring or painful—but it should be truthful. It may tell us something about how we relate to one another."*[7]

The hope was that this act of listening and engaging with others through improvisation would spark a peaceful transformation into a new form of social organization. Conversely, a number of Rzewski's improvisation-based pieces from this time period like *Attica*, *Coming Together*, and *Plan for Spacecraft* recreate the initial disorganization, struggle, and spontaneous recreation of order in movements for Marxist-inspired social change, allowing the performers

[5] For a discussion of the political, social, and artistic motivations behind improvisation in the *MEV* and the Scratch Orchestra, see Griffiths, Paul *Modern Music and After*, 3rd ed. (Oxford: Oxford Universtity Press, 2010), 203-208.
[6] Although Rzewski's political views are strongly to the left, he consistently avoids labeling himself politically. He is often quoted as replying "Harpo or Groucho or what?" when asked about his Marxist views. For example, see his hesitation in being called a "political" composer in LaRose's collection of responses to the question in her dissertation (p. 13-14);. However, he does believes in a collective, rather than capitalistic, money-based organization of society. A recent example of this view is his conclusion to the lecture "Little Bangs," where he advocates for a communistic economy based on barter and trade, but not Communism per se. Matthew Gurewitch, "Maverick with a Message of Solidarity," *New York* Times, April 27, 2008, accessed April 21, 2014. http://www.nytimes.com/2008/04/27/arts/music/27gure.html, LaRose, Andrea, "Politics, Improvisation, and Musicking in Frederic Rzewski's 'Which Side Are You On?' from *North American Ballads*" (DMA diss., City University of New York, 2012), 13-14, Rzewski, "Little Bangs," Lecture from 2000, first published in English in *Current Musicology* 67&68 (2002): 377-86. In *Nonsequiturs* 64-66.
[7] Rzewski, *Sound Pool* (1969), first published in *Dissonanz* 6 (September 1970). In *Nonsequiturs* 324-326.

and listeners to experience this process directly in the music.[8] In her dissertation, Andrea La Rose explores how Rzewski's experiences with the MEV influenced his approach for including improvisation in his notated music from this period so that the structure of the work together with the decisions of the performers communicate the depth of the socio-political ideas behind the piece.[9] Rzewski's later variation pieces like the *North American Ballads* actively reflect this approach in their use of polytonality to model the collective behavior of society. Much like his instructions in *Sound Pool* to "influence the music towards *order* (unity), [by] play[ing] together with … these sounds. …[or to] *disorder* (variety) [by] playing in the *spaces in between* these sounds," each polytonal line's rhythmic and harmonic coordination with others recreates the same phenomenon of social organization through counterpoint.[10] Rzewski transfers this metaphor for collective action to a wide variety of social topics in many of his theme-and-variation pieces from this time period.

Rzewski's turn to tonality and melody in these works grew out of his rejection of the "Darmstadt School" mentality of musical complexity and a need to more directly reach the hearts and minds of, and send a message to, his audience. In a lecture from 1979, the same year he completed the *North American Ballads*, Rzewski describes this shift in his own and others' compositional style directly as a reaction against the current avant-garde. Charging that serialism had changed from "a liberating movement of rebellious young lions, to a position of domination in the bourgeois cultural establishment [i.e., academic institutions]," Rzewski

[8] Asplund, Christian. "Frederic Rzewski and Spontaneous Political Music," *Perspectives of New Music* 33 (1995):418-441, accessed October 10, 2012, http://www.jstor.org/stable/833713.
[9] La Rose "Politics, Improvisation, and Musicking" 30-41. La Rose's thorough analysis of Rzewski's style goes on to tackle the problematic question of the validity of Rzewski's political protest through an avant-garde classical music idiom using "Which Side are You On?" as her main focus.
[10] Rzewski, *Sound Pool.* In *Nonsequiturs* 326.

objected to the assumptions this method held about human perception.[11] Rather than attempting to create a new style of listening, Rzewski suggested instead that composers play with the natural, preexisting tendency of a mind to attempt to organize sound events in terms of melody. Based on an influential comment from Christian Wolff at a performance of Cage's music that "no matter what we do, it always comes out as melody," Rzewski describes how melody, like human faces in visual art, retains its aural identity even when transformed, allowing listeners to hear the structure behind the music in a way they would be unable to through serialism:[12]

> *"A melody, in the most commonly understood sense of the word, is … like an abstraction of the human voice: a real person's voice, free of symbolic connotations, … and behind every voice is a face. This "facial" quality of melodies is responsible, I believe, for their ability to linger in a mind. … Melody would be, therefore, for the art of music what the human form, and especially the human face, would be for the visual arts, [capable of] retain[ing] its identity even when removed from a context [or when] subjected… to a considerable degree of abstraction and distortion."* [13]

When associated with the meaning behind the source tune of a variation, processes created through this compositional technique naturally suggest parallels within the social context of the original song.

He then goes on to reclaim one of the oldest traditions in classical music: the use of folksong. Watching composers "resume experimentation in a field" after the "pioneering work" of "Ives and Bartók," he specifically cites "folk tune and religious song" as two of the most tenacious melodic sources composers could distort that would still be recognizable to a broader public. Since around 1970, Rzewski, Cardew, Wolff, Nono, and others had all begun to

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[11] Rzewski was himself thoroughly trained in serialism as a student at Harvard in the 1950s, and has (and continues) to write music influenced by serial procedures. If the piece has a political message, however, he links the serial process with text or some other reference to make his point clear (as in his serialist-based *Antigone-Legend*). Rzewski, Frederic. "Melody as Face: On the Interpretation of Perceived Phenomena." Lecture from 1979, first published in German in *Karl-Hofer-Symposion 1979*. *Grenzüberschreitungen*, Berlin: Colloquium-Verlag, 1980. In *Nonsequiturs* 130.

[12] Ibid.,132. Also, in the context of folk music (p. 138): "it becomes possible to achieve a peculiar dimension of depth, or distance in a way not possible in, say, formal serial music, which abjures the use of folk- or other non-formalized material."

[13] Ibid., 136-138.

compose pieces based on politically-oriented folk songs that carried a contemporary, socially relevant message by transforming folk elements with modern compositional techniques, such as in Rzewski's style of polytonality.[14]

The influence of politics in popular music also impacted Rzewski's shift in compositional approach. Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, many popular commercial songs on the top charts took on political causes, and some like John Lennon's anti-Vietnam "Give Peace a Chance" became protest anthems symbolic of entire movements. The *nueva canción* movement in Latin America gave a sense of solidarity and a collective voice to the revolutionary spirit behind the political upheavals in the 1960s and 1970s. The American folk music revival reached its peak in the 1960s and often carried political messages, such as the work of Pete Seeger with songs like "If I had a Hammer" (Communism), "We Shall Overcome" (civil rights), and "Where have All the Flowers Gone?" (nuclear disarmament). Although Rzewski had drawn on political songs before, it was not until a pivotal conversation with Seeger that he developed his approach to polytonality. Rzewski, who had always admired Seeger, got the chance to meet him in the early 1970s when he returned to the United States from Rome. Rzewski asked Seeger for advice on starting a songwriters' collective, and Seeger replied that Rzewski should "follow the example of Bach" with melodies that could be sung together with the audience, as in a chorale.[15] A few years later, Rzewski combined Seeger's suggestion with his own ideas about the direction of the avant-garde in art to shape his own new theme-and-variations pieces.[16]

Altogether, these influences created Rzewski's new approach to polytonality and theme-and-variations form found in his *North American Ballads*, the collection including "Down by the

[14] Griffiths, "Modern Music and After," 206.
[15] Rzewski, Program notes to *Ballads*, Nonsequiturs 464.
[16] After first developing the idea of polytonality in the *North American Ballads*, Rzewski has since employed it in all of his variation pieces, although it features more prominently in some works than in others.

Riverside," and in *The Housewife's Lament.* These two pieces address contemporary issues—the anti-war movement, and feminism—in a direct and explicit manner, and seek to engage with an audience in a way that reflects the revolutionary attitude of the times. Compositionally, Rzewski's polytonality puts the emphasis on structure from the 1960s avant-garde to use for a socially relevant context through a process audible to the audience. And, by returning to folk song for inspiration, Rzewski connects struggles of the past to current problems through a musical style actively associated with recent social protest movements. Overall, Rzewski joins these effects in a linear narrative form that evokes the action behind the political and social focus of each work.

"Down by the Riverside"

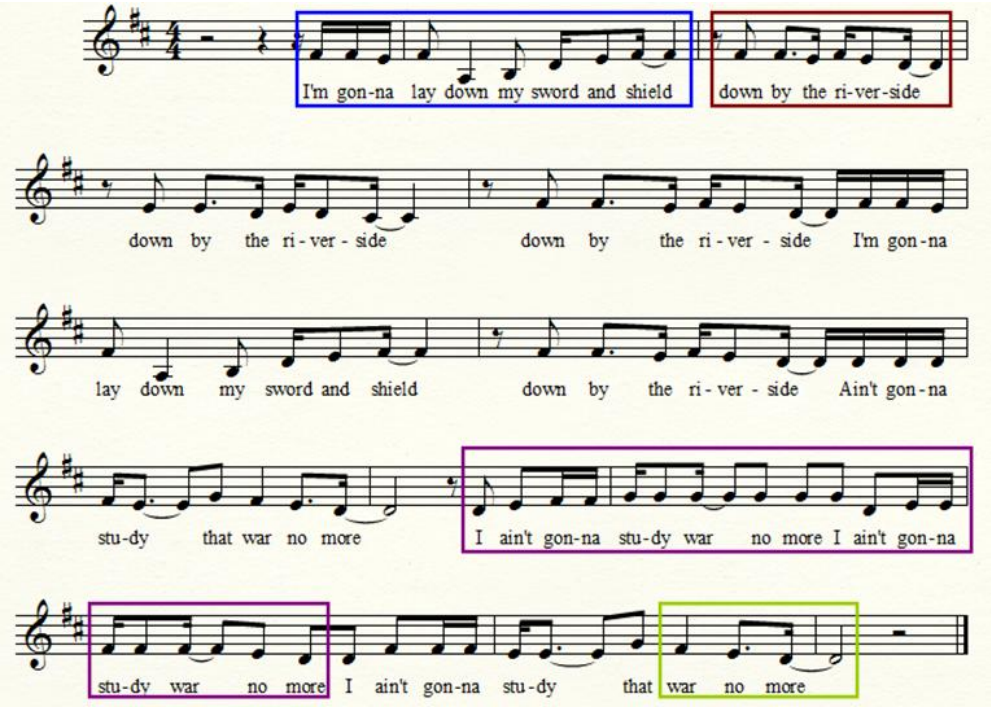
Rzewski's "Down by the Riverside" was originally composed for a festival of political song in East Germany in 1979 which focused on music from Vietnam.[17] Using a well-known American peace anthem from the Vietnam war era as the theme, Rzewski's piece poignantly considers the struggle and attainability of peace in society. The source spiritual dates back to World War I with lyrics that echo hopes of earthly peace behind its descriptions of heaven. Rzewski's version of the song matches the version popularized by Pete Seeger, who promoted this song as a protest piece alongside other anthems like "We Shall Overcome."[18] The words capture the idealism in the 1960s and 1970s running through the anti-war and civil rights movements.

[17] See Sujin Kim's interview with Rzewski in "Understanding Rzewski's North American Ballads: From the Composer to the Work." (DMA Document, Ohio State University, 2010), 112-113.
[18] Rzewski mentions Seeger's take on the song as part of his inspiration and lists the first verse in Seeger's version, "I'm gonna lay down my sword and shield," in his program notes for the work. Rzewski, Frederic. Liner notes. *Rzewski Plays Rzewski: Piano works, 1975 – 1999*. Nonesuch Records, CD, 2002.

Verse: *I'm gonna lay down my sword and shield*
Down by the riverside
Down by the riverside
Down by the riverside
I'm gonna lay down my sword and shield
Down by the riverside
Ain't gonna study that war no more

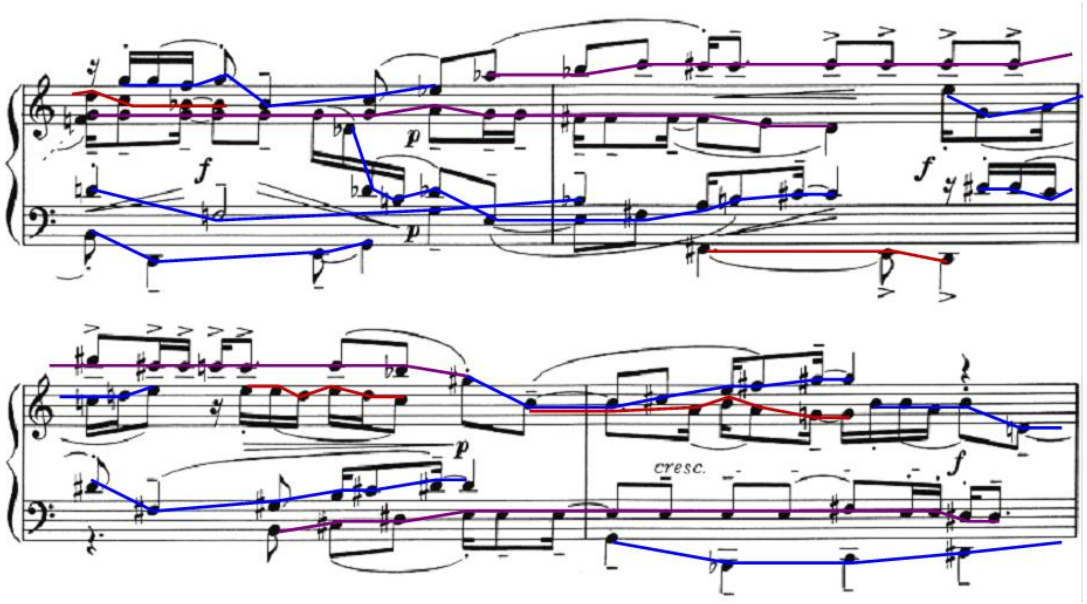
Following Verses (common variants):
I'm gonna lay down my burden…
I'm gonna try on my long white robe…
I'm gonna put on my starry crown…
I'm gonna meet my dear mother…
I'm gonna talk with the Prince of Peace…
I'm gonna shake hands around the world…

Chorus: *I ain't gonna study war no more,*
I ain't gonna study war no more
I ain't gonna study war, war no more.



Example 1: Main Theme and Motives from "Down by the Riverside"

By contrapuntally layering lines of the song in different keys, the polytonal variations of "Down by the Riverside" poetically reflect multiple voices within society discussing the same idea. As this interaction fluctuates between tension and agreement, these sections model the inevitable conflict that accompanies any movement for social change. Each quotation retains the relative pitch and proportionate rhythm of the original tune so that fragments remain discernable throughout the work. All the phrases from the spiritual appear, but Rzewski focuses on three



Example 2: "Down by the Riverside," First Variation (Polytonal), m. 19-22. Reprinted by permission of the publisher. Copyright 1978 by Zen-on Music Co., Ltd. Tokyo Japan.

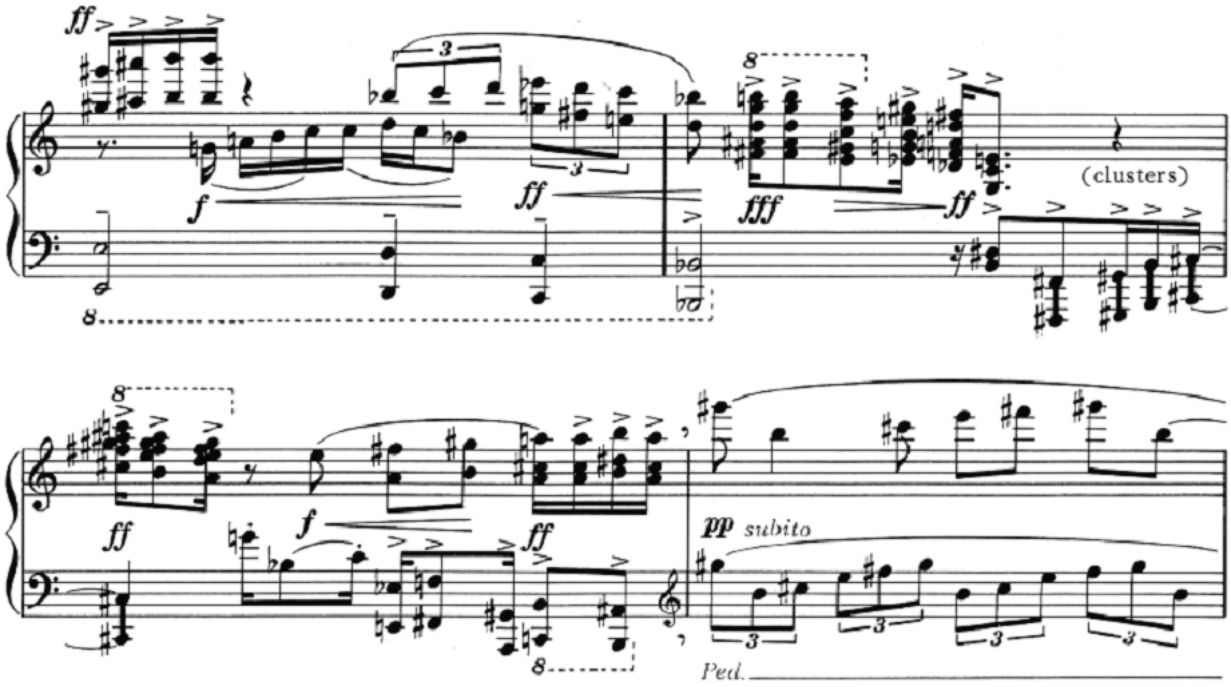
main motives that emphasize the core themes of the text (Example 1). To create a more modern sound, Rzewski places the theme in all keys and often cycles through all twelve pitches every two to three measures, although he does not follow any formal serial technique. Surprisingly, the net result becomes reminiscent of jazz: the free, fantasia-like tone echoes the feeling of an improvisation, and transient harmonies contain seventh and ninth chords or blues modal inflections.

Following a linear narrative strategy, Rzewski structures the work so that each new variation acts out a different stage in society's collective search for peace. As new musical developments in the piece arise, the contrasts between tonality and polytonality and consonance and dissonance actively shape a sense of reaction and response throughout the work. The piece begins with a gentle jazz presentation of the spiritual that musically echoes the hopeful ideals within the song. With a rocking, swing bass below blocked chords in the melody, the left hand metaphorically becomes the flowing river of the title while the right hand's articulation mirrors

the inflection of the lyrics. The melody gradually builds from two voices to five in the final phrase, subtly hinting at the importance of many coming together as one, a theme that returns in the climax.

With a chromatic jazz ♭7 transitioning to the next section, the first variation employs polytonality in a way that echoes a society attempting to reach peace individually (Example 2). Except for the opening transition, the voices in this variation begin rhythmically independent, reinforcing the separateness of each part and creating a musical dialogue that imitates the dynamics of discussion. Tenuto markings and accents bring out specific voices as lines interrupt one another, much like participants in a conversation. The vocal articulation, which carries over from the introduction, keeps present the idea of human speech and the lyrics within the abstract tone of the variation. Alternations between forte to piano mirror the reactions of multiple perspectives against one another, agreeing and disagreeing. In the midst of this complex texture, Rzewski still weaves passing moments of harmony that hint at the ideal carried in the message of the song.

All this interaction comes to a standstill when two lines converge on a unison, finally reaching musical agreement and leading into tranquility of the second variation. Unified in the single key of E-flat major, the music rediscovers the peace obscured in the previous section. The high register of the upper melody evokes heaven while the lower two voices create a flowing, polyrhythmic accompaniment recreating the river-like texture of the opening. Yet, this brief glimpse of hope slips into tragedy with a return of the polytonal texture as two statements of the theme in E-flat and D clash against one another. This conflict swells into a tragic, dissonant outburst before dropping back to pianissimo in a moment of grief.



Example 3: "Down by the Riverside," Third Variation (Polytonal), m. 56-59. Reprinted by permission of the publisher. Copyright 1978 by Zen-on Music Co., Ltd. Tokyo Japan.

Unlike the first polytonal section, the third variation increasingly groups voices in blocked intervals and chords. Starting with major thirds, sixths, and $^{6}_{4}$ chords, the sonorities become progressively more dissonant through diminished octaves and clusters (Example 3). As the voices expand into the upper and lower registers of the piano, the fragments of the melody grow more forceful, imitating the push and pull of protest that builds into a violent struggle. The melody that once represented peace now dramatically portrays war, a tragic and ironic realization Rzewski transforms into the turning point of the piece. Just as fortissimo clusters threaten to overtake the texture, a pianissimo recollection of the tranquil second variation cuts short their angry crescendo. This momentary remembrance shifts the tone in a poignant moment of transvaluation, stopping the fight through a recollection of the original hope of the song. Following an optional improvisation, where the performer is free to add his or her own musical

perspective on the struggle for peace, another quotation of the second variation leads to the triumphant climax of the work.

Returning to the jazz genre of the opening, the fourth variation finally attains musical unity. Using a different approach, Rzewski does not directly quote the tune but instead freely improvises a jazz rag with new upper melody over a walking bass line. These oddly familiar harmonies display their true function upon this section's repeat, when the addition of the theme in the tenor line reveals this variation as a new harmonization of the spiritual. As the variation gradually gains more voices and steadily crescendos from *ppp* to *fff*, it becomes more and more joyful with each voice contributing towards a common goal. The creation of the climax through the act of coming together evokes the achievement of peace in society earned after great effort, fulfilling the hope expressed in the lyrics of the song.

Despite the victory achieved in this climax, Rzewski challenges the attainability of that ideal in the final variation. A harsh augmented chord follows the triumphant close of the previous variation, abruptly transitioning back into polytonality and disintegrating the unified jazz into independent lines. Minor and diminished harmonies answer earlier optimism with irony and disillusionment, musically questioning the sustainability of the peace attained in the climax. The piece closes with the opening line of the song drifting off into the upper register of the piano, ending unresolved and poignantly creating the impression of a dream slipping away. This conclusion adds a layer of realism to the work that reflects Rzewski's attitude in 1976 of healthy skepticism towards American society:

> *"One should be very careful ... about being too optimistic about the ability of the American people to take control over the present chaos in the country. I think the proper*

attitude must be [rather] one of constructive pessimism. Working for a change but at the same time being very realistic about the enormous problems." [19]

The Housewife's Lament

Rzewski wrote "The Housewife's Lament" as a commission for harpsichordist Judith Norell in 1980, a year after completing the *North American Ballads*. The original song, which dates back to the nineteenth century, bemoans the never-ending woes of housecleaning in a half-comedic, half-serious tone. By integrating the folksong with musical styles associated with movements for freedom and social change, Rzewski turns the tune into a call for equal rights for women.

Verse: *One day, as I wandered, I heard a complaining,*
And saw a poor woman, the picture of gloom;
She glared at the mud on the door-step ('twas raining),
And this was her wail as she wielded her broom:

Chorus: "*Life is a toil and love is a trouble,*
Beauty will fade and riches will flee,
Pleasures they dwindle and prices they double,
And nothing is what I could wish it to be.

"There's too much of worriment goes to a bonnet,
There's too much of ironing goes to a shirt;
There's nothing that pays for the time you waste on it,
There's nothing that lasts us but trouble and dirt.

"In March it is muddy, it's slush in December,
The midsummer breezes are loaded with dust,
In fall the leaves litter, in muggy September
The wall paper rots and the candlesticks rust.

"There are worms in the cherries, and slugs in the roses,
And ants in the sugar, and mice in the pies—
The rubbish of spiders no mortal supposes,
And ravaging roaches and damaging flies.

[19] Rzewski, interview with Walter Zimmermann in *Desert Plants: Conversations with 23 American Musicians.* Vancouver: Aesthetic Research Center Publications, 1976. 308. Quoted in Asplund, Christian. "Frederic Rzewski and Spontaneous Political Music," 431.

"It's sweeping at six, and it's dusting at seven;
It's victuals at eight, and it's dishes at nine;
It's plotting and planning from ten to eleven;
We scarce break our fast ere we plan how to dine.

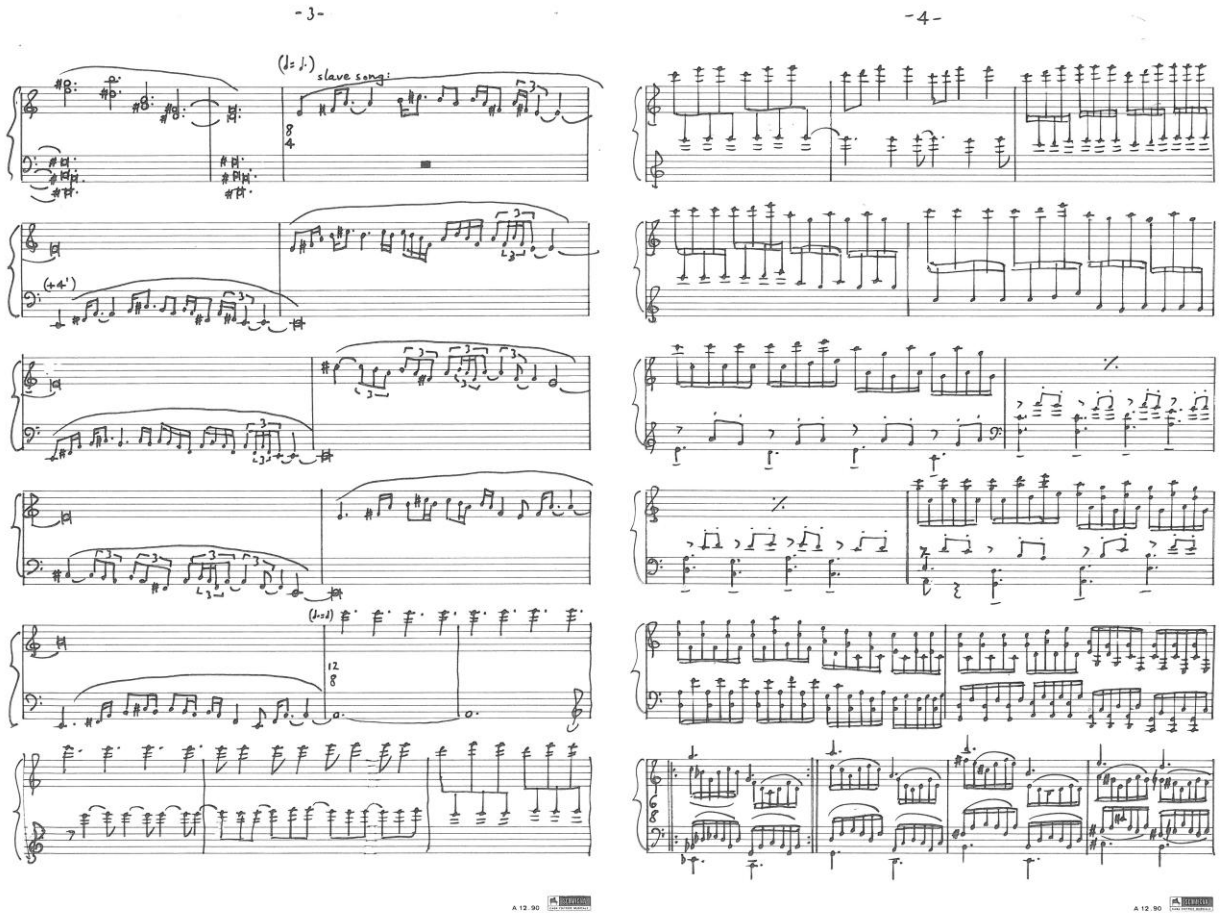
"Last night in my dream I was stationed forever
On a little bare isle in the midst of the sea;
My one chance of life was a ceaseless endeavor
To sweep off the waves ere they swept off poor me.

"Alas! 'twas no dream—again I beheld it!
I yield, I am helpless my fate to avert."
She rolled down her sleeves, her apron she folded,
Then laid down and died, and was buried in dirt. [20]

The two primary compositional strategies in this piece combine the transformations of the theme's genre with a persistent, often intrusive tremolo motif that musically imitates scrubbing and cleaning. This alternating motive progresses from an accompaniment figure, to trills and clusters in the melody, and finally culminates in a cadenza with dust cloth at the end of the work. The conflict between a continuous flow of music and gestural effects that halt forward motion structure the drama of the piece, echoing the progress and setbacks of the women's rights movement.

Harkening back to the origins of the song, Rzewski presents the theme in a sentimental parlor-music style, complete with a simple homophonic texture and harmonies embellished by the occasional seventh or chromatic neighbor. This genre evokes the traditional role of women in the Victorian Era with its implied social limitations. In the first two variations, Rzewski rapidly changes textures every two to four measures, alternating between new rhythmic figurations and polytonal counterpoint. With no musical idea able to firmly take hold, this variation builds a sense of anxiety and frustration consistent with the satirical tone of the text. In the polytonal sections, the melody appears in an abbreviated form with compressed or

[20] Peggy Seeger, a feminist folk singer and activist, recorded this traditional song with additional lyrics on her album *Penelope isn't Waiting Anymore* in 1976, along with the feminist ballad "I'm Gonna be an Engineer."



Example 4: *Housewife's Lament*, Slave Song and Additive Build, m. 47-76. Copyright 1980 by Frederic Rzewski, All Rights Reserved.

augmented rhythms, reducing its original coherence to broken fragments. In the midst of this activity, the intrusive cluster figure appears, first as a trill then as a cluster and tremolo. This motif progressively builds tension throughout the variation, alluding to its future role as a symbol of the continuing obstacles faced by women in the close of the piece.

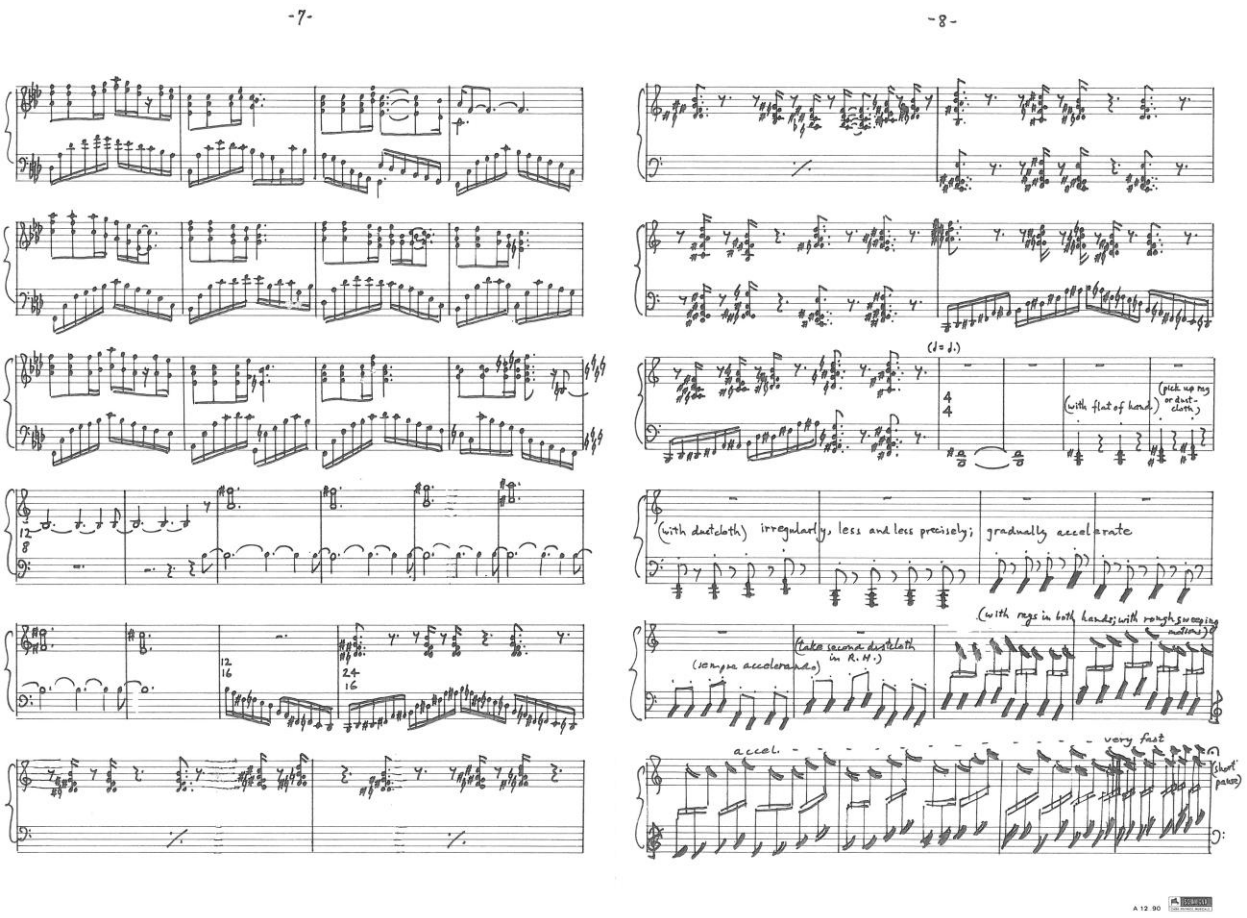
In the following variations, Rzewski composes out the process of changing society through collective effort. In contrast to the disjointedness of the first variation, the entire middle portion of the piece passes smoothly from style to style. The first variation of this section stylizes the original theme into a gospel call-and-response. Marked as a "slave song" in the

score, the back and forth between the right hand solo and the left hand echo serves as a recognition of shared dissatisfaction and a call to action (Example 4). Following through with this call, the ensuing variation begins with a single, repeated high E that becomes the first pitch of an additive process of thematic transformation. New lines enter below with their own rhythms and pitches until the texture fills full chords in both hands.[21] The tremolo, no longer an aggressive gesture, is transvalued to function melodically and harmonically. Through this build, Rzewski transforms the theme into a hopeful manifestation of constructive social progress.

However, this unity is only temporary. The first half of the next section sequences upwards in warm seventh chords before returning to a more literal statement of the theme. But, minor elements begin to tinge the optimistic energy of the major build and the section concludes in a more serious minor tone. This less-than-ideal result transitions into a distorted polytonal variation, which breaks apart the preceding homophony into independent lines. As in "Down by the Riverside," the polytonal disintegration of the coherence built up in the previous three variations mirrors social resistance to change.

In response, the next variation replaces polytonality with Bach-like counterpoint. In contrast to the prior dissonance, each voice contributes to the harmony as the section expands to four-part polyphony. After reaching into the upper and lower registers of the keyboard, a pause at the end of the last phrase leads into a Latin folk variation. Reharmonized into minor, the *leggero* arpeggiated chords in the accompaniment imitate the plucking of a guitar beneath the new traditional Latin rhythm of the melody. With this style, Rzewski alludes to the *nueva canción* movement that swept through the Spanish-speaking world in the 1960s and 70s. This genre, which combines traditional music with leftist political messages, Rzewski previously

[21] Although marked in the same register as the initial E in the score, Rzewski plays the second voice up the octave in both recordings of the piece in the CD set *Rzewski Plays Rzewski* and on the IMSLP website, accessed October 24, 2013, http://imslp.org/wiki/Ballade_ No.6_(Rzewski,_Frederic).



Example 5: *Housewife's Lament*, Latin, Jazz, and Dust Cloth Variations, m. 120-164. Copyright 1980 by Frederic Rzewski, All Rights Reserved.

explored in the main theme of *The People United will Never be Defeated!*. In the *Housewife's Lament*, it introduces hints of revolution and a fight for the oppressed, linking feminism to other global efforts for social transformation.

An off-key B-natural suddenly intrudes into the final cadence of the Latin variation and immobilizes the music (Example 5). Lingering as a single note for two measures, the opening of the original song returns outlined in slow, low clusters. Recalling previous hardships, this pause threatens to stop the music altogether, but a surprise jazz boogie bass line enters in the left hand, reversing the potentially negative outcome with spontaneous new energy. Previously unpitched clusters transform into thickly chromaticized jazz ninth chords, subverting the oppressive cluster

with a new style. As the variation progresses, the running motion of the bass line becomes momentarily caught in the chords of the melody, halting the motion with forceful sonorities that sound more like a mass of pitches than stylized harmony. Although breaking free the first time, the second time stops the motion and cuts the phrase short with a re-emergence of the avoided bass clusters.

In the last section, Rzewski goes beyond the music to directly communicate the message of the piece through the physical actions of the performer. He has a reputation for integrating a theatrical element in his works, unafraid to compose for props on stage, spoken words over music, vocal effects like grunts or whistling, or even bodily motions or noises. Here, the left hand begins with the first line of the melody in low clusters and then plays with a dust cloth midway through. Steadily accelerating, the right hand joins in, first with the hand and then with another rag. By the end of this section, the melody becomes more and more indistinct behind rapid and less precise sweeping motions until the section explodes into a cadenza of "free dusting," both on and off the keys. [22] Like the satire of the original folksong, this climax becomes "somewhat comical, but not exaggeratedly so" (Rzewski's notes in the score), as the performer embodies for a moment the daily burden of expectations the women's rights movement fought to change over the past century.[23] Falling back to a single trill on the highest notes of the keyboard, the melody returns for one final repeat, ending the piece on a lingering question mark. Thus, the conclusion leaves the audience considering that, while progress has been made, there is still work to be done to fully realize the ideal of equality between genders.

[22] Rzewski has performed it both ways; the CD recording is on the keys but the live recording on IMSLP is on the body and strings of the piano. See *Rzewski plays Rzewski*, and Ballad No. 6 on IMSLP website.
[23] Rzewski, *Housewife's Lament,* 9. IMSLP website, accessed October 24, 2013, http://imslp.org/wiki/Ballade_ No.6_(Rzewski,_Frederic)

Conclusion

As seen in "Down by the Riverside" and *The Housewife's Lament*, Rzewski thoughtfully constructs both the sequence of episodes and the processes within them in his theme-and-variation works to convey a socio-political message through his music. This linear narrative strategy enables the music to directly parallel the conflict and the ensuing struggle for positive social change behind the topic of each work. Rzewski applies this same approach to other works from this period, such as the progression from polytonal disorder to triumphant, polytonal, organized unity in the labor union-inspired "Which Side are You On?", or the war within a community faced by striking workers' families that musically swallows the staccato children's play motif in "Dreadful Memories." Rzewski's skill composing in this style forms an important background as he begins to deviate from it in his later approach to piano music and theme-and-variations form.

CHAPTER III

IMPROVISATIONAL COMPOSITION AND ANTI-NARRATIVE FORM

> *"There is no reason why music should be logical. In fact, there are good reasons why it should not be logical.... In order to qualify as music (rather than noise ...), it must continually vacillate between the predictable and the unpredictable, the expected and the unexpected, hovering in a midair compromise between gravity and grace. In the impossible dialogue between rational and irrational, music escapes from the limitations of both, occasionally attaining (potentially at least) a momentary sense of reality, or truth."* – Frederic Rzewski[1]

Development of and Philosophical Concepts Behind Improvisational Composition

The concept of spontaneity holds a special role in Rzewski's philosophy and approach towards music. Appearing in his collective improvisation works, cadenza elaborations, or structured spontaneous composition, Rzewski's exploration of spontaneous musical process remains one of the consistent elements of his compositional style since the 1960s. Following a growing interest in indeterminate music by the John Cage-influenced wing of the avant-garde, many composers in the mid-twentieth century began incorporating aleatoric techniques that reduced the role of the composer and increased the influence of the performer in the final outcome of a work. Many of Rzewski's collective improvisation works developed for the *MEV* and afterwards follow the social impetus of the *Fluxus* movement, using the spontaneous coordination (or lack thereof) of members to model the hoped-for transformation of capitalist society. Even as late as 2000, Rzewski expresses his belief that,

[1] Rzewski, "Nonsequiturs" lecture (2006). In *Nonsequiturs* 26.

> *"If there ultimately is some kind of peaceful transition to more generous forms of social organization, music, and specifically improvised music, will play an important role in this process, as it has done in the past. Great social movements do not have clearly definable causes. Although not totally free of causality, they nevertheless happen spontaneously. No individual can foresee them completely. This is precisely what improvisation is about."*[2]

These ideas parallel the structure and goals of his other politically-oriented works from the 1960s and 1970s.[3] However, a key part of Rzewski's interest in spontaneity lies in its philosophical implications. For Rzewski, the immediate decision-making required during improvisation, whether in performance or with a pen, unlocks the door for exploring the subconscious. Rather than emphasizing the final result, he focuses on the transition from initial motivating thought into action, which draws out some of the fundamental processes behind creativity, logic, and the perception of causality. Rzewski often uses his music in this style to challenge conventional assumptions about teleology in life, arguing that the sense of purpose commonly attributed to life is the result of the human mind attempting to order arbitrary sequences of events. This interest in the "in-between" can be seen even in his days with the *MEV*, where it expressed an important element to Rzewski's views on the nature of reality. In a 1967 letter to Alvin Curran, a fellow member of the *MEV*, Rzewski describes it as a reaction against the tendency of western art to seek out non-temporal "states" of being rather than the action of experience:

> *"I would call all such [a]esthetic experiences forms of "states of being": life which has time … for the individual consciousness to look at itself, outside of itself, interpret itself, and say something about its present condition: … but what about the between, the infinitesimal durations of transition from state to state? … That in between is what I am interested in. It seems to me that this is the province of life that art has not yet discovered… could it be that our whole perception of time is distorted by the way our minds pick up the images and hang onto them, beating the moments of darkness down:*

[2] Rzewski, "Little Bangs" (2000). In Nonsequiturs 66.
[3] In addition to La Rose and Asplund, see Michael Zuraw's discussion of *Les Moutons le Panurge* and *No Place to Go but Around* in "From Ideology into Sound: Frederic Rzewski's North American Ballads and Other Piano Music from the 1970s" (DMA diss., Rice University, 2003).

> *and could the darkness actually occupy the major part of our lives? I would like to suggest that music, and music maybe more than any other form of spiritual activity, can discover and explore an unknown level of life and reveal its true meaning, just because it is BEFORE all meaning, all rationalization, all reflection, it is what is happening to you right now, one millionth of a second before you have had a chance to register, interpret, and catalogue that blackness into volume zero of the spirit-library under the heading "NOW." "* [emphasis original][4]

Rzewski then goes on to describe what an ideal musical realization of these ideas through free, collective improvisation would look like that would encourage participants to discover a musical kinship with one another through give-and-take musical actions. Text-based works like *Sound Pool* and *Zuppa* carry through with these ideas, although Rzewski's interest in the underlying mental process behind improvisation in the 1970s occurs more during the act of improvising itself rather than a goal stated in the piece.

Although these undercurrents continue to run behind Rzewski's work during the next two decades, around 1990 he shifted his focus to experimenting with improvisational composition. Referencing a Stravinsky quote of "improvising with a pen," Rzewski began exploring ways to capture the spontaneous decision-making process of musical improvisation on paper.[5] The first piece Rzewski describes as using this strategy was *Whangdoodles* in 1990, in which the title refers to "a musical structure that is whanged, or thrown, down on paper with deliberate, uninterrupted speed … [so that the] normally watchful [mental] censor is momentarily distracted while the writer dodges through the window thereby opened."[6] Descriptions of spontaneous-style writing appear in a number of pieces written since then, including *Bumps* (1990), *Ludes* (1990-

[4] Rzewski, Letter to Alvin Curran, July 1, 1967. In *Nonsequiturs* 338-340.
[5] Rzewski, Program notes to *Whimwhams* (1993), written in 2005. In *Nonsequiturs* 526.
[6] The name "whangdoodle" is taken from the lyrics of the blues song "The Big Rock Candy Mountains" that Rzewski uses as one source tune in the song; the other is a Yiddish tune "Yidl mit'n Fidl". Although all the music in the piece is notated, Rzewski organizes the piece by long phrases (a "whangdoodle") rather than measures so that coordination between instruments is determined by listening between players, imitating the collective improvisation experience. Rzewski intentionally combined western and eastern influences so that the light-hearted feel of the piece would reflect a social hope for unity and peace. Rzewski, Program notes to *Whangdoodles* (1990), written in 1990. In *Nonsequiturs* 508.

1991), *Whimwhams* (1993), *Night Crossing with Fisherman* (1994), *Fougues* (1994), *Trio* (1998), *Stop the War!* (2003), the massive collection *The Road* (1995 – 2003), and others.

Rather than composing in an arbitrary or thoughtless manner, this concept for Rzewski means following creative possibilities as they come. By not judging one idea as more valuable than another, the outcome is no longer limited by the natural mental filter that seeks to order ideas according to its own logic. Instead, the result reflects a more accurate view of the actual thought process behind creativity and perception of reality. In a 1994 lecture entitled "Inner Voices: In Search of a more Spontaneous Form of Writing," Rzewski describes this process:

> *"What are these inner voices [of thought]? To what extent can I express them, translating them into symbolic language? How, when, and why do I suppress them? What governs my choice of what I listen to in my soul?…*
>
> *"There are resemblances between the disorder of my mind and that of the outer world. The rhythm is similar: for a while following one path, then jumping to another, which may or may not have some relation to the first. …I need some kind of rational structure [within the music] upon which to hang my thoughts as they appear; but it must be ready to collapse at any moment, giving way to a new one. In this way I may be able to express truthfully the chaos which I perceive everywhere, both within and without. …*
>
> *"In the game going on inside my head I …try to observe what is happening, and to describe it truthfully. …One object of the game is to get behind the everyday meaning of things, so that I can perceive them from a different perspective …I choose patterns, ranging from totally predictable to apparently random sequences. The transitions may be logical or illogical. I let them happen as they happen. …Rather than imposing an abstract rhetorical model upon my thoughts, I try to observe their uninhibited rhythm, and to reproduce this rhythm in some way. I let myself be distracted. …What interests me it not how ideas should develop, but how they actually do develop. In this way I hope to paint a truthful, if disorderly picture of what my mind actually perceives."*[7]

Instead of simply following free association when composing in this manner, Rzewski imposes some form or guiding idea in these pieces to structure the nature, length, and number of each section. Often pieces follow a grid-like division of time that organizes sound in numerical proportions, such as the fractal-like eleven parts of eleven eleven-beat sections in *Whimwhams*

[7] Rzewski, "Inner Voices." Lecture from 1994. In *Nonsequiturs* 72-76; this lecture was also published in *Perspectives of New Music* 33 (1995): 404-417.

or five groups of approximately ten sixteen-second periods in *Bumps*.[8] Rzewski had also explored a similar grid technique in the improvisation guideline *Second Structure* for the *MEV* which formed the basis for his thirty-six variations in *The People United.*[9] This type of organization alludes to both his background with formalist composition techniques and the proportional approach to time found in some of John Cage's works.[10] Other compositions include unifying elements between sections, like the circle-of-fifths progression in the background of *Fougues* or the recurring rhythmic motive in *Stop the War!*. Overall, however, these pieces push the form away from the linear narrative, overarching climactic trajectory exemplified in his earlier variation works towards fragmentation. Combinations of smaller, disjointed units in these pieces match a similar trend in his other works following 1990, when he began to distance himself from long-term teleological forms in favor of sequences of local effects which may or may not build to a peak point.

Following his own advice to compose music "more like life in its structure," for Rzewski this form carries important philosophical implications.[11] A recurring theme in his approach in these pieces is that musical events do not need to act in support of an externally-imposed framework that guides the order musical events should follow. Whether in the nineteenth century exploration of dramatic possibilities in the symphony or the mathematical structures behind the compositions of Babbitt and Xenakis, much of western art music has been composed

[8] Rzewski, Program notes to *Whimwhams*. In *Nonsequiturs* 526; Program notes to *Bumps* (1990). In *Nonsequiturs* 512

[9] "Second Structure" divides six time-based sections into six smaller divisions based on the five senses and four dimensions plus recapitulation. See the interview with composer in Southard, Keane, "The Use of Variation Form in Frederic Rzewski's The People United Will Never Be Defeated!" (Sen. thesis, Baldwin Wallace College, 2009) 163, accessed April 15, 2014, http://www.scribd.com/doc/39793944/The-Use-of-Variation-Form-in-Frederic-Rzewski-s-the-People-United-Will-Never-Be-Defeated.

[10] Although Rzewski was close friends with Christian Wolff and knew John Cage, he was never part of Cage's inner circle. However, Rzewski often describes David Tudor, the pianist who worked closely with John Cage in premiering his works, as one of the most influential pianists in the development of his own style of playing. See the interview with Vivian Perlis, December 2, 1984. Oral History, American Music Series, Yale University, New Haven, Connecticut. In *Nonsequiturs* 168.

[11] Rzewski, "Inner Voices." In *Nonsequiturs* 92.

with the conscious sense that it should be justifiable along some inner form of logic. The specific form of that logic varies widely, guided by the aesthetic principles, expressive considerations, and other relevant structural aspects within a piece, but generally this view prioritizes approaches that drive towards unity. Epitomized by the theoretical reception of Beethoven, a work appears artistically stronger if each part coherently connects to the whole. Rzewski directly challenges this quest for internal consistency, charging that it does not authentically present the true disunified nature of reality. From Rzewski's postmodern viewpoint, this perspective limits its potential to accurately reflect real life by removing the disjointed events that fill the majority of daily experience. By composing in an improvisational style that refuses to edit out naturally occurring inconsistencies, he rejects the tendency in western art music to emphasize a cleaned-up version of human thought in favor of a method which brings those non sequiturs to the forefront.

Rzewski explains his views on improvisation, which includes improvisational composition, in a lecture from 2000 entitled "Little Bangs: Towards a Nihilist Theory of Improvisation." The title is a pun on the Big Bang, which he uses as an analogy for the expanding universe of associations and possibilities that form from "little bangs" of thought. In his description, he links the spontaneous, non-logical development in improvisation to the nonlinear nature of life:

> *"In free improvisation this autonomy of the moment, in which things happen for no reason at all and lead nowhere, is fundamental. There is no reason why my thoughts should follow a logical order. They may be constantly interrupted, forgotten as soon as they occur, and lead to nothing. ... In this way improvisation resembles real life in the real world, unlike most written music, in which the interruptions of real life have been edited out."* [12]

[12] Rzewski, "Little Bangs." In *Nonsequiturs* 58.

He goes on to describe how this type of music highlights the mental inclination to interpret musical information within a cause-effect framework to provide a sense of order, regardless whether that framework applies in the situation:

> *"In an improvisation an event happens, for no reason: it just happens. It seems therefore unrelated to what happened before. The irrelevant event is like a question: "What?" – that triggers a response from the improviser. The reply—"This!" – is a second event, perhaps equally irrelevant, or perhaps, on the contrary, flowing logically from the first. The question-answer form has the function of removing the first event from its disturbing arbitrary isolation, and replacing it in the reassuring chain of causality with which we are pleased to govern our perceptions."*[13]

Although listeners can find connections from moment to moment and even long-term references across Rzewski's spontaneous-inspired compositions, these pieces resist the development of a consistent framework of expectation. By frustrating the normal thought process for listening to music, these pieces bring a heightened awareness of the standard assumptions behind art music. Rzewski challenges these assumptions with the intent of revealing parallels between an incongruous musical experience and the nonlinear flow of events in human experience:

> *"Because improvisation resembles real life, it can illuminate this real life. It can make us aware that the surface of rationality that covers this reality may be only an illusion. That reality that seems to flow smoothly along familiar lines, behaving predictably in accordance with familiar causal patterns, may be only a small part (the part which I choose to perceive) of a greater reality in which most things happen without cause. ... Most of my experience does not happen for a reason. It just happens. Only a few things happen in an orderly, rational sequence. But these are the things that occupy most of my attention, because they are the things I can control. ... Music can expand our awareness of the irrational, dark side of reality."* [14]

While this description of improvisational composition might give the impression that this music is incoherent, the final result, which contains genuine moments of order as well as unpredictability, closely matches the mathematical definition of randomness. Human perception

[13] Ibid., 60.
[14] Ibid., 62-64

considers short patterns to be less likely than unrelated sequences, but in an authentically random system both are equally probable.[15] Rzewski's pieces mimic this process by creating moments of patterns and connection between stretches of disconnected material. By presenting listeners with sequences that lead only to arbitrary outcomes, Rzewski challenges the inclination to interpret order as implying a logical process towards a goal. This idea is consistent with secular humanist and nihilistic arguments against the broader perception of purpose in the world.

Overall, his compositions in this style highlight interruptions rather than continuity, foregrounding the mental process that seeks to fit ideas into an orderly process by denying its fulfillment. In this view, mentally exploring possibilities is more important than finding actual relationships. For this approach to be successful, however, there must be clear aural characteristics within the music capable of prompting possible connections as the piece progresses. Rzewski develops these elements through recurring motives, gestures, textures, harmonic or rhythmic sequences, genres, and styles in these works. He typically picks some central theme or set of themes, which may be spontaneously generated, to guide the direction of the piece. In addition, in this spontaneous method of composition, returning to an old idea is equally as valid a possibility as following a new direction. Many of these pieces include a significant moment of recapitulation, and repeated material, even if appearing at unpredictable moments, create important mental reference points throughout each piece. While musical ideas are often brief and layered against one another, Rzewski's detailed articulation and phrase

[15] An everyday example of the problem of random perception would be patterns in licence plates. The odds are equally as great for three letters in a row (e.g., DDD) as they are for any other arbitrary set of letters (e.g., BQP or CXL). Our human minds find the first combination more striking because we recognize a sequence that could potentially carry meaning according to our own language, so we consider the first pattern more unusual or rare than the second. However, in the random process of generating license plates all combinations of letters are equally probable, which makes both sets equally "special" (or non-special, depending on your perspective).

markings group units together into clear gestures. The net result of this process contrasts moments of coherence with sequences of unrelated material.

Nonlinear Narrative

What Rzewski creates in this approach is an anti-narrative form: he provides enough musical information to create some local expectations or connections between sections, but those implications are intentionally not developed over the course of the whole piece.[16] Despite forming coherent motives, referencing specific genres, or creating recognizable textures, none of these elements become weighted (marked) into a hierarchal relationship with one another such that transvaluation could occur. In the same way that Rzewski's approach to spontaneous composition effectively treats all ideas as having equal merit, the listeners of his pieces are faced with a similar inability to gauge the value of one musical element compared to another. For example, when one musical idea abruptly transitions into another one, Rzewski often composes it in such a way that the changes in topics appear unrelated to one another by avoiding a sense of dominance or closure in either section. Although interrupting the flow of the previous unit, this rarely creates a sense of intrusion of one element *against* another as it would in more continuous styles, which would imply a change in relationship hierarchy between the two elements. Similarly, references to genres like blues or serialism occur but the associations from these genres generally do not have any impact on the direction of the piece beyond their appearance. Thus, they are prevented from forming a dialectic that could imply a relative hierarchical position between sections of different styles despite containing associations that could be used to

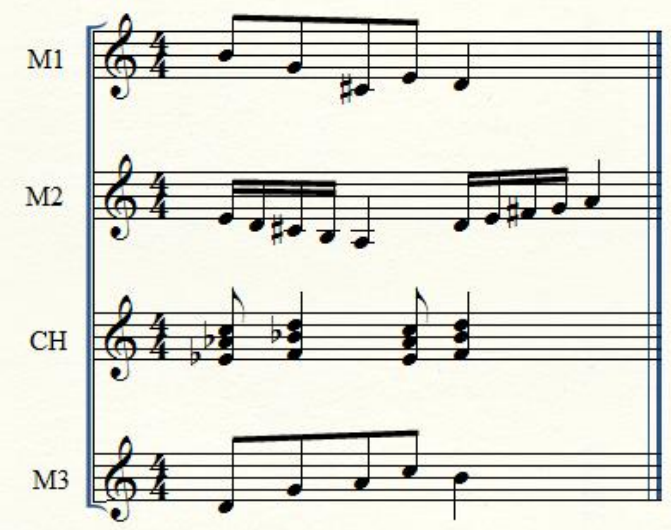
[16] Following Klein's use of the same term, taken from Pasler, Jan, "Narrative and Narrativity in Music," *Time and Mind: Interdisciplinary Issues*, ed. J. T. Fraser, (Madison: International University Press, 1989), 233-57. In "Musical Story," 6. His other category, non-narrative, corresponds to music that evokes neither a potentially weighted process nor musical style.

that end. The frequently short musical divisions within sections creates a fragmented form that resists continuous, long-term development typical of pieces following a narrative trajectory. Together, Rzewski's anti-narrative strategies successfully obstruct any interpretation based on cause-and-effect, the core assumption he seeks to challenge about human perception of reality.

The net result of this approach is a new mode of listening. The emphasis shifts away from traditional expectation fulfillment and instead focuses on effects like surprise and newness. As the initial assumption that events should flow along a rational framework dissolves, sections or musical ideas are free to be appreciated for their own unique effects rather than in terms of their contribution to a greater whole. This stance is similar to the experimentalism of John Cage, which values all sounds independent of how they fit (or don't fit) within the typical expectations for music.[17] However, Cage's goal was to shift the listener's focus outwards towards the environment, whereas Rzewski's is to heighten an awareness of the subconscious workings of the mind.[18] Rzewski's choice is motivated by a desire to explore the influence of thought on the perception of continuity and causality in life, not to censure the human psyche for its logical inconsistencies. Like his emphasis on interaction between people in collective improvisation, or his interest in the instinctive recognition of melody by the ear, Rzewski's responses to contemporary artistic issues consistently engage with the human element in music. Revealed in a different light by his choice to nearly always base pieces around extramusical political or

[17] The classic example of this is Cage's *4'33"* silent piece, where the ambient sound of the performance space becomes the music.

[18] Compare Douglas Kahn's analysis of *4'33"* with Rzewski's approach in the lecture "Inner Voices" discussed above, which views improvisation as a means to open the door to the "inner voices" of thought floating beneath the conscious level mediated by language or concepts. Kahn, Douglas. "John Cage: Silence and Silencing," *The Musical Quarterly* 81 (1997): 556-598, accessed March 2, 2014, http://www.jstor.org/stable/742286.



Example 6: *Ludes* Motives.

philosophical topics rather than compose absolute music, this focus on humanity is the one of the core unifying factors in his widely varied style.

Through his use of anti-narrative strategies, Rzewski's improvisational composition pieces all share the common trait of thwarting the perception of cause-and-effect. To explore how these ideas manifest in his music, I will examine his collection of *Ludes*, written in 1990 and 1991. These short pieces provide a sample of the variety of effects created in Rzewski's application of his approach and the way the musical results communicate his philosophical perspectives.

Ludes

Named after a pun on the word "prelude," Rzewski modeled his set of twenty-four "ludes" after the famous collections of Bach's *Well-Tempered Clavier* and Chopin's Opus 28. Intended to be "short, gamelike pieces for piano," Rzewski composed this set of playful, self-contained miniatures so that the form of each piece (none lasts more than two minutes) increases

variety through frequent changes and keeps any local development of ideas brief.[19] Stream-of-consciousness pastiches of short phrases in different styles alternate with pieces where a single texture dominates. Behind the surface, Rzewski incorporates several key motives throughout the work, basing the main motive M1, found in every 'Lude, on the first five notes of the piece (Example 6). Rzewski designed his compositional approach in Ludes to reflect improvisation and spontaneity:

> *"Although each piece is complete in itself, it is strung to the next like a bead on a chain. Within each piece, the sequence of events is similarly arbitrary. The flow of (apparently) relevant information is frequently interrupted by things which (apparently) have no relation to those that precede them. At the same time, there are themes which recur with reassuring regularity … In a sense, theme pieces are meant to be "written out improvisations;" but I think they can be understood as attempts not merely to encode in writing the things one does in an improvising situation, but also to apply the techniques of improvising to writing itself."*[20]

His program notes go on to explain the artistic and philosophical motivations behind his approach:

> *"After the experiments of serialism, improvisation, chance and trance music, all of which reflect, although in different ways, a newly-awakened consciousness of an inner universe, it has now become possible to explore this universe with greater freedom, throwing away the clumsy tools necessary for opening it up. Although much of this new music seems paradoxically to suggest a reversion to earlier rhetorical models, it in fact juxtaposes these models in a comprehensive negation of the rhetorical logic on which earlier forms of music were based. It is now possible to accept that in music things happen for no reason at all. The precariousness of this form of discourse corresponds well to the confusion of the present moment."* [21]

In Rzewski's view, the historical approach to composition reaffirmed the perception of progressive, logical sequence of order in the world, but experiments to remove the imposing ego of the composer on the music have begun to reveal the authentic, non-sequential process behind human thought and perception of reality. Rzewski's goal is to compose music where the

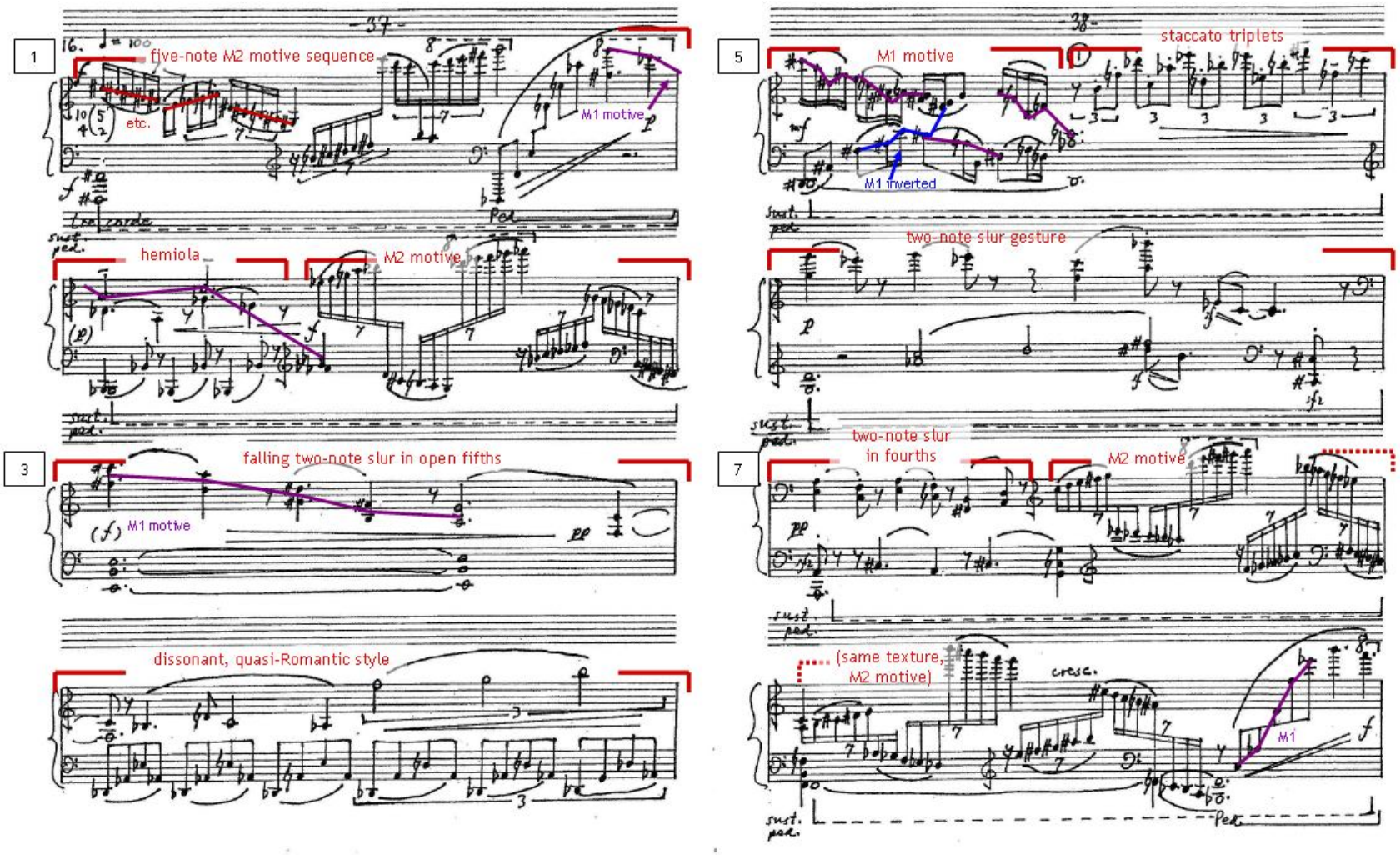
[19] Program notes to *Ludes* (1990-1991), written in 1991. In *Nonsequiturs* 512.
[20] Ibid., 512.
[21] Ibid., 512.

allusions and associations behind musical gestures remain discernable—the "rhetorical logic" behind systems like tonal harmony—but that denies the use of those gestures towards the historical ideal of a unified work of art, which in its self-consistency cannot convey the fractured nature of reality. This postmodern aesthetic runs behind *Ludes* and Rzewski's other improvisational composition works, resulting in an anti-narrative musical trajectory that avoids any teleological implications.

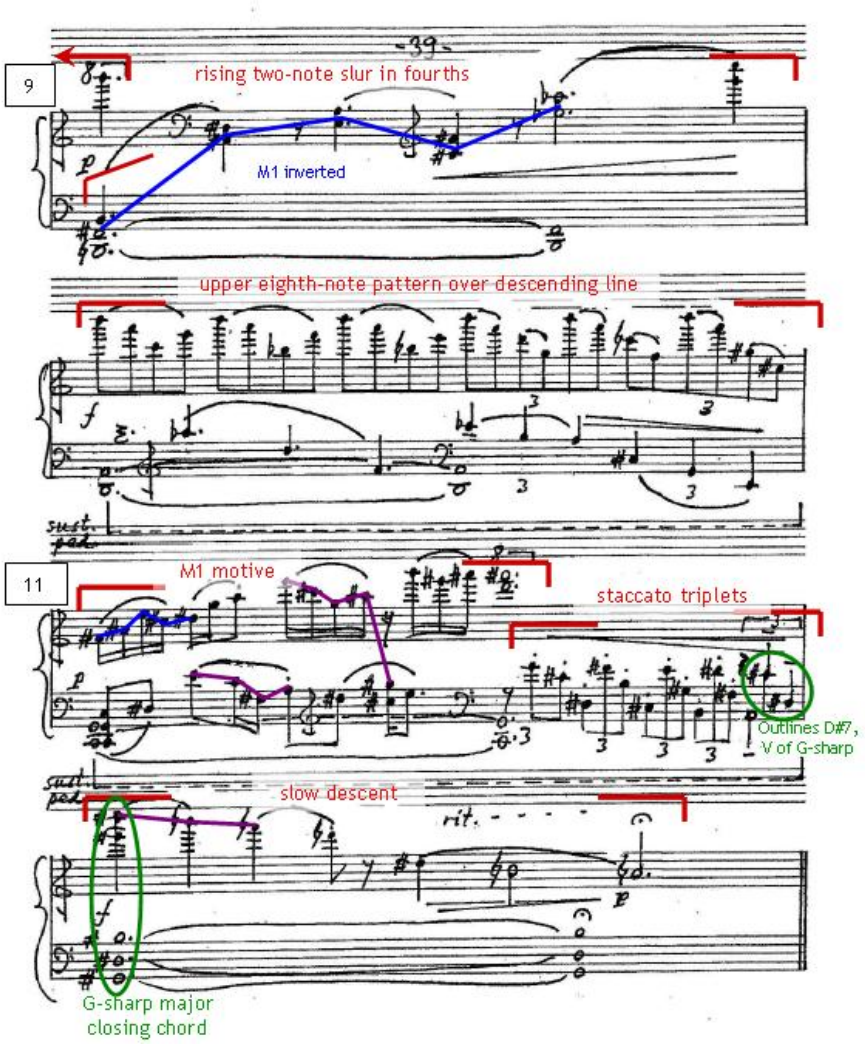
Dodging more complex theoretical issues behind this term for the sake of my simpler argument, a gesture is a unit of musical information that carries expressive content, regardless of size.[22] That expressive content then creates associations, which in turn initiate forming expectations. The power of even very short fragments of musical phrases to convey information allows Rzewski to play on conventional associations without needing to establish a musical context for each idea. Hints of antecedent or consequent-like phrases (only sometimes paired together), syntactic units like two-note slurs, dramatic musical implications from sudden changes in dynamics, and other techniques are all gestures Rzewski employs in *Ludes* to prompt a listener's imagination.

A close reading of Lude #16 gives an example of how these effects play out in an actual piece (Example 7). This Lude opens with a running sequence of M2 motives, altered into Lydian, minor, and major versions in a wave-like contour that blurs any sense of a tonal center (m. 1). Rzewski brings this motion to rest with a typical expansive closing gesture: an arpeggio-like sweep through the lowest to highest register of the piano decrescendos from *f* to *p* as it slows the rhythm to a pause. While the end of this phrase leads the ear to anticipate another event, the

[22] For a stronger definition, see Robert Hatten in *Interpreting Musical Gestures, Topics, and Tropes* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004), 109: a "*communicative* (whether intended or not), *expressive, energetic shaping through time* (including characteristic features of *musicality* such as *beat, rhythm, timing of exchanges, contour, intensity*), regardless of medium (channel) or sensory-motor source (*intermodal* or *cross-modal* [i.e., shared or exchanged across senses])." [emphasis original]



Example 7: *Ludes* No. 16, Motives, Textures, and Styles. Copyright 1991 by Frederic Rzewski, All Rights Reserved.



Example 7: Ludes No. 16, Motives, Textures, and Styles, continued.

next segment carries no stylistic connection to the first. Completely changing mood, the following phrase layers three voices in different meters for a dissonant, off-kilter effect (m. 2). As the growing crescendo, repeated rhythm, and upward sequence over a B-flat pedal begin to build tension, the leading implications of this pattern last only two repetitions before they are cut short by a return of the M2 motive sequence. Because the two styles are so different, the abrupt transition causes the two to seem further disconnected, as if the sudden change "simply happened" instead of indicating a musical response or reaction.

In the following sections, however, Rzewski begins to musically tie the transitions between phrases together. The descending M2 phrase in m. 2 lands on the bass note of the next section, eliding its ending with the next phrase of descending fifths, and the final note of that series carries over into the subsequent unit (m. 3). These connections become more direct as Rzewski combines the closing sequence of one phrase with the starting point for the next. The distorted, Romantic piano texture in m. 4 extends its melodic ascent to the first pitch of the M1-based phrase in m. 5, whose two-part texture shares similar dissonant harmonies. Along the same lines, the rising sequence and gradual deceleration of the triplets in the second half of m. 5 naturally lead up to the opening two-note motive and slower rhythmic pace of the ensuing phrase in m. 6. Because these sections share similar textures and rhythmic values and lead into one another, the overall flow of the piece becomes more continuous. Especially as the listener begins to sense the wavelike pairs between rising and falling phrases that run through much of the piece, the direction of a phrase creates an expectation for the motion of the next. But while a listener can anticipate contour or hear the connections between phrases, the sense that the piece "never goes anywhere" still remains because none of the musical ideas suggested ever develop beyond their brief phrase. Unpredictable, unrelated changes cut short patterns that begin to build towards a common goal, like the light, staccato triplets that follow the crescendo and growing dissonance in m. 4-5, or the unexpected, low sforzando staccato that breaks the two-note slur gesture in m. 6. Even the wave contour that creates continuity never establishes a sense of arrival at one extreme or the other by constantly changing direction.

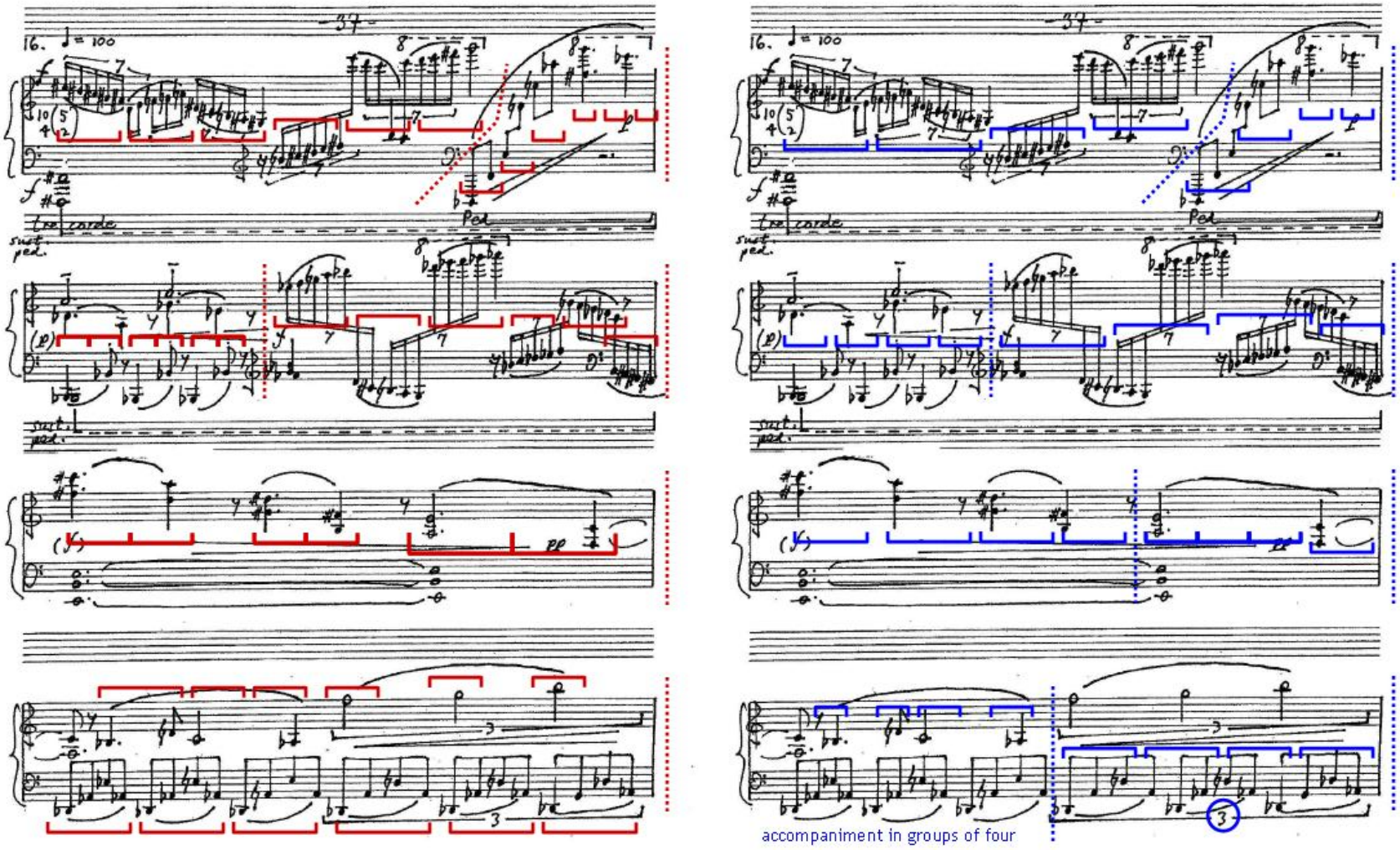
In the second half of the piece, the same musical ideas return in approximately the same order (compare measures 1 and 8, 2 and 7, 3 and 9, 4 and 10, etc.). Rzewski often inverts these new versions in some way from the original by changing the direction of motion or register.

Typically, repeated material in a piece brings a sense of stability or provides a reference point for the composer to develop into some kind of meaningful change, like the function of a recapitulation in a sonata. Here, although the listener recognizes familiar textures and gestures, these references do not create a stronger sense of musical motivation because the same processes that prevented this type of interpretation in the first half are at work in the second. As if to throw off the listener's expectations one last time, Rzewski initiates the closing phrase of the piece with a surprise arrival on a G-sharp major chord, resolving the seventh from the D#^{7} outline (V^7 of G#) in the preceding measure. This unexpected appearance of a cadential-like motion that actually functions as a closing gesture is one of the few moments where Rzewski fulfills the implications behind a gesture in the piece.

Despite the impression the aural experience of this piece gives, Rzewski composed this 'Lude following a fairly mathematical structure. Each musical idea follows a group of six, such as the six M2 motives and the following six eighth notes in m. 1, with a new change in texture every six beats (one beat = one quarter note) (Example 8, left side).[23] Behind this surface, Rzewski adds an inner division of four by regrouping the original arrangement of the notes, like the groups of seven marked into the M2 motives in m. 1, or including a second layer as in the right hand's compound meter in the first half of m. 2 (Example 8, right side). These fit into a group of six measures which return in the second half for a total of twelve measures of twelve beats each, the lowest number divisible by both six and four. By setting definite limits on the length for each idea through this grid structure, this method guarantees the frequent changes necessary for maximum variety while still creating connections between units.

As this example shows, Rzewski's idea of improvisational composition does not mean writing an arbitrary sequence of notes, but rather intellectually pursuing any creative ideas as

[23] Rzewski mismarks the time signature at the beginning; the piece is in 12/4 or 6/2, not 10/4 or 5/2.



Example 8: *Ludes* No. 16, Groups of Six (left, red) and Four (right, blue). Copyright 1991 by Frederic Rzewski, All Rights Reserved.

they come without regard for how they fit into the whole of the entire work. Structure plays a central role in this process by providing "problem" situations to solve for which there are no "wrong" answers to spark creative thought.[24] By prompting a train of thought through structure while repressing the tendency to judge the results during composition, Rzewski comes close to being able to observe and record the creative process itself—his goal from the start.[25] Likewise, the listener also shares in this experience. Once an attempt to organize the musical sequence into a preexisting framework fails, he or she is free to form a new set of associations that develop and change with each new piece of musical information. The goal is no longer to communicate a direct message to the listener, but for the listener to develop his or her own perspective through the music. In borrowing music's natural ease in creating expectations, Rzewski effectively simulates an environment for the listener to examine the creation of his or her own thought.

Throughout *Ludes*, Rzewski explores different approaches to manipulating his listeners' expectations. The first 'Lude, like others in the set, emphasizes a pastiche of juxtaposed textures and styles (Example 9). Fragments often act as if caught in the middle of a phrase, hinting at some sort of temporary key, scale, or style, but the music changes direction before those characteristics establish themselves. Rzewski emphasizes clear melodic units with articulation and separation from the texture, like the parallel sixths in m. 2 and 7 or the upper triplets in m. 6, but these are cut short and do not continue or reappear later in the piece. Similar effects occur when a discernable style appears but abrupt changes in texture prevent that idea from developing, such as the break in the duple-meter march topic in the bass in m. 6 by the

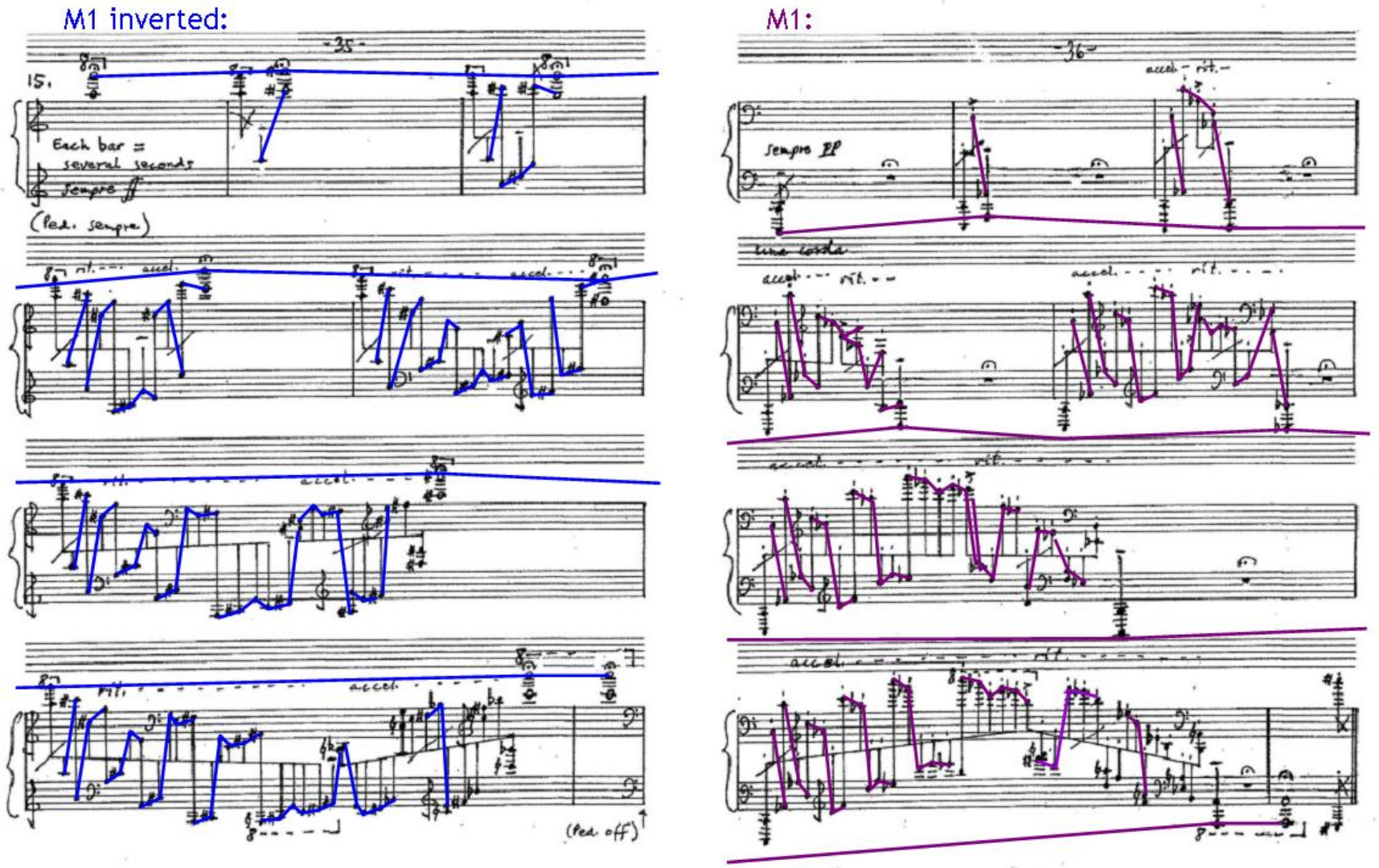
[24] "One of the purposes of having a rational, abstract structure, is to make it less likely that you do the same old thing over again. It's usually not as good as the first time." Rzewski, quoted in Ferretti, Joseph A. "Notated Extemporization: The Structural Ramifications of Improvisatory Composing in Part VIII of Frederic Rzewski's The Road," (DMA doc., University of Cincinnatti College-Conservatory of Music, 2006). Joseph Ferretti discusses this same function of structure in Rzewski's compositional process of *The Road* Part VII, and then continues into detailed analysis of the structure and meaning behind this large-scale work.
[25] See Rzewski's "Little Bangs" lecture quoted earlier. In *Nonsequiturs* 76.

Example 9: *Ludes* No. 1, Texture and Style Groups. Copyright 1991 by Frederic Rzewski, All Rights Reserved.

compound treble melody in m. 6, or the E-flat major jazz-like chord motive in m. 9 followed by the D-major pentatonic counterpoint in m. 10. Following a more abstract combination of melodic lines in the final measures, Rzewski closes this 'Lude like he did in #16 with a passing reference to tonality: the last three chords are all triadic, and the seventh in the C^9 chord (in second inversion) resolves down to the third for a weak V-I cadence in F. In other numbers, Rzewski combines this collage form with contrasting textural oppositions. 'Ludes 4, 9, and 14 focus on alternating between fast and slow phrases, and staccato motives interchange with more legato sections in 2, 8, and 13. Throughout the work, forte versus piano dynamics and high versus low registers interrupt the flow of the music to mark new divisions between ideas.

Contrasting with this pastiche technique, Rzewski also composes some of his 'Ludes within a uniform style. Following another numerical structure in the work, every third 'Lude has a monophonic texture, such as No. 3 for left hand, No. 6 for right hand, No. 9 in unison octaves, and so forth. Although this often corresponds to a single, dominant approach throughout each piece, Rzewski takes advantage of the ability of these approaches to form patterns to play against the listener's expectations. The monophonic 'Lude 18 breaks apart he M1 motive into two-note slur units of varying rhythmic lengths, which Rzewski marks with a flexible tempo so the performer can exploit the natural anticipation and release built into this gesture.[26] The additive processes in numbers 15 and 21 quickly establish audible patterns, but the unpredictable timing for when and how these sequences continue encourages the listener to observe rather than predict what happens next. Unsurprisingly, Rzewski creates these effects following a structure behind the work. In number 15, not only are sequences comprised of combinations of the M1 motive, but the entire second half of the piece is an inversion of the first (Example 10). Number 21

[26] The tempo marking on #18 reads "wavering around [a quarter note] = 96, not in strict time." Rzewski, *Ludes* 42. IMSLP website, accessed March 30, 2014, http://imslp.org/wiki/Ludes_(Rzewski,_Frederic).



Example 10: *Ludes* No. 15, Additive Motives and Inversion. Copyright 1991 by Frederic Rzewski, All Rights Reserved.

combines additive processes with serialist procedures, expanding M1 into a twelve-tone row with inversions and progressive interval set builds. Following Rzewski's philosophy, while a system is at work behind the scenes, there is no intended deeper meaning or motivation behind its structure except as an expression of his train of thought at the time of composition.

In an unexpected turn of events, Rzewski brings in an element of the absurd in 'Lude 19, where the performer reads the German children's poem "Das Stinktier" ("The Skunk") over a series of variations on the M1 theme. The combination of the text with the music seems to hint a subtext behind the nonsense words of the poem, sparking associations in the same way the music alone has up to this point. Likewise, an attempt to see if the music follows the words in some way creates a number of possibilities but returns only inconclusive results. The overall effect creates a strange uncertainty as the listener is not sure whether to take the meaning of poem seriously, similar to Rzewski's ambivalence towards meaning in life.

In many ways, the experience of the performer parallels that of the listener as he or she experiments with the effects created through different interpretations. Rzewski's own recording of *Ludes* stresses the phrasing in each piece, adding in his own emphasis, articulation, and sometimes dynamic contrast where none is marked in the score.[27] During live performance, the physical gestures and motions of the pianist can also accentuate or deemphasize particular groupings and patterns, influencing the connections perceived by the audience. The anti-narrative nature of these pieces invite a wide variety of interpretations, both in listening and playing.

[27] Rzewski, Frederic. *Ludes*, in *Night Crossing with Fisherman*, Music&Arts CD-988 DDD, CD, 1997.

Conclusion

Through works like *Ludes* and his other improvisational composition pieces, Rzewski merges his philosophical perspectives on the perception of reality with the form of his music. His intentionally anti-narrative compositional approach foils the expectations of his listeners by both drawing on and rejecting standard conventions for musical listening and interpretation. By negating the familiar processes for understanding music, Rzewski opens up the possibility for the listener to explore new associations, foregrounding the process of creative thought itself. Thus, Rzewski's anti-narrative improvisational composition pieces musically parallel the discontinuities within the often incongruous experience of human life.

CHAPTER IV

IRAQ WAR VARIATION WORKS AND NONLINEAR NARRATIVE FORM

For a politically-minded composer like Rzewski, the onset of the Iraq War made a significant impact on the subject of his compositions. A quick survey of titles like *Stop the War!* (2003), *Bring them Home!* (2004), *No More War* (2005), *Fall of Empire* (2007), and the nanosonata set *Peace Dances* (2007-2008) uncovers just a few of the many war-themed pieces Rzewski composed since 2003. Following his recent motto that "music probably cannot change the world. But it is a good idea to act as though it could," many of Rzewski's works during this time explicitly reveal his moral objections to the war and his concern over its future implications for western government and society.[1] While these pieces contain straightforward anti-war protests, Rzewski also expands this message to express his philosophical view that the experience of war on and off the battlefield brings out the fractured, anti-teleological nature of life. To musically communicate this idea, Rzewski writes many of these works in a style that synthesizes the linear narrative musical structures found in his variation works with the fragmented effects in his anti-narrative improvisational composition. The net effect creates a nonlinear narrative trajectory that combines stretches of cohesive transvaluation with interruptions so that the piece does not build up to an overarching goal or outcome. These interruptions, whether in the form of interjections of unrelated material or sections that

[1] Rzewski, "Nonsequiturs." Lecture from 2006. In *Nonsequiturs* 30.

emphasize textural effects over forward musical action, hamper the dramatic flow in ways that parallel Rzewski's perspective on the Iraq War.

Rzewski's chamber work *Knight, Death, and Devil*, written in 2008 for the ensemble eighth blackbird, is an example of this approach, and will serve as the focus of this analysis. In addition to following a nonlinear trajectory, this piece contains direct connections to two earlier works, his *Sonata* (1991) and the *10 War Songs* (2007-2008). The *Sonata*'s association with the Gulf War and shared folksong sources draw out philosophical consistencies in Rzewski's anti-war stance over time, while *Knight, Death, and Devil*'s precursor in the piano solo set *10 War Songs* reveals some of Rzewski's compositional strategies for writing polytonally for ensemble. Together, these pieces reflect how Rzewski develops his political and musical ideas between works which led to his nonlinear, postmodern approach to musical dramatic trajectory.

Parallels between Rzewski's Philosophical Perspectives on Reality and War

As a composer actively speaking out against war in his music since Vietnam, Rzewski's general stance shares some of the same central tenets as the anti-war protests in the 1960s and '70s. His belief in nonviolent social revolution, anger over the loss of human life, and skepticism towards capitalist governments who, in Rzewski's view, turn to war for the sake of their own economic interests over the needs of the people, are all common themes expressed in general objections to American involvement in Vietnam. However, later in life, Rzewski's response to war began to carry some of the same nihilist, anti-teleological overtones found in his writings on improvisational composition. In a lecture from 2006 where he summarizes his challenge to the perception of continuity in life and his style of improvisational composition, he concludes with a discussion of the futility of the Iraq war. His description of the situation

emphasizes the parallels he sees between the purposelessness of the war and the lack of reason inherent in life:

> *"By now the war has cost something like two trillion dollars. … [If it had been used for some purpose,] this would at least make some kind of sense. But even that is not possible. This wealth has simply been squandered in an orgy of destruction. Nobody has benefited from it. The empire may collapse, like others before it, and for the same reasons: overextension of the military, depletion of non-renewable vital resources, or simply by spending itself to death. Or it could just happen, for no reason at all."*[2]

In contrast to the more literal approach in earlier works like *The People United*, Rzewski's Iraq War pieces tend to musically present violence and destruction at a distance rather than directly. Instead, the perspective shifts away from the battlefield to the juxtaposition of daily, domestic life against the unspoken presence of war abroad. The naturalness with which most people not directly affected by war gloss over its minor intrusion into their everyday experience, despite the enormous and drastic consequences for those caught up in it, bears a certain similarity to Rzewski's belief that the desire for perceiving continuity in life obscures the true chaos beneath the surface. This surreal experience, coupled with the emotional intensity of being outraged at the situation but unable to do anything to stop it, forms the background for most of Rzewski's pieces dealing with the Iraq War. His explanation for the piece *Stop the War* (Mile 61 from *The Road*) expresses this idea directly:

> *"Like millions of people I was horrified by the outbreak of war, and by the apparent ease with which other (many more) millions could be misled into supporting it. … I couldn't get the war out of my mind, but at the same time I had to go on living my regular life. This simultaneity of an obsessive presence with unrelated, trivial events became the substance of the composition [Stop the War!]."*[3]

Rzewski's discussion of *The Babble* (Mile 62 of *The Road*), as with other pieces from this time, directly connects his philosophical ideas about causality to his perspective on war. Because the action of these two concepts is similar, Rzewski incorporates techniques from his

[2] Ibid., 30. The quote at the opening of Chapter 2 comes from this same lecture.
[3] Rzewski, Program notes to *Stop the War!* (2003), written in 2006. In *Nonsequiturs* 536.

improvisational composition to musically highlight this discontinuity. *The Babble* includes abrupt vocal effects to break the flow of the music, a Latin square grid filled with spontaneously-generated material, and a unifying four-note whole tone motive that connects the stream-of-consciousness-like course of events to one another.[4] He describes these effects with the same language he applies to his ideas about improvisational composition:

> *"For some time now I've been trying to write music that reflects the disorder I observe, both in the world around me as well as in my own head, while at the same time trying to subject my incoherent thoughts to some kind of rational ordering principle.* The Babble*... is a piece of this kind. It was written in the spring of 2003, as the bombs were raining around the ziggurats of Babylon and civilization appeared threatened at its very roots. ... Continuity doesn't matter. Interruptions matter. Silences, obscure noises and gestures constantly thwart the music in its design; ... They might seem like alien intrusions; but they are all part of the same piano piece."*[5]

In works like *Stop the War!*, *The Babble*, and *Honk!*, the discontinuities created through his improvisational composition form evoke the intrusion of war into the awareness of the listener, the destruction left in its wake, and the logical inconsistency about life it represents to Rzewski. These ideas carry through in his folksong-based Iraq War works, although these pieces tend to form more traditional musical structures and follow a loose dramatic trajectory. As with his earlier variation works, Rzewski selects songs with a meaningful history and a relevant, contemporary message which he develops through the course of the piece. But, in his Iraq War pieces, Rzewski merges the goal-oriented form from his prior variation works with the anti-narrative techniques from improvisational composition so that the music reflects his perspective on war while still retaining the intent behind the folk tune themes. These pieces go beyond a surface-level protest against the US involvement in Iraq to musically examine the similarities between the experiences and causes of war across history.

[4] Ferretti, "Notated Extemporization" 53-58. Rzewski also previously used a Latin square arrangement for improvisational composition in his *Trio*. Rzewski, Program notes to *Trio* (1998). In *Nonsequiturs* 532-534.
[5] Rzewski, Program notes to *The Babble* (2003). In *Nonsequiturs* 542.

Nonlinear Narrative

For pieces like the *North American Ballads,* the dominant linear narrative qualities allow sequences of events to create a sense of cause-and-effect that forms future expectations and guides interpreting expressive reactions. At the other extreme, works like *Ludes* intentionally distort the natural inclination of the mind to organize musical information in this manner by denying its expectations or interrupting its flow. Rather than following his earlier theme-and-variations approach, Rzewski dilutes the narrative implications in his folksong-based Iraq pieces so that transvaluation shapes the dramatic trajectory of the work, but interruption and ambiguity frustrate this process and weaken its function in expressive interpretation. This creates a nonlinear narrative trajectory, where both continuity and interruption play important roles in the structure of the work. [6]

In an ideal linear narrative archetype, a drawn-out build to a central climax leads to a pivotal transvaluation that determines the outcome of the piece. Instead, in his Iraq works, Rzewski focuses on a sequence of smaller transvaluation effects interrupted by other events which do not build towards the goal of the work. In Rzewski's nonlinear works, few individual transvaluation moments are strong enough to dominate its overarching trajectory, as they would in a piece with a major climax. Instead, this slow process forms a gradual trajectory with a weak sense of resolution, if any, implied at the conclusion. Even moments that could serve as a key transvaluation often appear without sufficient dramatic motivation or reaction, or occur too far removed from the conclusion to firmly direct it towards a particular outcome. At other times, the ambiguous weighting of certain musical textures form stretches of music with an ambivalent

[6] Instead of separating this into its own category, Klein describes the perception of this sort of piece as shifting between the narrative or neo-narrative, where expectations develop to support a narrative interpretation, and the anti- or non-narrative, when those expectations are either frustrated or never manifest. See particularly Klein's discussion of Ligeti's Cello Concerto in "Musical Story" 6-8 for a small-scale process similar to the effect Rzewski creates over a longer span of time in these pieces.

impact on the trajectory of the piece that further separate moments of clear, marked musical change. While the overall trajectory follows a process of transvaluation and sequences of musical action, progress tends to be gradual, not straightforward, and lacks the goal-oriented drive found in his earlier variation works.

Interruption and unexpected intrusions play an important role in breaking apart the dramatic trajectory of Rzewski's Iraq pieces. Many feature improvised cadenzas, marked *[CAD]* in the score, that temporarily pause or disrupt the action of the piece. Rzewski intends certain short cadenzas to be a "spontaneous (i.e., unpremeditated) [sic] comment… like a sudden intrusion, an unexpected or unrelated event" that comes like "a flash. Do NOT prepare!"[7] Although brief, these intrusions allude to his interest in discontinuity in thought and life that connect to his perspective on war. Other, more traditional improvised cadenzas appear at the ends of sections, serving as an elaboration or as a closing transition into the next section of the work. Even without the improvised contribution of the performers, Rzewski's compositional style incorporates unpredictable shifts between and within episodes that disrupt a steady sequence of events. While the weight of many of these intrusions is strong enough to influence the trajectory of the work, at times the music continues with little or no response, frustrating its narrative implications.

Altogether, these effects create a nonlinear narrative trajectory where gaps and interruptions separate sequences of related transvaluation events, musically paralleling Rzewski's perspective on the Iraq War. His piece *Knight, Death, and Devil* takes this approach through its set of 12 short pieces based on six anti-war songs. The six songs used in the work represent different anti-war perspectives throughout history: Taps, Peat Bog Soldiers, The

[7] Rzewski, *Johnny has Gone for a Soldier*, 1, and *10 War Songs*, 2. Both Available on the IMSLP website, accessed July 31, 2013, http://imslp.org/wiki/Johnny_Has_Gone_for_a_Soldier_(Rzewski,_Frederic) and http://imslp.org/wiki/10_War_Songs_for_Piano_(Rzewski,_Frederic).

Conscript's Departure, Johnny I Hardly Knew Ye, Johnny has Gone for a Soldier, and L'Homme Arme (see Table 1). Rzewski weaves these songs together to evoke a gradual change in attitude from optimism and confidence to disillusionment and loss over the course of the work.

Ideological and Compositional Connections between *Knight, Death, and Devil*, *Sonata*, and *War Songs*

The title of the piece comes from the 1513 engraving by Albrecht Dürer, which Rzewski names as his main inspiration for the work (Example 11). According to Rzewski, his decision to combine a continuous, polytonal texture with pauses and interruptions connects back the scene in Dürer's print. As he explained to eighth blackbird, the group that performed the premiere, "These [folk] songs represent the "Knight on horseback" (string quartet is the "Horse," actually the star of the show). The songs interrupted by "stills," where nothing happens. That's "Death." And periodically there are interruptions of irrelevant material. That's the "Devil." "[8] Rzewski's description matches with the nonlinear narrative trajectory he creates over the course of the work.

Applying a different approach to polytonality than he has in the past, Rzewski composed *Knight, Death, and Devil* polytonally throughout, except for transitions between pieces, with layered lines from all six songs at once. Unlike his earlier theme-and-variation pieces, the polytonal sections themselves form different textures and allude to particular genres rather than standing apart as one type of style. Instead of piecing together fragments of songs, he starts with the beginning of each tune and often follows it to the end, augmenting the rhythm or delaying the

[8] From a January 2008 e-mail to eighth blackbird while composing the piece, posted on the eighth blackbird blog: "Heading Home." Accessed April 14, 2014, http://www.eighthblackbird.org/heading-home/

Example 11: *Knight, Death, and Devil*, Albrecht Dürer, 1513[9]

entrance of the next phrase to coordinate with other layers. Homophonic textures with clear melodies appear in addition to polyphonic textures, and each instrument typically keeps its own melodic line and song during each section. Among these songs, "Taps" is the only melody that appears in all ten parts, and its theme forms a subtle motto throughout the work. Discreetly worked into the opening of every section, each movement concludes with an audible snippet of

[9] Image from the Metropolitan Museum of Art website, accessed April 12, 2014, http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/works-of-art/43.106.2.

Knight, Death, and Devil/*War Songs* (2008)	*Sonata* (1991)
*1. Taps	*1. Taps
*2. L'Homme Arme	*2. L'Homme Arme
*3. Johnny I Hardly Knew Ye	*3. Johnny I Hardly Knew Ye
4. Peat Bog Soldiers (Die Moorsoldaten)	4. Give Peace a Chance
5. Johnny has Gone for a Soldier	5. Ring Around the Rosy
6. The Conscript's Departure	6. Santa Claus is Coming To Town
*7. Three Blind Mice (briefly)	*7. Three Blind Mice

Table 1. Songs quoted in *Knight, Death, and Devil*/*War Songs*, and *Sonata*. Shared songs marked with an asterisk (*).[10]

this theme that surfaces from the texture, often played with harmonics by the strings. This quiet undertone of mortality tinges even less serious numbers with a reminder of the sacrifices entailed in war. As melodies rise and fall from the surface, the musical effects echo a mental shift in attitude rather than model a social process of action, where recurring prominent tunes become tinged with irony, cynicism, and even lost hope as the piece progresses.

Prior to composing *Knight, Death, and Devil* (*KDD*) and *War Songs*, Rzewski's *Sonata* from 1991 was the only piece which explored simultaneously combining a large set of source songs. Following the form of its title, the *Sonata* consists of three movements: the first is an unusual development-recapitulation form based on six songs (numbers 2-7 in Table 1), the second is a slow movement centered around "Taps" which quotes tunes from the first movement, and the third is a set of variations on "L'Homme Arme." Although not mentioned in Rzewski's program notes for the work, the topics behind the songs in *Sonata* carry clear anti-war overtones. The cover page of the score quotes a line from Bertolt Brecht's 1947 adaptation of *Antigone*, which recast Sophocles' tragedy into a protest against war.[11] In Brecht's version of the play, Creon, the king of Thebes, kills Antigone's brother Polynices for refusing to fight in the army after his other brother Eteocles dies in battle. Antigone's decision to bury her brother Polynices

[10] Ibid., "Heading Home" blog entry. Rzewski, Program notes to *Sonata* (1991). In *Nonsequiturs* 514.
[11] Jones, Frank and Vidal, Gore. "Tragedy with a Purpose: Bertolt Brecht's '*Antigone*,' " *The Tulane Drama Review* 2 (1957): 39-45.

after Creon forbids burial for traitors is an act of rebellion supporting Polynices's stand against the war. The pivotal scene in the play when Antigone confronts Creon becomes a debate in Brecht's version, as Antigone challenges Creon's and the elders' decision to go to war with Argos to obtain the metal needed to create weapons for war. In 1982, Rzewski set the entire text in his piece *Antigone-Legend* as a dramatized performance for vocalist and pianist.[12]

A decade later, Rzewski began work on the *Sonata* in February 1991 during the same month the Gulf War ended in Iraq.[13] Among many other factors, Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait and the US and UN involvement against Iraq were partly prompted by concern over the control of oil reserves in the Middle East. The quote Rzewski selects from Brecht's play seems to allude to the conclusion of the war and part of the motivation behind it: "But when they heard of victory in the long war for metal, the elders of Thebes put on the wreaths of victory, which are woven of glittering leaves of the poisonous laurel, which twists the mind and makes the step unsteady."[14] In the play, Thebes eventually falls to Argos's forces after a failed second military campaign weakens the army and the city's populace can no longer economically sustain its defense. These reasons—overextension of the military and exhaustion of economic and environmental resources—match the description Rzewski gives in his prediction of the collapse of the US in the lecture from 2006 quoted at the start of this chapter.[15]

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[12] Rzewski writes about *Antigone-Legend* that, " as I worked every day on my piece, I often had the uncanny feeling that I was not dealing with material from the past, but … with a continuing story which from day to day approached its fateful end. This was not exactly a pleasant sensation; but perhaps therein lies a clue to why such a tale continues to speak to us today after thousands of years." Program notes to *Antigone-Legend* (1982), written in 1982. In *Nonsequiturs* 478.

[13] The last page of the *Sonata* states "Feb/May '91." Rzewski often lists the date(s) of composition at the title or the end of pieces. Rzewski, *Sonata*, Available on IMSLP website, accessed February 16, 2014, http://imslp.org/wiki/Sonata_(Rzewski,_Frederic).

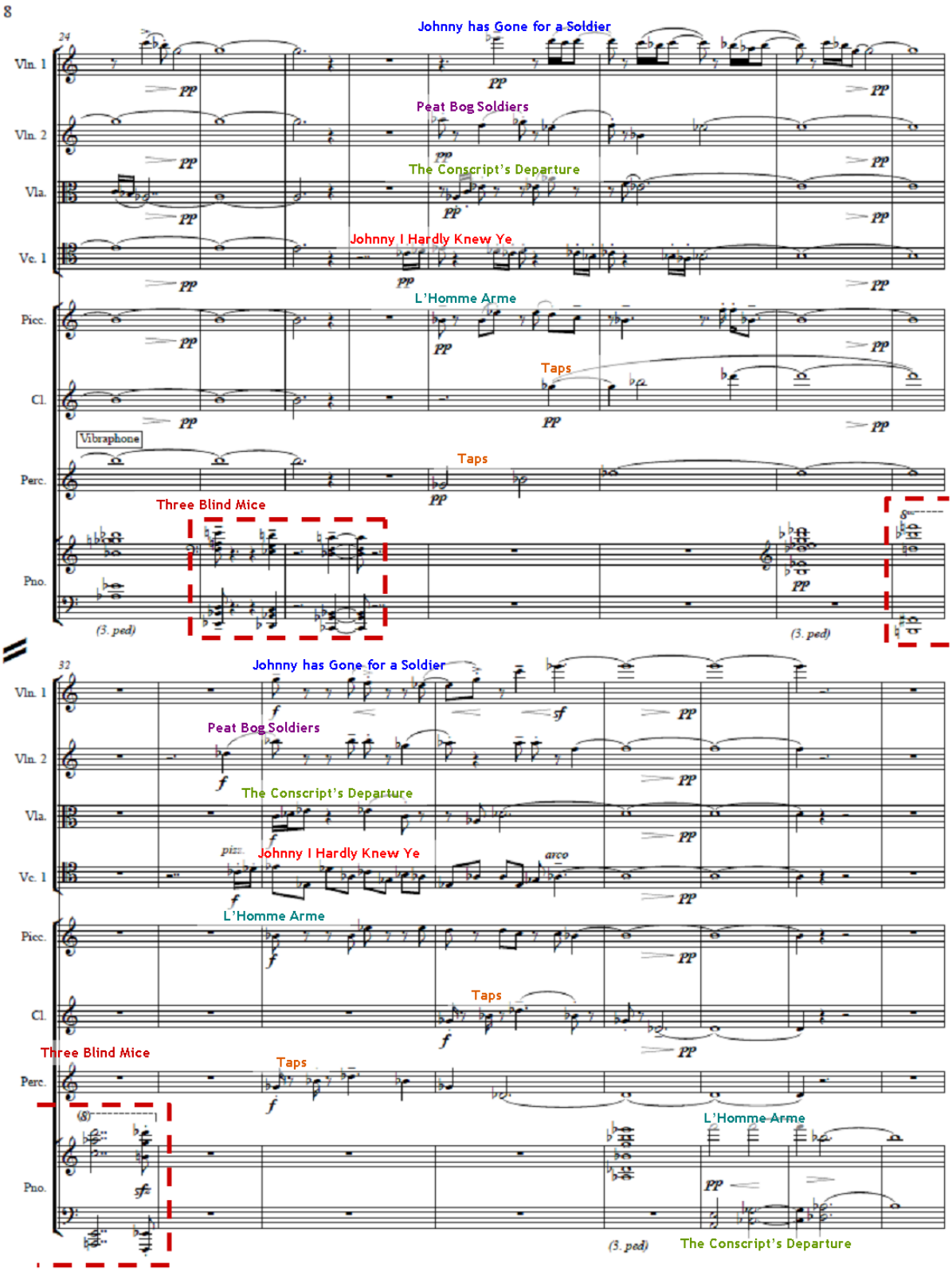
[14] Rzewski, *Sonata*, title page.

[15] Rzewski, "Nonsequiturs" lecture. In *Nonsequiturs* 30.

Rzewski's interest in improvisational composition also began around 1990, which he merged with an unusual take on sonata form.[16] Instead of following a traditional exposition-development-recapitulation sequence, he omits the presentation of the six song themes in an exposition and jumps directly to the development, which also takes over the role of the exposition as the point of return in the recapitulation. Following a grid structure of sixty-four twelve-second periods, Rzewski fills the first half, the development, with "freely composed material" based on the six themes, where his combination of children's songs with more serious themes gives a sardonic edge to the darker tone of the work. However, he divides the second thirty-two periods into groups of sixteen, eight, four, and so on that continuously recapitulate the development, condensing the first half into shorter and shorter statements with each cycle. As these repeated quotations occur at progressively more frequent intervals, it creates the impression of history repeating its cycle of war and peace to infinity.

With the United States' return to Iraq in 2003, Rzewski drew on ideas found in his *Sonata* to compose *Knight, Death, and Devil* and *War Songs*. Rzewski bases both works on a set of traditional songs rather than a single source tune, with three of the same themes found in both pieces. Also, during an unusual break in the polytonal texture in the second episode of *KDD/War Songs*, Rzewski in two phrases quotes "Three Blind Mice," one of the nursery rhymes Rzewski uses in his Sonata (Example 12). In addition, the quote by Thomas Paine that Rzewski writes on the title page of *War Songs* echoes the same idea of false peace found in the Sonata's *Antigone-Legend* reference: "Wearied with war, and tired of human butchery, they sat down to rest, and called it peace," taken from a passage in *The Rights of* Man decrying the war-driven history of monarchical governments.[17] More generally, the idea of composing a work based on

[16] Rzewski describes the form of the piece in his program notes to the *Sonata*, Nonseq 514
[17] Rzewski, *10 War Songs* 1.



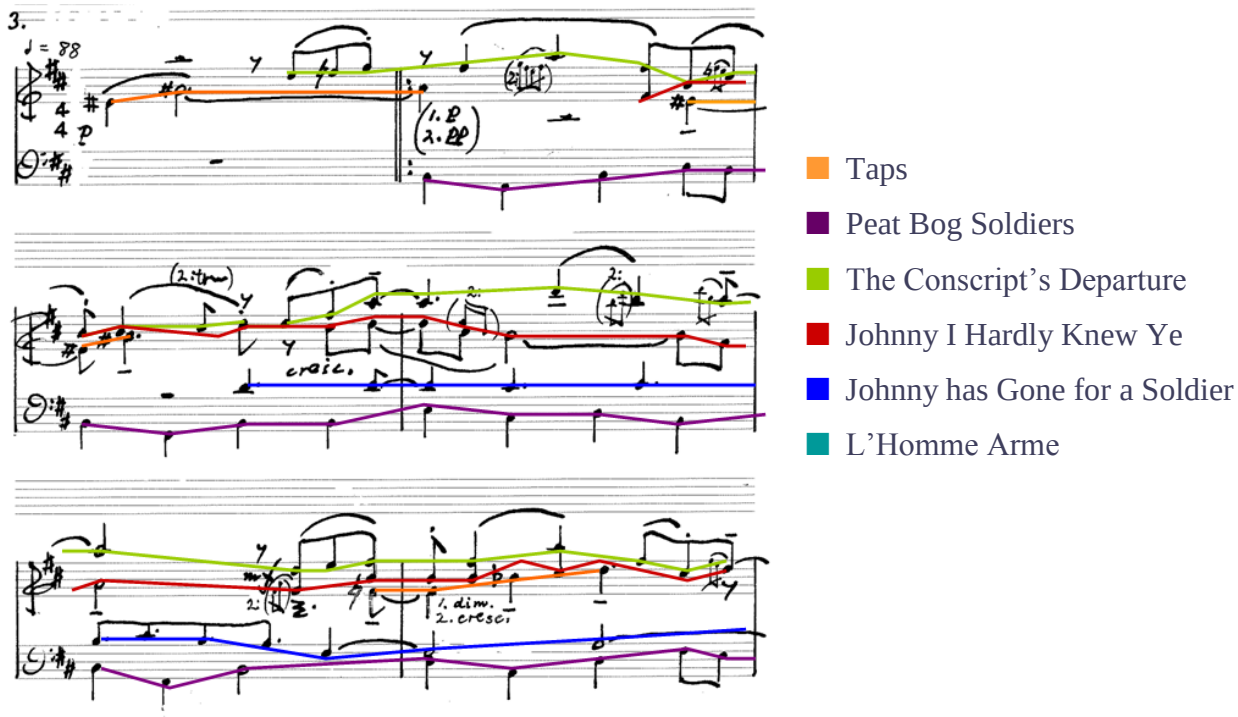
Example 12: *Knight, Death, and Devil*, No. 2, "Three Blind Mice" Quotation, m. 24-39.

Dürer's print seems to have originated around the same time as the *Sonata*: Rzewski wrote the cello solo *Knight*, intended to be the first of a trilogy of pieces ("Death" and "Devil"), back in 1992.[18] Through a turn of world events creating one of the cycles of war and peace that the *Sonata*'s first movement seems to allude to, the connections between Rzewski's two pieces reveal some of the consistencies in Rzewski's views on war.

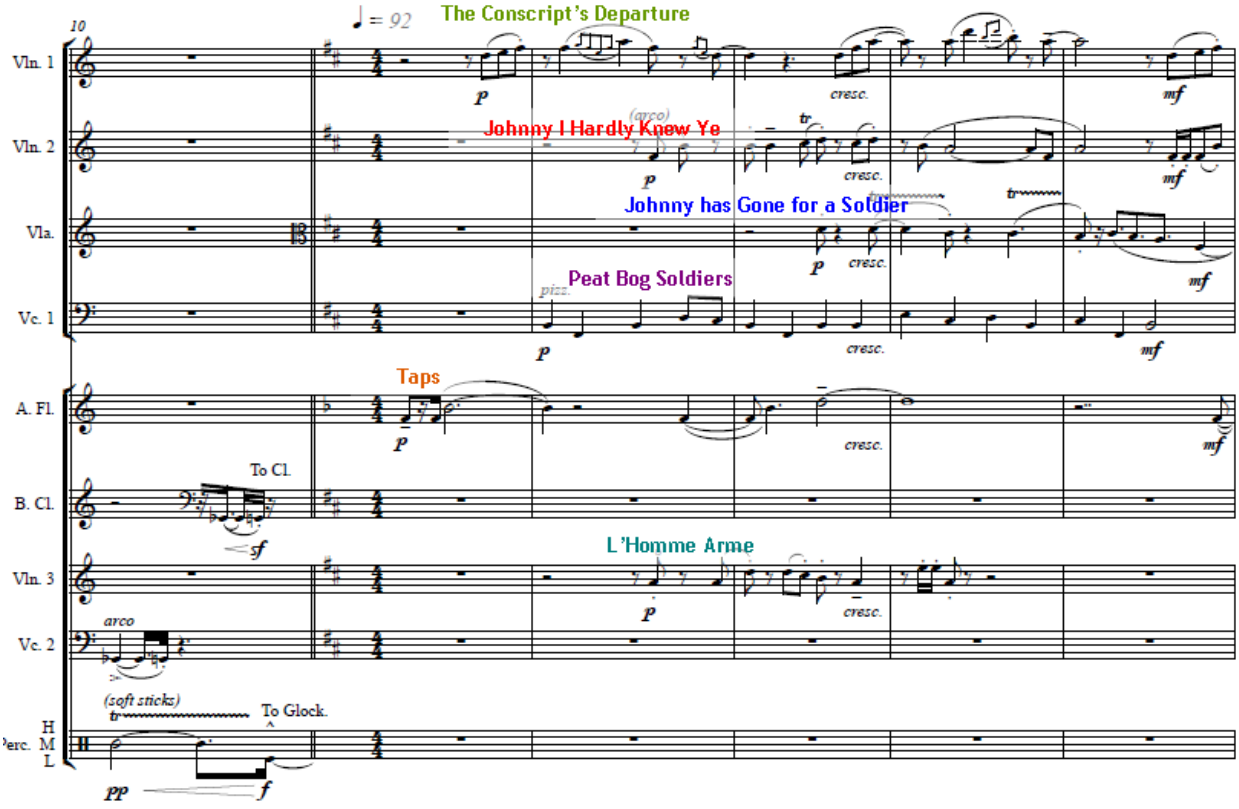
Before scoring *Knight, Death, and Devil* for multiple instruments, Rzewski first composed the main sections in the solo piano work *War Songs*. Containing ten out of the twelve movements of *KDD*, including the complete version of the epilogue, Rzewski began performing *War Songs* in early March of 2008 while continuing to work on its chamber version. At the premiere performance in Seattle, he described them as a work in progress which he was still experimenting with and asked for audience input at the end of the piece.[19] In *War Songs*, Rzewski lays out the basic polytonal arrangement of themes, coordinating melodic lines over accompaniment and adjusting entrances to create stylistic and harmonic effects. These "war songs" form the core of *KDD* as Rzewski divides the piano part among multiple instruments, separating combined contrapuntal lines to individual instruments and adding new lines above and below (Example 13). The final version in *KDD* then expands this structure by adding transitions between sections and new movements designed for ensemble. Rzewski took a similar approach with another pair of Iraq works, *Johnny has Gone for a Soldier* for solo piano and *Bring them Home!* for ensemble or two pianos and percussion. In these pieces, which are also based on

[18] "This is all based on an idea I had almost 20 years ago. I wanted to write a piece for solo cello based on this same engraving. I wrote the first part, "Knight", about 6 or 7 minutes long. I thought about incorporating it in the new piece, but then decided against it. It might, however, go in front of the new piece." Rzewski, quoted on eighth blackbird blog "Heading Home."

[19] According to one audience member at the premiere: "[Rzewski] informed us that the next pieces were a work in progress and that this in fact was the first time he'll perform them. "I don't know how to play these yet," he concluded as he sat down. These feeling[s] definitely went through the performance of these, as it felt hesitant, rawer [and] a bit careful. At times he'd lean forward and his big bushy eyebrows would raise almost in surprise, a "what was I thinking" kind of look. … Afterwards he genuinely asked for comments on the piece." Blog post, accessed April 15, 2014, http://www.spiralcage.com/blog/?p=192.



Example 13a: Comparison, *War Songs*, No. 3 m. 1-6. Copyright 2008 by Frederic Rzewski, All Rights Reserved.



Example 13b: Comparison, *Knight, Death, and Devil* No. 3, m. 10-15. Copyright 2008 by Frederic Rzewski, All Rights Reserved.

variations of a traditional anti-war folk song, Rzewski outlines the basic trajectory and central musical events in the earlier piano piece before extending it into its larger format.

Knight, Death, and Devil

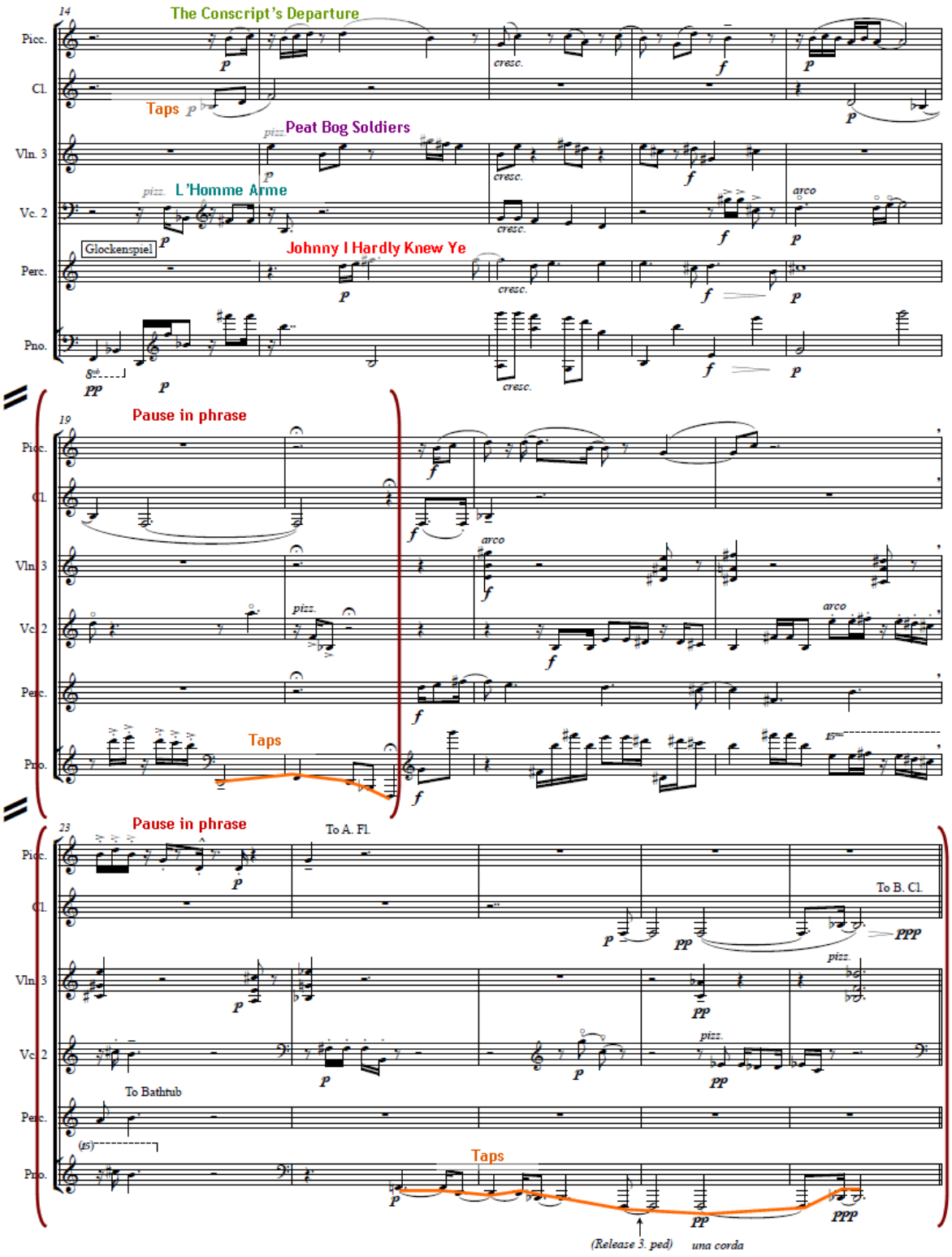
One of the most significant differences between *War Songs* and *Knight, Death, and Devil* are the transitions Rzewski composes between movements that tie the work together into a whole. Instead of following the polytonal structure of the rest of the piece, these sections introduce episodes of chaos into the work that disrupt its flow. Through extended instrumental effects, vocalizing, unpredictable improvisation and even theatrical actions by the percussionist, Rzewski musically evokes the sound and actions of Dürer's demons. The absurdity of some of these actions in a concert setting—snorting, squeaking, barking, using a goose call—literally recreate the sounds of Dürer's demons, but they also reflect Rzewski's belief about the nonsense in life, like the surreal effect of the children's song themes in his *Sonata*. As the piece alternates between these sections and the polytonal "war songs," Rzewski portrays the ongoing struggle between the knight and the devil, or man against the evil in the world. Although these sections are juxtaposed together, Rzewski keeps each part self-contained so that they do not directly interact like scenes combined in a single painting. However, while not always a consistent progression, the gradual increase in dissonance in the polytonal sections seems to reflect the influence of these intrusions and allows a slow process of transvaluation to take place through the course of the work. More so than in War Songs, which lack these transitions, the listener interprets the change in tone of the piece as a process of wearing down the confidence presented at the opening.

During the most arresting of these transitions, a percussion solo recreates the image of a domestic argument by shattering plates and dragging a table or chair across the floor, ending with a low growl scraped on one of the instruments.[20] Matthew Duvall, the percussionist for eighth blackbird, relates how Rzewski based this scene on an experience Rzewski had many years earlier where he became so angry that he smashed a large serving platter on the floor of the place he was living in Italy. The experience of losing reason and being completely overwhelmed by anger represents the "devil" inherent in the human heart taking over.[21] Like his other Iraq War works, Rzewski shifts the focus inward, identifying the shared root of war in the capacity of every human being to destroy and hurt others. Musically, this event comes as a complete surprise at the start of the fifth section, paralleling the way the onset of anger can rise at any time.[22] In one of the more direct cause and effect moments of the piece, the ensemble responds with a sense of hurt following the outburst by harmonizing the ensuing piccolo melody with dissonances and tritones, doubling the line with violin and cello in the original arrangement in *War Songs* No. 4. However, the mood quickly recovers at the *a tempo* four measures later, and the movement continues with a lighter, if still oddly dissonant style featuring "L'Homme Arme." This somewhat limited musical reaction in the face of such a drastic event underscores its long-

[20] Rzewski, *Knight, Death, and Devil*,15. Available on the IMSLP website, accessed November 21, 2013, http://imslp.org/wiki/Knight,_Death,_and_Devil_(Rzewski,_Frederic).

[21] "At one of the moments in the performance… the instructions in the score are "smash plates on the floor." This actually refers to a very specific incident many, many years ago where he [Rzewski] got very, very upset in a certain situation [while he] was living in Italy and took a large, beautiful serving platter and just smashed it on the tile floor of this place he was living at the time… That moment, being overwhelmed by anger, really stuck with him. For him, the idea is that there are times when we become so angry that that you can lose reason. For him, that's the devil taking over." Matthew Duvall, percussionist with eighth blackbird, discussing the piece in an interview. "West Coast Tour: Interview with Matthew Duvall, part II," Oberlin College interview, last modified January 14, 2009, accessed April 15, 2014, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JDAO-2Z7vFs.

[22] In the eighth blackbird/Oberlin quartet performance, most audience members could anticipate that something was about to happen (although they did not know exactly what) as nearby performers stood back and Matthew Duvall put on goggles before proceeding to smash glass plates and bottles inside a metal trash can (the can prevented glass from scattering into the audience). See the detailed tongue-and-cheek description of one of eighth blackbird's performances by Daniel Stephen Johnson, "Tardiest Concert Review Ever" posted November 24, 2008, accessed April 15, 2014, http://www.danielstephenjohnson.com/2008_11_01_archive.html.



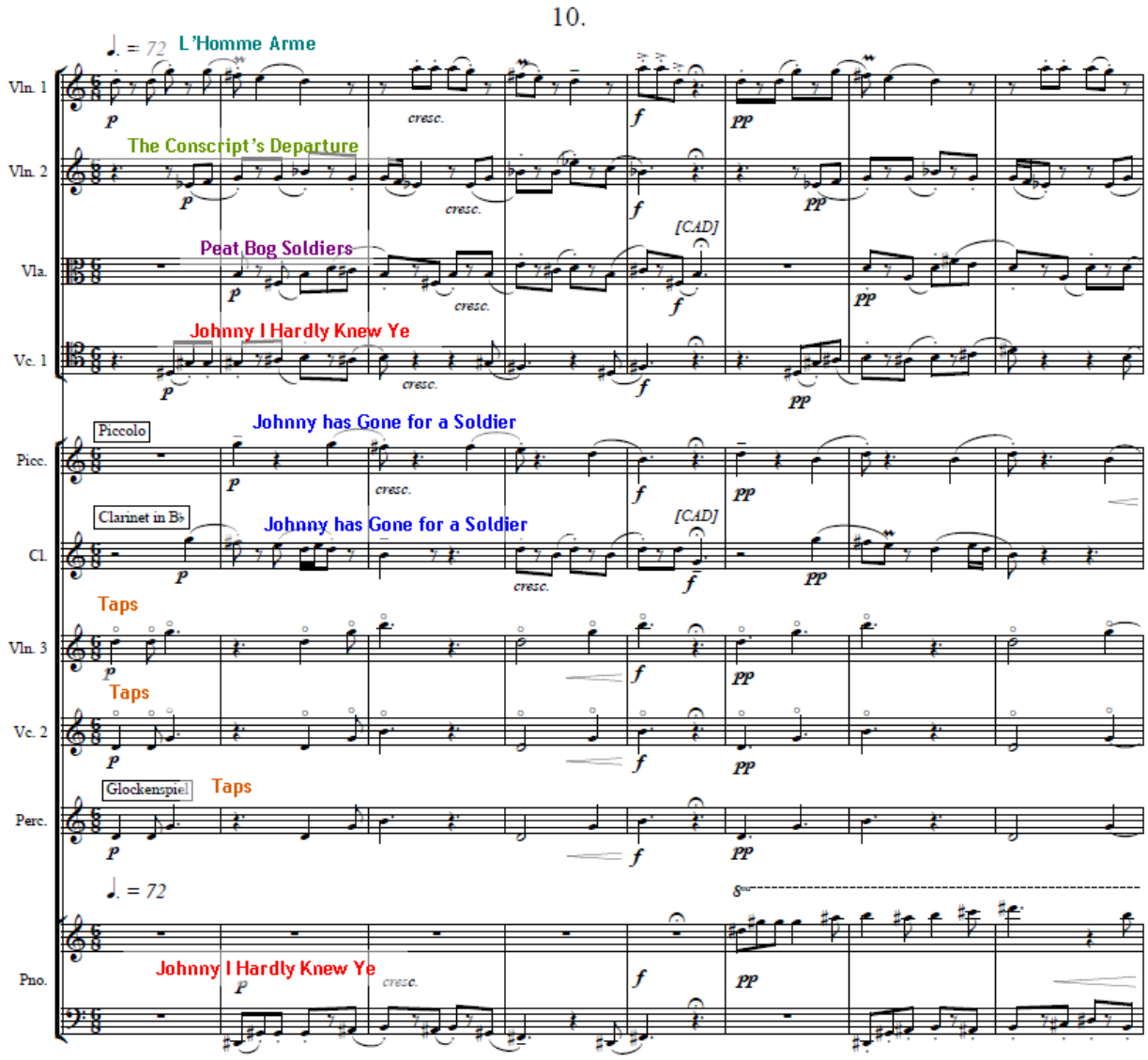
Example 14: *Knight, Death, and Devil*, No. 5, m. 14-27. Copyright 2008 by Frederic Rzewski, All Rights Reserved.

term narrative implications as the transition that initiates audibly more dissonant polytonal sections beginning in the next movement.

Another aspect Rzewski employs to halt the forward motion of the piece are the frequent pauses at the ends of phrases or the end of the section. In the space created by these "stills," Rzewski often quotes fragments of "Taps" or creates other quietly intrusive effects that seem to match his comment that these pauses represent death in the work. The polytonal section just discussed in the fifth "war song" places "Taps" beneath the other voices in the low piano register, where it drifts to the surface between the phrases before the section's conclusion (Example 14). This effect tinges the conclusion with as sense of gravity as it recalls the inescapable presence of death. Rzewski structures the entire second movement around this pattern, interjecting each short, thoughtful phrase played by the ensemble with unexpected sets of slow chords in the piano (Example 12). Interestingly, Rzewski does not compose these chords polytonally from the main six songs until their last appearance, adding a compositional element to further separate them from the rest of the piece.[23] These quiet intrusions sometimes allude to war in the distance through low, impending dissonance, and other times hint at more hopeful reflections in gentle sonorities. Through the contrast between the tranquil strings and winds and the out-of-time response in the piano, this song acts out the impact of an awareness of war and death in familiar, everyday experience.

In the midst of the polytonal texture, Rzewski evokes different styles and moods so that the arrangement from section to section develops the overall trajectory of the work. The fourth number, for example, evokes the blues by placing "Peat Bog Soldiers" as a walking bass line in the cello beneath "The Conscript's Departure" in the first violin as an upper melody (Example 13a). Rzewski stylizes this melody with quick-moving grace notes, creating an free, lighthearted

[23] Two of these intrusions quote "Three Blind Mice" from the *Sonata*, as mentioned earlier.



Example 15: *Knight, Death, and Devil*, No. 10, Dissonance and Taps Theme, m. 1-8.

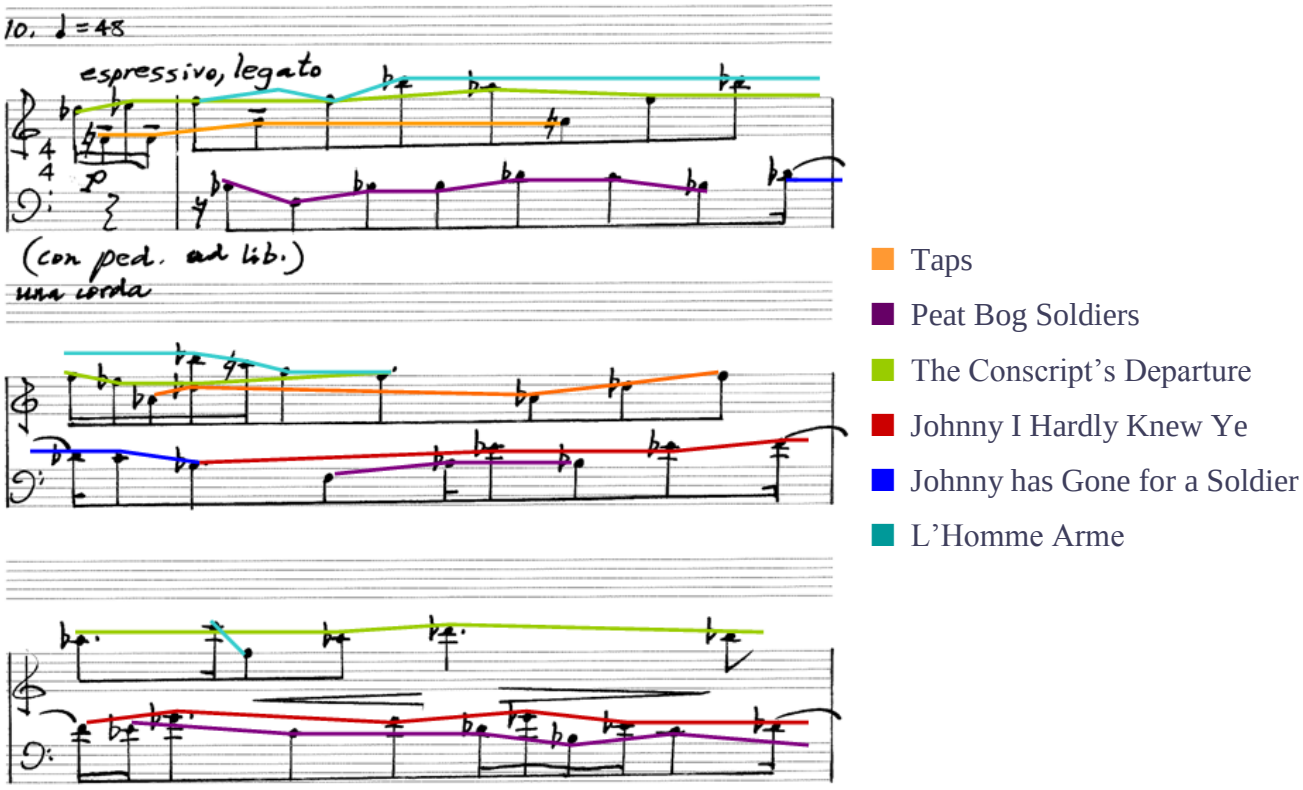
feel as if one were humming or whistling the tune while walking with the beat. The opening piece also shares this jazz tone, elaborating the lower melody of the piano with gestures in the strings that double the grace notes in the left hand. These optimistic sections create a background context for the gradual inclusion of more dissonant material, which convey a shift in tone towards bitterness and loss in the later sections in the work. For instance, the cello melody

of the sixth section quickly becomes lost in the scattered texture as the polytonal lines, no longer in sync, work against one another. In a sardonic, lilting parody, the tenth section reharmonizes "L'Homme Arme" so that the counterpoint between the violin melody and ensemble accompaniment awkwardly accents its clashes instead of consonances (Example 15). Rzewski further makes this section more serious by tripling "Taps" in the accompaniment in harmonics of a violin and cello and in the glockenspiel. Compared to the more coherent jazz-inspired sections in the first and fourth movements, whose polytonal lines were also rhythmically aligned, this piece marks a cynical contrast and carries a sense of frustration and disillusionment.

Other polytonal sections, however, do not imply a clear style or mood. For example, in the third movement Rzewski layers all six themes together so that the natural phrases of each song begin and end at the same time. The net result makes each line appear independent of the other, instead of mutually contributing towards an overall effect. A similar outcome occurs in the pointillistic eighth movement which does not develop any clear rhythmic alignment or melody. Rather than adding a sense of forward motion or growing change within the piece, the sense of ambivalence itself reflects another aspect of Rzewski's perspective on life and mortality in the music.

The final movement and epilogue both contain significant compositional departures from the rest of the piece. With the exception of brief, optional cadenzas in the tenth section, only the "devil" transition sections up to this point had incorporated improvisational elements. In the eleventh section, Rzewski combines improvisation with polytonality by allowing each player to play any of the polytonal lines he provides, dropping out or changing lines ad lib.[24] Compared to other sections in the piece, the effect is closer to more ambiguous episodes like the third movement and leads to an inconclusive end. In the epilogue for piano solo, Rzewski combines

[24] Rzewski, *Knight, Death, and Devil* 29.



Example 16: *10 War Songs*, No. 10, identical to "Epilogue" of *Knight, Death, and Devil*, m. 1-3. Copyright 2008 by Frederic Rzewski, All Rights Reserved.

all six themes into a quiet, flowing, but almost pointillistic texture (Example 16). Lacking any stable melody, fragments of songs rise then fade into the background, as if lost and unable to find a clear sense of direction. The sudden loss of instruments and the melancholy tone creates a sense of emptiness, confusion and grief as it brings the work to a close. Although Rzewski does not directly portray the conflict that led to this state, the final, tragic outcome is clear.

Many of these same strategies can be found in Rzewski's earlier work *Bring them Home!* from 2004. Based on his solo piano variation set *Johnny has Gone for a Soldier*, Rzewski first composed a version for two pianos and percussion (which he premiered together with Ursula Oppens) before expanding it for small ensemble. This work follows a more traditional theme-and-variations form, incorporating polytonality and other styles in a series of episodes.

However, like the transitions in *KDD*, Rzewski includes unexpected instrumental solos and moments for improvisation that break the flow of the piece. In the middle of the work, one particularly bare, minor quotation of "Taps" serves a similar dramatic function to the broken plates in *KDD* as it initiates the onset of vocal effects and increasing dissonance.[25] Through these effects, this piece also avoids a strong goal-oriented path, building up local climaxes and moments of transvaluation but ending, in Rzewski's words, "inconclusive[ly], just like the ongoing war now."[26] These similarities reflect some of the consistent approaches in Rzewski's recent explorations in variation-based form.

Conclusion

In *Knight, Death, and Devil*, Rzewski combines linear narrative strategies from his variation pieces with his anti-narrative improvisational composition techniques to create a nonlinear narrative form that follows a loose overarching trajectory but not along a continuous path of transvaluation. This type of form emphasizes discontinuities and ambiguity as well as traditional expressive sequences of cause-and-effect, making it an ideal approach to communicate Rzewski's complex philosophical views on war and the nature of reality. Some of these ideas date back to the early 1990s, when Rzewski's first exploration of improvisational composition coincided with the onset of the Gulf War and the composition of his *Sonata*. Rzewski applies this approach, studied here in the two related works *Knight, Death, and Devil* and *War Songs*, in other Iraq War works based on folk songs such as in *Bring them Home!* and

[25] Rzewski, *Bring them Home!* for two pianos and percussion 50, for small ensemble 35. IMSLP website, accessed November 11, 2013, http://imslp.org/wiki/Bring_Them_Home_(Rzewski,_Frederic).
[26] Rzewski, Program notes for *Johnny has Gone for a Soldier* (2003). In *Nonsequiturs* 544.

Johnny has Gone for a Soldier. This hybrid of styles represents Rzewski's current approach to theme-and-variation form.

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