

LOTT, WALTON ALEXANDER. D.M.A. Narratives of Political Struggle in Frederic Rzewski's *Four Pieces*. (2022)
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This dissertation reads a narrative of political struggle in Frederic Rzewski's 1976 composition *Four Pieces* for solo piano. As with many of Rzewski's other politically themed works, *Four Pieces* is rich with allusions to folk song and political struggle. Rzewski applies compositional techniques to the primary musical ideas of *Four Pieces* that directly suggest concepts of social struggle and violence. Throughout his life, Rzewski identified politically with leftist ideas, often exploring themes on anti-war sentiment, popular struggle against oppressive power structures, and labor songs. This work expands on the ideas of literary theorists like Roland Barthes, Mikhail Bakhtin, and Gérard Genette who emphasize the reader's importance in interpreting a text, as well as analyses of narrative in music developed by Elaine Sisman, Michael Klein, Robert Hatten, Richard Cone, and Eero Tarasti. Analysis of *Four Pieces* specifically draws on Northrop Frye's literary narrative theories and Byron Almen's extension of Frye's concepts to the musical domain, the author developed a framework through which to hear a narrative in Rzewski's *Four Pieces*. According to this framework, musical narrative emerges as an interplay between the poles of *order* and *transgression*, where *order* connotes an established dominant hierarchy and *transgression* connotes forces that disperse or struggle against the elements of *order*. Given Rzewski's ideological alignments and his treatment of political topics this dissertation argues that *Four Pieces* can be read as a narrative in which *transgression* represents an oppressed subject or subjects that struggles against a dominant *order* that represents oppressive power structures responsible for fomenting chaos and preventing unity. A live performance by the author of *Four Pieces*, recorded in March 2012 at the University of

North Carolina at Greensboro, is included as four supplementary .wav files titled “Piece 1,” “Piece 2,” “Piece 3,” and “Piece 4.”

NARRATIVES OF POLITICAL STRUGGLE IN FREDERIC RZEWSKI'S *FOUR PIECES*

by

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CHAPTER I: RZEWSKI'S MUSIC AND HIS POLITICS

The scope of this paper encompasses an examination of a narrative of socio-political struggle in the 1976 work *Four Pieces* by American-born composer Frederic Rzewski (1938 – 2021). Specifically, this analysis traces how Rzewski creates a unique theme and manipulates its basic elements to construct this narrative. Through the repetition and variation of this material, the narrative of *Four Pieces* can be articulated as the outcome of tension between two narrative poles, *transgression* and *order*, that are in opposition to one another.

Rzewski's career spanned several geographical locations and his musical style showcases a mastery of writing with diverse techniques and for a wide range of ensembles and instruments. He connected with many of the most influential musicians in the United States and Europe, studying with composers Milton Babbitt, Roger Sessions, Randall Thompson, Walter Piston, and Luigi Dallapiccola. In the 1960s he garnered attention in New York with performances of difficult avant-garde works for the piano like Karlheinz Stockhausen's *Klavierstücke X* (1962). After establishing himself as a performer, he moved to Italy and co-founded Musica Elettronica Viva (MEV), an experimental ensemble that explores collective improvisational music and socialist political themes. As a professor he taught composition at Yale University, the Conservatoire Royal in Liège, the University of Cincinnati, the University of Buffalo, the State University of New York System, the Royal Conservatory of The Hague, and the Berlin Hochschule der Künste. Despite his sizeable creative output and consistent activity as a teacher and performer there is a limited amount of research discussing Rzewski's contributions to music.

Rzewski has been labeled a “political composer.” He can be categorized as a composer that acknowledges the creation and valuation of music as the byproduct of dynamic social structures and regularly weaves that awareness into his compositions.. In interviews and writings

Rzewski identifies politically as a Marxist. Several of his compositions like *Coming Together* and *Variations on The People United Will Never Be Defeated* incorporate explicitly political themes and use political writings or songs for content. Even his more abstracted pieces like *Squares* for piano are rich with jazz idioms, situating the music within the context of a contemporary musical tradition.

Rzewski's compositional style is highly varied: he routinely quotes music from the American working class and South American protest traditions, exhibits an eclectic compositional style that includes improvisational jazz, serialism, and contrapuntal rigor. Rzewski consistently employs this diverse array of compositional techniques in an highly expressive "Neo-Romantic" style. This style is evinced in many of Rzewski's works of the early 1970s and lends itself to narrative readings.

Several researchers have written on Rzewski's contribution to the piano repertoire and on his music's political associations, but only cursory analyses have been applied to *Four Pieces*. *North American Ballads* garners the most attention in the body of literature dedicated to Rzewski's piano music. Bree K. Guerra offers readings of musical narrative in her analysis of Rzewski's treatment of "Down by the Riverside," while *Four Pieces* is entirely omitted from discussion.¹ Michael Zuraw's dissertation explores how Rzewski's compositional aesthetic combines a pastiche of styles and music from various nations to present his political beliefs, but Zuraw's work offers only a paragraph on *Four Pieces*.² Vanessa Cornett-Murtada's dissertation explores the extensive use of quotation in *North American Ballads* and compares Rzewski's

¹ Bree K. Guerra "Narrative Structure in the Works of Frederic Rzewski," Master's Thesis, University of Texas – Pan American, 2014.

² Michael Zuraw, "Ideology into Sound: Frederic Rzewski's North American Ballads And Other Piano Music From The 1970s," DMA Dissertation, Rice University, Houston, 2003.

technique to Charles Ives's incorporation of quotations.³ Again, discussion of *Four Pieces* is limited to cataloguing it alongside coeval works. Seth Beckman's dissertation examines the diverse stylistic techniques in three of Rzewski's piano works *North American Ballads*, *Variations on "The People United Will Never Be Defeated!",* and *De Profundis*.⁴

Two dissertations in particular survey a range of Rzewski's solo piano music, with attention to *Four Pieces*. Ronald Lewis reads *Four Pieces* as a multi-movement whole with a "cyclic structure" in which "all movements are based on the same folk-like tune."⁵ Jee-Young Shin identifies the synthesis between compositional aesthetic and political thought in a survey of Rzewski's piano works.⁶ Shin's dissertation provides the most extensive examination of *Four Pieces* in the literature and includes extensive theoretical analysis of each movement. Shin recognizes that the intervallic features of the main theme, especially the "intervals of the third and the fifth," make up the primary compositional material for *Four Pieces*.⁷ Shin's observation is particularly relevant to this paper's thesis, as it asserts Rzewski's manipulation of these intervallic features structures a sense of narrative in *Four Pieces*.

The author intends to answer the paucity of scholarship on Rzewski's *Four Pieces* through a focused study on the entire piece, arguing that music can communicate narrative qualities and that Rzewski's *Four Pieces* can be read within the context of sociopolitical struggles for liberation. Many of Rzewski's works are overtly political and function as metaphors for various aspects of socio-political action. In his article "Frederic Rzewski and Spontaneous

³ Vanessa Cornett-Murtada, "Quotation, Revolution, and American Culture the Use of Folk Tunes and the Influence of Charles Ives in Frederic Rzewski's *North American Ballads* for Solo Piano," DMA Dissertation, University of North Carolina at Greensboro, 2004.

⁴ Seth Beckman, "The Traditional and the Avant-Garde in Late Twentieth-Century Music: A Study of Three Piano Compositions by Frederic Rzewski," DMA Dissertation, Ball State University, 1996.

⁵ Ronald Edwin Lewis, "The Solo Piano Music of Frederic Rzewski," DMA Dissertation, University of Oklahoma, 1992, 53.

⁶ Jee-Young Shin, "Synthesis of Various Elements in Selected Piano Works of Frederic Rzewski," DMA Dissertation, The City University of New York, 2004.

⁷ Shin, 75.

Political Music,” Christian Asplund interprets Marxist themes and metaphors for political struggle in Rzewski’s works in the 1960s and 1970s.⁸ *Four Pieces* is unique among these works as it does not draw from real folk material but instead unfolds as a political narrative. Unlike in his other political compositions of the 1960s and 1970s, Rzewski composes a unique melody for *Four Pieces* that has characteristics of South American folk music. Similar to other works like *North American Ballads* and *Variations on “The People United Will Never Be Defeated!”*, *Four Pieces* varies its primary theme through techniques also seen in *North American Ballads*. As such, *Four Pieces* occupies a unique place in Rzewski’s *oeuvre* and deserves a dedicated analysis.

The period from the late 1950s to the 1970s was marked by a shifting balance of geopolitical powers, and as such was charged with social unrest and dissent. Around the globe, former colonial territories struggled, usually painfully, to establish economic and legal sovereignty in a world defined by two hostile superpowers. Often, these struggles were met with fierce opposition by powerful Western countries who enabled and engineered repressive coups in Guatemala, Iraq, and Indonesia, or acted through direct military force as in Vietnam. Continuous struggle against “neocolonialism” recurred as a common theme among the organized left in the Third World.⁹ Back in the United States, cultural movements like rock and roll situated themselves as a symbolic expression opposing a repressive social order. Protests against military intervention by the United States in Vietnam altered the political and social landscape. Organized marches, freedom rides, and eventually riots opposing racism in the social and legal structures of the United States pressured lawmakers to pass the Civil Rights Act.

⁸ Christian Asplund, “Frederic Rzewski and Spontaneous Political Music,” *Perspectives of New Music*, Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2006.

⁹ Vincent Bevins, *The Jakarta Method: Washington’s Anticommunist Crusade & the Mass Murder Program that Shaped Our World*, PublicAffairs, New York: New York, 2020.

The landscape of academic music also experienced schisms in the early to middle Twentieth Century. In his landmark work *Philosophy of Modern Music*, Theodor Adorno critiqued the works of Schoenberg and Stravinsky as two dialectically opposed composers representing progress and regression, respectively.¹⁰ The Darmstadt school, including Pierre Boulez, Karlheinz Stockhausen, and Luigi Nono, considered total serialism the pinnacle of serious composition.¹¹ In contrast, many composers explored new methods of composition outside the European music tradition. Composers in the United States in particular contributed to new musical branches. Examples include Henry Cowell's extended techniques; John Cage's challenge to the basic philosophical underpinnings by which we regard sound as "music" rather than "noise;" Steve Reich's development of minimalist sound; and Charles Ives's combination of folk song and dissonance.¹²

It seems no coincidence that new musics developed as a response to traditional academic music at the same time that social unrest organized against racism, imperialism, and the "status quo." A theoretical analysis of the interrelationship between material conditions and cultural practices is beyond the scope of this paper, but that does not preclude the study of composers responding to conditions of the world around them through their music. Many composers adhered to the "music for music's sake" approach and continued in the European tradition (for instance, Milton Babbitt's mathematically-oriented works). Other composers chose to use topical themes connoting extant cultures, often making their music explicitly political. Cornelius

¹⁰ Theodor Adorno, *Philosophy of New Music*, University of Minnesota Press: Minneapolis, 2006.

¹¹ Christopher Fox, "Darmstadt School" in *Grove Music Online*, <https://www-oxfordmusiconline-com.libproxy.uncg.edu/grovemusic/view/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.001.0001/omo-9781561592630-e-0000049725?rkey=7KcCPV>, Accessed 2/03/21.

¹² Pierre Boulez (1925–2016); Karlheinz Stockhausen (1928–2007); Luigi Nono (1924–1990); Henry Cowell (1897–1965); John Cage (1912–1992); Steve Reich (b. 1936); Charles Ives (1874–1954).

Cardew (1936–1981), Krzysztof Penderecki (1933–2020), Fred Ho (1957–2014), and Frederic Rzewski constitute only a sampling of this group.¹³¹⁴

Rzewski's biographical details have been well covered in other works, so a few brief notes will suffice. Born in America, Rzewski initially established his career as a virtuoso pianist capable of playing demanding new works by Boulez and Stockhausen. During a stay in Rome (1960 – 1971), he co-founded the experimental collaborative group *Musica Elettronica Viva* and developed a musical aesthetic that emphasized communal improvisation. After returning to the United States, Rzewski met Chilean activists and musicians and subsequently published his landmark *Variations on "The People United Will Never Be Defeated"* for solo piano in 1975. The well-received work marked the first time Rzewski used an existing popular protest song as the primary material for a piece. *North American Ballads* displayed this same technique, drawing from American folk songs that explore anti-war sentiments and resistance to labor exploitation.

In his survey of Rzewski's works from the 1960s and 1970s, Christian Asplund notes several Marxist themes. Music "should be didactic," informing the listener of "the true nature of society and motivating an active response."¹⁵ Accordingly, Rzewski presents class struggle as an objective truth with identifiable actors on the sides of oppression and liberation. Next, effecting social change demands difficult and often protracted struggle that "may require the sacrifice of many things, including perhaps one's life."¹⁶ Rzewski's critiques contain a "constructive pessimism" that critiques systems of oppression and injustice. This particular form of pessimism is distinct from "pessimism fostered by the capitalists and their media to discourage and deaden

¹³ Larry Sitsky, edited by Larry Sitsky, *Music of the Twentieth-Century Avant-Garde: A Biocritical Sourcebook*, Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2002.

¹⁴ Fred Wei-Han and Diane Carol Fujino, *Wicked Theory, Naked Practice: A Fred Ho Reader*, Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2009.

¹⁵ Christian Asplund, *Perspectives of New Music*, Vol. 33, No. 1/2 (Winter - Summer, 1995), 427-428.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 427-428.

action and resistance.”¹⁷ Finally, “collective, democratic activity” offers the best path to effect “lasting, positive change.”¹⁸ Rzewski's writings and interviews correspond with Asplund's assessment. These philosophical stances on music inform a political reading of Rzewski's music from the 1960s and 1970s, including *Four Pieces*.

Political awareness attends Rzewski's works in several ways. His compositions often use politically charged source material such as protest music and letters from prisoners incarcerated in the United States prison system. The titles of his works often bluntly convey his political views. The works “Mile 61: Stop the War!” from *The Road* (1995 – 2003); *The Fall of the Empire* (2007); *No More War* (2005); and “Whose Side Are You On?” from *North American Ballads* (1978) all carry evocative titles confirming Rzewski's political sympathies.

Rzewski acknowledges the complexity of music's relationship to politics and stresses that music alone cannot achieve progress. Rather, direct, communal action engenders change:

The important thing is to get past the notion that an individual can, with his own resources, make any significant progress on solving a problem which is social in nature. This is one of the biggest hurdles that artists have to overcome, the idea that art alone can solve problems that really need other forms of action. Art can help; it can be useful in solving human problems. It always has been and it always will be, but only as long as it recognizes its own limitations.¹⁹

Rzewski stresses that a single composer may not change the world but “you have to write as if you could.”²⁰ Though he correctly outlines music's limited capacity to effect change, music can still address political issues and real world events. A survey of interviews and his own writings underscores Rzewski's views that music is part of a complex social dynamic. Though his political theories regarding music prove complicated, that complication serves to respect the

¹⁷ Ibid., 427-428.

¹⁸ Ibid., 427-428.

¹⁹ Ken Terry, “Frederic Rzewski and the Improvising Avant-Garde,” *Downbeat* x/vi (1978), 40.

²⁰ Frederic Rzewski, in interview with Zachary Woolfe, “The Composer Frederic Rzewski: In His Notes, Protest and Politics” <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/05/06/arts/music/the-composer-frederic-rzewski-in-his-notes-protest-and-politics.html> (visited July 9, 2020).

richness of social processes and avoids easy ideological essentialisms that reduce social conditions and actors to static, unchangeable categories.

Rzewski's stance acknowledges the difficult, porous boundary between abstract art and the social realm. However, the influence of social events and the impact of socialist critique is traceable in his music. Many of his works are drawn from actual historical events like the Attica prison uprisings and Chilean protest movements. And indeed Rzewski himself stresses that in the 1970s, he and like-minded composers saw music as a venue for revolutionary contribution: "they were convinced...that a potentially revolutionary situation existed in the United States, and...the 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."²¹ Rzewski composes from this ideological stance for almost all of his output.

The link between Rzewski's approach to composition and his political leanings has been highlighted by his peers and contemporaries. Cornelius Cardew notes that Rzewski's ideological convictions and his compositions are intertwined: "it is likely that Rzewski's social and political beliefs are underscored by his musical interests, as well as being an inseparable part of his personality. The democracy of the jazz ensemble and the open-ended environments spontaneously produced by *Musica Elettronica Viva* could be considered a well-meant attempt to reconcile elements of socialism and anarchy into musical terms."²² Cardew touches on an important point: the ideal operation of social interactions through anarchist or socialist organization is mirrored by the collaborative orientation in the performance of such pieces.

Academic study of Rzewski's works consistently identifies an embedded narrative quality rich with sociopolitical associations. *Four Pieces* differs from the works so far examined

²¹ Frederic Rzewski, writing in reference to the 1970 Kent State shootings. Program notes to *Jefferson* (1970), written in 1997, in *Nonsequiturs*, 444.

²² Cornelius Cardew, "A Note on Frederic Rzewski," *Musical Times*, No. 1595 Vol. 117 January 1976, 8.

because it is not based on an actually existing song. This paper demonstrates that *Four Pieces* evokes narrative associations similar to those found in works like *Variations on “The People United Will Never Be Defeated!”* despite its not quoting actually existing music or artifacts. Towards solidifying this analysis it is necessary to investigate concerns around how music in general can function as narrative by examining theories that argue for music’s capacity to act as narrative.

CHAPTER II: STRATEGIES FOR HEARING MUSICAL NARRATIVE

An investigation of narrative qualities in Rzewski's *Four Pieces* must address general concerns about whether music can function as a narrative. Narrative qualities are mostly associated with media containing strong textual components, like literature and film. However, narrative readings of large-form Romantic and Modern works are fairly common, and scholarship of the past two decades has reappraised the theoretical problems of whether music can or can not function as narrative. Rzewski's outspoken political concerns and his inclusion of material that heavily signifies political content provide a rich context of social concerns and composerly intent, supporting a narrative reading of *Four Pieces* that relates to larger narratives of oppression and political struggle.

While Rzewski's intentions and political thoughts inform a reading of political narrative in *Four Pieces*, the listener is also crucial to interpreting this narrative structure. Many literary theorists from the Russian formalist school of thought and from the structuralist and semiotic approaches of the 1960s emphasize the reader as an important actor in the creation of a work's meaning. In his essay "The Death of the Author" Roland Barthes argues that authorial intention is not relevant to a reader's understanding of a text.²³ Mikhail Bakhtin developed the concepts of *polyvalence* and *heteroglossia* to describe the multiple layers of meaning-creation that emerge from the complex interactions between reader and text.²⁴ Gerard Genette's idea of the "paratext" demonstrates that context of a work beyond narration of plot, for example the title, impacts how that work is read.²⁵

²³ Roland Barthes, "Death of the Author," *Image, Music, Text*, translated by Stephen Heath, New York: Hill and Wang, 1977.

²⁴ Bakhtin, M. M, Pam Morris, V. N Voloshinov, and P. N Medvedev, *The Bakhtin Reader: Selected Writings of Bakhtin, Medvedev, and Voloshinov*. London: E. Arnold, 1994.

²⁵ Gérard Genette, and Marie Maclean, "Introduction to the Paratext," *New Literary History* 22, no. 2 (1991): 261–72.

In order to formulate an approach for tracing and unpacking the narrative qualities of *Four Pieces*, frameworks will be utilized that investigate music's narrative potential in general. Several writings that explore the possibility and nature of narrative in music will be regarded in turn. Byron Almen's article on narrative archetypes explores and challenges Jean-Jacques Nattiez' semiotic works on music and discourse, drawing on literary narrative theories to explore how music can provide a form of narrative separate from literary genres.²⁶ Karol Berger's works, such as his essay on themes and narrative in Mozart's concertos, defines *narrative/diegetic* and *lyric/mimetic* ways of conveying content in music as well as literature.²⁷ Michael Klein's essay on Chopin's *Fourth Ballade* also investigates potentials for musical narrative, asserting that music "is adept at signifying expressive states whose arrangement follows a narrative logic."²⁸ Elaine Sisman's essay on Beethoven's *Pathétique* Sonata surveys the reception of the piece through the lens of rhetoric, compiling evidence that *pathos* and rhetorical devices structure musical parallels to human emotions and analyzing the rhetorical devices employed in Beethoven's sonata. Each of these stances argues for a unique type of narrative logic created by music, even in the absence of a narrator to correlate plot, narrative time, plot time, or tense.²⁹

NARRATIVE WITHOUT A TEXT?

The existence of a narrative quality in music seems as commonsensical as it is problematic. On one hand, listeners and music theorists alike tend to assign narrative dynamicism to the development of content, repetition of structures, ideas, and cadences that

²⁶ Byron Almen, "Narrative Archetypes: A Critique, Theory, and Method of Narrative Analysis," *Journal of Music Theory*, Vol. 47, No. 1 (2003).

²⁷ Karol Berger, "The Thrice-Told Tale: Thematic Narratives in the Allegros of Mozart's Piano Concertos," *Mozart-Jahrbuch 2007-2008* [2011], 3-38; "Diegesis and Mimesis: The Poetic Modes and the Matter of Artistic Presentation," *The Journal of Musicology*, Vol. 12, No. 4 (Autumn, 1994), 407-433.

²⁸ Michael Klein, "Chopin's Fourth Ballade as Musical Narrative," *Music Theory Spectrum*, Vol. 26, No. 1 (Spring 2004), Oxford University Press, 25.

²⁹ Elaine R. Sisman, "Pathos and the Pathétique: Rhetorical Stance in Beethoven's C-Minor Sonata, Op. 13," *Beethoven Forum*, University of Nebraska Press 3, no. 1 (1994).

make up musical form. As an art that unfolds in the real, lived time of the performers and listeners, music establishes a literal span of time during which it conveys its content to listeners. On the other hand, the absence of text or a literal narrator conveying events in music creates troubling relationships to the sense of time and the tense in which music operates.³⁰ For instance, in his article “Can One Speak of Narrativity in Music?” Nattiez argues that the absence of a text or narrator precludes narrative expression in music.³¹

Since music is a predominantly sonic medium, it is difficult to identify narrative in musical structure. Arguments against music’s capacity for narrative address several parameters germane to literary narrative that are absent in music: verbal cues, causality, narrator, and referentiality. Music is structured by registers of pitch and rhythm and does not require any verbal cues, although verbal cues may be present in music as titles, performance directions, and sung text. Causality, narrator, and referentiality necessarily separate the actual story being told from the manner of its telling. Narrative “requires an ordering mechanism by which individual musical events can be organized into a unified whole.”³² Works that lack a narrator make it difficult for the audience to determine direct causality between characters and their actions. In the case of musical works that lack a network of referentiality within which to coordinate discrete musical events, narrative structure becomes too ambiguous to define. As Andrew Davis emphasizes, narrative “engages simultaneously with two temporal spaces: that of the narrative’s content and that of the actual act of narration.”³³ Carol Abbate stresses that since music does not exhibit the act of narration proper, it has “no ability to posit a narrative survivor of the tale who

³⁰ For further discussion of these themes see Fred Everet Maus’ “Music as Narrative,” *Indiana theory Review*, Vol. 12 (Spring and Fall 1991), pp. 1-34.

³¹ Jean-Jacques Nattiez, “Can One Speak of Narrativity in Music?,” *Journal of the Royal Musicological Association* 115/2: 240-57.

³² Almen, 3-4.

³³ Davis, Andrew, *Sonata Fragments: Romantic Narratives in Chopin, Schumann, and Brahms*, Chapter: “Atemporality in Narrative and Music,” Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press (2017), 35.

speaks of it in the past tense.”³⁴ Accordingly, if there is no narrator to imperatively demand “Call me Ishmael” there can be no past tense.

While it proves difficult and inadvisable to assign a direct correlation between musical structures and a narrative mapping of character and plot, several researchers make the case that narrative qualities emerge through reception of a piece. The concept that meaning emerges from the dialectical interaction between a work and its readers, listeners, or viewers can be traced to the Structuralist thinkers of the 1960s and the Russian Formalist school of the 1920s. Roland Barthes develops an argument that the author is no longer even a necessary contributor to a work’s possible meanings. Literary theorist and philosopher of language Mikhail Bakhtin’s concepts of polyphony and dialogic interconnection suggest that the meaning of a work emerges from the dynamic interaction of a work’s internal parts, and his development of the term heteroglossia to describe the multiple overlapping codes of language is useful for situating a work within a complex social context. Almen cites research demonstrating that literature constructs its own unique idiomatic relations between tense, narrator, and drama, out of which readers construct narrative even in the absence of a reliable narrator.³⁵ Thus, one cannot “convincingly argue that the narrator is a prerequisite for narrative with respect to either music or to literature.”³⁶ This assertion suggests that listeners can intuit a narrative structure inherent in musical forms, even if the composer does not explicitly intend a narrative schema in their work.

Almen suggests revisiting the possibility of narrative in musical structures, challenging scholars who contend that narrative in musical structure is “at best, a metaphorical and limited concept, or, at worst, a product of wishful thinking.”³⁷ He suggests that “[m]usical narrative is

³⁴ Carolyn Abbate, “What the Sorcerer Said,” *19th-Century Music* 12: 230.

³⁵ Almen, 8-10.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 10.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 1.

the process through which the listener perceives and tracks a culturally significant transvaluation of hierarchical relationships within a temporal span,” where “transvaluation” refers to meaning that derives from “the reconfiguration of simultaneous and successive relationships between musical elements in the course of a temporal succession.”³⁸ That is, listeners perceive identifiable elements of music that are juxtaposed and transformed throughout a work’s duration. The dialectical framework that emerges constitutes a narrative structure. This analysis of narrative emerging through a linear progression of musical sequences offers an alternative to literature-specific narrative theories.

The history of analyzing narrative is indebted to semiotics. The work of Saussure, Pierce, and Levi-Strauss establish the creation of meaning from the interplay of signs and the reading of signs.³⁹ Nattiez applies these concepts to the domain of music. Nattiez proposes a formidable problem regarding referentiality, arguing that music does not signify properly and that the closest approach to referentiality musical structures can attain is as metaphor. This problem is not unique to music and extends to text as well. Resolution of the slippage between signifier and signified relies on subjective construction by the reader: a text can mention a chair but does not necessarily point to a single physical object. A text can refer to L’Arc de Triomphe, but the reference to this real physical object evokes a rich network of subjective experiences and historical and national discourses. That the signs refer to one another, Almen says, is more important than any reference they may make to discretely signified components: “it is the *relations between elements* and not the elements themselves that are the foundation of narrative.”⁴⁰ If music acts as metaphor through complex networks of interrelated signs, it is still

³⁸ Ibid., 11-12.

³⁹ Gottdiener, Mark, Karin Boklund-Lagopoulou, and Alexandros P. Lagopoulos, eds, *Semiotics. (SAGE Benchmarks in Social Research Methods)*. London: SAGE Publications Ltd, 2003.

⁴⁰ Almen, 11.

capable of forming a kind of narrative insofar as it consists of identifiable, variegated content that interacts with, audibly effects, and is affected by musical events.

As Almen argues, and as this paper illustrates, narrative analysis should not be limited to textual, verbal cues, but can be extended to methods of musical unification and differentiation. Technical distinctions such as texture, form, thematic development, harmony, and counterpoint perform these functions, as do musical components that connect to human activity like popular songs and topical tropes.

Similarly, causality need not be excluded as a concept relevant to musical listening. Sonata form provides the quintessential example of a structure stressing conflict and resolution through development of distinct themes and distinct key areas. By establishing and developing differentiated themes and tonal centers which experience conflict and eventual resolution, sonata form evokes a sense of causality. These musical processes effect transvaluations by which listeners perceive narrative structure. While the problem Nattiez presents as *metalinguistic discourse* remains, music's specific form of temporal unfolding leaves the listener with a sense of definable units of content and that something has happened to them.⁴¹

Almen outlines two criteria for analyzing a musical narrative. First, the "musical elements that are in conflict must be identified; that is, the meaning of *order* or *transgression* in the piece's context must be determined."⁴² These elements are unique to each particular piece, and the embedded narrative is revealed through the unique interplay of the conflicting elements. Second, the "oppositional pole that elicits the analyst's sympathy as listener must be identified for each piece."⁴³ This refers to expectations and frustrations relevant to the interplay of the

⁴¹ Nattiez defines a *metalinguistic discourse* as a process operating beyond the unfolding "story" and the action inflected upon characters, which coordinates the elements of the story into a unified whole.

⁴² Almen, 19.

⁴³ Ibid, 20.

elements in conflict. For instance, a sudden strident theme appearing in a somber, minor mode piece could represent a transgressive attempt at overcoming order. If the strident theme does not effect a victorious cadence in a major mode a listener may infer that the transgressive attempt failed.

Almen draws on Northrop Frye's narrative categories and James Jakob Liszka's semiotic work on narrative in literature to develop an approach to musical narrative.⁴⁴ In the third essay from his 1957 work *Anatomy of Criticism*, Frye proposes that literature unfolds through "two fundamental movements of narrative: a cyclical movement within the order of nature, and a dialectical movement into the apocalyptic world above."⁴⁵ The dialectical motion between the natural order and chaos results in one of four narrative archetypes: tragedy, comedy, romance, or irony/satire.⁴⁶ Almen extends these four categories to analysis of musical narrative.

Almen also draws on Liszka's analysis of narrative and myth to define a strategy for hearing narrative in music specifically. Where Frye limits his definitions of narrative structures to literary analysis, Liszka's definition of narrative extends to any cultural activity: "narration focuses on a set of rules from a certain domain or domains of cultural life which define a certain cosmic, social, political, or economic hierarchy, and places them in a crisis."⁴⁷ Almen uses Liszka's definition of narrative to extend Frye's four archetypes to musical narrative, replacing the concepts *nature* and *chaos* with *order* and *transgression*:

- Romantic*, in which order achieves victory over transgression;
- Comic*, in which transgression achieves victory over order;
- Ironic*, in which order suffers defeat to transgression; and

⁴⁴ James Jakob Liszka, *The Semiotic of Myth: A Critical Study of the Symbol*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press (1989), 117-141.

⁴⁵ Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 162.

⁴⁶ Frye, 162.

⁴⁷ Liszka, 15.

-*Tragic*, in which transgression suffers defeat to order.⁴⁸

In order to analyze the narrative archetype under which a piece of music falls, “the musical elements that are in conflict must be identified,” as well as an “oppositional pole that elicits the analyst’s sympathy as listener.”⁴⁹ Identifiable musical elements that could interact and come into conflict include themes, motivic cells, and programmatic associations. Consequently, the analyst is able to identify an “oppositional pole” by tracing the contrast between these musical elements and the hierarchy against which these conflicts unfold. The elements of *order* and *transgression* in the comic and ironic archetypes do not equate with one another. In the comic genre, the listener sympathizes with the *transgressive* forces of the narrative. Comic weight comes from *transgressive* victory over the established *order* in the narrative. By contrast, the ironic genre elicits sympathy with *order* that will be overcome by *transgressive* forces.

Almen further suggests that boundaries between drama and narrative are porous and that there “may be little distinction between the notion of narrative and the elements of drama.”⁵⁰ This conclusion seems reasonable: music unfolds temporally as a drama, and the listener/analyst infers narrative structure through analysis and suggested archetypes that emerge through analysis.

Almen provides a model for analyzing a piece’s functionality as narrative, as well as determining its relevant archetype, in an examination of Chopin’s *C-minor Prelude*, Op. 28, No. 20.⁵¹ Through analysis of motif, harmonic development, and topical elements (in the case of this prelude, funereal themes), Almen identifies the musical components representing *order* and *transgression*, as well as the means by which the listener’s sympathies may be aligned. Even small details take on narrative significance in Almen’s reading: a rising half-step motive that

⁴⁸ Almen, 18.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 19-20.

⁵⁰ Almen, 32.

⁵¹ Ibid., 20 - 27.

later occurs as a rising whole-step signals a transvaluation of that gesture's place within the hierarchy of musical events.

Specific social contexts and a composer's intent also help to determine a piece's narrative qualities. Narrative reading emerges through considering Nattiez's proposed three levels of signification: poietic, immanent, and esthetic. The poietic level includes composerly intent, as in the purposeful incorporation of the *Dies Irae* chant into a composition in order to connote death; the immanent level relates to the written score itself; and the esthetic level involves signification that emerges through the reception of a piece. These three domains are distinct, yet always interrelated to various degrees. Accordingly, analyzing Rzewski's political works requires consideration of his personal politics and philosophical approach to music, the interrelationship of content and form in his pieces, and listeners' awareness of and response to "folk" music. A narrative reading of this type proves useful for analyzing *Four Pieces*. Since Rzewski does not provide any accompanying text that would historically contextualize the melodic content of *Four Pieces*, a reading of narrative in this work relies on explorations of narrative in those other works of Rzewski that draw from extant folk songs, as well as on his own statements and writings on politics and art.

NARRATIVE THROUGH REFERENTIALITY, GENRE, AND EMOTIONS

Rzewski makes use of musical genres that specifically imply narrative capability. His *North American Ballads*, coeval and similar in compositional technique to *Four Pieces*, evoke a musical and literary genre apt for narrative readings. Generically, the ballade functions as a narrative poem, and its use in a musical setting therefore suggests a narrative quality. For instance, Chopin's ballades are often subjected to narrative interpretation and serve as accessible examples for the problems that arise in attempting to pin down music's narrative potential. For

analysts who read a narrative in Chopin's ballades, these works provide an example of the indeterminacy of narrative tense and sequence of events in music. It is also worth noting that the ballade genre influenced a wide range of Romantic composers. James Parakilas' work as editor for *The Nineteenth-Century Piano Ballade: An Anthology* offers a concise overview of the ballade's influence on Chopin's contemporaries. The anthology compiles ten ballades from ten different composers, all of which exhibit narrative characteristics.⁵²

Musical events unfold in the present, but their interrelations can sometimes construct a semiotic space connoting a past tense. For example, towards the end of Chopin's Op. 52 *Ballade in F minor*, material exclusive to the opening (Figure 1a) reappears in A major (Figure 1b) just prior to the theme's final presentation of the melancholy F-minor primary theme. The listener could assume that it suggests the past tense, since it points both to the opening, with thematic similarity, and to *difference* from the opening, occurring in a new key with new harmonization after a sequence of other musical events. A narrative reading might assume this is a recurrence of a character from the past, or a remembrance of the past from the present tense. Without a narrator to provide syntax and tense, analyzing narrative within musical structure must grapple with the ambiguity between the linear unfolding of musical events and questions of tense. Despite this complication, music constructs its own sense of narrative distinct from literary narrative.

⁵² James Parakilas, ed., *The Nineteenth-Century Piano Ballade: An Anthology*, A-R Editions, Inc., Madison WI (1990).

Figure 1: Opening of Chopin's Op. 52 *Ballade* and its recurrence

Andante con moto

Reprise of opening

Constructing a narrative reading of a piece relies as much on the archetypal cataloguing provided by Almen as it does on knowledge of historical context, reception history, and codes that signify place and identity. Michael Klein's essay "Chopin's Fourth Ballade as Musical Narrative" analyzes the titular piece through an intertextual lens to counter "those who

argue that music cannot narrate.”⁵³ Klein addresses music’s unique relationship to the diegetic and mimetic (i.e. telling versus showing) modes of conveying action. Whereas traditional definitions of narrative rely on a narrator to provide diegetic function, Klein draws on more recent works by several authors, including Edward Cone, Robert Hatten, and Eero Tarasti, who argue that music’s narrative potential emerges through a rich network of signs, indices, and codes.⁵⁴ Defined as such, narrative structures do not necessarily require a narrator proper. These considerations suggest that “showing” can be a kind of “telling” (i.e. *mimesis* forms its own narrative function counter to *diegesis*) and therefore the lack of a narrator proper “ceases to impact music’s status as a narrative artform.”⁵⁵

Nevertheless, reading narrative in music still creates unique challenges. In addition to the difficulties posed by a missing narrator, music also lacks a lexicon capable of relating instances of sound to specific textual definitions. Often an understanding of a composer’s reasons for writing a work helps to fill this lack. For instance, while musical sounds can sometimes imitate real-world objects, events, or concepts (e.g., a train-whistle, a waltz, quotations of “The Internationale”), a narrative reading of music as a one-to-one representation of events or characters would rely on an understanding of composerly intent lest a narrative reading devolve into arbitrary constructions. If listeners are presented with a score or performance of a piece without a context, it is reasonable to assume their attempts at reading a narrative structure would vary wildly. Klein realizes the shortcoming of such an approach, and adopts an analysis that emphasizes intertextuality:

⁵³ Michael Klein, “Chopin’s Fourth Ballade as Musical Narrative,” *Music Theory Spectrum*: Vol. 26, No. 1(Spring 2004), 23.

⁵⁴ Edward Cone, *Musical Form and Musical Performance*, New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc. (1968); Robert Hatten, “Grounding Interpretation: A Semiotic Framework for Musical Hermeneutics” *The American Journal of Semiotics* 13/1–4: 25–42 (1996); Eero Tarasti, *A Theory of Musical Semiotics*, Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press (1994).

⁵⁵ Klein, 26.

The methodology of this narrative interpretation involves intertextuality, a conception of the text as the site of allusions, citations, and transformations of other texts. Under the broad definition used in this article, a text is any cultural artifact: a work of art, a piece of music, a novel, a scholarly publication, an historical document, a calendar, or even that composer whom we imagine, whose name is the same as the historical figure called “Chopin.”⁵⁶

Klein analyzes a narrative reading of this type as a series of emotional states rather than a reflection or interpretation of a specific text. Musical narrative may include references to historical reality, but that is not essential for musical narratives: “[music] may have a limited capacity to signify [text] but it is adept at signifying *expressive states* whose arrangement follows a narrative logic” [italics mine].⁵⁷ Rather than seeking a literary counterpart to accompany Chopin’s *Ballade in F minor* as a narrative liner note, Klein “[describes] expressive states evoked by this music and the ways that their unfolding implies a narrative,” where *expressive* states can refer to emotional affect or dramatic action.⁵⁸ Klein’s article helpfully informs a reading of Rzewski’s works. Attempts to understand *Four Pieces*, *North American Ballads*, or *Variations on “The People United Will Never Be Defeated!”* as representations of discrete historical events ultimately result in an act of story-telling, but these works can also be understood as assemblages of emotional states which coordinate towards displaying narrative. Klein’s analytical concept of narrative as a sequence of emotional states elides well with Almen’s analytical construct of *transvaluation*. Each analysis observes a linear sequence of musical events that are contextualized by their juxtaposition to one another. A synthesis of these approaches proves useful in analyzing the narrative potential of Rzewski’s music.

⁵⁶ Klein, 29.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 25.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 26-27.

The themes of sociopolitical struggle and of “the people” versus oppressive forces are also applicable with this approach. Given the political context of Rzewski’s works, their poles of *transgression* and *order* can be identified clearly. Pessimistic critiques of oppressive structures attend many of Rzewski’s works. These critiques take an ideological stance reflecting organized struggle against an oppressive *order*, suggesting that victory is not guaranteed, and eliciting sympathy with a vanquished *transgressive* content. Accordingly, a large portion of Rzewski’s works fall into the *tragic* genre as defined by Almen.

In *North American Ballades* and *Four Pieces*, two principal compositional traits represent the opposition of stability to chaos. Each work exhibits moments of tonally stable terrain that contrast with sections featuring fragmented, polytonal counterpoint. The interplay between these two phenomena establishes domains of relative stability and instability that unfold in conflict with one another. As analysis of *Four Pieces* proceeds, I argue that the dialectic tension between these two domains aids in constructing narrative poles signifying past/present, solidarity/chaos, introspection/action, and social order/revolution. Drawing on this *order* versus *transgression* model to analyze Rzewski’s works suggests that he has a tendency to construct tragic works.

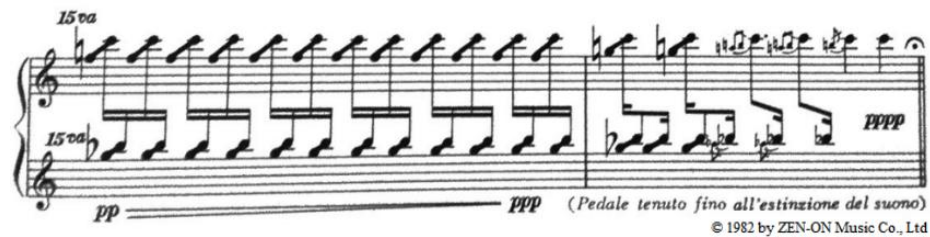
Nevertheless, an element of uncertainty that Rzewski implants into his works problematizes a clear reading according to the mappings Almen provides: Rzewski tends to end pieces with more of a question mark than a clear conclusion. For instance, “Down by the Riverside,” “Winnsboro Cottonmill Blues,” and all movements of *Four Pieces* end with quiet compositional gestures that strip the material to its barest thematic elements and avoid a conclusive cadence. “Down by the Riverside” (Figure 2), “Winnsboro Cottonmill Blues” (Figure 3), and the final piece of *Four Pieces* (Figure 4) all feature an ascent to the upper limits of the

piano, an extreme *decrescendo* or *crescendo* (Piece IV has both dynamic markings simultaneously), and a disintegration of the musical material.

Figure 2: “Down By the Riverside” ending




Figure 3: “Winnsboro Cottonmill Blues” ending




Each movement of *Four Pieces* concludes by reducing the material to each piece's basic components (Figure 4). Piece I ends eerily with a *pianissimo* descent of chords constructed of stacked thirds (a dominant interval in the piece) performed with staccato articulations in an abrupt ending, Piece II ends with *pianissimo*, staccato articulations of whole-tone dyads in both hands, echoing material from the opening of the piece, Piece III ends with repeated dissonant chords in the low bass with a *decrescendo* from *fortissimo* to *pianississimo*; after a brief pause, a soft *pianississimo* chord built on minor sixths sounds in the lowest register.

Figure 4: Endings for each movement in *Four Pieces*

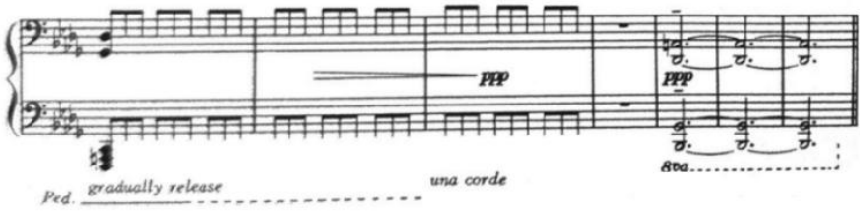
PIECE I




PIECE II



PIECE III



PIECE IV



N.B. The final notes should not have the character of a cadence but rather the contrary, of something unfinished; it should not be clear whether another sound is coming, until all sound has in fact died away.

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Following archetypes laid out by Almen, as well as Klein's analysis of musical narrative unfolding as a series of emotional states, Piece IV, the final movement of *Four Pieces*, can be seen to end in a state of uncertainty. The ambiguous, quiet ending of each movement instills a sense of incompleteness, obscuring a clear reading of *transgression* or *order* as the victorious narrative pole. The interplay between coherent structure and chaos, tonal stability and polytonal instability, and homophony and polyphony results each time not in a conclusive ending but in

ambiguity. In the context of an archetypal reading of *Four Pieces*, this implies a *tragic* narrative in which the elements of opposition to hierarchy do not achieve victory.

DETERMINING POLITICAL ELEMENTS OF A NARRATIVE

If mapping a piece's narrative potential is difficult, it is even more challenging to argue that narrative structure is inherently political. In the case of Chopin's ballades, if their narratives are political in nature, then their political qualities are not inherent to the musical structure. Instead, they are generated obliquely through critical analysis of such content as harmonic progressions or melodic idiom and their situation within broader social contexts. Political concerns emerge from reception in this case: for instance, Chopin's *Second Ballade* occasionally references poetry depicting military invasion and occupation of Poland, as explored in Jonathan Bellman's interpretation of the work as a narrative of Polish suffering.⁵⁹ In contrast, narrative music that has a distinctly programmatic element makes reference to the composer's lived world and reveals composer intent on a poetic level. Examples such as Schumann's *Carnaval* and Liszt's *Years of Pilgrimage* combine historical content with musical structure, revealing in the first case traces of Schumann's interaction with fellow musicians and social peers and in the second, regional musical codes that identify and differentiate the European landscape of Liszt's travels. A significant portion of Rzewski's *oeuvre* makes use of melodies borrowed from folk music or specific historical artifacts. Paired with Rzewski's own musings on politics and its relation to music, this imbues his pieces with narrative qualities.

Rzewski's synthesis of narrative form with politicized content like writings from the Attica prison uprising and popular songs imbues his pieces with ideological content. When Rzewski draws from labor and protest song, popular protests, or political struggles for a

⁵⁹ Jonathan Bellman, *Chopin's Polish Ballade Op. 38 as Narrative of National Martyrdom*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2009.

composition, the connection between musical content, setting, and source material is clearly political. Christian Asplund examines some of Rzewski's works composed during his association with *Musica Elettronica Viva* and during his residence in New York, asserting that the musical content of such pieces evokes ideological and sociopolitical struggle. Additionally, technical and collaborative demands Rzewski's pieces place on performers incorporate a performed metaphor for these kinds of struggle. Rzewski's works from this period "model socio-political phenomena and...teach specific lessons about these phenomena on both intuitive and intellectual levels to both performers and listeners." Furthermore, the players of these pieces "will literally experience these socio-political phenomena in the course of performing these pieces."⁶⁰

Asplund identifies this phenomenon in several of Rzewski's pieces for collaborative ensembles: *Attica*, *Coming Together*, *Plan for a Spacecraft*, and *Les Moutons de Panurge*. *Coming Together* sets a text written by prisoner Sam Melville during the Attica uprisings. In this work Rzewski uses an additive/subtractive compositional process through which lines of text are repeated, each repetition adding a new line until the final line is reached. Once the final line of text is reached, a line is removed from the beginning of the text upon each repetition. A collaborative work for speaker and undetermined ensemble, performing *Coming Together* "is a strange and beautiful mixture of anarchy and linearity; a highly constrained gesture that is governed not by an individual nor even so much by law but by an awareness of and adherence to the progression of the line, the text, and time in all the performers."⁶¹ Performance of *Coming Together* requires group interaction around a single idea and thus imitates social organization around a single ideological or political idea. Furthermore, the rigidly defined compositional

⁶⁰ Asplund, 418.

⁶¹ Asplund, 421.

procedure by which the poem unfolds neatly reflects the inhibitions and constraints of imprisoned life.

In *Coming Together*, collaboration creates an unfolding, undetermined process and reveals a dialectic tension between chaotic freedom and ineluctable linearity. Thus, Asplund notes that every player “makes a contribution (a ‘melody’) that is unique and spontaneous while the sum of these melodies is absolutely unified, though multifaceted, not according to a grid or any exterior superimposed structure be it metrical, harmonic, or serial, but around a line that is the piece.”⁶² Asplund uses the concept of the “line” to describe the general contour of the piece, accounting for undetermined, aleatoric elements that occur along the way. The concept is similar to a scatter plot line, which averages scattered data points into a single line on a graph. This piece contains “the very important concept of the inevitability of the course of history and the ability of the proletariat to be coordinated in their actions without the imposition of power structures characteristic of bourgeois institutions,” and these actions require “vigilance, struggle and constant awareness of where history is in its progression.”⁶³ *Coming Together* presents a metaphor for the hard work of organizing and struggling against oppression, the inherently chaotic nature of that struggle, and the difficulty of individual ideological commitment.

These same themes abound in *Les Moutons de Panurge*, an aleatoric piece using additive procedures. The title of the work references a scene from François Rabelais’s 16th century pentalogy of novels *La vie de Gargantua et de Pantagruel*. In the third novel, the character Panurge throws a sheep over the side of a boat into the sea. The remaining herd of sheep blindly follow the first over the edge. Rzewski’s *Les Moutons de Panurge* mimics this scene, instructing any collection of musicians to play through a single melody 65 notes in length. The performers

⁶² Ibid., 421-422.

⁶³ Asplund, 421-422.

must build the full melody through a repetitive procedure that involves immediately repeating the first note and returning to the beginning of the line. Each repetition adds one more note to the line as the tempo gradually increases. After the entire melody is assembled each repetition of the line removes the previous first note, eventually sustaining on the final pitch until every performer also concludes the piece. The process creates an eventual polyphonic din, as it is nearly impossible for every musician to stay in the “correct” position of the melody. In fact, this is an intended effect of the piece. Rzewski directs: “Never stop or falter, always play loud. Stay together as long as you can, but if you get lost, stay lost. Do not try to find your way back into the fold.”⁶⁴ As with *Coming Together* and *Attica*, *Les Moutons de Panurge* expresses the same tension between individual expression and collective action. Ultimately a collective improvisation at the end of the piece resolves this tension. It is easy to see a metaphor for political struggle as a collective and chaotic action in *Les Moutons de Panurge*. This dialectic between the hierarchies of different forms of music making and political thought exists in many of Rzewski’s works.

Asplund’s analysis looks mostly to collaborative pieces that prove analogous to communal action and make ideological appeals to identify and act against oppression. Rzewski’s repertoire for solo piano also bears several comparable markers that allow for similar comparison. *North American Ballads* and *Variations on “The People United Will Never Be Defeated”* both feature extant folk songs, additive/subtractive methods, extremely dissonant polyphony, and technical demands that Asplund might compare to the painful struggle of developing a critical ideology. In addition, and specifically relevant to the solo piano works, Rzewski’s pieces bear a

⁶⁴ Frederic Rzewski, *Les Moutons de Panurge*, self-published by author, 1969, Petrucci Music Library, International Music Score Library Project, <https://ks4.imslp.info/files/imglnks/usimg/a/a9/IMSLP115525-WIMA.72ab-Les-Moutons-de-Panurge.pdf> (accessed July 21, 2020).

distinctive story-telling quality. He achieves this by using representational material within large scale narrative structures.

Rzewski's eclectic style contributes to his works' representational richness and political content. By using extant popular songs with themes of working class struggle or political protest, political writings, and other artifacts connected to historical political events, Rzewski's works evoke the sensation of a lived present, one capable of being shaped by human action and organization. In his analysis of *North American Ballads* and *The People United Will Never Be Defeated* Michael Zuraw observes how Rzewski balances quotation and representation with musical form to effect a sociopolitical narrative:

While many of his peers employed stylistic quotations to imply a connection with the past, Rzewski used his eclectic style to reflect more of a sense of the present. There are two types of associations that the composer uses. The first of these associations is representative. This type does not indicate a specific chain of events or narrative, but rather focuses more on evoking the psychological ramifications of a chosen object or idea.... The representative type of association is most obviously explored through the relationships between musical form, compositional styles, and featured cultural references.... Chains of representative associations... evolve into the second type of association, which is the narrative.... Most often, the narrative association builds out of the listener's sense of relationships between representative associations that sequentially evoke many moods or psychological states.... A larger unified whole emerges out of the smaller, meaningful structural units that depict the development of revolutionary sentiment and its eventual suppression. *The sense of the narrative is constructed by means of psychological development that evokes the rise and fall of a social movement.*⁶⁵ [Italics added]

The way Zuraw hears narrative in Rzewski's works underscores Klein's contention that music proceeds as a sequence of emotional states. Such a reading remains essential to examples of Rzewski's music discussed in the scope of this study.

Almen and Klein establish arguments and technical analysis useful for analyzing *Four Pieces*. Using these frameworks, this paper interprets *Four Pieces* as a narrative tragedy which

⁶⁵ Michael Zuraw, "From Ideology into Sound: Frederic Rzewski's North American Ballads and Other Piano Music From the 1970s," DMA Dissertation, Rice University, 2003, 17-18.

unfolds as a series of emotional states. Following Asplund's tracings of political context in Rzewski's works, the content constructing this narrative framework with its elicited emotional states suggests the categories of systemic oppression, struggle, and concepts of class. These categories are situated within the "social imaginary" of the politically-engaged working class, where "social imaginary" defines a set of values, institutions, and moral codes of a particular social body. This analysis shies away from ascribing a direct plot or set of characters to Rzewski's piece. Music does not represent these actions in a one-to-one relationship. As such, there will be no suggestion that a particular place in the score represents a bucolic worker's society, factory bosses overworking laborers, or a military *junta* dispersing a collective of the oppressed. As the primary musical theme is the composer's creation rather than a reference to an extant popular music relevant to labor struggles or populist movements, analysis cannot directly assign an idea of characters or plot to the unfolding of *Four Pieces*. However, in keeping with Klein's stress on intertextuality, it will be essential to consult Rzewski's similar works that more explicitly connect to real-world political events. Whereas *North American Ballads* directly draws on actual popular melodies, *Four Pieces* evokes generic qualities of folk songs, specifically those of popular dance music from South America.

SONGS OF STRUGGLE IN RZEWSKI'S SOLO PIANO MUSIC

In her dissertation on Rzewski's music, Bree Guerra argues that narrative structure and political content are intertwined. She seeks to explain how Rzewski composes in such a way that the "experience of the work parallels the concept within it."⁶⁶ Like Almen, Guerra also utilizes the concept of *transvaluation* to refer to an interaction between differentiated portions of a musical structure which invites the listener to associate meaning to both the individual sections and the tension between their interactions. In her analysis, Guerra identifies a flow of discrete

⁶⁶ Guerra, 1.

sections in Rzewski's variation-based works that presents "contrasts in dynamics, style, rhythmic pacing, register, [and] texture," arousing tension between elements that "align into a hierarchy so that a listener interprets a shift between dominant characteristics."⁶⁷ As a result the listener assigns relative weight or narrative meaning to these changes in the hierarchy. Rzewski's eclectic harmonic techniques enrich his works' narrative potential: a "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."⁶⁸ Genre and topical associations are also important musical features that can signify historical place, people, and political events. The final section of "Down by the Riverside," for instance, imitates the bluegrass music of Appalachia. Sections of *Four Pieces* evoke genres ranging from lyric Romanticism to strummed guitar.

"Down by the Riverside" serves as a useful subject for analysis using the techniques and ideas presented here. Several of the compositional techniques Rzewski uses in it are also utilized in *Four Pieces*, and an understanding of the sourced folk song's thematic content and cultural origins helps to trace connections and similarities to the main theme of *Four Pieces*. The theme of "Down by the Riverside" quotes a spiritual hymn-tune from the Civil War era. The text of the hymn stresses an anti-war theme: "I'm gonna lay down my sword and shield...ain't gonna study war no more." Given its pacifist themes, this spiritual was popularized as an anti-Vietnam War protest song. As with the other works in *North American Ballades*, the source material addresses injustice, oppression, and a desire for a more just world free of systemic violence. The salient compositional technique Rzewski uses constitutes a kind of polytonal texture in which the main tune of "Down by the Riverside" is broken into smaller components, then quoted in different keys and at different rhythmic values.

⁶⁷ Guerra, 5.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 6.

Figure 5 presents the melody of “Down by the Riverside” in full. Figure 6 outlines the primary motifs that Rzewski draws from it to develop his piece, in which the motifs, labeled *X*, *Y*, and *Z*, appear simultaneously in different keys, occasionally in diminution or augmentation, to construct a polytonal and polyphonic texture. This results in a rich musical fabric with multiple independent voices. Importantly, the identity of the original melody is aurally preserved: when performed with care, each strand of the complex texture recognizably projects the original melody. Figure 7 identifies the motifs in the first contrapuntal section of the piece, measures 19-24. Each fragment of the melody is circled and labeled as *x*, *y*, and *z*.

Figure 5: Melody from “Down by the Riverside” (transcribed by author)



Figure 6: Motivic cells from “Down by the Riverside”



Figure 7: Motifs in “Down by the Riverside,” mm. 19-24



Guerra’s dissertation reads “Down by the Riverside” as a layering of multiple, aurally recognizable voices in a narrative that mirrors the political content of the folk song. Rzewski employs polytonal techniques to structure the motifs of the theme in such a way that the tune “fragments remain discernable throughout the work.”⁶⁹ Guerra recognizes that the piece unfolds as a “linear narrative,” balancing “contrasts between tonality and polytonality and consonance and dissonance” such that “each new variation acts out a different stage in society’s collective search for peace.”⁷⁰ Guerra correlates compositional process with political signification, but does not identify the narrative genre these pieces evoke.

Following Almen’s model, *transgression* and *order* must first be defined before identifying an appropriate narrative genre. The two poles manifest along different dimensions:

⁶⁹ Guerra, 13.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 14.

topically, through extra-musical associations like a text; or musically, through contrapuntal devices, textures, harmonic developments, generic allusions, *et cetera*. The rich context of the cited melodies and the eclectic compositional techniques Rzewski uses render a mapping of *order* and *transgression* that is more complicated than mere tension between key areas and themes. This reading contends that the musical events of “Down by the Riverside” suggest a hierarchy of *order* that counters and suppresses efforts for peace. In the topical dimension, this hierarchy of order is represented through reference to “war” in the text of the sourced spiritual: “I’m gonna lay down my sword and shield / Down by the riverside / Ain’t gonna study war no more.” In the context of American anti-war activism, *order* in this piece can be read as conflicts and the socio-political mechanisms leading to war generally, and American imperialist activity specifically; *transgression* is represented through the text’s anti-war sentiments.

Rzewski’s alignment as a Marxist and his critiques of contemporary capitalist society’s vicissitudes also inform the narrative associations a listener may hear in his music. His political stances frame his works in a way that listeners are encouraged to sympathize with oppressed peoples, the working class, or those critical of dominant and destructive ideologies. In “Down by the Riverside,” the hoped-for victory of an oppressed people constitutes the *transgressive* pole. The oppositional pole constituting a hierarchy of *order* is suggested through a process of fractured tonality that connotes uncertainty. As Guerra notes in her analysis of the piece, the idea of delivery from warfare and conflict emerges through Rzewski’s polytonal techniques: “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.”⁷¹ Conversely, the potential of peace functions as the oppositional *transgressive* pole that elicits the listener’s sympathy. Rzewski begins the piece with a straightforward presentation of the theme,

⁷¹ Guerra, 13.

intending to align the listener's sympathies with the tune and its suggested themes. Tonally stable moments of the theme recur throughout the piece, creating contrast with the contrapuntal, polytonal segments. In varying registers and moods, these moments of resolved conflict interpolated between the polyphonic sections suggest *transgressive* efforts to overcome the *order* that generates the disarray and chaos suggested through dissonance and fractured appearances of the theme.

Almen's analysis of the Chopin prelude relies on historical and technical contexts: harmonic motion and tonal center are its key determining elements. In contrast, Rzewski's compositions do not serve the same harmonic functions. While the key areas of tonally stable areas in "Down by the Riverside" are not necessarily irrelevant, they do not interrelate through the rules and voice-leading tendencies of functional Western harmony. Identifying the interrelations between *order* and *transgression* requires shifting to a polytonal context. Rather than harmonic motion, the forces of the piece manifest through polyphony, homophony, and registral difference.

Historical circumstances contextualize the poles of *order* and *transgression* that frame the narrative action of *Four Pieces*. Organized popular struggles in South America, such as the protests in 1960s Chile that inspired Rzewski to write *Variations on "The People United Will Never Be Defeated!"*, situate the work within a narrative depicting a people's struggle against unjust oppression. As *Four Pieces* unfolds, moments of stability in harmonic, melodic, and textural registers are associated with *transgression*. The narrative pole of *order* is implicit in the moments of musical turbulence. This reading suggests that the pole of *order* represents the categorical experiences of oppression and injustice which afflict "the People." *Transgression* represents the categorical experience of struggles against injustice.

To be clear, *order* as a concept in narrative analysis is not to be confused with order as a feature of musical organization. For instance, regular tonality, consonant harmony, and regular rhythms might often suggest higher levels of order. This results in a seemingly paradoxical analysis whereby *transgressive* moments in the piece occur during the most unified and structurally “normal” parts of the piece, and *order* manifests in schisms and irregularity. For the sake of clarity, the concept *order* will be utilized in its capacity as a narrative concept. The listener responds to moments of violence and moments of hopeful solidarity, which represent *order* and *transgression* respectively, with the same emotional responses they would feel toward real-world struggle. As a *tragic* archetype *Four Pieces* “depicts the failure of a desired *transgression* (or an exercise of freedom) against a restrictive or undesired *order*” [italics added].⁷² This relates to the actual history of the organized Left in the Global South in the period after the second World War. Populist Left movements were met with displacement and repression in Indonesia, Chile, and Brazil, to name only a few examples.⁷³

Significantly, in “Down by the Riverside” the boundaries between sections dramatically representing *transgression* and *order* are porous, and the piece lacks a clear division between the two poles. Rzewski utilizes a polyphonic technique to fracture the recognizable main theme into quotations that express simultaneously in differing key-centers, resulting in a chaotic destabilization of the tonal quality of the thematic material. Contrary to narrative mappings of a Chopin ballade, in which harmonic difference between sections relies on functional, stable, and distinct tonal centers, the sections representing forces of *order* in “Down by the Riverside” express multiple sliding tonal centers at once. The use of recognizable source material (i.e. the quoted main theme) maintains a close connection with the sections of *transgression*. Within the

⁷² Almen, 29.

⁷³ See the Eduardo Galeano’s *Open Veins of Latin America*, Vincent Blevins’ *The Jakarta Method*, and Greg Gardin’s *Empire’s Workshop: Latin America, the United States, and the Rise of the New Imperialism*.

sections of polytonal quotation, the material displays varying degrees of contrapuntal intensity. In this reading, sections that are highly complex and dissonant align with the narrative pole of *order*, while more stable moments align with *transgression*.

As an example of this alignment, the initial polytonal section that immediately succeeds the opening of the piece is highly fragmented, with several voices articulating short portions of the theme across several registers (as shown in Figure 7 above). Moments which exhibit homogeneous texture or clear presentation of melody are placed in contrast to the highly contrapuntal sections, one of which occurs from measures 63 to 66 (Figure 8). Beginning in measure 63, the *x* fragment of the main theme is played simultaneously in F major and C major at two different rates of speed, underscored by predominantly A-flat major harmony sustained in the middle register. In measures 64 to 66, a modified form of the end of the *z* fragment is played in parallel second-inversion triads in the right hand. Although Rzewski still employs polytonal contrapuntal techniques in these short measures, several factors contribute to a mood of stability. The *p* and *pp* dynamics contrast with the intensity of previous sections; the fragments of the theme employ C-major and F-major pentatonic scales, the pitch collections of which differ by only one note and are highly harmonically consonant with one another; and the parallel second-inversion triads clearly outline the contour of the melody. These brief moments of relative stability provide a sense of coherence, as if the forces of *transgression* have made progress towards the goal of coming together.

Figure 8: Tonal and dynamic stability in “Down By the Riverside,” mm. 63-66



Significantly, in both “Down by the Riverside” and *Four Pieces* the elements suggesting the pole of *order* are not depicted representationally. That is, there is no theme or motif specifically connoting war, oppression, *et cetera*, but rather *order* is implied as a thing to be overcome in the process of *transgression*. This contrasts with others of Rzewski’s works which do project oppressive elements representationally. For instance, the repetitive bass toccata texture and chord clusters of “Winnsboro Cottonmill Blues” clearly represent the churning machinery that occupies exploited workers’ efforts and labor time.

Thus, in the polyphonic sections of the piece the elements of the *transgressive* melodic material are layered in a complex manner, motivated in response to the implicit elements of *order*. The mere fact that several voices simultaneously express fragments of the theme in disharmony does not alone constitute the hierarchy of *order*. Rather, in these contrapuntal sections Rzewski crafts a texture featuring atomized thematic material aligned with *transgression*: these address and are motivated by the hierarchy of *order*. If Guerra’s assessment that this compositional process suggests a noisy, varied discourse on one theme is accurate, then the polyphonic sections of “Down by the Riverside” most closely represent a democratic struggle for progress. *Order* is implicit as the reason these voices have to struggle in the first place. These complexities and elisions suggest a porous relationship between the sections and interplay of material. This pairs well with Asplund’s assertions that the dialectical nature of political struggle is embedded in Rzewski’s compositions from this period.

In summary, a reading of “Down by the Riverside” as a functional narrative advances the following argument: Rzewski associates the piece with anti-war themes on the poietic level by sourcing a spiritual hymn *qua* protest song. Additionally, he situates the piece in a historical locus by evoking Appalachian folk genres. On the immanent and esthetic levels, the piece

unfolds as an interplay between bands of intensity of the experiences of unity and struggle (functioning as Klein's "emotional states"). *Transgression* as an "oppositional" pole presents as the primary folk tune, in various states of harmonic rest and unrest (harmonic consonance versus polytonal counterpoint). On the poietic and esthetic levels this manifests through association with the anti-war theme of the text. *Order* as the established, hierarchical pole functions "in the background," compelling the polytonal struggles of the *transgressive* material. On the poietic and esthetic levels one can read *order* as forces of war and imperialist activity. While the climax of the piece features the most coherent, idyllic presentation of the folk tune, this energy is dispelled as the piece ends atomized, tonally uncertain, and in the high register of the piano; therefore, the piece reads as *tragic*.

Analyzing Rzewski's development of quoted material, his use of various musical genres, and his application of extended techniques yields a narrative reading suggesting the experience of living through and confronting oppression. This experience presents itself through the lens of the working class struggling under the capitalist mode of production. Using the above analyses and works as touchstones, *Four Pieces* can be interpreted as representing socio-political struggle.

CHAPTER III: TRACING NARRATIVE STRUCTURE IN *FOUR PIECES*

Both *North American Ballads* and *Variations on “The People United Will Never Be Defeated!”* have been noted for their historically situated content, the political subtexts inherent in that content, and the possibility of narrative readings that emerges from Rzewski’s formal structures. Situated between these two works, *Four Pieces* also suggests the concept of “the People” in struggle against oppression and exemplifies this theme in thematic content and narrative structure.

Drawing upon the same compositional techniques utilized in *North American Ballads*, *Four Pieces* is likewise imbued with the capacity for political narrative. A primary theme, outlined clearly at the beginning of the piece, generates material for the entire work, but in contrast to his other works of the 1970s, the theme for *Four Pieces* was of Rzewski’s own creation, with no prior existence as a historical folk or popular song. It nevertheless possesses qualities associated with South American popular dance music. Rzewski composed many works that do not draw from popular music, but *Four Pieces* remains unique among these more “abstracted” works in its method of varying thematic material that alludes to popular dance music.

Rzewski utilizes a handful of compositional devices in *Four Pieces* that correlate with narrative development: topical associations (e.g. dirge, guitar folk music), motive-oriented development of musical ideas, rhetorical gestures (for instance the prevalence of ambiguous, open-ended conclusions), and contrapuntal complexity. To reiterate, through the temporal interchange of these musical elements, transvaluation creates the scaffolding for a larger musical narrative.

Four Pieces exemplifies emotional states imbued with political associations and sympathies through the use of a melody with a distinctly South American flair. This is not unexpected, given Rzewski's interaction with musicians visiting New York from Chile, as well as his subsequent focus on a Chilean protest song in *Variations on "The People United Will Never Be Defeated!"*. The character of the original theme is so convincingly rustic that David Burge describes it as a "folk song waiting to be born."⁷⁴ As with "Dreadful Memories" and "Down By the Riverside," *Four Pieces* opens with a direct statement of this melody that appears in each of the *Four Pieces* and binds them into one multi-movement work. *Four Pieces* thus functions as a narrative whole in four parts that "resembles a sonata structure in its number and order of movements."⁷⁵ For the remainder of this paper the term "work" will refer to *Four Pieces* as a whole, while the individual movements will be referred to as "pieces" to maintain Rzewski's naming convention.

For Rzewski, the melody creates a work's essential identity. Rzewski notes of melody in general:

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] retaining its identity even when removed from a context [or] subjected... to a considerable degree of abstraction and distortion.⁷⁶

Situated amid works that make use of populist themes, such as *Variations on "The People United Will Never Be Defeated,"* *Four Pieces* significantly works out a melody that connotes qualities of folk and the idea of "the people." The flavor of the melody in conjunction with

⁷⁴ David Burge, *20th Century Piano Music*, Schirmer Books: New York, 231

⁷⁵ Ronald Lewis, "The Solo Piano Music of Frederic Rzewski," DMA Dissertation, University of Oklahoma, 1992, 53

⁷⁶ Frederic Rzewski, "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.

Rzewski's previous political works evokes the geographical and imagined South America, the site of struggles against dictatorship and right-wing suppression of populist politics. Rzewski wrings out of the source melody numerous variations and "distortions" that complicate the theme's identity and suggest the experience of struggle, a theme relevant to the ideas and stories of populist struggle that the Left contends constitutes just action against injustice.

By presenting the melody at the outset, Rzewski establishes an identity for a historical subject that will unfold throughout the piece, namely, the dialectic among oppression, progress, and struggle as understood in the context of popular organizing in South America in the 1960s and 1970s. This tactic appears frequently in this period of Rzewski's output and fits within the narrative framework and analytical tools established in the previous chapter. As with "Dreadful Memories," "Down By the Riverside," and *Variations on "The People United Will Never Be Defeated!"*, the first piece in *Four Pieces* opens with a direct expression of the faux-folk melody that defines and generates the content of the entire work and establishes a reference point to orient the listener as the narrative of the piece unfolds. Performance directions indicate the opening should be "Dreamlike," suggesting the idyllic nature of the theme and its function as a subject about to undergo political struggle against oppression.

All of the compositional techniques Rzewski uses, as well as abstract, extra-musical associations with the identity and struggle of the oppressed masses, are inherent in the melodic and rhythmic features of this short tune. As a result, *Four Pieces* contains extramusical associations with a wide range of concepts that are bound by a single mutable identity. The character of the primary theme suggests South American popular dance. Various social rituals are evoked by treating the theme as a funereal topic, a lively dance, or a guitar-accompanied

song, generates a narrative that suggests phenomena attending political struggle, among which are rupture, struggle, loss, despair, and yearning.

Figure 9: Mixed meter in the primary theme for *Four Pieces*

Figure 10: Mixed Meter in “Los Patos en la Laguna” [transcribed by author]

This primary theme exemplifies a supple rhythmic structure that imparts the character of a mixed-meter dance: the first phrase expresses two groups of $6/8 + 3/4$. More than any other

feature of the melody, this dynamic rhythm drives the sections of the work with the greatest sense of coherence, which project a people's hope to be freed from oppression. These rhythmically vivacious, mixed meter segments also act as vehicles for introducing very clear variations of the main theme. Appearing occasionally throughout *Four Pieces* and associated with the opening "Dreamlike" theme, these moments of clarity break up the musical chaos. They represent political repression and act as signposts that orient the listener ideologically to the framework of class struggle. These sections anchor the narrative in a the concept of oppressed peoples organizing to overcome hardship.

Intervallically, the most prevalent features of *Four Pieces*' theme are the thirds in the right hand opening of the tune and the minor second in the second phrase of the tune. The minor second appears as a melodic interval in the top voice of the left hand's entrance. The open fifth also appears as a prevalent harmonic interval at the left hand entrance.

When discussing relationships among groups of pitches, this paper uses the vocabulary of set theory analysis to discuss tone rows, inversions, and transpositions. Collections of unordered pitches are listed within parentheses, for instance (C – E – F♯), while specific sequences of pitches are listed within brackets, {G – G – G – E-flat}. Integer notation is used to describe occasional sections where Rzewski employs serialist technique. Otherwise scientific pitch designation is used to specify pitch and register. For example, C4 ("middle" C) and G4 are related by T_7 , which indicates transposition by 7 semitones. Similarly, I denotes an inversion of a set of pitches.

Harmonically, the melody equivocates between two harmonic areas: D major prevails in the first phrase until B minor is tonicized in the second phrase. While tonal ambiguity is not uncommon, it is a fitting quality for a musical narrative organized around the idea of struggle.

Mediant harmonic relations appear in several of the more tonally stable sections of the piece. For instance, measures 62 to 66 in Piece III oscillate between A minor and F major, ultimately concluding on a half-cadence in A minor (Figure 11). The passage at measures 52 to 53 in Piece IV alternates between B minor and G major (Figure 12). These relations recall the original theme's harmonic bipolarity.

Figure 11: Mediant harmonic relationships in Piece III, mm. 61-66



Figure 12: Mediant harmonic relationships in Piece IV, mm. 52-53



Conflict between harmonic centers expresses itself chromatically at several points in *Four Pieces*. For instance, Piece I at measure 13 features stacked triads in T_I relation (Figure 13), while ninth chords appear in T_I relation in Piece II beginning at measure 109 (Figure 14).

Figure 13: T₁ relationships in Piece I, m. 13

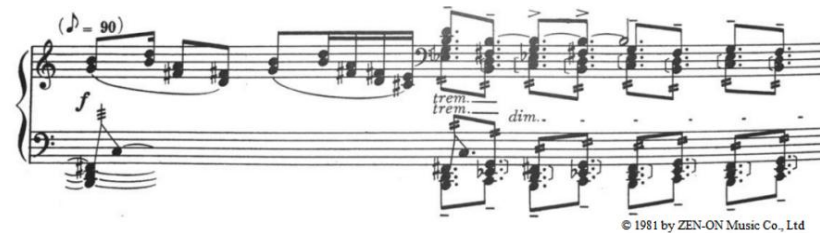


Figure 14: T₁ relationships in Piece II, mm. 109-111



Rather than attempting to connect musical material to an almost endless list of phenomena such as specific people, a populist leader, or specific historical moments of unrest, this analysis argues that “narrative structure” unfolds in this piece as a sequence of emotional states elicited by equilibrium and disruption between musical events. This reading attaches specific ideological or historical qualities to the narrative that emerge from the consideration of Rzewski’s political leanings, his *modus operandi* in coeval works, and other relevant scholarship attaching the experience of sociopolitical struggle to his music. Thus, while real historical events inform the context that allows for the theme to reflect qualities of South American music or concepts of political struggle, musical events in *Four Pieces* do not function as representative. Rather, a knowledge of historical events creates the capacity in the listener for extra-musical associations and emotional responses. It is the abstract interaction of valuations from this musical material that structures a narrative experience and situates *Four Pieces* within a specific narrative archetype.

The theme’s South American folk character and fractured appearances throughout the work correlate to the concepts of South American identity and socio-political struggle. Narrative

conflict arises between the folk song in its ideal tonal state and the dissonant polyphony that it undergoes. These two treatments of the theme generate a fundamental tension throughout *Four Pieces* and represent the poles of *transgression* and *order*, respectively. This resonates with the themes of folk and popular protest (*transgression*) against structural forms of injustice (*order*) that attend both Rzewski's *oeuvre* and the radical politics of the 1960s and 1970s.

To illustrate the connections of *Four Pieces* with Klein and Almen's conceptions of musical narrative, Tables 1 to 4 chart how each movement in *Four Pieces* unfolds, with a description of each section's defining musical dimensions (tonality, register, texture, *etc.*) in the central column along with a proposed set of possible expressive, abstract, or generic associations in the rightmost column. Following this overview, an analysis of motivic connections and the interplay between the sections of each piece, together with their related emotional associations will structure a reading of political narrative in *Four Pieces* and expand out the scaffolding presented in the tables.

Table 1: Piece I

A' Initial-melody	Traditional dance-like quality; tonally stable	Nostalgic, "Dreamlike"
B Mm. 2-15	Dissonant, registrally disjunct, tremolos, simultaneities v. pointillistic texture	Chaotic, uncertain, "Violent, Impulsive"
C Mm. 16-29	Return of theme, long "neo- Romantic" melodic lines, minor/"dark" harmony	Dirgelike, lamenting
C' Mm. 30-33	Free rhythm, registrally disjunct, long melodic lines broken into pointillistic texture	Uncertain, searching
B' Mm. 34-40	Low register, arpeggiated "additive" procedure, sudden <i>f</i> dissonant tremolos	Violence, impending, unstoppable force
Coda Mm. 41-45	Theme from C presented over tremolos, <i>staccato</i> -pedalled chords strip away the long melody	Uncertainty, defeat, perseverance

Table 2: Piece II

A Mm. 1-59	Extended triadic horizontal lines, syncopation, chromatic vertical clusters, polytonal counterpoint	Scherzo-like, energized yet hesitant, struggle and momentary conviction
B: B ₁ Mm. 60-108	3rds-based legato melody, subdued dynamics, long continuous ♯ bass-lines	Wandering, introspective
B: B ₂ 109-201	Constant triplets, semitone movement, <i>ff</i> presentation of B ₁ melody; counterpoint with dilation/augmentation	Passionate, motivated
A' Mm. 202-248	Return of A material	Hopeful but uncertain

Table 3: Piece III

A Mm. 1-35	Octave displacement, meandering melody, dissonant, compound meter dirge, aria	Gloomy, defeated
B Mm. 36-66	Tremolos like strummed guitar, segments of original melody, strong E-flat minor tonality, then A minor/F major bipolarity	Longing but plaintive, then “confident” and organized
C Mm. 67-107	Extreme polytonal counterpoint, dense texture across all registers, intensely dissonant, fragments of melodic cells	Intense struggle, organized compared to mvmt I
Coda Mm. 108-136	<i>ppp</i> recall of folk-tune from B, cadenzas, low repeated dissonant chords	Nostalgia, defeat

Table 4: Piece IV

A Mm. 1-35	Octave displacement, meandering melody, dissonant, compound meter dirge, <i>aria</i> ?	Gloomy, defeated
B Mm. 36-66	Tremolos like strummed guitar, segments of original melody, strong E-flat minor tonality, then A minor/F major bipolarity	Longing but plaintive, then “confident” and organized
C Mm. 67-107	Extreme polytonal counterpoint, dense texture across all registers, intensely dissonant, fragments of melodic cells	Intense struggle, organized compared to mvmt I
Coda Mm. 108-136	<i>Ppp</i> recall of folk-tune from B, cadenzas, low repeated dissonant chords	Nostalgia, defeat

While *Four Pieces* functions as a multi-movement tragedy, analysis of the individual pieces reveals each to be unique in emotional intensity, if still similar in narrative archetype. *Transgression* fails to overcome *order* in any piece, but the emotional tone and consequent narrative timbre varies between pieces. The ametric, chaotic impulsiveness of Piece I stands in contrast to the driving energy of Piece II, the melancholic spleen of Piece III, and the uncertain perpetual motion of Piece IV. Differentiation in intensity and cultural values among the pieces deepens the narrative capacity of *Four Pieces* as a complete work.

CHAPTER IV: PIECE I – “DREAMLIKE — VIOLENT, IMPULSIVE”

The first piece functions as an improvisatory prelude or fantasia. As established, the initial melody provides stability and evokes a traditional South American dance topic. Marked at a soft dynamic, the undulating theme has a plaintive, longing quality. The statement of this theme at the outset establishes an identity that will subsequently be assaulted by disharmony and rupture. Given the context of the composition, the theme correlates with populist political projects in the 1960s and 1970s that sought to overcome injustice and oppression. It constitutes a “thing lost,” an idea of the “will” of the people, or some humanity that has been stripped by injustice and strives to be reclaimed. The attempts throughout each piece to reorganize the theme into something stable constitute attempts of *transgression* against the powers of *order* that coordinate oppression and injustice.

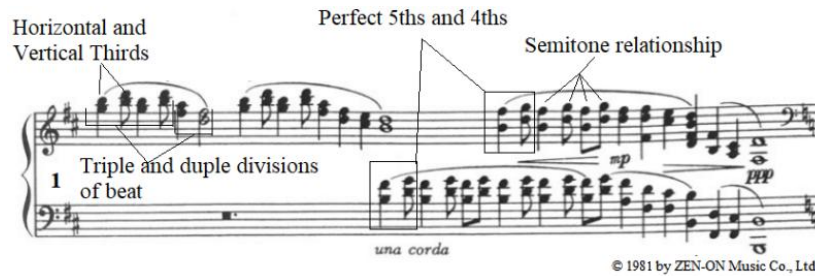
The two poles structuring *Four Pieces* as a narrative appear at the outset of the piece. After the opening melody is presented, the piece begins in earnest with a chaotic section full of tempestuous swells, dissonant tremolos, sudden ruptures and crashing chords. The harmonic stability established at the B minor cadence in measure 1 is immediately unsettled by the (B1 – C2) tremolo in measure 2. Texture, rhythm, dynamics, and meter are all irregular. Swelling dynamics that range from *pianississimo* to *fortissimo*, the performance direction “Violent, impulsive,” and the absence of meter introduced in measure 2 all suggest turbulence (Figure 15). A direct juxtaposition between the gentle opening theme and the violently disjointed section that succeeds it presents a dramatic contrast between *transgression* and *order*.

Figure 15: Turbulence in Piece I, m. 2



As in his other keyboard works of the period, Rzewski weaves the opening theme throughout the work. *Four Pieces* contrasts with his other works in the way the elements of the original theme are presented. In *North American Ballads*, the fragmented development sections retain a close relationship to the main theme. As a result, even as the theme is broken into small motivic cells and presented polytonally, its presence remains audible. In *Four Pieces*, Rzewski uses a similar technique but atomizes the theme into its smallest harmonic, melodic, and rhythmic elements. With this granular technique Rzewski incorporates the theme throughout the piece in such a way that the presence of the original theme is simultaneously omnipresent and obscured. Figure 16 outlines the primary melodic and rhythmic components of the main theme. This may seem incidental: after all, basic intervals like perfect fourths fifths and major and minor thirds are not conspicuous in themselves, but here their employment suggests something more purposeful than incidental. Further, in the dialectic between a firmly tonal theme and compositional devices like disharmony, basic intervals like perfect fifths and major/minor thirds correlate strongly with the primary theme. Specifically, they represent stages of the theme going through struggle, aligning with other Rzewski works like *Coming Together* and *Les Moutons de Panurge* that imitate political struggle and democratic action.

Figure 16: Primary characteristics of main theme in *Four Pieces*



The first piece's first chaotic section features each of these elements. A falling third motif, generated out of the opening theme, is scattered throughout this fractured section. The minor/major ninth and its inversion as minor/major second form the salient vertical harmony. When the melody returns and expresses something close to its original form in measure 15, the minor ninth remains a significant interval and complicates the stability of the triad in left hand tremolos

The most evident use of thirds occurs in the form of several horizontal lines of motion that permeate the texture of measures 2 to 13. The motivic germ cell of the melody is fractured and written in disjunct leaps across the entire range of the keyboard. Despite the chaotic dissonance and kaleidoscopic texture of the section, the connection between the thirds motif and the melody remains audible. The motif usually occurs at the top of chord voicings, aiding their audibility. Figure 17 highlights several of the minor third falling gestures from measures 2 to 10.

Figure 17: Falling 3rds in Piece I, mm. 2-10

(1 = ca. 90) * Violent, impulsive

2

II

ppp

trem.

8...

gradually remove soft pedal

8

7

3

trem.

2

trem.

trem.

3

trem.

4

pp

6

trem.

5

6

3

5

ff

(2)

trem.

f

ff

f

ff

6

ff

trem.

f

Free time

acci.

8...

4

pp

ff

8...

5

f

ff

fff

trem.

3

f

ff

5

trem.

1

1

trem.

2

trem.

1

8

ff

trem.

6

trem.

4

trem.

f

ff

ff-p-ff

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Adding to the chaotic mood of the section, the chords are largely unmeasured and unmetered. Instead of clear rhythmic notation, Rzewski denotes rhythmic duration with numbers over the noteheads. He writes that they “indicate loosely rhythmic values, depending on resonance of instrument. Not to be felt as in a meter. Where no values are given interpret freely.” In addition to this aleatoric device, Rzewski marks certain measures “Free time,” indicating the performer is free to interpret rhythm according to taste. This effects a sense of chaos and rupture that underscores the performance notes for this section: “Violent, Impulsive.” Variation between free material, time-denominated material, and beat-denominated material also underscores the impulsive character of the section. For instance, measure 10 includes even value notations, time-

denominated chord marked “4,” and a rapid flourish of thirty-second notes that suggests a stricter subdivision of a beat. The sudden shift from the dreamy, loosely metrical expression of the opening and the ametrical violence that immediately succeeds it suggests calamity and rupture. Lacking regular articulations to structure a meter and offer the listener the experience of regular time, this section creates a sense of uncertainty. The primary theme becomes immediately “out of joint.”

The theme returns in a shortened form at measure 13. In contrast to the *pp* dreamlike opening this brief instance responds to the preceding chaotic section with a truncated, restive version of the melody (Figure 18).

Figure 18: Truncated version of the primary theme, Piece I, m. 13



The physical demands of this piece provide an additional, bodily sense of struggle for the performer. Performing this section involves rapid leaps to the extremes of the keyboard, mastery of spatially-extreme pointillist texture, and dense chords. Christian Asplund interprets technical demands as metaphor for political struggle in pieces like *Coming Together* and *Les Moutons de Panurge*. Rzewski includes such thorny technical difficulties (like the end of “Winnsboro Cottonmill Blues”) as a guarantee that only those capable will play his music, supporting the idea that difficult things are worth struggling for.

The use of register in the opening section mimics an inexorable growth. Measure 2 begins in the lowest part of the piano. The registral “center-of-gravity” gradually rises in pitch

until the highest extremes of the keyboard sound in measure 10 (see Figure 17). After this extended swell, the material descends back to the lower-middle register of the keyboard by measure 13. Rzewski also uses this technique in the fourth piece in *Four Pieces*. Several sections feature a sustained and linear descent or ascent from one extreme of the keyboard to the other, effecting a sense of inevitability.

The narrative tension present in *Four Pieces* is outlined in these first fifteen measures. The theme is presented simply and conjures associations with folk music and South America. With its dreamlike atmosphere and soft dynamic, it appears as a reflective rather than an assertive statement. The immediately succeeding chaos suggests to the listener that calamity has befallen the theme. The ubiquitous presence of the theme's elements buttresses this reading. Furthermore, according to a schema that correlates emotional states to metaphors of political struggle, this opening section suggests the sensation of *experiencing* sociopolitical struggle against forces of oppression.

A plaintive dirge section succeeds the calamitous uncertainty of the opening. Minor chord tremolos at measure 14 imitate funereal drums (Figure 19). The topical association has a strong precedent in works for solo piano. The “Marcia Funebre” third movement of Beethoven’s *Sonata in A flat major*, Op. 26 and the “Funérailles” movement from Liszt’s *Harmonies poétiques et religieuses* both treat the funereal topic with bass tremolos (Figures 23a and 23b).

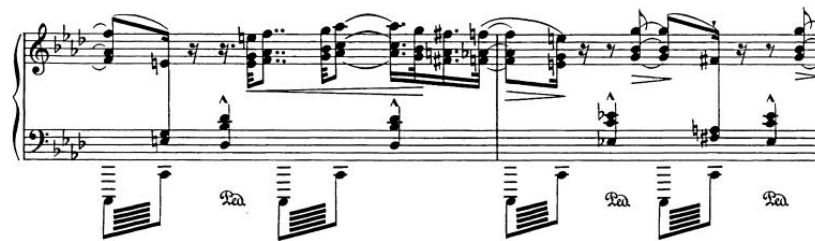
Figure 19: Funereal topic in Piece I, m. 14



Figure 20a: Funereal topic in Beethoven Sonata Op. 26, movement 2



Figure 20b: Funereal topic in Liszt “Funérailles”



At measure 16 this texture develops into dissonant rolled minor triads related by T_1 transposition, recalling the prevalence of the semitone in the opening chaotic section. Above the left hand imitation of snare drums, the melody returns in an expanded form as parallel thirds motivically linked to the cadential gesture of the original melody (Figure 21).

Figure 21: Development of theme over funereal topic, Piece I, mm. 14-18



The left hand texture begins to diversify in measure 22 (Figure 22). The previous tremolo triads transform into an arpeggiated texture stressing major 7ths, imparting a sense of forward momentum. Rhythmic and harmonic development also generate motion in contrast to

the previous static, funereal section. In measures 22 to 25 Rzewski explores a wider range of the piano and develops the motifs by increasing the rhythmic diminution of the melodic material.

The left hand harmony expands as well, extending bass root motion beyond the collection (C2 – D2 – E-flat/D#2 – E2) that underpins measures 14 to 21.

Figure 22: Rhythmic and harmonic development, Piece I, mm. 22-25

The image displays a musical score for measures 22 through 25 of a piece. The score is written for piano, with a treble and bass staff. Measure 22 begins with a *pp* (pianissimo) dynamic and a *cresc.* (crescendo) marking. The right hand features a melodic line with eighth and sixteenth notes, while the left hand provides a harmonic accompaniment with chords and moving bass lines. The score includes various musical notations such as slurs, ties, and dynamic markings. A copyright notice at the bottom right reads "© 1981 by ZEN-ON Music Co., Ltd".

These developments combine with the opening melody to create a sense of despair. The expansive yearning of measures 22 to 27 suggests a struggle to break from the oppressive gloom induced by the violent chaos of measures 2 to 13.

This lyrical yearning section is interrupted by a sudden eruption of out-of-time, freely performed material in measure 28. Punctuated with rhapsodic flourishes of tertiary arpeggios, the texture gradually slims down towards pointillist textures. Thirds again permeate the section as either a sighing gesture or a leaping gesture (circled in Figure 23). These gestures both relate to the previous mutations of the original theme that constitute the melody in measure 14 (see Figure 21 above).

Figure 23: Thirds in Piece 1, m. 28



Set against the previous dirge-like section, this free material suggests a brief, reflective escape from conflict. Rzewski often juxtaposes drastically contrasting material for dramatic effect, for instance in “Down by the Riverside,” where the same technique twice interrupts the forward momentum (Figures 24a and 24b). These sections feature stable tonality, left hand ostinato, and subdued dynamics, effecting a dreamlike suspension of the forward motion embodied by the polytonal counterpoint that drives the piece. Figure 24b shows the immediate shift from discordant polytonal *forte* – *fortissimo* material to a gentler E pentatonic mood. In the first piece of *Four Pieces*, measures 28 to 31 function similarly. The free section concludes with a long melodic expansion in tenths in the upper register before arriving at A minor at measure 31.

Figure 24a: “Down by the Riverside,” mm. 31-39



Figure 24b: “Down by the Riverside,” mm. 56-57



The final third of Piece I matches the opening’s violent, chaotic energy. In contrast to irregularity in meter and dynamics, Rzewski utilizes an additive composition technique in measure 33 (Figure 25).

Figure 25: Additive technique in Piece I, m. 33



A dissonant arpeggiated figuration is repeated 5 times, each repetition adding another note to the figuration. The motif begins subtracting from the beginning of each flourish.

Tremolando chords separate each repeated flourish, contributing to the turbulent mood. The articulation of these chords also displays an interesting use of the additive procedure: the chordal interruptions begin adding a new chord to the end of each articulation, while the duration of each previously-added chord is shortened; after reaching three chords, no more are added, but their duration continues to be shortened methodically. The interplay between the arpeggiated and chordal material creates a *stretto* effect, and gives the feeling of inexorably speeding towards some fate.

If there is a fatalism in this piece, it is grim: the final bars bear return to the funereal material (Figure 26). After an abundance of violent material, the piece ends with a whimper. Soft *portato* chords express acute dissonance before cutting off abruptly.

Figure 26: Ending to Piece I, mm. 40-45

The musical score for the ending of Piece I, measures 40-45, is presented in two systems. The first system (measures 40-44) begins with a tremolo in the right hand, marked *ff*, which gradually diminishes. The left hand plays a steady eighth-note pattern. The tempo is marked *mp*. The second system (measures 45-48) features a *p* *una corda* section with a very slight ritardando, followed by an abrupt cut-off. The final measure is marked *pp* and includes a staccato instruction with the note 'Catch resonance with pedal'. The copyright notice at the bottom right reads '© 1981 by ZEN-ON Music Co., Ltd'.

In summary, the opening piece presents a theme imbued with signifiers of place and identity (South America and “the people”). The piece unfolds as an interplay between violent, chaotic sections constructed from granular elements of the theme and gloomy presentations of the more complete theme. The chaotic sections present a sense of inevitability: the opening measures grow in density and rise in register; the final section begins as an additive-subtractive process, which implies an inescapable conclusion. The overall impression is one of calamity befalling the main theme. The pole that coordinates dominant events (*order*) is represented by these violent, chaotic sections. Attempts at *transgression* occur during the fuller representations of the main theme. These quotations call back to the original statement of the theme. Within the context of political awareness and socialist critique germane to Rzewski’s political philosophy, these moments represent struggles of “the people” towards overcoming injustice and oppression.

CHAPTER V: PIECE II – “LIGHT + BOUNCY”; TRANSGRESSION STRIKES BACK

In keeping with the imagined context of a four-movement sonata form, the second piece functions as an energetic scherzo in binary form with a coda. Bearing the playing direction “Light + Bouncy,” this energetic piece has a driving energy that contrasts with the gloom and chaos of the first piece. The spirited characteristics of Piece II suggest to the listener that the *transgressive* pole within the narrative attempts to compete with *order*.

The prevailing idea of the opening section consists of driving triadic arpeggiations in octaves between the hands in a constant eighth-note pulse (Figure 27). Eighth-note rests form “holes” in the texture. This linear, monophonic musical idea imbues a sense of organization and purpose that contrasts with the chaotic qualities of the first movement. Rzewski uses a twelve tone technique to develop the melody in Piece II, further contributing to an analysis that this material is rigidly organized. The first four major and minor triad arpeggiations spell out the tone row {e – 2 – 6 – t – 7 – 3 – 0 – 8 – 5 – 4 – 1 – 9}. With the subsequent four triads the row is inverted and transposed by 7 semitones (notated in Figure 27).

Major second dyads in T_1 relation between the hands suddenly contrast the driving eighth note motif harmonically and rhythmically. Marked “reflectively,” these dyads express “sighing” gestures that effect an introspective, questioning mood in contrast to the drive and energy of the prior measures.

The interplay of linear seventh chords and triad arpeggios and the appearance of seconds relate to the intervallic elements of the main theme. The emphasis on extended triadic motion draws from the thirds gestures that permeated the first piece. Here, those thirds are stretched out horizontally into a new form. The major second dyads in T_1 transposition between hands (or the

inverse T_{11}) stem from the semitone relationships present in the first piece as chords in T_1 relation or as major 9ths.

Figure 27: Twelve tone opening in Piece II, mm. 1-13

The original melody appears clearly in the climax of this piece's A section. Falling thirds related to the main theme appear constantly in measures 47 to 55. The melody in the right hand at measures 48 to 49 clearly relates to the original melody. The sequence of pitches {B5 – D6 – A6 – F#5 – E5 – D5} in measures 48 to 49 is identical to the end of the original melody's first phrase (compared in Figures 28a and 28b).

Figure 28a: Fragment of primary theme, Piece I, m. 1

Figure 28b: Fragment of primary theme in Piece II, mm. 46-48



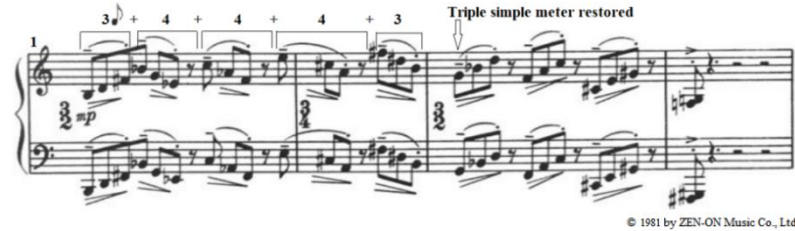
In addition to the connection to thirds in the original melody, the second piece also preserves the rhythmic vitality of the principal material. The meter changes of the first two bars mimic on a background level the primary theme's mixed meter, the metric schema of which is outlined in Figure 29.

Figure 29: Metric modulation in the primary theme



The second piece mirrors this with a notated meter shift from 3/2 to 3/4 in the first two bars. However, in the second piece the relationship between the notated meter and the foreground rhythms is problematized by syncopated accents on the first note of each slurred triadic gesture. The accent patterns immediately contradict the triple simple meter with an accent on the fourth eighth note pulse of the measure. The following patterns of three-note triad gestures and eighth note rests suggests a 3+4+4+4+3 division of the eighth note pulse stream (notated in Figure 30). This pattern initially creates cross-rhythms with the notated meter, but the foreground pattern returns to steady duple partitions of the meter (accented by syncopated motifs) and the contradiction is tidied up by the third measure.

Figure 30: Asymmetrical 8th note groupings, Piece II, mm. 1-4



The climax and closing measures of the opening A section reinforce the importance of duple and triple divisions of the beat. Beginning in measure 47, the top voice clearly articulates a 3+3+2 rhythmic pattern that expands to a 3+3+2+2 rhythm at measure 51 (Figure 31).⁷⁸

Figure 31: Triple and duple rhythmic groupings, Piece II, mm. 47-55



Where the first piece featured contrasts between chaotic and more stable sections, contrast in the second piece appears as consonance versus dissonance and rhythmic drive versus rhythmic cessation. The piece opens with two lines in octave unison and a rapid, linear eighth-

⁷⁸ The 3+3+2 rhythm is commonly found in Brazilian music and is known as *tresillo*.

note texture. The octave unison as well as rhythmic continuity are interrupted by dyad clusters expressing the chromatic tetrachord.

The interaction between unison octave gestures and dissonant chromatic dyads promotes a reading of the dialectic of conflict. Given Rzewski's interest in political struggle and readings of sociopolitical metaphor in his other works, it is reasonable that this dialectic can be read beyond conflict between musical content as conflict between social classes or conflict within the formation of individual political consciousness.

Rzewski heightens the sense of conflict through the use of polytonal counterpoint. At measure 28 a canon in inversion develops between two previously unison lines (Figure 32). The arpeggiated theme starts in the bass at measure 28 and is answered by its inversion at measure 29. A synthesis in measures 33 to 37 occurs between an augmented form of the arpeggiated theme (expressed as major 7th chords) over the ordinary form of the same theme.

Figure 32: Canon in inversion in Piece II, mm. 28-39

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The B section begins in measure 60 with a set of dissonant trills on the chromatic tetrachord (D-flat – D – E-flat – E), shown in Figure 33. With a lilting hemiola rhythm and long legato lines, this section is a languid response to the energetic opening to the second movement. The melody and harmony are again organized around thirds. The thirds G3 to E-flat3 ground the bass motion from measures 63 to 73. The melody at measure 64 emphasizes the minor third from C5 to A5, then expands upwards to D-flat5 and F5. In measures 70 to 72 two pairs of thirds spell out an A minor triad (E5 – C5, C5 – A5). The emphasis on the minor third (C5 – A5) in measures 64 to 66 subordinates the (D-flat – F) dyad as a chromatic neighbor function to the A minor triad. A similar chromatic neighbor embellishment is also seen in the bass from measures 74 to 79, emphasizing the pitches of a C major triad.

Figure 33: Thirds relationships, Piece II, mm. 60-79

The musical score for Figure 33 is presented in three systems, corresponding to measures 60-67, 68-75, and 76-79. The first system (measures 60-67) begins with a trill in the right hand, marked 'continue trill thru next line'. The left hand features a chromatic tetrachord (D-flat – D – E-flat – E) in the bass. The score includes dynamic markings of *pp*, *mp*, and *ppp*, as well as performance instructions like 'una corda' and 'Ped. sempre'. The second system (measures 68-75) shows a melodic line in the right hand that emphasizes the minor third from C5 to A5. The third system (measures 76-79) features a chromatic neighbor embellishment in the bass, emphasizing the pitches of a C major triad. The score is annotated with 'A minor triad' and 'C major triad' to highlight these harmonic relationships. The copyright notice at the bottom reads '© 1981 by ZEN-ON Music Co., Ltd'.

The left hand uses this chromatic neighbor tone relation beginning in measure 81 to link together lines of open fifths to accompany the legato lines of the right hand (Figure 34a). This

section looks forward to subsequent moments of *Four Pieces* that feature the open fifth as a motivic idea, particularly in the fourth piece. Prior to this section the open fifth occurs as consequence of triadic ubiquity and are thus incidental rather than a part of the interplay of content which constructs a sense of narrative. Beginning in the left hand in measure 81, the open fifth is used more purposefully and becomes a significant developmental tool.

The open fifths are further developed at measure 109 into driving and repetitive *moto perpetuo* material (Figure 34b). Rzewski abandons the chromatic neighbor relationship by which the long melodic bass lines connect a series of perfect fifths, instead writing two stacked perfect fifths in each triplet. At measure 119, the melodic intervals from measures 67 and 68 reappear as right-hand dyad fifths that repeat the left hand's arpeggiated fifths (Figure 34c). This section suggests a toccata idiom, with a rapid perpetual motion pulse as well as a variety of articulations and types of touch including long legato lines (left hand in Figure 34a), arpeggiated perfect fifths in contrary motion between hands (Figure 34b), and two-note slurs plus staccato chords (Figure 34c).

Figure 34a: Left hand open fifths, Piece II, mm. 80-89



Figure 34b: Melodic open fifths, Piece II, mm. 108-111

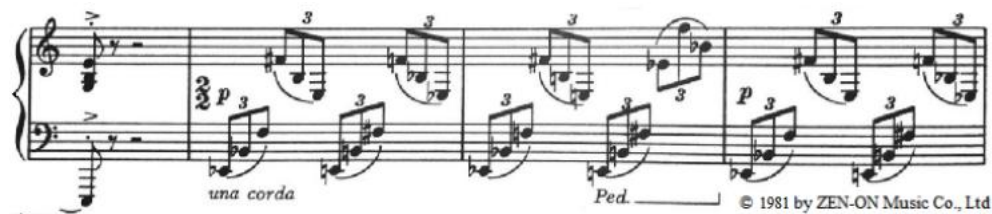


Figure 34c: Melodic and harmonic open fifths, Piece II, mm. 118-120



The climax of the B section begins at measure 143 (Figure 35). The right and left hand lines at measures 143 to 152 are mirror inversions of one another, recalling the imitative counterpoint in canon from measure 28 in the A section. Similarly to measure 28, Rzewski uses imitative counterpoint to develop a climax which arrives at a dramatic statement of thematic material. Whereas the A section's climax resulted in the harmonically dense presentation of the main theme of *Four Pieces*, the climax of the B section arrives at measure 153 with a resolute statement of the lyrical theme introduced earlier in the movement at measure 64.

Figure 35: Mirror inversion in climax to Piece II, mm. 144-152

144

147

150

cresc. *poco* *a poco*

release soft pedal © 1981 by ZEN-ON Music Co., Ltd

Polyrhythm permeates measures 153 to 166 (Figure 36). In measure 160 the melody projects a 3:2 hemiola phrasing which shifts seamlessly back to a half-note quarter-note rhythm in 3/4 at measure 164. The quarter-to-eighth-note lilt of the source melody is augmented into a half-note-to-quarter-note rhythm in these 3/4 bars, and further augmented into a broad 9/4 schema at 167. Here, dotted-half to tied-dotted-half values express the falling third motif, coordinating the broad meter shift with the previous metric variations and the melodic expression that binds them. Besides bringing compositional unity to this section, the use of tightly interwoven qualities of a single melodic source allows a reading of struggle.

Figure 36: Hemiola in Piece II, measures 153-161



The B section ends with a four-voiced contrapuntal texture in measures 181 to 187, each voice following its own isorhythm (Figure 37). This brief section provides an example of metric modulation that has been in operation on a single linear line, but here expresses simultaneously between voices in a vertical harmonic structure. Following this brief contrapuntal section, the tremolo idea that began the B section returns. These tremolos express the falling third in a *pianissimo* three times, as if to pose a question.

The second piece closes with a developmental reprise of the A and B material: the piece's opening sequence of triad arpeggios and the long legato theme of the B section. However, Rzewski modifies the material, frustrating a direct reprise of either section. The A material begins on the same pitch-class (B-natural), but proceeds in inversion and in a high register. Figure 38 compares the opening material and the reprised inversion, labeling the pitches according to integer pitch class. The B section melody at measure 227 includes a dissonant tritone in the top voices of each right hand chord (circled in Figure 39), in contrast to the perfect fifths that dominated the B section. The final measures read as a failed effort to establish the A section's version of the main theme as the dominant material. The long, legato B section melody

morphs into atomized falling third gestures scattered across several registers. The melody is then expressed in one last outburst which ultimately falls through the registers from a *fortissimo* to quietly end *pianissimo* in the bass register.

Figure 37: Counterpoint and falling thirds, Piece II, mm. 181-201

The image displays a musical score for three systems of piano music. The first system features a treble and bass staff with a key signature of one sharp (F#). Annotations include "Falling thirds at 1/2 pulse" pointing to the treble staff and "Falling thirds at 3x 1/2 pulse" pointing to the bass staff. The second system continues with similar notation, including a "p" (piano) dynamic marking. The third system includes a "catch resonance with pedal (sempre con una corda sola)" instruction, a "poco rit." (poco ritardando) marking, and a "Triads at semitone relation" annotation pointing to the bass staff. The score is marked with "pp" (pianissimo) and "trem." (tremolo) throughout. The copyright notice "© 1981 by ZEN-ON Music Co., Ltd" is located at the bottom right.

Figure 38: Prime form arpeggios at m. 1 compared to inversion at m. 202

Figure 38 displays two musical excerpts. The top excerpt, labeled '1', shows a prime form arpeggio in 3/2 time, marked *mp*. The bottom excerpt, labeled '202', shows the inversion of this arpeggio in 3/2 time, marked *f* and *tre corde*. Below the excerpts, the prime form and inversion are listed as sets of numbers: Prime Form : e 2 6 t 7 3 0 8 5 4 1 9 and Inversion : e 8 4 0 3 7 t 2 5 6 9 1. The copyright notice '© 1981 by ZEN-ON Music Co., Ltd' is visible at the bottom right of the musical notation.

Figure 39: B section melody at m. 227

Figure 39 shows a musical excerpt labeled 'B section melody' starting at measure 227. The melody is marked *f* and includes a *Ped.* (pedal) marking. The copyright notice '© 1981 by ZEN-ON Music Co., Ltd' is visible at the bottom right of the musical notation.

The narrative associations of the first piece map onto the second through correlation with motifs, rhythmic and melodic identities of the theme in particular. It has been demonstrated how the main theme of *Four Pieces* presents in these melodic and rhythmic contexts. As with the first piece, an examination of these manifestations and the different topical associations in this piece construct a map of emotional states.

Piece II bristles with forward momentum, in contrast to the turbulent chaos and languid sections of the first piece. The quicker tempo and relentless eighth note motion suggests a more

militant mood. In association with the folk and protest motifs inherent to the theme, a listener might consider the second piece as a response organized to counter some “event” causing the chaotic and mournful character of the first piece. As posited in the first piece, the *transgressive* motion consists of efforts to overcome systematized oppression.

The muscular energy of the second piece binds the symbolic content of the piece to one dimension: the *transgressive*. This reading suggests that this piece does not unfold as an interplay between contrasting sections, but as a linear working out of one essential energy defined by its associations with the opening theme. The form of the piece supports this, as does the continual flow of material. While short dyadic articulations embed silent moments of repose into the rhythmic texture, the A and B sections are generally continuous in motivic material and rhythmic intensity. The moments of rupture and intense dissonance result not from a sudden shift in texture, meter, or theme, but occur as an intensification of the principal themes in the A and B sections. This process is seen in this piece’s moments of canonic interplay at the climaxes of each section.

Conflict in the A section emerges as an extension of this continuous motivic vitality on both horizontal and vertical dimensions. Horizontal manipulation occurs in measures 27 to 32, as the flexible eighth note motif is explored as an inverted canon between the hands. This horizontal exploration expands into the vertical dimension at measure 33, as the right hand stacks extended tertiary chords over the continuous linear eighth-note line in the bottom voice.

In these moments, contrasts emerge not as a sudden difference in formal sections or tone but in the increasing intensity of elements of the primary theme. In a narrative reading, the theme is warring with itself. Guerra’s reading of “Down By the Riverside” correlates democratic processes with conflicted voices that articulate slight variations on a similar theme. In Piece 2 of

Four Pieces, a similar process unfolds. Given the association of the generating theme with characteristics of traditional dance music and with South American protest, and considering the socio-political parallels in Rzewski's music, this piece projects the metaphor of collaborators unified against an obstacle but struggling with one another through process.

Having outlined the content and form of the second piece and proposed a potential narrative, it is possible to identify the relationships between dynamic musical elements that constitute transvaluation. The narrative pole of *transgression* is associated with the main theme, harmonic regularity, and concepts of the people suffering injustice. The narrative pole of *order* correlates with dissonance, harmonic and rhythmic irregularity, violence, and oppressive structures associated with imperialism and capitalism. The second piece does not achieve a complete transvaluation of one force superseding another, but constitutes a greater magnitude of intensity towards victory as the *transgressive* pole struggles to overcome *order*. Ultimately, victory is not achieved. The listener does not get any conclusive statement of the theme, instead only a few uncertain chords punctuating the silence at the end.

In considering the set of *Four Pieces* as a narrative whole, the potential for transvaluation in this piece relates to the narrative developments of the first piece. Associations with violence, chaos, disorder, and lament dominate the first piece. The second piece answers with an energized, almost militant response (especially the unison, triadic motif that opens the piece). Furthermore, smaller struggles within the *transgressive* pole appear as moments of canonic interplay (measures 28 to 56) that suggest disorganized, individual voices struggling for solidarity. Ultimately, struggles for solidarity among the musical materials fail to result in unity. The canonic developments in the A section and its developmental reprise both result in increasing harmonic dissonance that underscore very brief iterations of the main theme, which

are subsequently cut short. The mirror imitation at the climax of the B section suggests a dialectic conflict between unity and disunity. The two voices each use the same intervallic material in inversion to one another, suggesting identity and difference at the same time. The direct mirror technique, linear growth in dynamics, and consistent rise in register evident in both lines augments a reading that these two contrary voices are also bound together. This reading is similar to Bree's reading that "Down By the Riverside" represents several voices in conflict on a similar theme. In Piece II, Rzewski employs polyphony to construct a metaphor for interaction between many social actors. As in so many of his works, the conflict remains unresolved.

CHAPTER VI: PIECE III – SOLITARY VERSUS SOLIDARITY

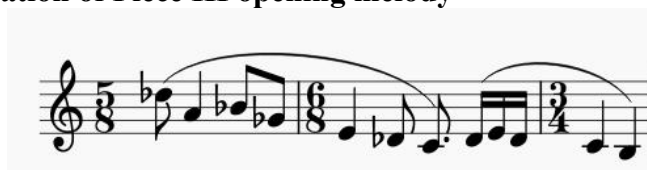
The slow third piece consists of three sections. In broad outline, these consist of a tonally uncertain opening that explores a new melody composed of fragments of the main theme, a tonally stable variation of the main theme closer to its original form, and an intense contrapuntal climax. The opening section introduces a spacious variation of the main theme that employs octaves across many registers of the keyboard and leads into a fluid melody expressed over dense, dark chords in a condensed 3+2+2 iteration of the theme's original 3+3+2 dance rhythm. The second section of the piece begins with a short, bluesy cadenza that transitions into a guitar-picking texture supporting a plaintive tonal version of the original melody. In the final section Rzewski works the opening melody of Piece III into the most contrapuntally intense section in *Four Pieces*. To end the piece, Rzewski briefly references earlier material before concluding Piece III ambiguously. A more detailed breakdown of these sections will substantiate a narrative reading of this piece that enables its transvaluative interpretation.

Figures 39a and 39b show the opening of the third piece along with a reduction to a condensed register for ease of reference. The initial melodic gesture contains the germ of the original theme, again utilizing thirds as an expressive tool. The opening melodic motion, D-flat to A, aurally connotes the opening sonorities of the first piece, though it is here technically a diminished fourth. Additionally it reminds the listener of other instances of this sonority throughout the work, such as the opening of the B section at measure 64 of Piece II. The opening three measures emphasize B-flat to G-flat and E to D-flat, which sound as major and minor thirds respectively.

Figure 40a: Opening to Piece III, mm. 1-13



Figure 40b: Simplification of Piece III opening melody



Here the original theme mutates into a ponderous legato melody that wanders with a free metric design. It employs rhetorical gestures that tend towards falling in “sighing” gestures. The semitone complements the third as an expressive tool, while larger intervals appear to represent yearning attempts to break away from the austere setting; these are usually accompanied by *mezzo-forte*, *forte*, or *fortissimo* dynamic markings. The texture is sparse, with octaves being the exclusive vertical sonority.

The unison octave textures in the opening contrast significantly with the fragmented polyphony that Rzewski so frequently employs. With two and three voices in unison on a single

musical theme, the opening implies multiple voices unifying around a socio-political idea. However, unity is undercut by other traits that lend an uncertain quality to this section. The phrasing is characterized by short rhetorical gestures with sudden shifts in dynamics, and the melody shifts quickly through registers even as it retains the contour of the melodic gestures.

After the expressive, "sighing" octaves, the piece finds measured rhythmic motion in measure 12 (Figure 41). The melody stems from the prose-like opening, specifically the D-flat to A falling third starting the melodic line in measures 13-14. The continually winding melody makes use of the same intervallic features as the opening melody in Figure 43a, embellishing the melody notes {D-flat – A – B-flat – G-flat – E – D-flat C} (circled in Figure 41). The section expresses a yearning quality through wide melodic intervals, as in measures 20 to 21 where a brief "solo" leaps through three octaves.

The left hand grounds the melodic wanderings with harmony intervallically related to the accompaniment found in the B section of Piece II. Where in the second piece the accompaniment featured linear perfect fifths linked by a semitone relationship (see the left hand in Figures 38 above, page 83), here perfect fifths are stacked vertically. Both forms of semitone relation are expressed: through T_8 relation a perfect fifth is stacked such that the top tone of the bottom perfect fifth and the bottom tone of the top perfect fifth are related by semitone. Figure 42 compares these perfect fifth based constructions in the left hand between pieces two and three.

Figure 41: Embellishment of opening melody, Piece III, mm. 10-23

m. 10

poco rit. - - - *Left hand evenly*

Poco più mosso (♩ = 120-132)

embellishment of B-flat

m. 20

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Figure 42: Perfect fifths in Piece II, mm. 157-161, and Piece III, mm. 14-16

Piece II:

Piece III:

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Taken together, the opening materials evoke an oppressive air akin to a lament through the use of sparse textures, dark harmonies, and long, winding melodic lines without points of clear resolution. The pauses, wide intervallic gestures, and sudden rhapsodic flourishes of the melody evoke a sense of uncertainty, which, coupled with familiar gestures from previous pieces, connects a sense of despair to the opening motif. This solidifies a narrative that something new has happened to the work's subject and the range of ideas and feelings it may have thus far evoked.

The section ends with the most determined instance of the theme to appear so far, where the theme appears over steady quarter-note chords in the left hand at measure 29 (Figure 43). But a shift in the action of the piece is signaled when the perfect fifth T₈ sonority mutates into a structure of stacked diminished 5ths {E – B-flat} – {C-flat – F}. This structurally significant diminished sonority was foreshadowed by the left hand (G – D-flat – F) chord in measure 17 (Figure 41 above, page 90)..

Figure 43: Steady appearance of melody, diminished fifths, Piece III, mm. 28-33

The musical score for Figure 43 shows measures 28-33 of Piece III. The top system (measures 28-33) is in 7/4 time. The right hand features a melody with a trill and a sustained note, while the left hand plays steady quarter-note chords. The score includes dynamic markings (f, ppp, p, pp, f, pp) and performance instructions (Ped., rit., sust. Ped.). The bottom system (measures 34-35) is in 8/4 time and features a melody with sixteenth-note runs and a bass line with quarter-note chords. The score includes dynamic markings (1x-pp, 2x-mp, 3x-f) and performance instructions (marcato, quasi staccato, (sust. Ped.)).

The B section begins at measure 36 (Figure 44). An arpeggiated texture evokes virtuosic *flamenco*-style arpeggio and tremolo finger-picking techniques. The allusion to a strummed

guitar texture signifies a folk quality. Rzewski utilizes an additive technique to compose out this section (as he did in *Attica* and in the conclusion of Piece I of *Four Pieces*). The technique imbues the melody and harmonic environment with a sorrowful affect, as opposed to the insistent aggression evoked by the same technique in Piece I. Minor thirds from Eb to Gb recur throughout this section in the top voicing, producing a minor variant of the primary melody of *Four Pieces*. This section adheres to a static harmonic center, firmly rooting E-flat minor tonality through a constant E-flat pedal point. The familiar third dominates the melodic motion. The top note rises by third each measure in measures 37 to 39 (G-flat4 to B-flat5 to D-flat5) before finally landing on an E-flat at measure 39. Here, the original melody begins to appear in altered form as the minor third E-flat5 to G-flat5.

Figure 44: Arpeggiated E-flat pentatonic material, Piece III, mm. 34-40

Rising thirds within E-flat minor seventh harmony

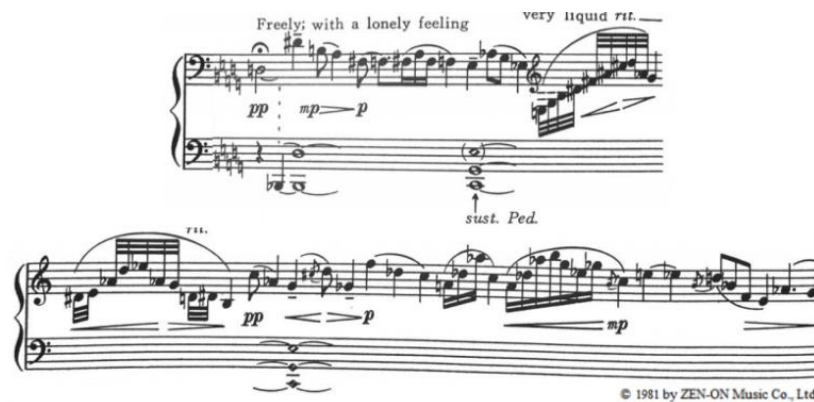
Altered form of primary theme

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Here Rzewski composes the most harmonically tonal area since the dirge-like section of the first piece. Emerging through an additive compositional process, this instance of the theme functions narratively as a *transgressive* struggle against *order*. This section occurs at the nadir of the narrative sequence of events, situated directly before the most chaotic rupture in the set. As he had done in the final section of “Winnsboro Cottonmill Blues,” Rzewski directly juxtaposes a highly contrapuntal, chaotic section to a tonally straightforward iteration of a theme. The direct contrast firmly links the melodic source material, and all ideations pertaining to it, with the previous struggle; or, in the case of *Four Pieces*, with an ensuing disaster. Lament, nostalgia, loss, and hope are all suggested during tonally secure sections, whereas chaos and struggle are effected through polyphony and extreme textural, motivic, registral, and dynamic variation. Rzewski pithily outlines the contrast by means of direct juxtaposition.

The distinction between group and individual is emphasized by the solo line at measure 54, where a variation of the melody from the beginning returns in a single voice marked “with a lonely feeling” (Figure 45). A brief cadenza presents the opening melody as a monophonic, registrally condensed line with subdued dynamics in the *pianissimo* to *mezzo-piano* range. As the melody has no disjunct octave leaps between its phrases, the passage effects a cohesive quality in opposition to the spaciousness of the opening. In the opening of this piece the plurality of melodic voices, the spacious texture, and the dynamic outbursts imply a socially cooperative, collective demeanor. In the cadenza at measure 54, monophony, a limited register, and a subdued dynamic palette suggest an interiority representative of isolation within the dialectic of social struggle and oppression. In this brief aside, a return of melodic material from the opening reconnects the listener to the unfolding of a tale of political struggle.

Figure 45: Solo version of melody, Piece III, m. 54



After the melancholic solo, the *tremolando* idiom returns in measure 55 (Figure 46). In contrast to the previous section’s additive procedure, this section presents a straightforward version of the original theme. The opening measures of Piece III make abstracted use of the elements of the theme, in which the prevalence of melodic thirds connects the new melody with the original theme but its harmonic stability and characteristic rhythm are both absent. In contrast, the melody at measure 55 explores the A pentatonic minor pitch collection (A – C – D – E – G) and a lilting quarter-note – eighth-note rhythm drawn from the original melody. Figure 47 makes clear the connections between the original melody and this A-minor iteration.

The written indications for interpretation suggest the uncertainty which attends a process of struggle: “Slowly and hesitatingly at first, then becoming more confident, but always expressive, with subtle variations of speed.” If the musical content suggests a subject that expresses (whether heard as an individual actor or as expression of a general, shared phenomenon), the directions also suggest the psychology intrinsic to working-class struggle against systems of oppression.

Figure 46: Variation of primary theme, Piece III, mm. 55-64

Slowly and hesitatingly at first, then becoming more confident, but always expressive, with subtle variations of speed.

una corda

rit.

p

mf

rit.

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Figure 47: Primary theme variation in Piece III

Original melody:

3rds

falling 3rd

falling 4th

stepwise motion

Piece III, mm. 62-63:

mf

una corda

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The development of the theme in measures 54 to 66 has a twofold character. The solo at measure 54 starts as a lament and continues sorrowfully in measures 55-58. The melody changes

register, jumping an octave, and gains more rhythmic energy with the addition of sixteenth notes in measures 59-61. An attempt to overcome the lamenting mood finally occurs at measure 62 with the addition of chordal texture to the melody, a constantly increasing tempo, and another octave rise. The harmonic motion also breaks from the A-minor center (in contrast to the ubiquitous E-flat pedal point in the first portion of the B section). While measures 55-61 feature harmonic motion in the pattern Am – F – D⁷ – Cm – D⁷ – F – Am, the A pedal remains static. In the final phrases of this section bass motion by root emphasizes a fluctuating harmonic center, as F major, A minor, and C major compete for priority. Whereas in measures 55 to 61 the chromatic alterations in the harmony often clash with the pentatonic melody, in measures 62 to 66 the harmony is consonant with the pentatonic melody. The struggle to overcome a harmonic fate effects this tonal motion; in the context of narrative suggesting sociopolitical struggle, here is an attempt to overcome oppressive conditions.

The effort towards a tonally secure, hopeful ending comes to an halt in measure 66 with an abrupt fermata over a dominant chord (Figure 48). In contrast to the melancholic solo that appeared without meter at measure 54, here the melody is set over an ostinato in 10/8. The irregular meter and dissonant intervals outlined in the left hand creates a sense of imbalance. Again, perfect fifths and semitones provide the granular motors of development. The left hand ostinato features two perfect fifths, related by transposition and inversion (illustrated in Figure 49).

Figure 48: Perfect fifths and semitone relationships, Piece III, mm. 65-70



Figure 49: Perfect fifths related by inversion and transposition, Piece III, m. 54

$$\begin{array}{c} \text{B-flat} - [\text{E} - \text{B}] - [\text{B-flat} - \text{F}] - \text{B-flat} - \text{etc.} \\ \quad \quad \quad \swarrow \quad \searrow \\ \quad \quad \quad \text{IT}_6 \end{array}$$

In the next section Rzewski composes a chaotic polyphonic development of the thematic fragments. Polyphonic manipulations include simultaneous augmentation and diminution, inversion, and extreme leaps of register that exploit the entire keyboard. There are moments which almost seem to require three hands, recalling Christian Asplund's observation that the difficulty of the material imposes a dimension of struggle for the performer.

The first portion of the melody from the opening measures of the piece (Figure 40b above) forms the most conspicuous material in this section. A few examples will demonstrate how ubiquitous fragments of the theme generate the most complex polyphony in *Four Pieces*.

In measures 75 to 79, Rzewski states the theme in octaves before embedding the melody within a registrally disjunct texture (Figure 50). The melody can be traced in measures 77 to 79 by following the line circled in Figure 50: {C-#5 – A5 – B-flat6 – G-flat4 – E4 – C-#4 – C4}.

The thick harmonic texture and rapidly shifting textures require careful treatment from the performer to render this line audible. Despite the obscured quality of this line, Rzewski likely intended for the melody to be noticed. The opening {C-#5 – A5} dyad clearly relates to the falling third that opens the piece, the {G-flat4 – E4 – C-#4 – C4} line has a registrally narrow range amid a texture with registral extremes, and the final C4 is placed at the top of the chord, making it very likely to be heard as an important pitch.

The theme appears in its normal form several other times within the rich texture, maintaining close fidelity to the original form of the melody. The tenor line at measure 84 states the melody rhythmically simplified into straight thirty-second notes, transposed up two semitones (Figure 51). Integer notation for pitch class makes this connection clear. Piece III opens with the pitch class sequence {1 – 9 – t – 6 – 4 – 1 – 0 – 1 – 4 – 1 – 0 – e – 3 – 2 – t}. The tenor line in Figure 51 is a T₃ transposition of this pitch class sequence, resulting in the pattern {3 – e – 0 – 8 – 6 – 3 – 2 – 3 – 6 – 3 – 2 – 1 – 5 – 4 – 0}.

Figure 50: Fragments of opening melody, Piece III, mm. 75-81

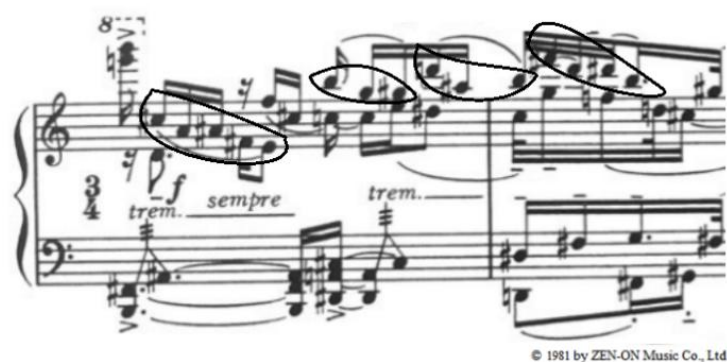
The image displays a musical score for a piano piece, specifically measures 75-81 of Piece III. The score is written for piano and features complex harmonic textures. The top system includes tempo markings "free, but ♩ = ca. 60~66" and "rit. molto", and a tempo change to "♩ = 80". The bottom system continues the complex texture. The score is copyrighted by ZEN-ON Music Co., Ltd. in 1981.

Figure 51: T₃ transposition of opening melody, Piece III, m. 84



Most of the material in this section utilizes various fragments or mutations of the theme. Small fragments of it appear throughout the section, for instance in measures 88 to 89, where a cascading sequence of treble voice entries is drawn from the first five melodic notes {D-flat – A – B-flat – G-flat – E} (Figure 52). Aurally, the melodic cell falls a major third, steps up a semitone, falls another major third, and steps down a whole tone. Each entrance is a transposed version of this melodic cell and is circled in the figure below. Several are fragments of the cell, like the three note slur {B6 – G5 – G#5}.

Figure 52: Polytonal fragments of opening melody, Piece III, mm. 88-89



The [014] trichord, a conspicuous feature of the opening melody, frequently recurs in this polytonal section. The fragment {C4 – D-flat4 – E4 – D-flat4 – C} (found in the second measure of Figure 40b above) also appears throughout the section, for instance transposed to

{C#2 – D2 – F2 – D2 – C#2} in measures 81 to 82 (Figure 53), {D#3 – E3 – G3 – E3 – E-flat3} in measure 86 (Figure 54), to {G5 – A-flat5 – B6 – A-flat5 – G5} in measure 92 (Figure 55), and inverted to {E-flat2 – D2 – B2 – D2 – E-flat2} in measure 92 (Figure 55).

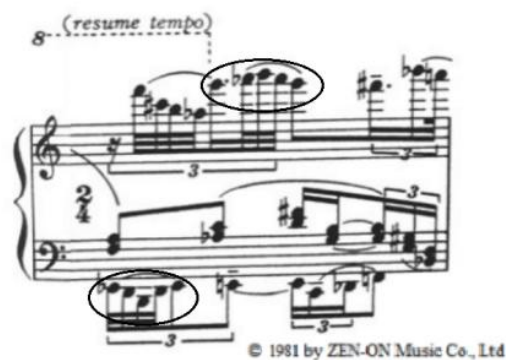
Figure 53: [014] trichord in Piece III, mm. 81-82



Figure 54: [014] trichord in Piece III, m. 86



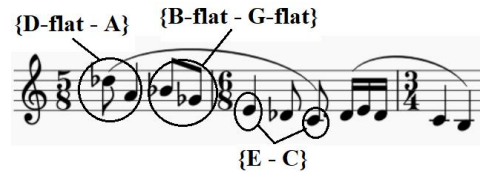
Figure 55: [014] trichord in Piece III, m. 92



In keeping with the prevalence of melodic and harmonic thirds in *Four Pieces*, major thirds are frequently exploited as a vertical sonority in this section. The opening melodic notes Piece III emphasize major-third dyads relating by two different T_n transpositions (Figure 56).

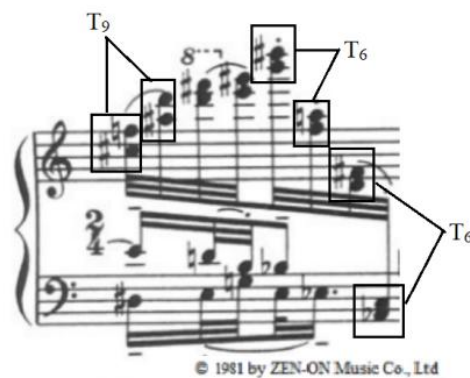
The first four notes {D-flat – A – B-flat – G-flat} emphasize two major thirds related by T_3 : (D-flat – A) and (B-flat – G-flat). The third through seventh notes {B-flat – G-flat – E – D-flat – C} in the opening melody also emphasize two major thirds related by T_6 : (B-flat – G-flat) and (E – C).

Figure 56: Major thirds embedded in opening melody of Piece III



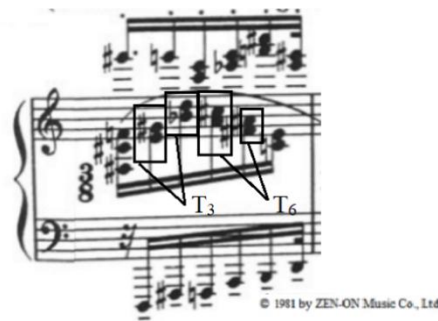
These relationships are seen in measure 86 in the right hand (Figure 57). The dyads (C#5 – F5) and (A#6 – D6) relate by T_9 transposition, therefore suggesting the T_3 relationship (by inversion) through registral shifting. The dyads (B7 – D#7) and (F5 – A6) relate by T_6 transposition (in a *modulo* 12 system, T_{18} reduces to T_6) and similarly jump between registers. The dyads (D4 – F#4) and (A-flat3 – C3) also relate by a multiple of T_6 .

Figure 57: Major thirds in Piece III, m. 86



These thirds relationships fill out the middle texture at measure 91 (Figure 58). The dyad pairs (E4 – G#4) and (B-flat4 – D5) relate by T_6 , and the dyads (A5 – C#) and (F#4 – A#5) relate by T_3 .

Figure 58: Major thirds in Piece III, m. 91



Continuing the narrative reading, this fecund motivic development features the most intense interaction between the two poles. Settings of the theme or its fragments that exhibit tonal, rhythmic, metric, and registral stability suggest *transgressive* motion, while settings of the theme that display complexity and disjuncture in the same musical domains suggest motion towards *order*. Throughout the highly polyphonic texture, the theme of the piece (and its implied relation to the main theme) maintains a ubiquitous and rigorous presence, suggesting to the listener the *transgressive* subject. As a polytonal texture employing fractured segments of the theme, this section frustrates the theme's reconstitution and suggests the pole of *order* as the dominant narrative force. Fragmentation of the motives among many voices situates this explosion of the theme within the dialectic of oppression and struggle. This section serves *Four Pieces*' narrative as its apex of social upheaval and the violence and uncertainty that attend such chaos. Sudden bursts of seventh chords in measure 84 recall the explosive, harmonically dense chords at the climax of piece two's A sections (Figure 59). The stacked thirds in measure 91 relate both to the opening thirds that begin *Four Pieces* and to other instances of the ubiquitous interval. All these elements cooperate to contextualize the original theme within a new turbulent setting.

Figure 59: Related textures in Piece II (mm. 32-34) and III (mm. 83-84)

Piece II:



Piece III:



The subsequent coda functions as an index for the piece's contents. A brief return of the guitar-idiom section occurs, followed by a return of the melody from measure 55 in an extremely high register and lacking the "strummed" accompaniment. A brief return of the cadenza from measure 54 refers to the "lonely feeling" and underscores the sense of loss and the failure to achieve victory. Repeated dissonant chords thrash around in the lower register of the piano, diminishing from *ff* to *ppp*, ultimately arriving at a quiet, dissonant chord containing the (A3 – D-flat2) dyad (a connection with the {D-flat – A} gesture that opened the piece).

Piece III conveys a sorrowful, troubled narrative, extending the sequence that began with the violent, impulsive ruptures of Piece I and the organized structure of Piece II. The listener is presented with several variations on a melancholic expression of the primary theme: a nostalgic setting in a guitar idiom at measure 36; a "lonely feeling" solo voice at measure 54 that repeats the opening; another guitar-idiom moment that develops into an driving, hopeful statement in measures 62 to 66; the dense polytonal counterpoint in measures 75 to 100; and a coda that wistfully recalls the theme in its dance-like form from measures 58 to 66.

Throughout *Four Pieces*, homophonic, tonal expressions of the primary theme (or its derivatives) represent *transgression*'s focused attempt to overcome *order*. Piece III provides two examples of this relationship in the guitar-idiom sections at measures 36 to 53 and measures 55 to 66. Adjacent to the melancholic "lonely" expressions of the theme and the explosive contrapuntal section, these sections featuring the theme constitute *transgressive* attempts to reconstitute the source theme (and its topical, contextual associations) against the forces that impede and disorder it. The explosive polytonality of measures 75 to 100 dispels and fractures the theme's stability, supporting a reading of this piece as a *tragic* narrative.

CHAPTER VII: PIECE IV – UNFINISHED ENDINGS

The final piece requires control, virtuosity, and variety of touch for effective performance and thus resembles a toccata. The constant eighth-note texture manifests successively as rapidly repeated notes in the heavily pedaled opening, in crisp dance-like versions of the main theme with repeated chords, in sweeping legato arpeggiated material, and in rapid staccato fifths. The piece opens with a repetitive eighth-note texture that descends through a series of dissonant chords from the upper to the lower limits of the keyboard, with a swell from *pp* to *ff* and back to *pp*. Rzewski marks an open pedal for this section, along with the direction that each chord should be repeated “any number of times” and that the notes should be “stroked” rather than struck. Performing these directions produces a cloudy, ambiguous atmosphere framed within a linear descent.

This opening section evokes a sense of inevitability. New pitches emerge at the bottom of each current chord while notes are dropped from the top in a descent to the bottom of the instrument (Figure 60). The sequence of pitches introduced constructs a twelve-tone row, though the sequence is not strict, as instances of the A-natural pitch class recur before the row is completed. Once all twelve pitches have been produced, Rzewski continues the descent in the middle register, constructing a new row in a similar fashion. The first row is composed of the pitches {B – A# – F# – A – G – G# – D# – (A) – D – C# – E – F – C} and concludes at the third chord in the second stanza, while the second row assembles the pitches {G# – G – D – E – (Ab) – Bb – Eb – B – A – C – G – C# – F#} (pitches in parentheses indicate repeated pitch classes). The development of the texture emphasizes intervals important throughout *Four Pieces*: major and minor thirds, perfect fifths, major sevenths, and minor ninths. If a reading that these

intervallic motifs and gestures represent various dimensions of social struggle and oppression is valid, then the direction that the shifting harmonies should be “fading in and out of each chord imperceptibly” reinforces the idea that the emergence of these sonorities from a complex progression represents a complex and unpredictable social process involving many actors.

Figure 60: Twelve-tone rows in Piece IV, mm. 1-2

The figure displays three systems of musical notation for a piano piece. The first system includes a treble and bass staff with a dynamic marking of *pp*, a crescendo to *ff*, and a decrescendo back to *pp*. It features a *Ped. sempre* instruction and a text box stating: "Maintaining a constant pulse of ca. 6 attacks per second, repeat each chord any number of times (different durations for each chord, with an average duration of 2-3 seconds), fading in and out of each chord imperceptibly, with transitions as smooth as possible. The notes should be 'stroked' rather than struck, as if one were exciting a large gong; the object being to make the entire instrument speak, throughout its spectrum." The second system continues with similar chordal textures and a *Ped. sempre* instruction. The third system shows a transition from a *pp* section to a *ppp una corda* section, with a *Ped. sempre* instruction and a note to "allow time for D to be heard". Above the *ppp una corda* section, there are performance notes: "barely audible and very spaced at first, then accel." and "maintaining constant pulse, single notes of these chords ad lib.; cloudy and indistinct." with durations of "Ca. 10''" and "Ca. 5''" indicated. The score is copyrighted by ZEN-ON Music Co., Ltd. in 1981.

As the pattern reaches the bottom of the keyboard, Rzewski writes that the performer should “allow time for [the] D to be heard,” suggesting that the falling third {D1 – B-flat1} is an intentional gesture which relates to the falling third gestures of the main theme introduced in Piece I. A minor ninth between B-flat and B-natural, an inversion of the two opening pitches in the higher register, immediately succeeds the falling-third gesture. The closeness of the falling-

third gesture to the discordant minor ninth suggests conflict between *transgression* and *order*. The juxtaposition of the two signifying motifs also recalls the opening of the entire set of *Four Pieces*: after the dreamy falling thirds in the opening to Piece I, a section marked “Violent, Chaotic” begins with the same discordant minor-ninths sonority present in Piece IV. In the narrative progression of *Four Pieces*, this section presents another example of fragmentation and the complicated nature of sociopolitical struggle.

After the initial sonic cascade, an additive process structures the material, beginning at measure 3. Each subsequent measure rises in register and adds new pitches to the repeated toccata material, as the melody gradually emerges out of the texture. This process recalls the stricter additive procedure from Piece I (measure 33, see Figure 25 on page 68). Similar to the opening “violent, impulsive” section of the first piece, the third-based melodic “strands” emerge in different registral bands of the piano and occur in various registers and harmonic densities. Figure 61 shows measures 5 to 10. The familiar falling thirds emerge in the top of the texture as {D-flat4 – B-flat4} and {G4 – E4} in measures 3 to 6. The third pairs {B6 – A-flat5}, {G#5 – E5}, {G6 – E6}, and {C#6 – A#6} follow in measures 7 to 8 as the melodic cell expands into a higher register and fills out a richer chromatic palette. The closeness of these atomized thirds to the primary theme becomes clear in measures 9 and 10 when the thirds gesture is expanded into the {B6 – D6 – A6 – F#5} cell, which is a direct reference to the first phrase of the original melody (see the third through sixth notes of the melody in Figure 16 above, page 59). The spacing of the thirds becomes increasingly narrower in each measure, emphasizing a narrative reading of the struggle for unity necessary for *transgression* to overcome a repressive *order*.

Figure 61: Gradual emerging thirds in Piece IV, mm. 5-10

The musical score consists of three systems. The first system is in bass clef with a key signature of one flat (B-flat major/D minor). It features a {Db - Bb} dyad in the right hand and a {G - E} dyad in the left hand. The second system is in treble clef with a key signature of one sharp (F# major/C# minor). It features a {B - Ab} dyad in the right hand, a {G# - E} dyad in the left hand, and a {C# - A#} dyad in the right hand. The third system is in treble clef with a key signature of one sharp (F# major/C# minor). It features a {B - D - A - F#} cell in the right hand. The score includes dynamic markings like 'pp' and 'p', and performance instructions like 'Ped. sempre' and 'sempre pp'.

By measure 13 the theme coalesces into an energetic, tonal, 9/4 expression of the main theme (Figure 62). This version of the theme expresses rhythmic vitality. The rhythmic suppleness inherent in the original version of the theme is here extended to a quick dance, consisting of groupings of four dotted quarter notes and three quarter notes with a consistent quarter-note pulse. Rzewski preserves the strong-weak character of the opening theme's quarter-eighth rhythm. Though the first four notes of the rhythm above could perhaps be felt as equal dotted-quarter notes, the underlying quarter-note pulse indicated by the 9/4 meter ensures that the second and fourth dotted quarters fall between beats and are perceived as weak.

Figure 62: Dancelike variation on primary theme, Piece IV, mm. 13-16



The harmonic structure of this version of the theme emphasizes an E-minor pentatonic pitch collection. Measure 16 stresses a harmonic rhythm that cycles through G major, B Major, and E minor by dotted half notes. This recalls for the listener the harmonic uncertainty between D major and B minor inherent in the primary theme of *Four Pieces*.

Rzewski once again answers a tonally regular statement of the theme with dissonance. Measures 25 to 35 contrast this straightforward statement of the theme with a soaring, chromatically wandering melody, culminating in an aleatoric section that concludes in the lowest bass register of the piano (Figure 63). In contrast to the preceding harmonically-regular E minor pentatonic material, the melody is voiced here in triads that emphasize chromatic motion, while the arpeggiated accompaniment emphasizes open fifths and minor ninths. Rzewski concludes this turbulent section with a collection of measures that are to be repeated and permuted at the performer's discretion. The inclusion of aleatoric material further compounds a feeling of uncertainty and unpredictability.

Again, the juxtaposition of stability and instability represents struggle. The dance-like theme in measures 13 to 16 is tonally coherent, with a clear expression of the original theme. According to the established narrative framework, this depicts a *transgressive* narrative element

struggling against an established *order*. The chromatic material and aleatoric section in measures 23 to 34 represent the pole of *order* in the narrative.

Figure 63: Soaring melody and aleatoric material, Piece IV, mm. 25-36

Repetitions and permutations of units a, b, c, d ad lib.
(Suggested order: 2a-3b-a-2b-c-b-2c-d-c-2d-a-b-c-d)

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gradually add pedal

The melody in measures 25 through 28 recalls similarly chromatic melodies from Piece I and Piece II. For instance, thirds moving by chromatic motion recurred frequently in Piece I (see Figure 23 above on page 66), and the B section of Piece II made extensive use of arpeggiated

perfect fifths chained together by semitones (see Figures 33a, 33b, and 33c above on pages 78 and 79). This melodic material tends to move by intervals of thirds, fourths, or fifths embellished by a semitone above or below. Figure 64 compares measure 31 of Piece I, measures 81 to 87 of Piece II, and the melody from measures 24 to 28 of Piece IV. The similarities among these melodies invite the listener to hear this as a unified, recurring theme throughout *Four Pieces*. Small leaps embellished by semitone motion (circled in Figure 64 below) characterize each of the melodies in Figure 64. Every other step in the Piece I example is a semitone. The melody in the Piece II moves mostly by thirds connected by semitone relationships: the initial pitches of the first two gestures {A5 – F#4} and {B-flat5 – D5} are a semitone apart, and the pitches C#5, B-flat5, and F#4 are each approached by a semitone. And as in the Piece I excerpt, the Piece IV example employs semitone steps at every other pitch in the sequence. Each melody in Figure 64 also contains an upward gesture followed by a semitone step, indicated in the figure by a square overlay. The general motion by thirds, fourths, or fifths recalls the original melody, while the motion approaching by semitone underscores that the original melody has become unsettled, generating the dramatic energy for the entirety of *Four Pieces*.

Figure 64: Thirds with semitone connectors in Piece I, m. 31; Piece II, mm. 81-87; Piece IV, mm. 25-30

Figure 64 displays three musical excerpts from different pieces, illustrating the concept of thirds with semitone connectors. The excerpts are labeled Piece I, Piece II, and Piece IV.

- Piece I:** The excerpt shows a melody in treble clef with a key signature of one sharp (F#). The melody consists of eighth notes. Semitone steps are indicated by circles around the notes. An upward gesture is indicated by a square box around a group of notes. The dynamic marking is *pp*.
- Piece II:** The excerpt shows a melody in treble clef with a key signature of one sharp (F#). The melody consists of eighth notes. Semitone steps are indicated by circles around the notes. An upward gesture is indicated by a square box around a group of notes. The dynamic marking is *pp*.
- Piece IV:** The excerpt shows a melody in treble clef with a key signature of one sharp (F#). The melody consists of eighth notes. Semitone steps are indicated by circles around the notes. An upward gesture is indicated by a square box around a group of notes.

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In answer to the discordant descending texture of the opening that features fragmented intervals from the primary theme, the repeated-note process that begins the piece recurs in measure 43, ascending from the bottom to the top of the piano by perfect fifths (Figure 65). The ascent by stable perfect fifths in measure 43 directly precedes the final statement of the primary theme, which is arguably the most hopeful *transgressive* moment in *Four Pieces*. The passage begins in a very high register with extremely soft dynamics, imparting a dreamy character. The theme is stated twice: first in B-flat major in measures 44 to 47, then in D major in measures 48 to 51. The shift from B-flat major to D major registers differently from the juxtaposition between D major and B minor in the opening of Piece I. Instead of stressing a tension between minor and major chords, this final statement relates two major chords, contributing to a reading of a hopeful nature.

Figure 65: Perfect fifths and final return of primary theme, Piece IV, mm. 43-49

The musical score for Figure 65 consists of four systems of piano accompaniment. The first system shows the initial theme with a piano (ppp) dynamic and a 'una corda' instruction. An annotation 'Ascent by perfect fifths' points to a series of chords. The second system continues the theme, with a 'B-flat major' annotation. The third system shows a 'D major' annotation. The fourth system concludes the theme. The score includes various musical notations such as notes, rests, and dynamic markings.

At measure 52, Rzewski shifts the dance-like alternating dotted quarter notes and quarter notes into a steady pulse of four dotted-half notes per bar (Figure 66). This, in tandem with the steady descent from the highest to the lowest register, effects a feeling of inevitability that contributes to the narrative reading of oppression by *order*. Instead of a victory in a joyful mood or major key, the primary theme loses its dance-like hopefulness and ends with repeated notes at the lowest notes of the piano that are interrupted by rhetorical silences. As if to emphasize the

frustration of the pentatonically oriented main theme, these repeated low notes beginning at measure 57 abruptly cut off with dissonant minor second dyads on B and C (Figure 67).

Figure 66: Shift to regular rhythmic groupings, m. 52

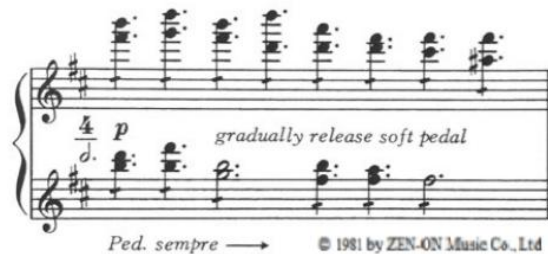


Figure 67: Semitone interruption, Piece IV, mm. 57-59



The subsequent measures 60 to 62 consist primarily of ascending open fifths (Figure 68), moving upwards and downwards mostly by semitone steps as seen in Figure 64 (above, page 115). This is a final example of a characteristic of the main theme being subjected to turbulence. The final ascent, which begins at measure 64, recalls the initial ascent from the beginning of Piece IV: both are highly discordant using a seemingly random process whereby new pitches emerge out of the texture. As with the discordant, chromatically shifting fifths in measure 60, the ascent is highly dissonant, incorporating many chordal major sevenths and minor ninths. The final sounds of the piece emphasize the minor second: a repeated high B recedes with a steady diminuendo while intermittent strikes of the A \sharp a half step below make a crescendo to a triple *forte*. Rzewski makes clear that the piece should feel as if it has no conclusion, writing that the “final notes should not have the character of a cadence, but rather the contrary, of something

unfinished.” Furthermore, this final ascent recalls the initial descent, returning the listener to the initial problem posed by the dissonant beginning and indicating that the issue has not been resolved. A reading of continual but ultimately unsuccessful struggle structures an understanding of the entire narrative arc of *Four Pieces*.

Figure 68: Perfect fifths and semitone motion, Piece IV, mm. 60-64

The musical score for Piece IV, mm. 60-64, is presented in three systems. The first system shows a piano (pp) and bass staff with a series of chords. Above the piano staff, semitone intervals are marked with arrows and labels: semitone ↓, semitone ↑, semitone ↓, semitone ↑, semitone ↓, semitone ↓, semitone ↑, semitone ↓. The tempo markings are *poco a poco* and *cresc.*. The second system continues the piano and bass staves, with dynamics *ff*, *cresc.*, *f*, and *ff*. It includes the instruction "repeat chords as above etc." and "gradually add pedal". The third system shows the piano staff with dynamics *ff*, *fff*, and *ppp*. It includes the instruction "(Ped. sempre)" and "repeat sporadically (on the average every 2 seconds, but irregularly)". A note at the bottom left states: "N.B. The final notes should not have the character of a cadence but rather the contrary, of something unfinished; it should not be clear whether another sound is coming, until all sound has in fact died away." A note at the bottom right states: "(at least 2 repetitions after the B has ceased to sound; then hold pedal to extinction)". The copyright notice at the bottom center is "© 1981 by ZEN-ON Music Co., Ltd".

Throughout this final piece, registral motion differentiates sections. In this perpetual-motion rhythmic setting the general registral motion is almost always either descending or ascending in a linear fashion. There are two descents and two ascents, shown in Table 5 below.

Table 5: Registral descents and ascents in Piece IV

Descents	Ascents
Opening “bar,” consisting of granular motion by motivically relevant intervals (P5s, 3rds, semitones)	Measure 43 to 47, a sequence of open fifths from the bottom B-flat to the highest B-flat
Measures 53 to 58 after first ascent and statement of the theme; descent by repetitive cells of theme	The final bar, which uses a technique similar to that of the opening descent but lacking the occasional presence of major chords and focusing heavily on tritones and semitones, ending in a single repeated note after the repeated chords have faded out.

The large-scale structure formed by these traverses across the keyboard presents a dialectic full of narrative import, tracing the following steps. The initial descent mirrors the chaos and the seeds of struggle encoded within the theme. An ensuing ascent to the middle-upper portion of the keyboard achieves tonal clarity and full expression of the theme (measures 1 through 13). After a brief section that shifts through registers with fluctuating harmonic implications, the music returns to the lowest portion of the keyboard (measures 24 through 36). Following this, an ascent by perfect fifths (measure 43) tethers the final movement to the rest of *Four Pieces* by focusing solely on the perfect fifth, an interval inherent to *Four Pieces*’ primary theme and one that Rzewski conspicuously develops in each movement of the work. These two large gestures in correlation form a narrative of social cohesion arising out of chaos in which the theme challenges an oppressive *order*. A hopeful *transgressive* response answers the sudden and violent descent to the lower register with an ascent by perfect fifths. The next pair of descending and ascending sections suggests an inverse relationship. The final descent (measures 52 to 57), arrived at after a successful major mode statement of the theme, outlines the primary theme. The final ascent (measures 63 to the end) is even less hopeful than the theme’s descent through the

registers, as it grows by discordant intervals and ends with only a repeated single strong note in the upper register. The descent of thematic material suggests a faltering of *transgressive* narrative momentum, while the subsequent discordant ascent suggests the omnipresence of *order* as a narrative pole. According to this reading, the final full statement of the theme fails to overcome *order* through struggle and is dispelled by a discordant and harmonically unsettling ascent with only a single “voice” repeating intermittently after the repeated, gong-like material fades into silence.

This recalls a similar uncertain fade into silence that ends *Winnsboro Cotton Mill Blues*, in which a statement of the popular tune in its original Appalachian blues setting is interrupted by metaphorical mechanical forces that explore the whole keyboard, ending in *pianissimo* clusters in the upper register. The effect is rather unsettling in both pieces. It functions as a rhetorical question mark: the lack of a cadence and the expression of the barest remnants of thematic material could represent defeat or cynical pessimism. Or perhaps the vague ending provides an imperative for listeners to leave the experience without a sense of closure and connects them more fully to the inescapable reality of oppression and struggle in the world. Regardless of its exact import, the ending of *Four Pieces* is unsettling and clearly lacks any implications of *transgression* having achieved victory over *order*. Thus, the set of *Four Pieces* ends firmly in a *tragic* mode.

CHAPTER VIII: CONCLUSION – REVOLUTION DEFERRED

This research contributes to a small body of literature that argues music can be read as narrative structure. Rzewski's music is ripe for narrative readings given his outspoken political views and a compositional style that often quotes extant popular music or alludes to popular musical genres. *Four Pieces* in particular is a uniquely apt candidate for analysis, as it exhibits each of these markers with the exception of quoting an pre-existing song. Rzewski instead constructs a theme with qualities that allude to traditional South American music, allowing for a narrative reading that does not rely on identifying specific historic themes but does require situating *Four Pieces* in the context of Rzewski's other works that quote popular music.

Extending Byron Almen's synthesis of Northrop Frye's narrative archetypes with theories that music is capable of carrying narrative import reveals tensions between the poles of *transgression* and *order* that drive the narrative flow of a piece. The specific archetype to which a narrative belongs depends on which of the two poles elicits the listeners' sympathies and which of the two poles emerges victorious. *Four Pieces* falls into the *tragic* archetype, which aligns the listeners' sympathies with the *transgressive* pole's unsuccessful struggle against an oppressive pre-existing *order*.

Rzewski's politics and the politically oriented material he chooses to set in works like *Attica*, *Coming Together*, and *North American Ballads* reinforce this reading. In these works the currently existing *order* manifests as the carceral system in *Attica* and *Coming Together*. In *North American Ballads*, *order* represents the oppression of working people and the poor working conditions their employers force them to endure. In these same works, the *transgressive* pole represents struggles to organize and unite in struggle against oppression. This phenomenon is best represented by two of the songs used as primary material in *North American Ballads*:

Florence Reece's "Whose Side Are You On?" draws # political distinctions between coal mine workers and bosses in 1930s America, and "Down By the Riverside" takes as its theme an explicitly anti-war hymn that became a touchstone of the protests against the United States' aggression in Vietnam.

In *Four Pieces* the melody is subjected to "violent, impulsive" compositional manipulation. The initial introduction of a tune with stable tonality, soft dynamics, and regular rhythmic character contests repeatedly with discordant, disjunct, and polytonal material. The brief moments of thematic stability within a larger context of dissonance and disorder support a reading that the primary theme represents a *transgressive* narrative pole continuously struggling against an omnipresent and oppressive *order*. The final movement ends uncertainly, suggesting that the *transgressive* motion of the piece fails to overcome *order* and that *Four Pieces*' narrative is a *tragic* archetype.

The allusions to traditional music, Rzewski's political convictions, and the political content in his works reinforce a narrative in which the *transgressive* represents the ideas and aspirations of the political Left. The ideas of the Left that Rzewski addressed included anti-war struggles, working conditions for the labor force, and visions for a more just society. The common theme between these ideas is a call for struggle in solidarity with the oppressed. As a *tragic* archetype, the narrative of *Four Pieces* suggests a climate of struggle in which these various political aims are rarely able to overcome their considerable opposition. As with many of his other works, Rzewski's *Four Pieces* does not end with a conclusive, final defeat, but leaves the listener with an ambiguous ending that gradually fades into nothing. The lack of a strong conclusion as well as the many hopeful iterations of the primary theme in *Four Pieces* suggest

that while the fight for solidarity and justice often meets with failure, they are worthy goals requiring continuous struggle.

Rzewski's *oeuvre* warrants more attention. While the literature on Rzewski's music is modestly populated, most of these writings either focus on Rzewski's political commentaries and his works' situation within that context or offer brief summaries of several of his works. Few writings synthesize sociological observations with a deeper analysis of Rzewski's music, with exceptions provided by Vanessa K. Bree's study of *North American Ballads* and Vanessa Cornett-Murtada's examination of the same compositions. Several of Rzewski's other works could also be read through a narrative framework. *The Road* (1995-2003) for solo piano, *Stop the War!* (1995) and *Struggle Song* (1973) for mixed chorus, *Fall of the Empire* (2007) for percussion and voice, and *The Price of Oil* (1980) for two voices and amplified pipe ensembles all emphasize sociopolitical themes and would be ideal candidates for narrative analysis. These works represent only a small fraction of Rzewski's prolific output over the past five decades. Rzewski was a deeply influential and prolific composer, and his output deserves the benefit of research that reflects the rich political and social fabric Rzewski aimed to reflect in his works.

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