

# Prisoners' Voices: Frederic Rzewski's *Coming Together* and *Attica*

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**F**rederic Rzewski has returned frequently to the topic of prison. He has written four works that not only explore the idea of prison but also take listeners into actual prisons, past and present. *Coming Together* (1971) and *Attica* (1972), as the title of the latter piece bluntly states, set their sights on the Attica Correctional Facility. "It Makes a Long Time Man Feel Bad" travels to the fields worked by African American chain gangs in the South during the early twentieth century.<sup>1</sup> Finally, *De Profundis* (1992) draws upon Oscar Wilde's evocation of Reading Gaol. The four pieces also present real-life prisoners. *Coming Together* and *Attica* feature the reflections of two men who were incarcerated in the New York prison, Samuel Melville and Richard X. Clark, respectively. "It Makes a Long Time Man Feel Bad" is a virtuosic piano fantasy based on a field recording of the eponymous work song. *De Profundis* has the pianist deliver lines from Wilde's prison epistle to Lord Alfred Douglas. *Coming Together* and *Attica* go a step further in this prison vérité by responding to a particular event that took place in a prison, one of the most significant events in the history of American incarceration: the 1971 uprising at Attica.

In these four pieces, Rzewski moves back and forth between specific prisons and prison as a larger institution. The exchange enhances the political commentary in the works. As a composer long committed to speaking through music to social issues, Rzewski not surprisingly

<sup>1</sup> Rzewski composed two works based on this song. The first, *A Long Time Man*, is a piece for piano and orchestra written in 1979. The second is the solo piano piece "It Makes a Long Time Man Feel Bad," the fifth of the composer's *North American Ballads* (1979, rev. 1997 and 2004).

concentrated on incarceration, which exacerbates social inequalities and consolidates government authority. Set in actual prisons, the four works chronicle the toll of incarceration: the exploitation of convict labor in the South, the crushing of Wilde's spirit, and the brutal government crackdown at Attica. Stepping beyond those events, the pieces ask broad questions about how and why incarceration leads to such cruelty. The dialogue between the specific and general is especially rich in *Coming Together* and *Attica*. Unlike "It Makes a Long Time Man Feel Bad" and *De Profundis*, the two speak directly to their time, having been written in the immediate wake of the riot.

In discussing *Coming Together* and *Attica*, this article intertwines the specific and the general. It begins with the events of the uprising and then considers the aftermath, looking in particular at how leftist organizations and press responded to the event. Rzewski moved in these circles, and his works engage with the ideas that circulated there. One such idea was to listen to prisoners' own voices. A striking feature of the coverage of the uprising was the turn in both the leftist and mainstream press to inmates for their accounts of events. Rzewski, in contrast, did not have Melville or Clark tell listeners what took place at Attica; rather, he was more interested in their descriptions of how prison battered their lives and what happens to their voices when they contend with forces set to keep them sequestered, if not silent.

The focus on prisoner voices forms part of a wider meditation on the institution, which takes two forms in *Coming Together* and *Attica*: a representation of prison and a critique of incarceration. The two reinforce each other. The representation serves as a means of critique, and the critique informs the representation. An analysis of both pieces reveals how they depict the confining psychological and physical space of prison and the gradual diminishment of the voices and presence of inmates. In so doing, the works get at a fundamental aspect of prison: the pain of punishment.

Pain may be a reality of prison, but it typically goes unacknowledged. We intuit that it exists in prison, but we rarely consider it, let alone wrestle with how we should respond to it. The neglect stems from the distance erected between prison and society. Scholars of incarceration have mapped that distance and the different forms that it takes. In his history of punishment, Michel Foucault describes how distance was central to the birth of the modern prison system around 1800.<sup>2</sup> Facilities were placed well beyond cities and towns so as to keep them out of sight and mind. Situated there, they become the "darkest region in the

<sup>2</sup> Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Pantheon, 1977), 236–39.

apparatus of justice.”<sup>3</sup> The remoteness of prisons augments what sociologist Michelle Brown calls “experiential distance.”<sup>4</sup> Many people never have direct contact with prison and therefore have little understanding of what inmates confront there. That distance, though, occasionally collapses, as happened with the Attica uprising. It revealed the horrible conditions of the facility, the suffering of prisoners, and the extremes that the government was willing to go to reestablish that distance. *Coming Together* and *Attica* shrink experiential distance by having listeners identify with Melville and Clark, and get a sense of the pain created by the confined space of prison and the loss of voice. Through that identification and their representations of prison, the works raise questions about incarceration and our relationship with—or distance from—it.

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In a 1975 interview, Rzewski called the Attica uprising “a very important milestone in American history.”<sup>5</sup> Rebelling against the deplorable conditions of the prison and the draconian control of the authorities, a group of inmates seized control of the D Yard on September 9, 1971.<sup>6</sup> They took forty-two guards and civilians hostage, and issued a manifesto that included such basic demands as improved medical care and sanitation. Negotiations between inmates and prison and government officials quickly collapsed. On September 13, Governor Nelson Rockefeller ordered state police to storm the prison, an attack that resulted in the death of twenty-nine inmates and ten hostages. Further victims included a prison guard, who was attacked at the start of the riots and later died of his injuries, and three inmates who were killed by other inmates. The surviving inmates were subjected to excessive and humiliating punishments that included being stripped and forced to sit in a latrine ditch, running through a gauntlet of guards who beat them, and time in solitary confinement.<sup>7</sup>

The Attica uprising was seminal in increasing awareness of the state of American prisons and the need to protect prisoners’ rights. Rzewski saw Attica as a “milestone” because it exposed what happened when people challenged the growing police power in the country. The riot was also significant because it ruptured the “state of ignorance” in which

<sup>3</sup> Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 256.

<sup>4</sup> Michelle Brown, *The Culture of Punishment: Prison, Society, and Spectacle* (New York: New York University Press, 2009), 9.

<sup>5</sup> Walter Zimmermann, *Desert Plants: Conversations with 23 American Musicians* (Vancouver: Aesthetic Research Centre of Canada, 1976), 309.

<sup>6</sup> For a magisterial account of the uprising, see Heather Ann Thompson, *Blood in the Water: The Attica Prison Uprising of 1971 and Its Legacy* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2016).

<sup>7</sup> For accounts of the brutal treatment of prisoners after the raid, see “Nixon-Rockefeller Convicted,” *The Black Panther*, November 6, 1971, 9, 13; and Richard X. Clark, *The Brothers of Attica*, ed. Leonard Levitt (New York: Links Books, 1973).

the media kept the public.<sup>8</sup> For five days, Americans saw—if they chose to acknowledge it—the oppressive force of the law, both in the treatment of prisoners before the riot and in the fate of those who challenged the severe rule of that authority.<sup>9</sup> The composer said that he and other “citizens” had no choice but to “cry out” against the injustices of Attica.<sup>10</sup> In addition, Rzewski backed the Attica Defense Committee, which provided legal support for inmates who had participated in the riots.<sup>11</sup>

Many citizens were similarly galvanized. Protests were held in New York City in the fall of 1971, and the following year an “anti-imperialist” student group called the “Attica Brigade” formed. They chose their name not only to ally themselves with Attica’s inmates but also because “Attica means fight back.”<sup>12</sup> Protesters and radical groups railed against the New York state government and clamored to know what had happened at the prison. The government suppressed files related to the uprising and continues to do so today.<sup>13</sup> At the time of the crackdown, rumors emerged that inmates had cut the throats of and castrated hostages, although they were treated with respect. The hostages killed during the raid were shot down during the police onslaught. The African American press in particular exposed these lies and pointed out that the majority of the prison population was black and the victim of pervasive racism.<sup>14</sup>

Rumors also circled around individual prisoners, notably Melville, whose conviction for bombing government institutions had led to him

<sup>8</sup> Zimmermann, *Desert Plants*, 309–10, 318–19.

<sup>9</sup> This view of a government enforcing its authority through state-supported violence appeared throughout the leftist press response to Attica. According to an editorial in *The Daily World* (the newspaper of the Communist Party USA): “‘Law and order’ are not just words in speeches by politicians. The bloody horror at Attica prison is those words in practice.” In another editorial, the newspaper placed the Attica crackdown alongside the violence at “Kent State University, Jackson, Mississippi and in the ghettos and labor strikes.” See “Official Murder Pattern,” *The Daily World*, September 15, 1971, 7; and “Criminals in Seats of Power,” *The Daily World*, September 14, 1971, 7. The Weather Underground Organization made a similar connection in a letter published in *Liberated Guardian*. See “Letter from The Weather Underground,” *Liberated Guardian* 11, no. 6 (October 14, 1971): 6.

<sup>10</sup> Zimmermann, *Desert Plants*, 310.

<sup>11</sup> Zimmermann, *Desert Plants*, 312.

<sup>12</sup> In *Attica Brigade: Attica Means Fight Back!*, May 1973 (New York: Attica Brigade). On the history of the group and choice of name, see [www.marxists.org/history/erol/ncm-1/attica-brigade.htm](http://www.marxists.org/history/erol/ncm-1/attica-brigade.htm). In 1974, the group changed its name to Revolutionary Student Brigade.

<sup>13</sup> Thompson, *Blood in the Water*, xiii–xvii.

<sup>14</sup> “Throat Cutting Report Debunked, Hostages Shot, No Guns in Cell,” *New Pittsburgh Courier*, September 25, 1971. Condemnations of racism at Attica go back as far as the 1930s. In 1934 Carl A. Bell, a representative of African American inmates, wrote to Walter White, executive secretary of the NAACP, to protest conditions for African Americans there. He concluded: “This place is worse than some of the places in the South for colored inmates.” Lillian S. Williams, “Attica Prisoners Seek Aid from N.A.A.C.P.: A Note and Document,” *Afro-Americans in New York Life and History* 1 (July 1977): 211–12.

being called the “mad bomber.” The headlines of a *New York Times* article tantalized readers with a cinema-worthy scene: “Bomb-Carrying Convict Killed by Sharpshooter.”<sup>15</sup> Melville had no bombs and was killed alongside others in the melee. How unexpected then that the following day the *Times* ran a story about letters that Melville had written to his lawyer days before the uprising in which he describes the “basic terror that people live under in prison.”<sup>16</sup>

Or maybe it was not that unexpected. The uprising startled the press and public, raising questions about why prisoners had revolted and what had occurred during the crackdown. Since the government did not respond openly to those questions, the press turned to both current and former inmates at Attica. Many stories about the riot included prisoner interviews. The leftist press in particular used such interviews to condemn the government crackdown.<sup>17</sup> Rzewski, in fact, first encountered the Melville letter set in *Coming Together in Ramparts*, a monthly publication tied to the emerging New Left movement.<sup>18</sup> The magazine memorialized Melville by publishing excerpts of his correspondence. The appetite for prisoner perspectives was further fed in the two years after the uprising by the publication of two collections of interviews with inmates, a book of Melville’s letters, and a book by Richard X. Clark on his time in Attica.<sup>19</sup>

The chorus of Attica prisoners spoke to the troubling reality of prison. Their accounts of life in Attica returned over and over to the debasing conditions of the facility. They also mentioned the economic exploitation of their labor and the lack of rehabilitation opportunities, including education and job training. Most inmates dealt with issues of race, the predominance of African Americans in the facility and the unfettered prejudices of white guards and officials. Carl Jones-El mentioned how “the white establishment” of the guards and officials gave him and fellow African Americans “the worst jobs.”<sup>20</sup> Melville and other

<sup>15</sup> Michael T. Kaufman, “Bomb-Carrying Convict Killed by Sharpshooter,” *New York Times*, September 14, 1971.

<sup>16</sup> Robert E. Tomasson, “Melville, Attica Radical, Dead; Recently Wrote of Jail Terror,” *New York Times*, September 15, 1971.

<sup>17</sup> “We Are Human Beings,” *The Militant*, September 24, 1971, 6; “We Are Not Criminals, Nor Are We Enemies of the People: Statement from the Survivors of the Attica Massacre,” *The Black Panther*, October 4, 1971, 3, 17; and “Attica Brothers Speak,” *Liberated Guardian* 11, no. 6 (October 14, 1971): 16.

<sup>18</sup> Zimmermann, *Desert Plants*, 310; and Samuel Melville, “Letters from Attica and Elsewhere,” *Ramparts* 10, no. 6 (December 1971): 45–51, at 47.

<sup>19</sup> *Voices from Inside: 7 Interviews with Attica Prisoners* (New York: Attica Defense Committee, 1972); *We Are Attica: Interviews with Prisoners from Attica* (New York: Attica Defense Committee, 1972); Samuel Melville, *Letters from Attica* (New York: William Morrow, 1972); and Clark, *The Brothers of Attica*.

<sup>20</sup> *We Are Attica*, n.p.

white prisoners described how their time in Attica increased their awareness of the injustices that African Americans faced inside and outside of prison, and the bonds that they formed with black prisoners.<sup>21</sup>

In one of the public statements made by inmates during the uprising, Elliott (L. D.) Barkley, who was killed in the raid, asserted: "We are men. We are not beasts and we do not intend to be beaten or driven as such."<sup>22</sup> His description and others that followed convey the racist brutality of the attack with a bluntness that rarely appeared in news reports, as with this account by an anonymous survivor:

Gas shrouded the D-Block yard like a deathly mask, and I tried to escape the oppressive cloud by hugging the ground and thrusting my face into the mud. Suddenly, an excruciating kick in my ribs added pain to the nausea I suffered. Paralyzed with fear, I glanced from the corner of my eye at the towering apparition above me, masked like some Martian creature. With a rifle pointed ominously at my head, the creature roared like a maniac, "Get on your feet you dirty, black nigger bastard! I'll kill all you niggers! Get up nigger!" Still cringing, I remembered to wipe the mud from my face, then I promptly stood up. In the excitement I placed my hands high in the air. He quivered with rage, eyes dull and vacant limbs catatonic, shouting, "On your head, nigger! Put 'em on your head, you dirty nigger bastard! I'll kill all you niggers! I'll kill all you niggers!"<sup>23</sup>

Richard X. Clark believed that some good may have come out of the uprising, but despaired at the cost:

Attica was very good in a lot of respects because in the society of today people have to be shocked into the reality of the time. You can sit down and talk all day long about what is being done, what needs to be done, what should be done. But it really takes shock therapy. If 43 hadn't been killed in Attica, people wouldn't have known that Attica existed.<sup>24</sup>

Frank Lott peered into the future, seeing the failure to confront the state of prisons and enact the reforms demanded by Attica as leading to the pervasiveness of imprisonment at the heart of mass incarceration: "As long as people remain ignorant as long as people don't bear responsibility, the responsibility of what happens in prisons, then nothing will have been gained by Attica. They got to become involved in these affairs.

<sup>21</sup> Melville, *Letters from Attica*, 168–69. For Jerome Rosenberg's views, see *Voices from Inside*, n.p.

<sup>22</sup> *Voices from Inside*, n.p.

<sup>23</sup> "Episodes from the Attica Massacre," *The Black Scholar* 4, no. 2 (October 1972): 34–39, at 38–39.

<sup>24</sup> *Voices from Inside*, n.p.

If they don't become involved, Attica could very easily be on 125th St., 42nd St., anywhere."<sup>25</sup>

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Melville frequently appears in accounts of Attica, a fact owing variously to the large number of letters that he wrote there, his involvement in educating prisoners and advocating for their rights, and his participation in the uprising itself.<sup>26</sup> The leftist groups behind the magazine articles on Attica held him up as a martyr, a man who discovered his political mission and paid the ultimate price.<sup>27</sup> After abandoning both his career as a draftsman and his wife and son, Melville found his way into such circles, which clarified and deepened his political leanings.<sup>28</sup> Restless with the seemingly endless meetings and empty dreams of political battle, he decided to take action. His campaign involved the bombing of eight government and corporate buildings from July to November 1969.<sup>29</sup> After his conviction, he passed through four prisons: the Federal House of Detention, The Tombs (Manhattan House of Detention), Sing Sing, and Attica. He organized prison strikes at both The Tombs and Sing Sing.

A letter that Melville wrote to his friend Joel Cohen on May 16, 1970, notably from The Tombs rather than Attica, provides the text for *Coming Together*. Rzewski excerpted the first two paragraphs:

I think the combination of age and a greater coming together is responsible for the speed of the passing time. it's six months now & i can tell you truthfully few periods in my life have passed as quickly. i am in excellent physical and emotional health. there are doubtless subtle surprises ahead but i feel secure and ready.

as lovers will contrast their emotions in times of crisis so am i dealing with my environment. in the indifferent brutality, the incessant noise, the experimental chemistry of food, the ravings of lost hysterical men i can act with clarity and meaning. i am deliberate—sometimes even calculating—seldom employing histrionics except as a test of the

<sup>25</sup> *Voices from Inside*, n.p.

<sup>26</sup> Melville, *Letters from Attica*. More than a year before the Attica uprising, *Rat: Subterranean News* published letters from Melville. "From Sam Melville," *Rat: Subterranean News*, March 20–April 4, 1970, 6. The magazine also gave updates on his movements through the prison system, reporting when he left The Tombs and went to Sing Sing. *Rat: Subterranean News*, June 26, 1970, 7.

<sup>27</sup> Melville, "Letters from Attica and Elsewhere," 45.

<sup>28</sup> Melville's original last name was Grossman. He changed it in homage to the writer Herman Melville. For discussions of Melville's life, see *Letters from Attica*, 1–80; and Leslie James Pickering, *Mad Bomber Melville* (Portland, OR: Arissa Media Group, 2007).

<sup>29</sup> Melville planned the attacks during off-hours so as to avoid casualties. There were, though, nineteen people injured in the August 20, 1969 bombing of the Marine Midland Building.

reactions of others. i read much, exercise, talk to guards and inmates for the inevitable direction of my life.<sup>30</sup>

Melville catalogs standard topics for prison letters: his health, condition of the prison, food, behavior of other inmates, and the passing of time. The language and tone, though, are far from standard. What does he mean by the “combination of age and a greater coming together”? And the metaphor about “lovers” in “times of crisis”? “Clarity and meaning” can be elusive. The tone is not always “deliberate.” The letter captures Melville whipping himself up into grim exhilaration to confront the ordeals around him.

Rzewski was captivated by the “poetic quality” and “cryptic irony” of these two paragraphs. Reading them over and over, he thought, might “unlock a hidden meaning.”<sup>31</sup> There is nothing cryptic about the rest of the letter, which Rzewski did not set. Among other things, it offers blunt descriptions of the differences between federal and state prisoners, and an explosion that occurred outside The Tombs. Nor do any of the other letters in the *Ramparts* article venture into the ambiguities of the paragraphs quoted above. Some are tender, like the ones Melville wrote to his son, and others straightforward, as in the accounts of his dealings with prison bureaucracy. The loving father and bureaucratic battler were not the Melville that fascinated Rzewski; rather, it was the man who created the heated ambiguity of those two paragraphs: the suffering prisoner.

Rzewski’s four works dealing with prison all focus on suffering. In the excerpts used by Rzewski in *De Profundis*, Oscar Wilde describes suffering as “one very long moment,” extended by daily tortures such as the “plank bed,” “loathsome food,” and “hard ropes.” In “It Makes a Long Time Man Feel Bad,” Rzewski captures the brutal work on the chain gang with the sounds of actual chains. *Attica* suggests the psychological torture that the just-released Clark faces as he realizes that he can never be freed from the memories of his ordeals there. Melville, like Wilde, lists hardships and also the fortitude to face them.

The following discussion of *Coming Together* focuses on Rzewski’s use of Melville’s letter, the prisoner’s voice, and the formal construction of the composition. The treatment of the voice and form are part of a representation of prison created by the work. Before getting to that scene, a few words are necessary about the role of representation in accounts of prison. As scholars have pointed out, representations are crucial given

<sup>30</sup> I have kept to the capitalization and punctuation in the *Ramparts* publication of the letter, which is where Rzewski first read it. “Letters from Attica and Elsewhere,” 47; and *Letters from Attica*, 110–11.

<sup>31</sup> Frederic Rzewski, *Nonsequiturs: Writings & Lectures on Improvisation, Composition, and Interpretation* (Cologne: Edition MusikTexte, 2007), 448.

the experiential distance between prison and society.<sup>32</sup> Since most individuals in the outside world have no direct knowledge of prison, it has to be depicted for them. That distance has made prison a site of fantasy, a removed place in which socially unacceptable behavior supposedly runs rampant. Numerous representations of prison on television and film play into these fantasies, offering scenes of sensational violence and cruelty.<sup>33</sup> *Coming Together* shuns such ideas and instead renders prison as a site of crushing despair. The use of Melville's letter alone sets the stage for a representation, conjuring thoughts of an infamous prison. The extent of the representation, though, goes well beyond the text. The musical construction offers a spatial topography and psychological account of life in prison.

Rzewski felt that the text of Melville's letter "cried out for some further elaboration."<sup>34</sup> He never says exactly what he elaborates upon, but the idea of Melville's letter "crying out" draws attention to the presence of a voice. Melville, in fact, was said to have had a nice singing voice.<sup>35</sup> Rzewski does not give us that voice; rather, he has a performer speak the text. The letter is spoken. It demands to be spoken. It is not just that the wordy text does not lend itself to a melodic setting—Melville's exhortations and damning observations have to be conveyed with unsparring directness.

Rzewski does not specify the instrumental ensemble, other than saying that it could consist of any number of performers, although he recommends eight to ten, and that it should include a bass guitar or electric bass to play the bass line.<sup>36</sup> That line is the one written part, which the other players either double or improvise off following directions given by the composer. The bass line is built upon a pentatonic collection centered on G that stretches across a melodic line that ascends or descends seven notes over the range of a tenth (exx. 1a and 1b). Rzewski unfolds the line through a technique that he calls "squaring," "in which a melodic sequence is gradually built up by adding a note at a time, and then washed away by subtracting notes from the pattern once

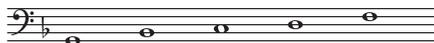
<sup>32</sup> Michelle Brown, "Penal Spectatorship and the Culture of Punishment," in *Why Prison*, ed. David Scott (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 108–24, at 112–16.

<sup>33</sup> There are several studies on representations of prison in popular culture. For an introduction to the field and a literature review, see Dawn K. Cecil, "Prisons in Popular Culture," in *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Criminology and Criminal Justice* (March 2017) <http://criminology.oxfordre.com/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780190264079.001.0001/acrefore-9780190264079-e-194>. See also Dawn K. Cecil, *Prison Life in Popular Culture: From The Big House to Orange Is the New Black* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 2015).

<sup>34</sup> Zimmermann, *Desert Plants*, 310.

<sup>35</sup> Melville, *Letters from Attica*, 8.

<sup>36</sup> Rzewski gives performance directions for and analytical commentary on *Coming Together* in the preface to the score, which can be found in Rzewski, *Nonsequiturs*, 448–50. The following discussion of those topics will refer to this preface.

EXAMPLE 1A. Pentatonic collection in *Coming Together*.EXAMPLE 1B. Seven-note string in *Coming Together*.

completed, in a slow, giant wave.<sup>37</sup> The work consists of eight sections (labeled A–H by the composer), in each of which melodic waves crest and recede. The squaring technique also introduces rhythmic currents into the work. The rhythms are uniform throughout the piece, a constant flow of sixteenth notes. The groupings of one to seven notes formed through squaring, though, break up the potentially monotonous succession of four attacks per beat.

The rest of the ensemble respond to the bass line with improvised parts that follow Rzewski's directions, which change with each section. The performers sustain the low G in the bass line while adding other lines (A–D), create their own melodic lines against the bass line (E), or engage in hoquet with that line (F and G). The work concludes with the ensemble playing the bass line in unison or octaves (H).

The open instrumentation, use of small modal pitch collections, additive melodic and rhythmic patterns, repetition of groups in those patterns, and constant sixteenth-note rhythms call to mind contemporary minimalist idioms, particularly those of Philip Glass. Rzewski became familiar with Glass's music by having played in his ensemble in 1971.<sup>38</sup> During the early 1970s, Rzewski was exploring diverse styles in his works, including collective improvisation with the ensemble *Musica Elettronica Viva*, inflections of tonality in *Jefferson* (1970), and electroacoustic idioms in *Falling Music* (1971).<sup>39</sup> For *Coming Together*, he drew upon Glassian minimalism but rendered it in his own way.

How personal that rendering is can be observed by comparing *Coming Together* with Glass's *Music in Similar Motion* (1969), which is also for an ensemble with open instrumentation and uses a different grouping of

<sup>37</sup> Rzewski, *Nonsequiturs*, 446.

<sup>38</sup> Rob Haskins, "Philip Glass and Michael Riesman: Two Interviews," *Musical Quarterly* 86 (2002): 508–29, at 518.

<sup>39</sup> For a discussion of Rzewski's musical and political explorations in New York City during the early 1970s, see Bernard Gendron, "Rzewski in New York (1971–1977)," *Contemporary Music Review* 29 (2010): 557–74.

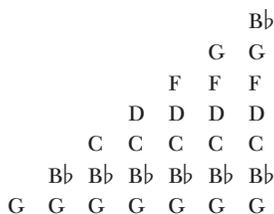
the same pentatonic collection as *Coming Together* for core melodic units.<sup>40</sup> The most compelling point of comparison is not pitch, however, but rather the relationship between additive procedures and structure. The form of *Music in Similar Motion* emerges from those procedures. It consists of three high points created by the gradual accumulation of the melodic/rhythmic units. After the first two highpoints, the units either gradually or suddenly shrink to a few units, the starting point for another buildup. The work concludes at the peak of the third buildup. In *Coming Together*, the buildups are contained within the individual sections, the lengths of which have been set at forty-nine measures. The whole process is, as stated in the Melville text, “deliberate” and “calculating,” far from the seemingly natural flows that unfold in their own time in *Music in Similar Motion*.

The “calculations” create a controlled space in which each note is accounted for in a governing formal scheme. The design can be appreciated by referring to the seven pitches in the melodic string from g<sup>2</sup> to b<sup>3</sup> with numbers (1–7) rather than pitch names (see ex. 1b). Building note by note (1, 1–2, 1–2–3, etc.), the pitches create, as Rzewski says, a “triangular structure” of twenty-eight notes (see fig. 1). Each of these units is “squared” so that there are 784 notes in each section. The eight sections combined create a total of 6,272 notes, a sum that Rzewski tallies in his commentary on the piece. The precise numerical relationships suggest a pre-compositional scheme, perhaps inspired by the seven-note melodic string. The melodic strings build and recede within grids laid out by Rzewski. For reasons that will soon become clear, this discussion will focus on sections A and B. The two unfold different patterns. The first half of the A section (mm. 1–26) consists of an accumulation of the individual units (1, 1–2, 1–3) until we get the complete string from 1 to 1–7 (ex. 2). The second half of the section (mm. 26–47) breaks down that string by removing individual units, and the final measures (mm. 48–49) delete notes from the 1–7 string. The B section follows a more elaborate plan in which processes of addition and subtraction dovetail and different subtraction schemes simultaneously play out (see appendix).

The squaring patterns laid out in the A and B sections are taken up in the following six sections. The patterns, though, are not repeated exactly; rather, they are presented in either retrograde, inversion, or retrograde inversion. For an inversion, a string begins on 7 instead of

<sup>40</sup> Glass also has members of the ensemble play the main melodic line in parallel fourths and sevenths, which adds other pitches to the collection. The ensemble in the Glass piece does not improvise as in *Coming Together*. For an analysis of *Music in Similar Motion*, see Keith Potter, *Four Musical Minimalists: La Monte Young, Terry Riley, Steve Reich, Philip Glass* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 295–300.

FIGURE 1. Triangular twenty-eight-note shape in *Coming Together*.



EXAMPLE 2. Full statement of seven-note string in *Coming Together* (mm. 24–26).



1 and follows the same sequence but in reverse (1–2 becomes 7–6). As seen in figure 2, sections C, D, and E employ the pattern from B, presenting it in the three transformations, just as the concluding three sections do with A. The result is a formal palindrome. The C–D–E block is an extension of B and the F–G–H block of A, the result being an A–B–A form.<sup>41</sup> In addition, the manipulation procedures in the C, D, and E sections are presented in retrograde in the F, G, and H units.

The formal symmetry provides both a structural logic and a representation of prison. As seen in examples 3a and 3b, the concluding measures are a retrograde of the opening ones. Or are the first measures a retrograde of the closing ones? In *Coming Together*, the beginning appears in the end, and the end appears in the beginning. Through that elision, the work can be heard as closing in on itself, a rich idea for a representation of prison. In a particularly vivid image, the retrograde linking of the opening and final measures creates a formal closure suggesting the locking of a cell door.

The speaker's part both breaks away from and adds to the strict and evocative construction of the ensemble music. That part and the formal schemes of the work engage in a play of opposites, an idea that Rzewski explored earlier in *Jefferson*. In that piece, he set the "unrestrained freedom" of the vocal line, consisting of the opening

<sup>41</sup> The pentatonic collection (G–B $\flat$ –C–D–F) also has a formal symmetry, the interval scheme of m3 M2 M2 m3.

EXAMPLE 3A. *Coming Together*, mm. 390–92.



EXAMPLE 3B. *Coming Together*, mm. 1–3.



FIGURE 2. Form of *Coming Together*.



R: Retrograde

I: Inversion

RI: Retrograde Inversion

sentences of the Declaration of Independence, against the “rigorous structuralism” of the piano part, which he describes as offering “a rational counterweight” to the freedom in the voice, one that brings out “the sober and careful construction of the text.”<sup>42</sup> In *Coming Together*, the bass line is likewise rigorous and the vocal part free, in the sense that it is not notated and left to the speaker to decide how to deliver it. Rzewski, though, does specify that particular words must be delivered in individual measures. Just as in *Jefferson*, the interaction between the voice and accompaniment says something about the text, in this case, the fate of Melville and his voice.

*Jefferson* and *Coming Together* both build upon the contrast between voice and accompaniment, but there is a significant difference in the outcome of that relationship in the works. The two parts remain in opposition in *Jefferson*, whereas the voice becomes part of the rigorous system in *Coming Together*. Rzewski breaks down Melville’s letter to its eight sentences, which are labeled here 1–8. If that numbering calls to mind the seven notes in the bass line, it should, for the two are treated in

<sup>42</sup> Rzewski, *Nonsequiturs*, 446.

FIGURE 3. Presentation of eight sentences in the text of *Coming Together*.

A 1 12 123 1

B 234 1234

C 5 123456

D 1234567

E 2345678

F 345678 4

G 5678 567

H 8 678 78 8

a similar fashion. As seen in figure 3, Rzewski stretches out the sentences across the eight sections. As with the bass line, he follows an additive process, 1, 1–2, 1–2–3, etc. Unlike the seven pitches in the bass line, the eight sentences never emerge as an intact group. Rzewski states each sentence seven times, which results in an incomplete statement of the text. The most complete statements, sentences 1–7 and 2–8, occur midway through the work. After that point, the sentences, as with the bass-line strings, are reduced line by line until just the last one is stated.<sup>43</sup>

All four of Rzewski's works dealing with prison depict the struggle of the prisoner's voice to move beyond the confines of prison, challenge the authority controlling that space, and awaken us to the brutality of that authority. Of the four works, *Coming Together* most vividly conveys the course of a prisoner's voice. Sentence by sentence, Melville's voice comes to us, building ideas and taking on an emotional presence. But it only goes so far; the voice in the piece never consecutively states all eight sentences from Melville's letter and eventually crumbles into repetitive scraps and silence, tellingly with the concluding phrase "the inevitable direction of my life." *Coming Together* suggests that a prisoner's voice never fully emerges from prison. It cannot cross the vast distance between prison and the outside world. The authoritative system that it

<sup>43</sup> For an account of how the text is treated in the work, see Christian Asplund, "Frederic Rzewski and Spontaneous Political Music," *Perspectives of New Music* 33 (1995): 418–41, at 419–21.

challenges and momentarily eludes will eventually stop it, and maybe, as with Melville's voice, even obliterate it.

*Coming Together* captures not only the emergence and suppression of the prisoner's voice but also the authoritative system with which this voice contends. A parallel can be drawn between that system and Rzewski's compositional one, which includes his squaring process as well as the use of retrograde, inversion, and retrograde-inversion procedures. The voice follows the rules of the system and is confined to the space that the system creates. It builds word by word through the additive procedures of squaring, but the process ultimately breaks it apart. The musical space is tightly confined. Every section derives from either the A or the B section. The voice—and the piece—cannot take flight into a new section. There is no escaping the space created by the work, a point made by the retrograde lock between the final and opening measures.

In *Coming Together*, the representation of prison in the work supports a critique of incarceration. Such a critique is part of what Rzewski calls composing works "with political content."<sup>44</sup> He describes two approaches, both practiced in the piece. The first involves the use of pre-existing songs and texts with political associations. Rzewski's celebrated *The People United Will Never Be Defeated!*, for example, draws upon the song "¡El pueblo unido, jamás será vencido!" by Sergio Ortega and Quilapayún that was taken up in the socialist campaigns of Chile in the early 1970s and later in the protests against the Pinochet regime. It and other borrowed songs are "carriers of a symbolic message," making the listener "think of a whole context, a whole social and historical context, in which the tune has meaning."<sup>45</sup> The same goes for texts set by Rzewski such as the Declaration of Independence in *Jefferson*. *Coming Together* builds upon a text that will not be familiar to the majority of listeners, but the mere mention of Attica will bring up a cluster of meanings for many, even decades after the uprising.<sup>46</sup> The second approach involves

<sup>44</sup> Rzewski, *Nonsequiturs*, 234. The topic of how a composer can write music with political significance is one to which Rzewski has returned often. Rich reflections on the topic can be found in a talk that he gave at the University of Wisconsin in April 1983. Rzewski, "Music and Political Ideals," in *Nonsequiturs*, 188–201. For a discussion of Rzewski's approach to writing works with political significance, see Asplund, "Frederic Rzewski and Spontaneous Political Music"; and Gendron, "Rzewski in New York (1971–1977)."

<sup>45</sup> Rzewski, *Nonsequiturs*, 200.

<sup>46</sup> As another composer interested in writing works with political significance, Cornelius Cardew questioned how strong the political impact of *Coming Together* and *Attica* was. Cardew, *Stockhausen Serves Imperialism and Other Articles: With Commentary and Notes* (London: Latimer New Dimensions, 1974), 64–77. Christian Wolff presented *Coming Together* at a seminar he offered at the 1974 Darmstadt Summer Course. For an account of the discussion of the political aspects of the work during the seminar, see Amy C. Beal, "Christian Wolff in Darmstadt, 1972 and 1974," in *Changing the System: The Music of Christian Wolff*, ed. Stephen Chase and Philip Thomas (Farnham, Surrey: Ashgate, 2010), 34–37. Along the lines of reception, it should be mentioned that the Creative Associates, a group devoted to

compositional techniques. As Rzewski observed: “Many of the devices of the new music, although they may have originated as moments of a purely artistic process outside of any topical context, can be used with great effectiveness in order to communicate emotion or to reinforce an idea.”<sup>47</sup> Minimalist idioms and twelve-tone procedures may have been born more out of compositional rather than political inspiration, but the two have served the latter and can be heard as doing so in the evocation of the confining space of prison in *Coming Together*.

Another compositional approach offers a hopeful vision of society to offset the grim depiction of prison. Such is the case with collective music, an idea Rzewski first pursued with the ensemble Musica Elettronica Viva. Collective music breaks down hierarchies of traditional ensembles, particularly those between composer/performer and conductor/performer. Players develop works or performances together through an exchange of ideas. In *Coming Together*, Rzewski still holds the position of composer, but, through score directions, he encourages ensemble members to interact with each other to create new lines.

According to Rzewski, collective music has a larger political relevance:

[Collective music] responds to the increasingly revolutionary spirit of our time: it expresses a state in which masses of people act collectively on a basis of freedom and equality, moving swiftly to make decisions of vital concern to them, doing away with older established conventions where these are not needed, and abolishing the hierarchical and authoritarian relationships which have been imposed upon them from above, where these restrict necessary progress.<sup>48</sup>

With *Coming Together*, the “freedom and equality” in the ensemble take on a new meaning, that of a world without prisons, one that has moved beyond the government authority and social inequalities that came to a head in the Attica uprising. Rzewski notably chose the phrase “coming together” from Melville’s letter for a title. The phrase is one of Melville’s more enigmatic ones, but in the context of the ensemble performance, it suggests people uniting and building upon ideas through collaboration, like the inmates did in the uprising.

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new music based at the SUNY Buffalo Music Department, offered a performance of Rzewski’s *Les Moutons de Panurge* at Attica in 1974. The audience grew restless during the performance, so much so that the ensemble stopped the work. Renée Levine Packer, *This Life of Sounds: Evenings for New Music in Buffalo* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 134–35.

<sup>47</sup> Rzewski, *Nonsequiturs*, 236.

<sup>48</sup> Rzewski, *Nonsequiturs*, 258, 260.

The bleak representation of prison in *Coming Together*, however, dims hopes for “freedom and equality.” The emphasis on suffering is especially crushing. Some sociologists see the administering of pain as the premise of the punishment of criminals through incarceration. According to Nils Christie, “imposing punishment within the institution of law means the inflicting of pain, intended as pain.”<sup>49</sup> Michelle Brown likewise identifies “the infliction of pain” as “the most fundamental feature of punishment.”<sup>50</sup> Neither defines pain, perhaps out of the realization that it, as Elaine Scarry has discussed, “resists” language.<sup>51</sup> Christie instead focuses on “acts intended as punishments” and the “form” those acts take.<sup>52</sup> For sociologist and criminologist Gresham M. Sykes, the pain of incarceration takes the form of five kinds of deprivation: liberty, goods and services, heterosexual relationships, autonomy, and security.<sup>53</sup> These privations result in part from the isolation of prison, which, having removed individuals from the outside world, creates a separate world in which those basic needs are denied. At the same time, the distance erected between prison and the outside world, as Brown argues, “shields” us from the reality of pain.<sup>54</sup> Representations shrink that distance by offering an experience of prison; the experience of pain, however, is typically avoided or minimized. Film and television shows, on the other hand, cater to lurid fantasies of prison, which sensationalize the pain associated with violence and often condone it along with the general suffering of incarceration as the appropriate retribution demanded by society.<sup>55</sup>

Rzewski’s works dealing with prison present pain as part of the harshness of incarceration. The pieces convey both physical pain (the banging of chains in “It Makes a Long Time Man Feel Bad”) and psychological duress (the fugue that goes awry to capture Wilde’s disintegration in *De Profundis*). In *Coming Together*, Rzewski evokes suffering through various means. The Melville letter lists inflictions that fit into Sykes’s categories: “brutality,” “incessant noise,” horrible food, and encounters with disturbed men. The seven repetitions of the list made through the

<sup>49</sup> Nils Christie, *Limits to Pain* (Oxford: Martin Robertson, 1982), 5.

<sup>50</sup> Brown, *The Culture of Punishment*, 9.

<sup>51</sup> Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 3–11.

<sup>52</sup> Christie, *Limits to Pain*, 10.

<sup>53</sup> Gresham M. Sykes, *The Society of Captives: A Study of a Maximum Security Prison* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1958), 63–83.

<sup>54</sup> Brown does acknowledge the pain of victims of crimes, but she sees that pain as part of a “chain” that results from larger problems of poverty and inequalities affecting both perpetrators and victims. Brown, *The Culture of Punishment*, 9.

<sup>55</sup> Brown, *The Culture of Punishment*, 9; and Brown, “Penal Spectatorship and the Culture of Punishment,” 112.

formal scheme of the work convey that the suffering is “incessant” and inescapable. *Coming Together* also suggests the effects of the pain of confinement on Melville through the treatment of his voice. As it progresses through the work, his voice becomes entrapped in a tightening musical space, and the effort to speak inevitably fails, resulting in fewer and fewer words. By the end of the composition, there is little left of the voice.

The depiction of pain is an incisive part of Rzewski’s critique of incarceration. A recognition of pain breaches the ignorance created by the distance between prison and society. For a rare moment, we may not only have an idea of what an inmate endures but we may also form a connection with the incarcerated person through their suffering. Awareness of pain creates knowledge of that which is supposed to remain unknown and forms ties with those who are supposed to be isolated. It poses another challenge; it raises questions. The authority of prison rests upon the premise that it is an institution necessary to protect society from crime and violence. As such, its authority is not to be interrogated. The exposure of pain, though, can make one ask why pain is being inflicted and what it achieves. As Christie argues, punishment poses the question of whether or not pain is “right.” Queries quickly multiply from there: “Was the punishment one where ordinary people—including the victim—took part in all aspects of the decision? Did they take part in the actual execution of the punishment? . . . How much did *everybody* in society know about all the details?”<sup>56</sup> Such a barrage of questions assails the presumed unassailability of prison.

The act of interrogation was essential to Foucault’s groundbreaking work on the power apparatus of prison, which, he claimed, began with three queries: “what is punished and why” and “*how* does one punish?”<sup>57</sup> More questions arose after he visited Attica in 1972, which surprisingly was his first time in a prison. As he shared in an interview about his tour of the facility, only guards and lawyers were allowed to enter French prisons at that time.<sup>58</sup> The visit to Attica confirmed his idea of prison as a “machine” of “exclusion,” of removing people considered to be socially undesirable. The size and efficiency of the machine at Attica surprised him and made him ask what role it played in capitalist society and who benefited from it, questions that anticipated the interrogation

<sup>56</sup> Christie, *Limits to Pain*, 104. Brown takes up Christie’s questions in her discussion of the pain of incarceration. Brown, “Penal Spectatorship and the Culture of Punishment,” 110, emphasis in the original.

<sup>57</sup> Michel Foucault, “Questions of Method,” in *Power*, ed. James D. Faubion and trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Free Press, 2000), 224, italics in the original.

<sup>58</sup> Michel Foucault and John K. Simon, “Michel Foucault on Attica: An Interview,” *Social Justice* 18, no. 3 (Fall 1991): 26–34, at 27–29.

of the multibillion-dollar prison industrial complex.<sup>59</sup> Beyond the capitalistic infrastructure of incarceration, Foucault was struck by the “human and virtually physical horror of what goes on at Attica.” He narrowed in on the pain brought about by separation, which involved “the strange relationship between the periphery and the inner part” of the prison, a relationship that took the form of a “double game of bars.” There are the expected “bars” separating the facility from the outside world and then those isolating the individual cells, which at “about two yards by one and one-half yards” resembled an “animal cage,” a reality that he once again calls “terrifying.” For Foucault, the uprising at Attica did not come as a surprise for, as he saw it, the only way to challenge such cruel conditions was through “collective action, political organization, rebellion.”<sup>60</sup>

Foucault’s vision of the “double game of bars” and the human horror or pain that it created at Attica finds unsettling parallels in *Coming Together*. The succession of eight sections of the exact same length (forty-nine measures) in the work calls to mind the rows of small cells of the same dimensions described and measured by Foucault. To complete “the double game of bars,” the musical sections are organized into a larger structure that closes in on itself, similar to the grid of cells set into a complex that is sealed off from the outside world. The closures within closures in the piece enhance the depiction of pain, as we hear a voice struggle to emerge and then gradually disintegrate and disappear before the locking of the door suggested by the symmetrical link of the final measures. The awareness of pain in *Coming Together* raises the same broad questions that occur in other interrogations of prison: why has pain been inflicted on inmates and to what ends? These questions, of course, also extend to the Attica uprising: what kinds of suffering led to the event and why was such brutality used to crush it? Finally, the depiction of pain stirs us to identify with Melville, to feel his struggle to be heard and acknowledged, and his subsequent agony of being silenced.

Locked cell doors and the infliction of pain constitute one interpretation of *Coming Together*. A focus on incarceration inspires this view. Other interpretations of course arise, even highly contrasting ones. Collective music, to recall, suggests the creation of a space of freedom and collaboration. Such hermeneutical latitude emerges from the clash of supposed opposites—of abstract minimalist idioms and content bearing political associations—explored by Rzewski and other artists of the time.

<sup>59</sup> Among the many writers who have taken up Foucault’s question, see Angela Davis, “Masked Racism: Reflections on the Prison Industrial Complex,” [www.historyisaweapon.com/defcon1/davisprison.html](http://www.historyisaweapon.com/defcon1/davisprison.html); Eric Schlosser, “The Prison-Industrial Complex,” *Atlantic Monthly* (December 1998): 51–77.

<sup>60</sup> Foucault and Simon, “Michel Foucault on Attica,” 28–29.

Consistent with the minimalist aesthetic, works such as *Coming Together* reduce musical elements to basic materials, shapes, or brief melodic lines, which are then foregrounded through repetition or, as described by Steve Reich, a process.<sup>61</sup> Political content would appear to have no quarter in such abstract idioms as the extraneous has already been purged. Moreover, political statements would seem to demand idioms open to, if not already engaged with, the social sphere.

Yet Rzewski and other artists saw minimalist idioms as a way of making political commentary. That commentary, as with *Coming Together*, is open to interpretation. The breadth of views results in part from the tensions between the abstract idioms and political content. Contrasting views come from emphasizing one side over the other or by depicting how one side services the other.

Striking examples of these unions of abstraction and minimalism with political content can be found in works by African American sculptor Melvin Edwards from the 1960s. He escalates the tension between the two through his “sculptural-political combination of thinking.”<sup>62</sup> True to that phrase, his works combine aspects of sculpture—volume, suspension, material—and politics with pieces addressing such topics as lynching (*Lynch Fragments*, 1960s–present), the assassination of Malcolm X (*The Lifted X*, 1965), and the 1965 Watts Riots (*August the Squared Fire*, 1965). Rather than a clash between the sculptural and political, an exchange emerges in which one enhances our thinking of the other.

Edwards’s *Pyramid Up and Down Pyramid* (1969) consists of two pyramids created from wire adjacent to each other, the one, as the title says, going up from floor to ceiling and the other, down from ceiling to floor (fig. 4). The “rigorous conceptual geometry” departs from minimalism.<sup>63</sup> The piece is abstract in the sense that it focuses on a shape and how it occupies the gallery space.<sup>64</sup> But then there is the wire. Edwards constructed the piece from barbed wire, about which he commented: “Wire like most linear materials has a history both as obstacle and enclosure but barbwire has the added capacity of painfully dynamic and aggressive resistance if contacted unintelligently.”<sup>65</sup> The history of barbed wire

<sup>61</sup> Steve Reich, “Music as a Gradual Process,” in Steve Reich and Paul Hillier, *Writings on Music 1965–2000* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 34–35.

<sup>62</sup> Catherine Craft, “Conversations with Melvin Edwards: Extended Version,” Nasher Sculpture Center, [www.nashersculpturecenter.org/art/artists/melvin-edwards-interview?nomo=1](http://www.nashersculpturecenter.org/art/artists/melvin-edwards-interview?nomo=1).

<sup>63</sup> Catherine Craft, “Barbed Abstraction,” *Art in America* 102 (January 2014): 71–75, at 72.

<sup>64</sup> Edwards lists the pyramid as one of the fundamental shapes in cubism. “Melvin Edwards by Michael Brenson,” *BOMB*, November 24, 2014, <https://bombmagazine.org/articles/melvin-edwards/>.

<sup>65</sup> Quoted in Craft, “Barbed Abstraction,” 75.

FIGURE 4. Melvin Edwards, *Pyramid Up and Down Pyramid*, 1969 © Melvin Edwards / SOCAN (2020) Melvin Edwards (b. 1937), *Pyramid Up and Down Pyramid*, 1969, refabricated 2017. Barbed wire. Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; purchased with funds from the Painting and Sculpture Committee 2018.14. Photograph by Ron Amstutz.



intrudes upon the reflections on geometry. Wire, as Edwards mentions, evokes enclosed, guarded spaces, whereas barbed wire materializes the barriers violently keeping people from entering or leaving those spaces. Given the disproportionate imprisonment of African Americans from Reconstruction to today's mass-incarceration crisis, barbed wire, when used by a black artist, evokes the ribbons of wire on prison fences. Incarceration is one of the possible meanings emerging from the work.<sup>66</sup> With that in mind, a compelling comparison with *Coming Together* appears. The sculpture, similar to the musical piece, features two halves (identical in this case) that are in a symmetrical relationship (one side goes up, the other down). And as in Rzewski's work, an exchange develops between

<sup>66</sup> Edwards has mentioned the use of barbed wire in concentration camps in Europe during WWII as well as the death camps built by the Germans in Namibia for the Herero and Namaqua peoples. See "Conversations with Melvin Edwards."

the abstract and political. The wire enhances the abstraction of the sculpture by adding texture to both it and the shadows it casts, whereas the abstraction calls attention to the barbed wire, which stands out against the austere geometry of the work. Put into relief, the wire demands that we consider the cruel uses it has served.

The encounter between minimalist geometry and barbed wire in *Pyramid Up and Down Pyramid* sets off various interpretations. Conceptions of the work can stick to the abstract side and see it to be what the title says it is and nothing more. Other views can emphasize the barbed wire and its political resonances, like incarceration. Or one could keep the two sides in play and understand the piece as both abstract and political. For black artist David Hammons, the back-and-forth between the two makes *Pyramid Up and Down Pyramid* both a revelation and an important work in the history of African American art: "That was the first abstract piece of art that I saw that had cultural value in it for black people. I couldn't believe that piece when I saw it because I didn't think you could make abstract art with a message."<sup>67</sup>

Written around the same time as Edwards's sculpture, Steve Reich's *Come Out* (1966) also inspires different interpretations in part through responses to the combination of the abstract and political. The phasing and multiplication processes in Reich's piece interact with a recording of Daniel Hamm's voice. Hamm was a young African American man assaulted by police while in custody. In the recording, he describes how he manipulated a wound so that blood would "come out" and he would be removed from jail and taken to a hospital. Hamm later became a member of the Harlem Six, a group of young black men falsely charged for the murder of a white shop owner.

Conceptions of the piece, which Reich composed for a benefit that was held for the Harlem Six, turn around the extent to which one hears either the phasing and multiplication processes overtaking the voice, or the voice maintaining its presence and testimony against police violence amid these processes. Recognizing such interpretative breadth, Reich described *Come Out* and other of his works as aural "Rorschach tests." He also referred to *Come Out* as a "political piece."<sup>68</sup> In his study of the work, Sumanth Gopinath admits that it "[requires] a multifaceted interpretation." Among the interpretations that he discusses are evocations of violence, resistance, and paranoia.<sup>69</sup> Gopinath closes his discussion of *Come Out* by placing it alongside *Coming Together* and *Attica*. He sees the

<sup>67</sup> Quoted in Craft, "Barbed Abstraction," 71.

<sup>68</sup> Cited in Sumanth Gopinath, "The Problem of the Political in Steve Reich's *Come Out*," in *Sound Commitments: Avant-garde Music and the Sixties*, ed. Robert Adlington (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 121–44, at 123.

<sup>69</sup> Gopinath, "The Problem of the Political in Steve Reich's *Come Out*," 134–40.

works as helping “to provide a historical understanding of incarceration in the United States today.” The police violence and brutal treatment of prisoners captured in those pieces fall along the path leading to the rise of the prison industrial complex and mass incarceration.<sup>70</sup>

The encounter between the abstract and political in *Coming Together* similarly produces a Rorschach test. One interpretation could emphasize the structure of the work and see the voice as adhering to that structure through the addition/subtractions procedures that it follows. Or the propulsion of the bass line created through additive schemes could be heard as building an intensity that stirs listeners to unite in a fight against the injustices suffered by Melville and other prisoners. Incarceration is always present in *Coming Together*, textually and historically. The topic, though, does not have to eclipse the abstract idioms. The elaborate formal schemes of the work can be understood both on their own and within the context of incarceration. Indeed, the formal procedures of *Coming Together* add to our knowledge of incarceration by evoking the endless processes of enclosure and separation that sustain its institutions.

The range of interpretative possibilities extends to the different approaches taken to the work by performers. Just as with critical conceptions, performances of *Coming Together* vary widely, especially when it comes to the intensity of the speaker’s part. In a 2016 concert with the New Music Ensemble of the San Francisco Conservatory, prisoners’ rights activist Angela Davis maintains calm throughout the work.<sup>71</sup> Most performers begin at a calm point but grow more impassioned, as is the case with the first recording of the work with Steven Ben Israel as speaker and Rzewski on piano.<sup>72</sup> Two performances by Eighth Blackbird build emotional crescendos. Their 2005 recording has ensemble members scream out phrases from Melville’s letter while speaker Matt Albert grows more and more frantic.<sup>73</sup> Similarly, in a 2016 Chicago performance, singer/songwriter Will Oldham becomes increasingly agitated and rages.<sup>74</sup> Julius Eastman, in contrast, whose performance of the part of the speaker at a 1974 new music concert in Buffalo is captured in an archival recording, constantly changes mood, measured sometimes and then moving from eerie quiet to anguish.<sup>75</sup> Performers’ interpretations influence how

<sup>70</sup> Gopinath, “The Problem of the Political in Steve Reich’s *Come Out*,” 139–40.

<sup>71</sup> The performance took place on November 6, 2016, and was led by Alan Pierson. [www.youtube.com/watch?v=S2GquuyvHto](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S2GquuyvHto).

<sup>72</sup> Rzewski, *Attica / Coming Together / Les Moutons de Panurge* (Opus One, no. 20, 1974).

<sup>73</sup> Eighth Blackbird, *Fred* (Cedille Records CDR 90000 084, 2005).

<sup>74</sup> <https://vimeo.com/177577807>.

<sup>75</sup> The performance with Eastman was on March 31, 1974, part of the Evenings for New Music series. University at Buffalo Institutional Repository, Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo, NY, 1972. I would like to thank the Music Library of the State University of New York at Buffalo for making this recording available.

listeners experience *Coming Together*. The calmer renditions draw attention to the intricacy and dynamism of the ensemble music. Frenzied moments, on the other hand, bring out the pain of incarceration, suggesting an individual crying out in the face of hopelessness.

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After the dramatic and evocative conclusion of *Coming Together*, it seems nothing could, or should, follow the work. Yet Rzewski wrote a postlude, *Attica*, perhaps because *Coming Together* is so grim. The two “form a pair of dark and light images of the same subject.”<sup>76</sup> Set in a major key and full of gently rocking rhythms, *Attica* counters—as much as a six-minute piece can—the brunt of *Coming Together*. It also holds out what the larger piece crushed: the promise of release.

*Attica* begins at a moment of release, when Richard X. Clark walked out of the prison in February 1972. Asked by Joseph Lelyveld, the reporter who was waiting for him and drove away with him, what it felt like to leave the facility “behind him,” Clark replied: “Attica is in front of me.”<sup>77</sup> Rzewski uses this single line as the text of the piece. The line conveys how Clark was bound to Attica by both fear and devotion to fellow prisoners. He dreaded that his freedom would be short-lived and that he might be arrested for his role in the uprising “maybe next week, maybe even tomorrow.”<sup>78</sup> Clark also vowed “to be an extension of the brothers’ voice on the outside,” which he did with numerous interviews after being released, a 1973 book, and a lifetime of speaking about the government crackdown and prisoners’ rights.<sup>79</sup>

Although poised as opposites, the two works follow similar construction principles. *Attica* is based on a related pitch collection to that used in *Coming Together*, now with six pitches and cast in B-flat major rather than the G minor of the first piece (ex. 4a). As with the earlier composition, it stretches the collection across a seven-note figure, which is likewise presented in a twenty-eight-note triangular structure (ex. 4b and fig. 5). Both works rest upon a bass part, a drone in *Attica* instead of the driving bass line in *Coming Together*. The drone adds to the sense of peacefulness in *Attica*. There is also a collective

<sup>76</sup> Rzewski, *Nonsequiturs*, 450.

<sup>77</sup> Joseph Lelyveld, “First of Attica Uprising Leaders Is Released, but He Fears Arrest at Any Time,” *New York Times*, February 9, 1972.

<sup>78</sup> Lelyveld, “First of Attica Uprising Leaders Is Released.”

<sup>79</sup> Lelyveld, “First of Attica Uprising Leaders Is Released”; and Clark, *The Brothers of Attica*. For an interview about Attica done by Clark a year before his death, see “Richard X. Clark,” *The HistoryMakers*, August 12, 2014, [www.thehistorymakers.org/biography/richard-x-clark](http://www.thehistorymakers.org/biography/richard-x-clark).

EXAMPLE 4A. Pitch collection in *Attica*.EXAMPLE 4B. Seven-note string in *Attica*.

ideal in the performance of the work. Some of the instruments play melodic parts composed by Rzewski around which others improvise. The addition and subtraction of squaring used in *Coming Together* shape *Attica*, which consists of four sections (A–D) following the rigors of squaring (fig. 6). Each section is stated four times, for a total squared figure of sixteen statements of all the sections. Moreover, the sections all contain forty-nine beats (the square of the seven-note melody and comparable to the forty-nine-measure sections in *Coming Together*), which, with the sixteen total statements, create a total of 784 beats, the square of the twenty-eight-note melody.<sup>80</sup> Across the four sections, the melodic lines gradually grow longer, consisting of three pitches in the A section and six of the seven-note string in the C and D sections. Unlike in *Coming Together*, the complete string is never stated in a single section. The text, which can be both spoken and sung, gradually builds and recedes as in *Coming Together*; this time, however, the full text is stated (fig. 7).

In contrast to *Coming Together*, *Attica* breaks away from the governing logic in its concluding moments. At the end of the final D section, the last note in the melody is sustained with a fermata. That note is a C, which functions as part of an unresolved dominant chord. So whereas *Coming Together* closes decisively through retrograde, *Attica* has a suspended ending. As with the retrograde, the unresolved chord welcomes interpretation. It might suggest the uncertainties facing the just-released Clark. Or it could, as with Melville in *Coming Together*, keep him imprisoned, not physically but psychologically. Just as the chord cannot move forward and close, Clark too seems to be unable to move beyond *Attica*. Tied there by trauma and his commitment to an ongoing fight for justice, *Attica* is

<sup>80</sup> The total number of beats for four individual sections is 196 beats (49×4). The piece consists of 196 bars, or 197 if one views the closing fermata as a measure (as Rzewski notates and numbers it).

FIGURE 5. Triangular 28-note shape in *Attica*.

G  
F F  
E♭ E♭ E♭  
D D D D  
C C C C C  
B♭ B♭ B♭ B♭ B♭ B♭  
F F F F F F F

FIGURE 6. Sectional form of *Attica*.

A  
AB  
ABC  
ABCD  
BCD  
CD  
D

FIGURE 7. Presentation of text in *Attica*.

Attica  
Attica is  
Attica is in  
Attica is in front  
Attica is in front of  
Attica is in front of me  
is in front of me  
in front of me  
front of me  
of me  
me

always before him. Through the suspended ending, *Attica* keeps Clark trapped in a scene of pain. He cannot escape memories and fears of the prison and, once again like Melville, his attempts to express his fears crumble word by word until he has no voice.

\* \* \*

One striking feature of *Coming Together* and *Attica* alike is how quickly and forcefully they responded to the Attica uprising.<sup>81</sup> Decades later, how strongly do they speak and what do they have to say? Composer David T. Little sees the works remaining artistically and politically relevant. Little writes what he calls “critical music,” that is, works that aim “to observe, illuminate, and critique a particular aspect of society.”<sup>82</sup> Among the social and political topics that he has turned his attention to are protests against war (*Dog Days*, 2012; and *Soldier Songs*, 2006/11), the “addiction” to oil (*sweet light crude*, 2007), and the El Mozote massacre during the Salvadoran Civil War in 1981 (*Haunt of Last Nightfall*, 2010).

In composing such works, Little has been “spurred on” by the idea of what Rzewski called the “effective combination” of art and politics.<sup>83</sup> *Coming Together* and *Attica* have inspired him with “their particular approach to the questions/problems of music and politics.”<sup>84</sup> He describes two approaches in Rzewski’s and other politically engaged pieces. The first is the “politics of bearing witness,” “a type of arts activism that engages in documentation with an ear toward counter-memory.” Counter-memory resists how quickly past events and figures fade away in public consciousness by stating: “Yes, this happened,” or “This person lived, and did great work, and you, listener, should acknowledge that fact.”<sup>85</sup> *Coming Together* and *Attica* testified to the uprising, and they continue to do so today for listeners who may have little or no knowledge of the event, as was the case with Little when he first heard *Coming Together* in 2000 at a summer music festival. The piece prodded him to learn more about the riot, the kind of instigation that is, as he puts it, “incredibly effective politically.”<sup>86</sup> His research into Rzewski’s work and the uprising constitute a second approach to art and politics: that of functioning as “starting points” for further reflection on the political developments and ideas that a piece engages.<sup>87</sup> *Coming Together* and *Attica*, for example, led Little to face “the emotional and psychological effects of imprisonment.”<sup>88</sup> His ensemble Newspeak has performed the works several

<sup>81</sup> There were other musical works written shortly after the uprising, including Archie Shepp’s “Attica Blues,” John Lennon and Yoko Ono’s “Attica State,” and Tom Paxton’s “The Hostage.”

<sup>82</sup> David T. Little, “Until the Next Revolution,” *New York Times*, May 18, 2011.

<sup>83</sup> Rzewski, *Nonsequiturs*, 192; and Little, “Until the Next Revolution.”

<sup>84</sup> Lynne DeSilva-Johnson, “Coming Together / Attica: A Collaborative [Re: Con]-versation with Choreographer Rebecca Lazier and Composer / Musical Director David T. Little,” *The Operating System*, June 13, 2013, [www.theoperatingsystem.org/coming-together-attica-a-collaborative-reconversation-with-choreographer-rebecca-lazier-and-composer-musical-director-david-t-little/](http://www.theoperatingsystem.org/coming-together-attica-a-collaborative-reconversation-with-choreographer-rebecca-lazier-and-composer-musical-director-david-t-little/).

<sup>85</sup> Little, “Until the Next Revolution.”

<sup>86</sup> DeSilva-Johnson, “Coming Together / Attica.”

<sup>87</sup> DeSilva-Johnson, “Coming Together / Attica.”

<sup>88</sup> Little, “Until the Next Revolution.”

times, with choreography by Rebecca Lazier. The two pieces, as she shared, “brought new perspectives to my experience of isolation and confinement.”<sup>89</sup>

\* \* \*

That Rzewski wrote four works dealing with prison provides a closing context in which to view *Coming Together* and *Attica*. The four join other pieces that confront the toll of incarceration in American society, works stretching across periods and genres: early twentieth-century blues, midcentury country songs, and hip hop. These works may be diverse, but they challenge incarceration through tactics similar to *Coming Together* and *Attica*. At the same time, this larger pool of works brings out the distinct ways in which Rzewski’s pieces employ those strategies.

The challenges to incarceration made by these works begin with bridging the experiential distance between listeners and prison. *Coming Together*, *Attica*, and other pieces overcome that distance through the use of prisoners’ voices, either real-life ones like Melville’s and Clark’s or fictional ones. The use of those voices to confront incarceration raises questions. What is the voice telling us? In *Coming Together*, Melville describes suffering. Along similar lines, Sara Martin’s “Georgia Stockade Blues” (1925) captures the ordeal of work in a labor camp, “all that pain” from “chippin’ boxes” with “both legs shackled to a ball and chain.” How does the voice engage listeners? The disintegration of Melville’s voice unnerves listeners. The mellifluous voices of such country singers as Merle Haggard and George Jones performing “Green, Green Grass of Home” (1968) draw listeners into a prisoner’s dream about returning home to his family only to be ripped out of the fantasy when the prisoner awakens and is escorted to his execution. In “Prisoner 1 & 2” (2015), Lupe Fiasco gives us the voice of two prisoners and a guard. Through his driving rap delivery, he riles listeners by describing how incarcerated individuals are reduced to “a number and release date.” A verse read by his sister Ayesha Jaco evokes the Ku Klux Klan and menacing symbol of the “noose” to reveal the “new Jim Crow,” that is, the disproportionate imprisonment of African Americans fueling mass incarceration.<sup>90</sup>

Rzewski’s works raise a question not often posed by this group of pieces: what happens to the prisoner’s voice? *Coming Together* entraps Melville’s voice in a rigorous system that breaks it down to silence.

<sup>89</sup> DeSilva-Johnson, “Coming Together/Attica.”

<sup>90</sup> The phrase can also be heard as a reference to Michelle Alexander’s groundbreaking study on mass incarceration. Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (New York: New Press, 2010).

Silence may be the fate of his voice in the work, but it is through *Coming Together* that Melville's voice rings forcefully today. The piece is one of the composer's most frequently performed works. It captivates audiences with the drama of Melville steeling himself against the harshness of prison only to succumb to it, both in real life and in the formal design of the work. Audiences may also respond to the stand against incarceration made through the use of Melville's voice. Written months after the uprising, the piece protests the brutality of the government crackdown through the testimony of a man who died in the raid, even if his testimony precedes the Attica uprising. Decades later, Melville's voice and *Coming Together* can still be heard fighting against the cruelties of incarceration. Rzewski's setting of Melville's ordeals in the criminal justice system resonates with pieces pitted in the most recent campaign against incarceration. This battle does not focus on the events at a single prison, as with *Coming Together*, but rather on the relentless spread of the institution of prison with the rise of the prison industrial complex and mass incarceration after the Attica uprising. Through those developments, the suffering experienced by Melville, Clark, and other men in Attica has mercilessly spread as well. As hip hop artist Napoleon Da Legend puts it in his bluntly titled "Mass Incarceration" (2016): "two million of us sitting in jail, what they selling us is lies; where's heaven when you're living in hell?"

*APPENDIX: Melodic Schemes in the A and B Sections of Coming Together*

**A section**

mm. 1–26: Gradual buildup of the sequence 1 (m. 1), 1–2 (m. 1), 1–2–3 (m. 2), 1–2–3–4 (m. 4), 1–2–3–4–5 (m. 9), 1–2–3–4–5–6 (m. 15), 1–2–3–4–5–6–7 (m. 26).

mm. 26–49: Removal of the individual units from the complete sequence. Removal of 1 (m. 26), 1–2 (mm. 28–29), 1–2–3 (mm. 31–34), 1–2–3–4 (mm. 35–39), 1–2–3–4–5 (mm. 40–44), 1–2–3–4–5–6 (45–48), 1–2–3–4–5–6–7 (quickly reduced in mm. 48–49).

**B section**

mm. 50–51: A quick buildup to 1–7 (a response to the subtraction in mm. 48–49).

mm. 52–55/56: Alternation between a complete statement of the 1–7 string with a buildup of the 1–2–3–4–5–6–7 string.

mm. 56–61: Dovetailing of two processes. Buildup of strings (1, 1–2, 1–3, 1–4, 1–5) with each additional unit followed by a subtraction sequence (1–7, 1–6).

mm. 61–67: Buildup of strings (1, 1–2, 1–3, 1–4) with each additional unit followed by a subtraction sequence (1–7, 1–6, 1–5).

mm. 67–71: Buildup of string (1, 1–2, 1–3) with each additional unit followed by a subtraction sequence (1–7, 1–6, 1–5, 1–4).

mm. 71–77: The buildup involves 1 (m. 71) and 1–2 (m. 73), which are followed by a subtraction sequence (1–7, 1–6, 1–5, 1–4, 1–3).

mm. 75–77: Complete statement of the subtraction sequence.

mm. 77–84: Simultaneous subtraction schemes. The 1–7 string is broken down. It now begins on 3 with the following subtraction sequence 3–7, 4–7, 5–7, 6–7, 7, each unit of which is followed by the sequence 1–6, 1–5, 1–4, 1–3, 1–2, 1.

mm. 84–86: Statement of 1–6 to 1–2 strings.

mm. 87–93: The 3–6 string is broken down (4–6, 5–6, 6) with each unit followed by the sequence 1–5, 1–4, 1–3, 1–2, 1.

mm. 93–96: The 3–5 string is broken down (3–5, 4–5, 5) with each unit followed by the sequence 1–4, 1–3, 1–2, 1.

mm. 96–98: The 3–4 string is broken down (3–4, 4) with each unit followed by the sequence 1–3, 1–2, 1.

mm. 98: Pitch 3 followed by the strings 1–2, 1 and then pitch 2 followed by 1–2, 1 and then pitch 1 followed by 1.

### ABSTRACT

Frederic Rzewski composed *Coming Together* and *Attica* in response to the 1971 uprising at the Attica Correctional Facility. The texts for the works draw upon testimonies of two men who participated in the riot: Samuel Melville and Richard X. Clark, respectively. Rzewski condemns the government crackdown on the uprising through representations of both prisoners and prison. In these and other works, the prisoner is a figure of suffering. Both Melville and Clark suffer through efforts to raise a voice about the hardships of incarceration only to have that voice break apart into fragments and silence. Prison emerges as a space of increasing confinement, conveyed by rigorous compositional schemes

that tightly link individual sections and close them off in a larger sealed structure. The musical evocation of confinement along with the expression of psychological distress in the texts creates scenes of suffering. Through these scenes, Rzewski brings out the infliction of pain that scholars have viewed as a fundamental aspect of incarceration. The interaction between the critiques of incarceration and the compositional schemes in *Coming Together* and *Attica* is an example of how artists at the time (Steve Reich and sculptor Melvin Edwards) drew upon abstract idioms and materials in works that comment on contemporary political developments.

Keywords: Rzewski, incarceration, pain, minimalism, politics