

Notes from the composer on *Four Places in New York*

Each of the *Four Places in New York* is a musical evocation of the sights, sounds, smells and feelings of one of these special places. There is also a subtle homage to Charles Ives's *Three Places in New England* via not only the title, but also by utilization of some of his unique musical techniques, primarily in the third movement.

The Belltower at Riverside Church, a tranquil, spiritual hideaway on the Upper West Side, was a place I visited on my first trip to New York. I have never forgotten it, although going there has become increasingly more difficult (the bells seem to be perpetually under construction). For me, the music describes an emotional voyage, perhaps of someone who came there for solace, which becomes quite tumultuous towards the middle.

Christopher Street has been the heart of Greenwich Village for as long as anyone can remember. And as far as I know, it has always been full of multiple collisions of contrasting places and people which somehow manage to coexist in relative peace (a metaphor for the City as a whole?): a jazz club here, a French bistro there, a cabaret bar with songs spilling into the street, roving youth from the Bronx with boom-boxes, partying teenagers from outside the city (driving SUVs) ogling downtown hipsters who wish they would just go back to where they came from! Not to mention endless traffic all trying to go *somewhere* down narrow, tree-lined streets overrun by pedestrians who could care less. Hopefully, a bit of all of this comes across in the music, heightened by some subtle cabaret quotation near the end of the movement.

September 14, 2001 is a day I, and many others, will not forget. At 7 p.m. on the Friday following the day no American will ever forget, millions of New Yorkers lit candles in commemoration of those who had died on September 11, and thousands of them converged on Union Square, which had already become a focal-point and makeshift memorial. Following a long period of silence, a lone trumpeter began to play the *The Star-Spangled Banner*, followed by *When the Saints Go Marching In* and *America*. The effect of hearing this music emerging out of the communal silence, which inspired everyone to join in singing, was mesmerizing. This is evoked in music by a fugue-like crab cannon, in which the outer sections of the movement are melodic mirror images of each other, based on the National Anthem. The middle section is an ethereal variation on *Saints*, juxtaposed with *America*, which gradually emerges from the haze. The lone trumpeter is heard again at the very end.

Driving down Henry Hudson Parkway, otherwise known as the Westside Highway, who can resist the grandeur of the George Washington Bridge—especially at night when it is illuminated by thousands of glimmering lights? Even now, the sight of it elicits a gasp of pleasure. The bridge, one of the largest in the world, has been patiently carrying people in and out of New York since 1931. On special occasions, it also becomes home to the world's largest free-flying American flag. This is the longest and most virtuosic movement, which will perhaps leave the listener with thoughts and impressions of this grand gateway to the greatest city in the world.

Originally for solo piano, Pascal Rogé requested a four-hand version that he and his wonderful wife, the pianist Ami Hakuno, can play together. In creating the arrangement, I discovered that many sections unfolded in new ways and had to be re-written. Thus, the four-hand version has become a separate work of its own.

-Drew Hemenger