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Our mission is to expand public understanding of Experimental music, moving away from simplistic tropes such as “cutting edge” or “contemporary,” and instead striving to engage with experimentalism as a timeless and recurrent artistic practice.

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BOWERBIRD PRESENTS

THE PEOPLE UNITED WILL NEVER BE DEFEATED

HEATHER O’DONNELL, PIANO

SUNDAY, OCT 18, 2026

TRINITY MEMORIAL

PROGRAM

Frederic Rzewski (1938–2021):
T*he People United Will Never Be Defeated!* (1975)
36 Variations on the Chilean Song *¡El pueblo unido jamás será vencido!*

ABOUT THE PROGRAM

Frederic Rzewski composed The People United Will Never Be Defeated! in 1975, creating one of the monumental works of twentieth-century piano literature. The hour-long cycle consists of thirty-six variations on the Chilean song ¡El pueblo unido jamás será vencido!, composed by Sergio Ortega and associated with the years surrounding Chile's 1973 military coup. Over time, the melody came to symbolize solidarity and the enduring human desire for dignity and self-determination.

Commissioned for the United States Bicentennial, the work was premiered by Ursula Oppens at the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts in Washington, D.C., on 7 February 1976.

Rather than presenting a straightforward set of variations, Rzewski transforms the song through an extraordinary range of musical languages – from counterpoint to jazz, minimalism, improvisation, virtuosic display, and moments of profound stillness. The result is a work that continually shifts between the individual and the collective, certainty and doubt, struggle and renewal.

Although rooted in a specific historical moment, the piece has long transcended its original context. Today it is regarded not only as one of the great masterpieces of contemporary piano literature but also as a meditation on resilience, memory, freedom, and the enduring capacity of communities to imagine a different future.

– H. O'Donnell

ABOUT THE ARTIST

Heather O'Donnell is an American pianist, psychologist, author, and founder of The Green Room, a nonprofit organization dedicated to the mental health and professional sustainability of performing artists.

As a pianist, she has appeared throughout Europe, North America, Asia, and the Middle East as recitalist and concerto soloist, performing with ensembles including the St. Petersburg State Symphony, the Romanian State Philharmonic, the Mendelssohn Chamber Orchestra Leipzig, and the Tanglewood Festival Chamber Orchestra. Her performances have been broadcast by Deutschlandradio, Radio France, Deutsche Welle Television, and other international media.

Internationally recognized for her commitment to contemporary music, O'Donnell has given more than thirty world premieres, including works by Luciano Berio, John Zorn, Walter Zimmermann, and James Tenney. She is the dedicatee of compositions by Michael Finnissy and Frederic Rzewski and received First Prize and the Gaudeamus Prize at the Fifth Krzysztof Penderecki International Competition in Kraków. Her artistic projects have included the commissioning initiatives Responses to Ives and Piano Optophonique, and she appeared in Alexander Kluge's cinematic interpretation of Karl Marx's Das Kapital.

Following a career interruption caused by injury, O'Donnell completed degrees in psychology and redirected her work toward the wellbeing of artists. She holds an M.Sc. in Prevention and Health Psychology, is a certified Artistic-Systemic Therapist (DGSF), and has become an internationally recognized voice on musicians' health, creativity, identity, and sustainable artistic careers.

She has lectured and presented at institutions including Weill Cornell Medicine, the University College London-hosted Performing Arts Medicine Association Symposium, Columbia University, the Eastman School of Music, and the Mozarteum University Salzburg.