

URSULA OPPENS, PIANO



Artist Partner Program and Michelle Smith Performing Arts Library present

URSULA OPPENS, PIANO

*Presented as part of the International Piano Archives at Maryland
50th Anniversary Celebration*

Thursday, February 4, 2016 . 8PM
Joseph & Alma Gildenhorn Recital Hall

PROGRAM

LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN

Sonata No. 32 in C Minor, Op. 111

Maestoso — Allegro con brio ed appassionato

Arietta: Adagio molto semplice e cantabile

INTERMISSION

FREDERIC RZEWSKI

The People United Will Never Be Defeated!,

36 Variations on ¡El Pueblo Unido Jamás Será Vencido!

Thema: With determination

Variation 1: Weaving: delicate but firm

Variation 2: With firmness

Variation 3: Slightly slower, with expressive nuances

Variation 4: Marcato

Variation 5: Dreamlike, frozen

Variation 6: Same tempo as beginning

Variation 7: Lightly, impatiently

Variation 8: With agility; not too much pedal; crisp

Variation 9: Evenly

Variation 10: Comodo, recklessly

Variation 11: Tempo I, like fragments of an absent melody, in strict time

Variation 12

Variation 13

Variation 14: A bit faster, optimistically

Variation 15: Flexible, like an improvisation

Variation 16: Same tempo as preceding, with fluctuations; much pedal —
Expansive, with a victorious feeling

Variation 17: L.H. [left hand] strictly: R.H. freely, roughly as in space

Variation 18

Variation 19: With energy

Variation 20: Crisp, precise

Variation 21: Relentless, uncompromising

Variation 22

Variation 23: As fast as possible, with some rubato

Variation 24

Variation 25

PROGRAM (cont'd)

Variation 26: In a militant manner
Variation 27: Tenderly, with a hopeful expression — Cadenza
Variation 28
Variation 29
Variation 30
Variation 31
Variation 32
Variation 33
Variation 34
Variation 35
Variation 36
Optional Improvisation
Thema (reprise)

This performance will last approximately **1 hour and 40 minutes, with one 15-minute intermission.**

Video or audio recording of the production is strictly prohibited.

ABOUT THE ARTIST

Ursula Oppens has long been recognized as the leading champion of contemporary American piano music. Her original and perceptive readings of other music, old and new, have earned her a place among the elect of today's performing musicians.

In addition to tonight's performance, highlights of Ms. Oppens' 2015–2016 season have included recitals at Northwestern University, New York's Bargemusic, the Cutting Edge New Music Festival and the Ascoli Piceno Festival in Italy. Ms. Oppens also returned to Music Mountain for a performance with the Cassatt Quartet in September and was the featured artist along with the International Contemporary Ensemble in a residency celebrating composer Christian Wolff at Dartmouth College in October. Ms. Oppens will also perform at The Phillips Collection in Washington DC, and Symphony Space in New York City. A prolific and critically acclaimed recording artist with four GRAMMY nominations, Ms. Oppens' recent releases include a new recording of Frederic Rzewski's *The People United Will Never Be Defeated!*; a collaboration with Meredith Monk, *Piano Songs*; the GRAMMY-nominated *Winging It: Piano Music of John Corigliano*; and *Oppens Plays Carter*, a recording of the complete piano works of Elliott Carter.

Over the years, Ms. Oppens has premiered works by such leading composers as John Adams, Luciano Berio, William Bolcom, Anthony Braxton, Elliott Carter, John Corigliano, Anthony Davis, John Harbison, Julius Hemphill, Laura Kaminsky, Tania Leon, György Ligeti, Witold Lutoslawski, Harold Meltzer, Meredith Monk, Conlon Nancarrow, Tobias Picker, Bernard Rands, Frederic Rzewski, Allen Shawn, Alvin Singleton, Joan Tower, Lois V Vierk, Amy Williams, Christian Wolff, Amnon Wolman and Charles Wuorinen.

As an orchestral guest soloist, Ms. Oppens has performed with virtually all of the world's major orchestras, including the New York Philharmonic, the Boston Symphony Orchestra, the Los Angeles Philharmonic, the American Composers Orchestra, the Boston Modern Orchestra Project (BMOP) and the orchestras of Chicago, Cleveland, San Francisco and Milwaukee. Abroad, she has appeared with such ensembles as the Berlin Symphony, Orchestre de la Suisse Romande, the Deutsche Symphonie, the Scottish BBC and the London Philharmonic Orchestras. Ms. Oppens is also an avid chamber musician and has performed with the Arditti, Cassatt, JACK, Juilliard and Pacifica quartets, among other chamber ensembles.

Ursula Oppens is a Distinguished Professor of Music at Brooklyn College and the CUNY Graduate Center in New York City. From 1994 through the end of the 2007–2008 academic year she served as John Evans Distinguished Professor of Music at Northwestern University in Evanston, Illinois. In addition, Ms. Oppens has served as a juror for many international competitions, such as the Concert Artists Guild, Young Concert Artists, Young Pianists Foundation (Amsterdam) and Cincinnati Piano World Competition. Ms. Oppens lives in New York City.

ABOUT THE PROGRAM

Sonata No. 32 in C Minor, Op. 111
LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN (1770–1827)
Composed in 1821–1822

Beethoven's painful five-year court battle to secure custody of his nephew Karl from his brother Caspar's dissolute widow (whom the composer disparaged as the "Queen of the Night") finally came to an end early in 1820. He won the case, but lost the boy's affection (Karl, half crazed from his uncle's overbearing attention, tried, unsuccessfully, to kill himself); the trial also exploded the composer's own pretension that he was of noble blood. Beethoven was further troubled in 1820 by deteriorating health and a certain financial distress (he needed a loan from his brother Johann, a prosperous apothecary in Vienna, to tide him over that difficult period), so it is not surprising that he composed little music during the time. With the resolution of his custody suit, however, he returned to creative work and began anew the titanic struggle to embody his transcendent thoughts in musical tones. In no apparent hurry to dispel the rumors in gossipy Vienna that he was "written out," he produced just one composition in 1820, the Piano Sonata in E Major, Op. 109, but followed that quickly with the A-flat Sonata, Op. 110, dated on Christmas Day 1821, and the Sonata in C Minor, Op. 111, finished just three weeks later, on January 13, 1822. The C Minor Sonata was his last such work, followed in his output for piano only by the *Diabelli Variations* and the two late sets of Bagatelles (Op. 119 and Op. 126). Upon its publication in April 1823 by the Parisian firm of Maurice Schlesinger, the Op. 111 Sonata was dedicated to the Archduke Rudolph, youngest son of Emperor Leopold II and brother of Emperor Franz, who had been Beethoven's student of piano and composition for 20 years. Rudolph received altogether the dedications of 15 of Beethoven's most important works, including the *Missa Solemnis*, Fourth and Fifth Piano Concertos, Op. 97 Piano Trio ("Archduke"), Piano Sonata in B-flat

(Op. 106, "Hammerklavier") and Grosse Fuge (Op. 133). (An edition of the Sonata published in London by Muzio Clementi was dedicated to Antonie Brentano, whom the composer's biographer Maynard Solomon convincingly identified as the long-mysterious "Immortal Beloved.")

Beethoven chose for the C Minor Sonata the unusual structure of two vast movements — a tempestuous essay in sonata form followed by a set of lofty variations of ethereal character — which are contrasted at almost every level: tonality (C minor, C major); rhythm (fiery, placid); melody (craggy and filled with dramatic leaps, hymnal and smoothly flowing); harmony (chromatic and bold, pure and introspective); texture (contrapuntal, chordal). Beethoven drew criticism when the Sonata was new from some who felt that the work was incomplete, lacking a spirited rondo to bring it to a brilliant close. When Anton Schindler, Beethoven's amanuensis and eventual biographer and one of those who felt cheated of a proper finale, asked the composer why he had included just two movements, Beethoven answered facetiously that he did not have time to write a third one because of the press of his work on the Ninth Symphony. Despite Schindler's misgivings, the C Minor Sonata is not only complete as it stands, but occupies the very pinnacle of Beethoven's writing for the piano, the culmination of his lifetime of creative thought and first-hand experience as pianist and composer for the keyboard. This music is not only the product of the obsession of his last years with motivic development, fugue, variation and the very essence of musical form, but it also embodies the potent emotional-philosophical progression of darkness-to-light, struggle-to-transcendence, minor-to-major that makes the Fifth and Ninth Symphonies such powerful utterances.

*The People United Will Never Be Defeated!,
36 Variations on ¡El Pueblo Unido Jamás
Será Vencido!*

FREDERIC RZEWSKI

Born April 13, 1938 in

Westfield, Massachusetts

Composed in 1975

Premiered on February 7, 1976 in

Washington DC by Ursula Oppens

Frederic Rzewski is one of modern music's great iconoclasts. Rzewski (r'ZHEFF-skee), born in Westfield, Massachusetts on April 13, 1938, had an excellent and thoroughly conventional education — piano lessons as a boy in nearby Springfield with Charles Mackey, a pupil of the celebrated Russian virtuoso Josef Lhévinne; undergraduate study at Harvard with Randall Thompson and Walter Piston; a master's degree from Princeton, where his principal teachers were Roger Sessions and Milton Babbitt. Rzewski went to Italy on a Fulbright scholarship in 1960 to study with Luigi Dallapiccola in Florence, and he has since lived mostly in Europe. He became known as a first-rate pianist in avant-garde music during those years (Nicolas Slonimsky, in his authoritative *Baker's Biographical Dictionary of Musicians*, assessed, "He is a granitically overpowering piano technician, capable of depositing huge boulders of sonic material across the keyboard without actually wrecking the instrument"), and also taught at the Kölner Kurse für Neue Musik ("Cologne Courses for New Music") and became closely involved with such noted classical and jazz modernists as Karlheinz Stockhausen, Christian Wolff, John Cage, David Tudor, Steve Lacy and Anthony Braxton; in 1966 in Rome, he formed the pioneering live electronics and improvisation group *Musica Elettronica Viva* with Alvin Curran and Richard Teitelbaum. Rzewski lived in New York City from 1971 to 1976, but then went back to Europe, where he joined the faculty of the Conservatoire Royal de Musique in Liege, Belgium, a position he held until his retirement in 2005. He has also lectured at Yale, the University of Cincinnati, SUNY/Buffalo, California Institute

of the Arts, University of California at San Diego, Mills College, Royal Conservatory of the Hague, Hochschule der Künste in Berlin and Hochschule für Musik in Karlsruhe.

Rzewski's music is dynamic in impact, original in concept, and diverse and distinctive in personality — some of his works (*Les Moutons de Panurge*) incorporate improvisation, some use twelve-tone technique in novel ways (*Antigone Legend, The Persians*); some employ experimental and graphic notation (*Le Silence des Espaces Infins, The Price of Oil*), some are powerful soundscapes (*Piano Piece No. 4*). A profound social consciousness informs many of his compositions: the *Winnsboro Cotton Mill Blues* is based on a 1930s workers' protest song from South Carolina; *The People United Will Never Be Defeated!* is a tribute to the Chilean struggle against the repression of the Pinochet government in the mid-1970s; *De Profundis* quotes from letters that Oscar Wilde wrote while he was imprisoned for homosexuality; *To the Earth* is intended to convey what he called the "sense of fragility" of our planet; *The Triumph of Death* uses texts from Peter Weiss' play based on the 1964 Frankfurt trial of former prison camp guards.

Soon after Salvador Allende's election as President of Chile in 1970, the country began its descent into economic chaos and strong-armed socialism. Civil unrest became common and led to the coup d'état in September 1973 by General Augusto Pinochet, who then subjected Chile to his own dictatorial rule for the next 17 years. (He was arrested in Britain in 1998 for human rights violations and indicted after he returned to Chile in 2000, but never convicted before his death in 2006.) The Chilean composer Sergio Ortega (he had written Allende's election campaign song) recalled a seminal event during the tumultuous days of summer 1973: "One day in June, three months before the bombing by Pinochet's military coup, I was walking through the plaza in front of the Palace of Finance in Santiago, Chile, and saw a street singer shouting a well-known Chilean chant for social change: ¡El Pueblo Unido Jamás Será Vencido! — The People United Will Never

ABOUT THE PROGRAM (cont'd)

Be Defeated! I couldn't stop and continued across the square, but his incessant chanting followed me and stayed in my mind. The following Sunday, after the broadcast of the television show *Chile Says No to Civil War*, which I directed, we went with a few artists to eat at my house outside Santiago. Upon arrival, I sat down at my piano and thought about the experience in the plaza and of events at large. When I reproduced the chant of the people in my head, the chant that could not be restrained, the entire melody exploded from me: I saw it complete and played it in its entirety at once. The text unfurled itself quickly and fell, like falling rocks, upon the melody. The song was performed in public two days later by the group Quilapayun in a heavily attended concert in the Alameda." The People United Will Never Be Defeated! (the original phrase is attributed to the Colombian politician Jorge Eliécer Gaitán, who was assassinated in 1948) became not only a rallying cry for Chileans, but has been taken up, with local variants, by protest movements as far afield as Iran, Portugal, Ukraine and the Philippines.

Frederic Rzewski, with his finely tuned social awareness, not only knew Ortega's song but also understood its cultural implications. When pianist Ursula Oppens commissioned him in 1975 to compose a companion to Beethoven's *Diabelli Variations*, he settled quickly on *The People United* as his theme: "I wanted to write a piece that she could play for an audience of classical-music lovers who perhaps knew nothing at all of what was happening in Latin America. By virtue of listening to my piece for an hour, they might somehow get interested in the subject. I really was trying to reach the audience by using a language they would not find alienating." He succeeded. Oppens premiered *The People United Will Never Be Defeated!* on February 7, 1976 on a piano series at The Kennedy Center in Washington DC celebrating the American Bicentennial and recorded the work for Vanguard; the disc received a GRAMMY nomination and was named "Record

of the Year" by *Record World* magazine, and won for Rzewski his first wide recognition.

The People United Will Never Be Defeated! is not only a staggering tour-de-force for the virtuoso pianist and a work with a strong social commitment but also embodies a vast yet meticulous musical architecture that warrants comparison with Bach's *Goldberg Variations* and Beethoven's *Diabelli Variations*. In his liner notes for Ursula Oppens' epochal 1978 recording, American avant-gardist composer and long-time Rzewski ally Christian Wolff wrote, "The musical logic is not an arbitrary, formalistic exercise, but is integral to the content of the music. For example, in a detail: the melodies of the songs that are quoted are not just dropped into the music but emerge from its fabric; they derive, in the sequence of their pitch intervals, from the developing variations of the opening El Pueblo song. [In addition to "The People United," Rzewski also quoted the Italian revolutionary song "Bandiera Rossa" in Variation 13 and the East German composer Hanns Eisler's "Solidaritätslied" in Variation 26.]

"The opening song is set in 36 bars, which are followed by 36 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 of the set, 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, the first five of a set subdivided equally into twelve plus twelve bars, and

the sixth recapitulating each previous variation in four bars plus a final four bars of new material. In the fifth set of variations, there is some expansion at the third variation; cadenza-like 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 becomes a gathering together of elements of all the preceding thirty variations — the overall structure of the piece is thus a reflection of the structure of its constituent parts. In this sixth set, the first 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 are summed up, even as

they had been a summation of the preceding thirty 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, though 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, is also both 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.”

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ARTIST STATEMENT

Many wonderful pianists have recorded Frederic Rzewski’s *36 Variations on “The People United Will Never be Defeated!”* The song itself, by Sergio Ortega, is superbly strong. Frederic and I first heard it sung by Inti-Illimani in a concert at Hunter College. The variations explore all of piano history; that’s

why so many pianists — like the creatures in Saint-Saens’ *Carnival of the Animals* — like to play them. History changes, but people need to remain united in recognition of the great varieties among us.

— Ursula Oppens