

Politicising the Piano

Four North American Ballads (1978-9)

Frederic Rzewski (b.1938)

4. Winnsboro Cotton Mill Blues

The People Protesting Drum Out Bigly Covfefe (2017)

Kevin Malone (b.1958)

This short piano recital of just over 20 minutes builds on the existing repertoire of political piano music (Rzewski) and suggests new ways (Malone) in which musicians might respond to recent politically traumatic events through protest, performance, act, community participation and so-called popular music.

Songwriter and activist Pete Seeger encouraged Rzewski to follow the example of Bach in his composition of the Ballads. This included Bach's use of melodies that can be sung by anybody as well as contrapuntal textures that draw upon Bachian compositional devices such as augmentation, diminution, transposition and compression, whilst always maintaining the profile of the tune on some level. Rzewski comments that "these tunes, and tunes like them, seem to have a special appeal to the human ear. You can change them and distort them without destroying them. The melodies often seem to describe some kind of 'human' form, perhaps related to the mother's voice or the rocking motion of her arms" (Rzewski, 2002). The words of *Winnsboro Cotton Mill Blues* were sung by Seeger as follows:

Old man Sargent, sitting at his desk,
The damned old fool won't give us a rest.
He'd take the nickels off a dead man's eyes
To buy Coca-Cola and Eskimo pies.
I got the blues, I got the blues,
I got the Winnsboro cotton mill blues.

The material for Kevin Malone's *The People Protesting Drum Out Bigly Covfefe* also draws on melodies that can be sung by anybody. These were transcribed by the composer at anti-Trump protests in the US and UK in 2016/17. The piece is a fantasia, directly quoting, transforming and juxtaposing these chants. You may like to join in with a chant, should a pink [pussyhat](#) come your way.

I said, Hey! Ho! Donald Trump has got to go.
America, America God shed his grace on thee. And crown thy good with brotherhood, from sea to shining ...
Let me tell you, we're here for peace.
Love trumps hate.
Tell me what America looks like! This is what America looks like.
No hate, no fear. Immigrants are welcome here.
Donald Trump, go to hell. Take Theresa May as well.
Say it loud, say it clear! Refugees are welcome here.
We are the people. Mighty, mighty people.
We want a leader, not a stupid tweeter.
You can't build a wall. Your hands are way too small.
What do we want? Justice! When do we want it? Now!



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Pianist Adam Swayne studied at the University of Manchester and the Royal Northern College of Music before completing his doctorate as a Fulbright Scholar at Northwestern University in the USA where he studied with Ursula Oppens. He now combines performing with his work as Lecturer in Music at the RNCM. He has performed in festivals throughout the UK and abroad, including on BBC Radio and Television and at the BBC Proms. His “blistering” solo CD (*speak to me*) new music new politics, released on the Coviello label in 2019, was selected as an Instrumental Monthly Choice by BBC Music Magazine and nominated in two categories at the 2019 Opus Klassik awards. The Times described him as “a pianist of formidable technique and high intelligence” and the Evening Standard as “an ideal blend of panache and subtlety”. He is also the pianist for the Riot Ensemble.

(link to album on YouTube:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=avLDumoXnDk&list=OLAK5uy_nk3hwpURg0fr7ODIVRGSmrWBRaw7Luw4&index=1)