

and beautifully, and thrills in "The Lord is my shepherd." Baritone Michael Mayes excels as a gruff and world-weary Col. Thompson.

Conductor Tyson Deaton keeps the dramatic tension high and the forward motion strong, not letting the stream-of-consciousness and nonlinear aspects of the opera sidetrack him; he was ably assisted by the nine soloists in the pit.

Glory Denied is a nontraditional opera that delivers the gripping drama we expect from a traditional one. And for those who still buy physical compacts discs, you'll be pleased to know this is a full-length opera that's just short enough to fit on one disc.

Frederic Rzewski's THE PEOPLE UNITED WILL NEVER BE DEFEATED

Four Reviews
By Andrew Violette

Ursula Oppens The People United Will Never Be Defeated

[Vanguard Classics OVC 8056]

Marc-Andre Hamelin 36 Variations on "The People United Will Never Be Defeated"

[Hyperion CDA67077]

Yuji Takahashi The People United Will Never Be Defeated

[ALM ALCD 49]

Ole Kiilerich The People United Will Never Be Defeated

[Bridge 9392]

The People United theme emerged from the United Popular Coalition in Chile (1969-1973) before the overthrow of the Salvador Allende government. Frederic Rzewski composed the piece (September to October 1975) as a tribute to the Chilean people.

According to the composer's program notes, "*The People United* is a series of 6 cycles, each of which consists of 6 stages, in which different musical relationships appear in order: 1) Simple events 2) Rhythms 3) Melodies 4) Counterpoints 5) Harmonies 6) Combinations of all these. Each of the larger cycles develops a character suggested by the individual stage to which it corresponds, so that the third cycle is lyrical, the fourth tends toward conflict, the fifth toward simultaneity

(the fifth also being the freest), and the sixth recapitulates, in such a way that the first stage is a summary of all the preceding first stages, the second a summary of the second stages, and so on.

Two songs, aside from the theme itself, appear at various points: the Italian revolutionary song *Bandiera Rossa*, in reference to the Italian people who in the seventies opened their doors to so many refugees from Chilean fascism; and Hans Eisler's 1932 antifascist *Solidaritätslied*, a reminder that "parallels to present threats exist in the past and that it is important to learn from them."

So there we are: 36 bars to the theme, 36 variations, in 6 groups of 6.

In *American Music in the 20th Century* Kyle Gann notes that *The People United* has "a range of styles that encompasses jazz, modal quasi-improvisation, serialist fragmentation, minimalist patterns, Romantic climaxes, and Ivesian texture layering." Everyone wants to play the piece. There are many recordings. Here's an overview of the interpretations of 5 very different approaches:

Ursula Oppens came out with the premiere recording of the piece. Rzewski wrote it for her. (She commissioned it as a companion piece to Beethoven's *Diabelli Variations*, premiered it in 1976 and recorded the piece in 1979.) She has formidable technique.

But that's a given for all internationally-known pianists. What is uniquely hers and what she uniquely brings to the table is decades of experience working with composers, decades of intimate pianistic knowledge of contemporary music.

As you would expect, this first recording probably remains truest to the score. Through the Oppens-lens every bar, every passage, every section serves the greater good of the whole. Everything comes together to create a unified performance of structural integrity. This general faithfulness to the score and faithfulness to the spirit of the composer is so integral to her performance that her playing on the CD seems like....."well, that's just the way the piece goes".

In the first variations (*weaving: delicate but firm*) Oppens keeps a tight rein on the pedal. You can hear this in the crisp staccatos, well manicured

phrases and even tempo throughout. The fifth variation (*dreamlike, frozen*) is played with very careful and subtle extended-technique pedal effects (the pedal catches the after vibrations of loud attacks as harmonics).

The CD sound is somewhat drier over-all than Marc Andre-Hamelin's version but the miking is just as close. (Killerich's version tends to be in the middle. The Hamelin is very wet, ultra-resonant and very closely and luxuriously miked. Takahashi's miking almost doesn't matter – so forceful is his presentation.)

Oppens's interpretation remains an introspective, somewhat understated performance. She tends to flatten the climaxes but she also plays close attention to the details.

In variation 7 (*lightly, impatiently*) she nails the breezy scherzando quality and plays it like a Conlon Nancarrow piano roll.

In the ninth variation there's a real contrast between *pp* and *ppp* and a true differentiation between the *una corda pedal* and the *tre corde pedal* passages. In general she plays all this with clarity and pristine grace. All the lines are differentiated although juxtaposed. Nothing gets in the way of delineating the structure. We hear this contrapuntal integrity work itself out in variation 13.

(I believe her careful attention to contrapuntal line is the result of her work with Elliott Carter. As a Carter student myself, I can personally attest that he was a stickler for maintaining the independence of lines by means of dynamic and textural variation.)

Unexpectedly for a classically trained pianist, she's the only one of the five pianists who plays variations 14 (*a bit faster, optimistically*) and 15 (*flexible, like an improvisation*) with a true jazz touch (that is, with an uninflected, *off the cuff* phrasing). She skillfully cuts between *sotto voce* fingered staccato phrases and *on the surface* fingered legato.

In the next variation, 16, (*same tempo as preceding, with fluctuations*) she holds back on the big *fortissimo* moment (*expansive, with a victorious feeling*). She doesn't let the grand gesture impede the flow of the over-all form.

Variations 19 (*with energy*) and 20 (*crisp, precise*) are so clear that every note is set like the facets of a diamond. The trill section in variation 21 (*relentless, uncompromising*)

is so concise you'd think it was a piano roll. And she's the only one of the five pianists who plays the true length (all 30") of the cadential repeated tremolo with both hands. (It's a B flat three octaves above middle C – *accelerando* going to a *ritardando* and, at the same time, a *ff crescendo-ing* to *ffff* then *decrescendo-ing* to a *PPPP*)

In variation 26 (*in a militant manner*), which she plays like Shostokovich, she gets the long, upward arch of the unwavering melodic line toward the midpoint of variation 27 (*tenderly, and with a hopeful expression*). Here her *piano* is always a true *piano*; her *forte* is always a true *forte*. Her *mezzo-forte* is perfectly mezzo-forte.

But she's not self-indulgent. She doesn't get caught up in the pianistic moment. Therefore, in variation 28, in the yearning mezzo-forte passage, I wanted her to take a more soaring, romantic approach – but she eschews that as superfluous. Of course, she's right.

Variation 32, technically hairy, is flawlessly executed; ditto the big double-octaves in variation 36. As one would expect from such a classic approach ("just the facts, mister.") Oppens doesn't take the optional five minute cadenza at the end of the thirty sixth variation (right before the recap of the main theme). She's not a composer. Yet her phrases up to that point are so well timed that variation 36 flows into the recap like... "well, of course, that's the way it's supposed to be played."

Her version comes in at a little under 50 minutes.

I respect Ursula Oppens's performance. But I love Marc Andre Hamelin's. He's the pianist's pianist who plays the big war-horses in the grand manner, a brainy Lang Lang.

He's made his name with his seminal recordings of Sorabji, Godowsky and Alkan. He plays these knuckle-breaking works with considerable power and spot-on accuracy. Eventually he branched out from a specialist of the lesser known high-romantic composers (Roslavets, Catoire, Medtner) to a pianist interpreting the moderns, including Frederic Rzewski.

As a composer he's under-rated. Every student pianist ought to learn Hamelin's *Etudes*, just as they learn the Chopin and the Ligeti *Etudes* in their little cubicles.

Listen on YouTube: there's a piece of his for player piano called *Circus Galop*. It's a Coney Island Cyclone: a hair-raising Godowsky-on-steroids-meets-Nancarrow-on-steroids.

Typically for him, Hamelin plays the opening *The People United* theme with a romantic sweep. His first variation is less dry than Oppens's. The over-all sound is rich, deep, resonant. The piano is very closely miked. The reverb is carnal.

He plays variation 3 (*with expressive nuances – sustaining some notes ad lib beyond notated durations*) with big pedal. Hamelin clearly takes to heart the Busoni maxim: The pedal is the heart of the piano. Hamelin pedals with unusual finesse.

Variations 6 and 7 are a Friedman's *Music Box* of sound, with dramatic contrast between the *f tree corde* chords and the *pp una corda* chords.

Though variation 8 (*with agility; not too much pedal; crisp*) is not as clear as the Oppens, he makes the piano ring out with great color, like Horowitz.

His massive glissandi sweeps in variation 10 (*comodo, recklessly*) are like molten chocolate. Lisztian are the repeated notes and trills.

He takes many more agogic accents than Oppens in variation 13. His trills are intense and lightning-fast. The cadenza which closes the variation is like a page out of the slow movement of Ives's *Concord*.

In the fifteenth variation, like Ursula Oppens, every note is carefully placed but here each note is also pearly. Hamelin is a master of color.

He builds to a tremendous climax in variation 16 – but without any bombast. Then goes on to give a real musical arch in the freely improvisatory right hand of variation 17.

Suddenly, another thunderous climax in the following variation and, just as suddenly, he backs off to a mezzo-forte. This is pianistic male preening in the concert jungle: accomplished, exciting, in your face.

Variation 19 brings a wetter sound, particularly in the hugely-resonating live silences. In the Hamelin version of variation 20-21 each Rachmaninov-phrase is grunted out toward a frenetic climax in variation 23

(as fast as possible, with some rubato).

He thrillingly executes the Bb cadenza in variation 24 and, in the twenty-fifth variation, he catches more of the after-note harmonics than Oppens. He comes down on the pedal a millisecond sooner. This is a good example of the difference between the two: the Oppens and the Hamelin approach.

Variation 27 sees a poetic, Schumann-esque interpretation with big aggregates of sound yet also intimate *sotto voce* effects. (By the way, he's the only performer to ad lib a four-measure repeat [page 62 of the score] in this variation.)

Witness the subtle, almond-rich color of variation 28. Observe how finely he shapes the Chopin-like grace-note phrases in the opening of variation 30. Hear how he works toward a massive cadenza in variation 31.

In variation 35 the thirty-second note octaves and chordal passages are so sharp it gave meaning to the phrase "It took my breath away" while perusing the score. Yet he dares to play the very slow chordal section ending variation 36 very, very slowly and with a haunting majesty.

He takes the cadenza, of course. After all, he's a composer/pianist of considerable heft. Given his reputation as the man-with-the-chops one would have thought he would have taken the virtuosic route. But no, this is a poetic and introspective contrast to all that has come before.

He opens with sustained whole-tone harmonies, uncommon to the Rzewski palette, which eventually give way to the theme in the bass in massive chords. These are contrasted with clouds of swirling high notes – soft, in the mid-range of the piano. He recaps much of the Russian Constructivist march material, though with altered rhythms and chords. He layers mountains of glissandi, heavy bass trills and tremolos, all in full pianistic sonority. *Subito piano!* and back into the Theme recap without missing a beat. It's just another Hamelin rabbit-out-of-hat trick.

On *YouTube* there's a video of Frederic Rzewski's own performance, played live from a score with very tiny notes and no page turner. Yes, it's got a few passages which are fluffed but hey! it's a live performance. The piano is ultra-bright. Watching the video, it

seemed as if he played the whole piece as one long improv. I also noticed that he tends to play with a flatter hand than most, almost approaching Glenn Gould, though his piano stool is at normal height.

In the first variation the composer disregards many of the staccatos opting for a strongly rhythmic interpretation. The *molto marcato* effect is striking.

He plays variation 3 with more rubato than anyone else. In general he takes more rhythmic freedom than anyone else. But, once again, it's a live performance. It can't be compared with the edited CDs and, after all, he *is* the composer.

At the end of the fourth variation the difference between *broadening slightly to a little slower, violently to gathering speed and finally poco rit* is greatly marked. I could hear these things. (He slows down the tempo.)

Of all the pianists he's the least broad in his dynamic differentiation, the least interested in touch for the sake of touch. He doesn't need it. He plays like no one else.

When, in variation 11, he slams the keyboard lid while he's playing a chord (he and Kiilerich are the only ones to do this) it's a spectacular, jarring effect.

Of all the pianists, in Rzewski's hands the fifteenth variation really does sound like the improvisation it was meant to be.

And, though he takes the next variation considerably slower than anyone else, I began to hear things I didn't hear in the other performances: the way all the voices came together in a prog-jazz sound. He played the upwardly arpeggiated chords in a downright cranky manner.

He takes more agogic accents than anyone else. This is really evident in the climax of variation 18.

Variation 20 is the slowest, most laid-back, almost a non-virtuosic interpretation. The slow chords ending variation 24 are the slowest of slow with daringly long fermatas. This man takes risks.

Of course he takes a cadenza. Upward *marcato* (then *dolce*) perfect fourths in all registers sound with triadic harmonies. Then there's a mid-range of two, sometimes three, partly chordal but mostly contrapuntal motivic reworking on the

themes. It's surprisingly austere for a cadenza. Then down a spiral of circular fifths he goes, finishing with a grand account of the theme in left hand octaves and strongly accented phrases. *Diminuendo poco a poco*, *morendo* to a fine pp, he cadences on an almost imperceptible, off the cuff, dominant to tonic link to the recap. He plays the recap theme nonchalantly, almost like an after-thought.

It's riveting.

Yuji Takahashi gives a wild, instantly recognizable performance of the piece, which he recorded in 1978. Like Hamelin, Takahashi's a composer/pianist. He studied with Xenakis (who wrote *Herma* and *Eonta* for the pianist). As a composer he has followed his teacher's stochastic procedures. Takahashi was definitely part of the European Kontarsky/Tudor crowd in the 60s and 70s – exponents of the most difficult of the difficult new music. He has recorded the complete piano works of the Second Viennese School. He's recorded the complete piano music of Messiaen, Roger Reynolds, Satie, Zorn, and Gubaidulina. In the early 60s he premiered the big Toru Takemitsu works: *Piano Distance*, *Corona*, and *Arc*.

From the way he first plays the theme to the way he leads right into the carefully crafted first variation, you get a sense of a non-fussy but driving interpretation of great sweep.

Variation 2 has a real firmness. He plays the technically challenging middle-section of the third variation like it's nothing. This guy's got chops to spare.

I was struck by the no-pedal clarity of variation 6. Again and again he achieves structural sense by an even tempo. You can hear the recap of all that came before it in variation 5.

He plays the tenth variation Berio *Sequenza* style: no nonsense, rhythmically dead-on.

He never whistles, slams the lid or gives out a cry. They're all optional anyway and the Japanese pianist/composer will have none of those American histrionics.

In variations 13 and 14 he highlights what's necessary and subdues everything else – just as you would play Sorabji.

Finally, variation 15 really does sound like a jazz improv.

He passes through the big moments in variation 16 neither slowing down nor speeding up. He not so much ignores the high pianistic points as tames them with his unyielding, dance-like beat.

Whereas Oppens's interpretation says *This is the way it's supposed to be played*, and Hamelin's interpretation says *Look at this! Look at this! Look at this!*, Takahashi's playing proclaims *This is the way I see the variations linking up. Deal with it. Startling!* You really hear all these things – the steady beat, the dead-on accuracy, the forceful interpretation – in variations 20-23. He takes the repeated notes incredibly fast. It's all extremely virtuosic but without calling attention to itself. And it's extremely musically coherent. This guy's an animal.

Like the composer, Takahashi plays the slow section before variations 25 daringly slow, with daringly long pauses.

The minimalist section in A minor (from variation 27) is more deliberate than most, with an inner expression, and crystal clear. When the opening material recaps it's obvious. You can hear it. So unified is his conception of the piece that it's as if the form just falls into place of its own accord.

He gives the twenty-eighth variation a golden glow.

The manic variation 34 has a controlled intensity.

It's said he improvised the cadenza on the spot during the recording. It's an Ivesian collage, filled with pedal effects and Skriabin-like trills. It's not long, more like an extended fermata.

He slips smoothly into the recap which he plays with a verve almost like a tune by Gershwin.

That was the last period before the pianist changed his career profile. Yuji Takahashi writes:

"I think there is a time when one has to do certain things, not only in life, but also in music. In the 1960s, I was one of very few pianists in Europe who played Xenakis, Boulez, Messiaen and Cage. I translated and published Xenakis' book, Maceda's book, introduced Gubaidulina to Japan. Now

other people take over. I consider myself a pioneer. As Mao the poet said in his "Ode to the Plum Tree": "not competing for spring/ only calling that it is coming/when mountain flowers are in full bloom/be among them smiling". Now many people play them so I don't have to do those works anymore. It should be so - music will be passed to the new generation. If the same people had continued to play the same music, those works would not survive."

This brings us to the new generation, Danish pianist Ole Kilderich, recorded on Bridge. He studied with Ursula Oppens and Seymour Lipkin and his work reflects this. It's carefully delineated with sharp attention to details.

He plays the opening theme with the least swinging triplet (the composer's is the most), almost matter-of-fact.

He's careful in variation 2, not as dry as Oppens but drier in sound than the Hamelin recording. In general, I'd characterize his work as mid-range. On this CD the mic seems further away than the others. It lacks "bite." The Steinway D sounds a bit dull in the lower register. I would have wanted the piano's upper register tuned somewhat more bright. The sound sometimes seems over-processed.

I also would have liked a more sustained cantabile in the upper register in variation 3. The seventh variation is nicely played with a very light, very clear sound.

The more placid variation 8 lacks energy and forward impulse.

And why did he have to lift the pedal before the start of variation 9? In general he views each variation as a discrete entity whereas the others link all the variations in an ascending arc.

Variation 10 is more solid, less playful than Rzewski's live performance and considerably less virtuosic than Hamelin's.

He's the only pianist other than the composer who slams the lid down in variation 11 and the only pianist to emit the optional vocal cry. It's truly terrifying. It's unforgettable. (He cries out again in variation 35 and it's still startling.) He's the only pianist to take the optional sung middle C in the same variation 35. Of all the pianists he shapes the optional whistling the best. I love the portamento that

ends his whistle-phrase. Of all the pianists he's probably the most comfortable with these extra-curricular effects, as if he grew up with them, which he did.

It's slightly muddy and slow in the midpoint of variation 13 and the moderate tempo variation 15 is almost too carefully placed. There's a nice pianissimo in the next variation, phrases shaped almost as if he were playing Skriabin. But the groupings in the seventeenth variation lacked the impulse to move ahead and I heard almost no differentiation of touch.

I wanted more accentuation throughout, more rhythmic drive in the nineteenth variation – though it was certainly accurate. But he nicely shapes the *crescendo – decrescendo quasi tremolo* in variation 21 and solidly brings out the theme in variation 20.

Kilderich takes the cadenza. It opens with static, triadic harmony in the bass. He juxtaposes this with colorful upper register configurations. This leads to an opening-up of mid-range, two part counterpoint with double and triple trills. This leads to a Bartokian low, staccato version of the *People United* theme which eventually gives way to a romantically arpeggiated left hand with right hand Rachmaninov-chords. Back he goes again to the 2 part counterpoint in a final "album leaf" moment. It's a tapestry of glittering chords, dynamics and attacks which flows nicely into the final recap of the theme.

Generally, he plays as if he wants to get everything right. Sometimes I get the feeling that he does not quite understand how one phrase builds upon another, how one phrase links to the next. It's as if he longs so much to be a good citizen, to get every separate phrase perfect, that he forgets how they link up to the whole big picture.

Then there are the occasions when the timing is woefully off. For instance, does there really have to be such a gap between variations 5 and 6? Likewise, the pause before variation 33 is so long the piece comes to a dead stop.

Timing problems don't happen with the other pianists. Oppens, Hamelin, Takahashi and Rzewski: they're all older, more seasoned. They are all big personalities with each a distinct point of view sharpened by decades long dog-fighting in the concert hall.