

Northwestern University

HENRY AND LEIGH  
BIENEN SCHOOL OF MUSIC

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**Frederic Rzewski's**

**The People United Will Never Be Defeated!**

Ursula Oppens and Jerome Lowenthal, *piano*

*with*

Students of the Bienen School of Music Piano Program

MARY B. GALVIN RECITAL HALL  
2025–26 SEASON

# **The People United Will Never Be Defeated!**

Ursula Oppens and Jerome Lowenthal, *piano*

FRIDAY, DECEMBER 5, 2025, AT 7:30 P.M.

***Twelve Blocks for one piano, four hands***

**Michael Stephen Brown**

(b. 1987)

**Conversation with Ursula Oppens and Jerome Lowenthal**

James Giles, *moderator*

INTERMISSION

***The People United Will Never Be Defeated!***

**Frederic Rzewski**

(1938–2021)

*Theme*

Jerome Lowenthal

*Variation 1—Weaving: delicate but firm*

Issay Niki

*Variation 2—With firmness*

Dirk Sun

*Variation 3—Slightly slower with expressive nuances*

Anya Liu

*Variation 4—Marcato*

Yance Zheng

*Variation 5—Dreamlike, frozen*

Sunmin Shin

*Variation 6—Same tempo as beginning*

Becca Harrison

*Variation 7—Tempo (Lightly, impatiently)*

Kenneth He

*Variation 8—With agility; not too much pedal; crisp*

Josh Lee

*Variation 9—Evenly*

Grace Ruisi Dong

*Variation 10—Comodo, recklessly*

Paul Williamson

- Variation 11—Tempo I, Like fragments of an absent melody—in strict time*  
Isaiah Adams
- Variation 12*  
Tian Tang
- Variation 13—Quarter Note = 72 or slightly faster*  
Saifei Wang
- Variation 14—A bit faster, optimistically*  
Andy Wu
- Variation 15—Flexible, like an improvisation*  
Connor Sung
- Variation 16—Same tempo as preceding, with fluctuations*  
Marie Wurtz
- Variation 17—L.H. strictly 36 to half note, R.H. freely, roughly as in space*  
Kyungmin Yang
- Variation 18*  
Annie Li
- Variation 19—With Energy*  
Amy Bao
- Variation 20—Crisp, precise*  
Justin Wang
- Variation 21—Relentless, uncompromising*  
Gregory Martin
- Variation 22—Quarter Note = 132*  
Sinhwa Lee
- Variation 23—As fast as possible, with some rubato*  
Ben Kim
- Variation 24—Quarter Note = 72*  
Hannah Zhang
- Variation 25—Quarter Note = ca. 84, with fluctuations*  
Jeremy Lee
- Variation 26—Quarter Note = 168 In a militant manner*  
Dominic Doutney
- Variation 27—Quarter Note = 72 Tenderly, and with a hopeful expression*  
Cameron Akioka
- Variation 28—Quarter Note = 160*  
Anthony Reznikovsky
- Variation 29—Quarter Note = 144-152*  
Erin Yu
- Variation 30—Quarter Note = 84*  
Robert Levinger

*Variation 31—Quarter Note = 106*

*Variation 32*

*Variation 33*

*Variation 34*

*Variation 35*

*Variation 36*

Ursula Oppens

*Cadenza (optional improvisation)*

Jerome Lowenthal

*Theme—Tempo I*

Ursula Oppens

*Special thanks to Stephen Alltop, Vincent Ip, and Seho Young.*

## PROFILES

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Widely admired for her original and perceptive readings of new music and the standard repertoire, **Ursula Oppens** has premiered and/or commissioned works by John Adams, Luciano Berio, Carla Bley, Anthony Braxton, Elliott Carter, John Corigliano, Anthony Davis, Julius Hemphill, John Harbison, Laura Kaminsky, György Ligeti, Witold Lutosławski, Conlon Nancarrow, Tobias Picker, Charles Wuorinen, and many more.

With five Grammy nominations to her credit, Oppens established her reputation early on with a classic recording of Frederic Rzewski's *The People United Will Never Be Defeated!* She has released *Piano Songs*, music by Meredith Monk, with pianist Bruce Brubaker; *Winging It: Piano Music of John Corigliano*; *Oppens Plays Carter* (complete Elliott Carter piano works); *Piano Music of Our Time*; *Keys to the City* (complete Tobias Picker piano music); and, with pianist Jerome Lowenthal, *Visions de l'Amen* by Messiaen and Debussy's *En blanc et noir*.

As guest soloist, Oppens has performed with the New York Philharmonic, Los Angeles Philharmonic, Berlin Symphony, and London Philharmonic Orchestras, among others, and has collaborated with the Arditti, Cassatt, Juilliard, and Pacifica quartets. In addition to *The People United Will Never be Defeated!* and *Friendship*, Rzewski wrote the following pieces for Oppens: *Four Pieces for Piano*, *Mayn Yingele*, the two-piano version of *The Winnsboro Cotton Mill Blues*, *Moonrise with Memories*, and *A Machine*.

Oppens teaches at Mannes College, and is a Distinguished Professor of Music at Brooklyn College and the CUNY Graduate Center in New York City. In 2019, Oppens was awarded an honorary doctorate from the New England Conservatory.

Born in 1932, **Jerome Lowenthal** continues to fascinate audiences, who find in his playing a combination of youthful intensity and eloquence born of life experience. He is a virtuoso of the fingers and emotions.

Lowenthal studied in his native Philadelphia with Olga Samaroff-Stokowski, in New York with William Kapell and Edward Steuermann, and in Paris with Alfred Cortot, meanwhile traveling annually to Los Angeles for coachings with Artur Schnabel. After winning prizes in three international competitions (Bolzano, Darmstadt, and Brussels), he moved to Jerusalem, where he played, taught, and lectured for three years.

Returning to America, he made his debut with the New York Philharmonic playing Bartók's Second Piano Concerto in 1963. Since then, he has performed virtually everywhere, from the Aleutians to Zagreb. He has appeared as soloist with celebrated conductors including Daniel Barenboim, Seiji Ozawa, Michael Tilson Thomas, Yuri Temirkanov, Leonard Slatkin, and with such giants of the past as Leonard Bernstein, Eugene Ormandy, Pierre Monteux, and Leopold Stokowski. Lowenthal has played sonatas with Itzhak Perlman; piano duos with Ronit Amir (his late wife), Carmel Lowenthal (his daughter), and Ursula Oppens; and quintets with the Lark, Avalon, and Brentano Quartets. He recorded *Two-Piano Music of Messiaen and Debussy* with Oppens and the complete *Années de pèlerinage* of Liszt in a 3 CD set released in November 2010. Other recordings include concertos by Tchaikovsky and Liszt, solo works by Sinding and Bartók, and chamber music by Arensky and Taneyev.

Teaching is an important part of Lowenthal's musical life, including thirty-four years at the Juilliard School and several decades at the Music Academy of the West. Lowenthal has worked with an extraordinary number of gifted pianists, whom he encourages to understand the music they play from a wide aesthetic and cultural perspective—and to project it with the freedom which that perspective allows.

## PROGRAM NOTES

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### ***Twelve Blocks for one piano, four hands***

**Brown**

*Twelve Blocks* (2021), for one piano, four hands with spoken poetry, is inspired by the special bond between Ursula Oppens and Jerome Lowenthal. During the pandemic, Jerry's daily ritual included walking twelve blocks to visit Ursula while reciting poetry along the way. This narrative inspired my composition.

*Twelve Blocks* begins with a line from Paul Verlaine's "Green set against a walking bass line" (Voici des fruits, des fleurs, des feuilles et des branches/ Here are fruit, flowers, leaves and branches). The work moves along in brief contrasting sections, punctuated by bell-like chords that illustrate each of the twelve blocks. Later, Keats' "Endymion" leads into a Lisztian episode, followed by Verlaine's "Clair de lune," Marvell's "The Garden," and Keats' "Ode to a Nightingale." The poems interact with the music, collectively evoking nature, pilgrimage, and ultimately the significance the words hold for both Ursula and Jerry. The acrobatic pianism at times requires intricate choreography of the four hands—effortlessly embraced by Ursula and Jerry.

Written for my mentors, Jerome Lowenthal and Ursula Oppens, *Twelve Blocks* aims to be a heartfelt and, I hope, amusing tribute to them.

—Michael Stephen Brown (2024)

### ***The People United Will Never Be Defeated!***

**Rzewski**

With the formation in Chile of the Unidad Popular in 1969 and the leftist coalition under Salvadore Allende, there emerged a new cultural movement of remarkable vitality. Its music drew on the resources of both indigenous folk and classical traditions, and conservatory-trained musicians took part together with folk singers. Melodies of popular songs might be harmonized in new, experimental ways and structured with the refinements of distinctive compositions. On the other hand, folk instruments, many of which are native Indian, would be used in compositions based on classical models. The resources of the Western classical tradition were put to use for a music that was truly popular—without being either simplistically primitive or commercially meretricious. The underlying force of this cultural movement was a commitment to the struggle for the socialist transformation of Chile. Frederic Rzewski's piano piece, comprising 36 variations, is a tribute to this

cultural movement and a musical expression of solidarity with the forces and traditions that inspired and helped shape it. The composition, dated September–October 1975, is dedicated to Ursula Oppens. The song on which the variations are based was written by Sergio Ortega and Quilapayún; it is probably the best-known product of the Chilean New Song Movement. After the coup in 1973, in which Augusto Pinochet toppled Allende's leftist coalition and replaced it with his dictatorship, this song became a kind of international anthem of the Chilean resistance. In 1991, Pinochet's repressive regime was replaced by Chile's current democratically elected government.

In the context of Rzewski's own musical background, these variations represent a noteworthy development. Both as a pianist and composer he had been closely involved in the avant-garde and experimental movements of the 1960s. He had worked with, among others, Pierre Boulez, Karlheinz Stockhausen, and John Cage. By the early 1970s, however (at about the same time as a number of other composers associated with the avant garde, including Cornelius Cardew), Rzewski started writing music with political subjects, notably the powerful *Coming Together*. This music included elements that recalled rock and the music of Terry Riley, Philip Glass, and Steve Reich (open, diatonic or modal sonorities, a steady beat, electric instruments). But because of the political texts associated with it, it expressed a distinctive urgency. It was also at about this time that Rzewski, after considerable experience with improvisation as a soloist and in the group Musica Elettronica Viva, began to associate with jazz musicians such as Anthony Braxton and Steve Lacy. Concurrently, he developed an interest in popular political music, including songs of the Italian left (he had been living much of the time since the 1960s in Rome) and of German socialist Hanns Eisler, the new Latin American music from Cuba and Chile, Puerto Rican folk music in New York, and the songs of Mike Glick.

In the variations many of these elements come together, along with yet others, in a remarkable amalgam. The expansiveness of the piece's structure, the virtuosity of the piano writing, and the use of tonal harmony, all bear some resemblance to Romantic piano music. Yet the large dimension, based on a carefully worked out, intricate underlying structure, also suggests features of avant-garde writing—and many recall the elaborate formal arrangement of Bach's *Goldberg Variations*. The piano writing includes explorations of new sonorities, uses of harmonics after a chord attack, whistling by the pianist, crying out, and slamming the piano lid—all techniques suggesting experi-



mental music and the free, informal kind of performing sometimes found in blues and jazz. Tonality too is of modal writing and the serial-like organization of sets of variations around restricted interval combinations. There are also suggestions of Rzewski's jazz-related piano improvising.

The opening song is set in thirty-six bars, which are followed by thirty-six variations and then an expanded repetition of the song setting. Throughout the variations there is a continuous cross-referencing of motifs, harmonic procedures, rhythms, and dynamic sequences. These in turn are contained within the organization of the variations. The variations are grouped in six sets of six. The sixth variation of a set, itself in six parts, consists of a summing up of the previous five variations, with a final sixth part of new or transitional material. (It has been suggested that the first five variations of a set make up the fingers of a hand, and the sixth unites them to make a fist.) This procedure is followed rigorously throughout the first four sets of six variations; each of the variations is 24 bars plus a final four bars of new material. In the fifth set of variations (tracks 26-31), there is some expansion at the third variation; cadenza material appears and the articulation of individual variations is less self-contained, though the sixth variation of the set again clarifies by uniting what preceded. Finally, the sixth set of variations (tracks 32 through 37) becomes a gathering together of elements of all the preceding 30 variations—the overall structure of its constituent parts. In this sixth set, the variation draws together, in units of four bars each, elements of the first variation of the first set, the first of the second set, the first of the third, and so on. The second to fifth variations of this last set proceed similarly. In the sixth variation of the set, the 36th and last of the entire piece, the preceding five variations of this last set proceed similarly. In the sixth variation of the preceding 30 variations, elements of each variation are now compressed into a fraction of a bar. Technically, this is a kind of *stretto*, the procedure in a fugue that brings the entrances of individual voices closer and closer together, although here the voices (or elements of individual variations) are not overlaid but compressed and juxtaposed in increasingly rapid sequence. The effect is of extraordinary intensification, which, by virtue of the logic of repetition, provides both a clarification and unification. The movement of the whole piece is towards a new unity—an image of popular unity—made up of related but diverse, developing elements (not to be confused with uniformity) coordinated and achieved by a blend of irresistible logic and spontaneous expression.

—Christian Wolff

## TEXT AND TRANSLATION

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### *El Pueblo Unido*

*El pueblo unido jamás será vencido,  
el pueblo unido jamás será vencido...*

The people united will never be defeated,  
The people united will never be defeated...

*De pie, cantar que vamos a triunfar.  
Avanzan ya  
banderas de unidad.  
Y tú vendrás  
marchando junto a mí  
y así verás  
tu canto y tu bandera florecer,  
la luz  
de un rojo amanecer  
anuncia ya  
la vida que vendrá.*

Arise, sing we are going to win.  
Flags of unity  
are now advancing.  
And you will come  
marching together with me,  
and so you'll see  
your song and your flag blossom.  
The light  
of a red dawn  
already announces  
the life to come.

*De pie, luchar  
el pueblo va a triunfar.  
Será mejor  
la vida que vendrá  
a conquistar  
nuestra felicidad  
y en un clamor  
mil voces de combate se alzarán  
dirán  
canción de libertad  
con decisión  
la patria vencerá.*

Arise, fight  
the people are going to win.  
The life to come  
will be better.  
To conquer  
our happiness.  
and a clamor  
of a thousand fighting voices will rise,  
speaking  
a song of freedom.  
With determination  
the fatherland will win.

*Y ahora el pueblo  
que se alza en la lucha  
con voz de gigante  
gritando: ¡adelante!*

And now the people,  
who are rising in struggle  
with a giant voice  
crying out: Forward!

*El pueblo unido jamás será vencido,  
el pueblo unido jamás será vencido...*

The people united will never be defeated,  
The people united will never be defeated...

*La patria está  
forjando la unidad  
de norte a sur  
se movilizará  
desde el salar  
ardiente y mineral  
al bosque austral  
unidos en la lucha y el trabajo  
irán  
la patria cubrirán,  
su paso ya  
anuncia el porvenir.*

*De pie, cantar  
el pueblo va a triunfar  
millones ya,  
imponen la verdad,  
de acero son  
ardiente batallón  
sus manos van  
llevando la justicia y la razón  
mujer  
con fuego y con valor  
ya estás aquí  
junto al trabajador.*

The fatherland is  
forging unity,  
from north to south  
they're mobilizing.  
From the salt mines  
burning and mineral  
to the southern forests  
united in struggle and labor  
they go  
covering the fatherland.  
Their steps already  
Announce the future.

Arise, sing  
the people are going to win  
millions now  
are imposing the truth  
Their steel battalions  
are on fire,  
taking in their hands  
justice and reason.  
Woman  
with fire and courage  
is already here  
Alongside the worker.

*–Sergio Ortega*

## CONCERT MANAGEMENT OFFICE STAFF

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## KEYBOARD MAINTENANCE

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Supervisor of Keyboard Maintenance	Wesley Owen
Piano Technician	Chris Scroggins

## FOR YOUR INFORMATION

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- Latecomers will be seated at the discretion of the house manager. In consideration of the artists and other members of the audience, patrons who must leave before the end of the concert are asked to do so between pieces.
- Photography and audio/video recording of performances is strictly prohibited without prior written consent of the Concert Management Office.
- A limited number of assisted listening devices are available for the hearing impaired. Inquire at the box office.
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