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New York - Starting in October, New York freelance instrumental musicians will be making more than mad dashes to the next gig. They'll be helping to bring the joys of playing musical instruments to children living in homeless shelters.

The program, which is sponsored by the Coalition for the Homeless, Meet the Composer, and the Police Athletic League, is due mainly to one man's dream. The man is composer Kevin James. And his dream is The Portraits Project.

Portraits is a large-scale musical work that gives a voice and an overall picture of the face of homelessness in New York City through a concert experience combining music, video and audio tape. The 90 minute piece, which will feature a variety of soloists and chamber ensembles, will be premiered in New York at the renowned multi-media center, The Kitchen in Spring of 2001.

Kevin James was recently selected for the Meet the Composer New Residencies program, an award of highly competitive and prestigious grants from the American Composer's Forum Composer's Commissioning Program and the Jerome Foundation.

The program to give instrumental music lessons to children living in New York homeless shelters came about as a direct result of having been chosen for the Meet the Composer/New Residencies Program.

"One of the requirements of the residency is that we develop programs such as this in concert with our resident partners," said James. "In this case we had originally planned to create a similar program on behalf of the adult constituency of Coalition for the Homeless and simply work with the kids at their summer camp, Camp Homeward Bound. But it turned out that the Coalition was doing some reorganizing and wanted to be able to provide year-round services to kids. So the folks there asked me if I would turn my efforts to creating an ongoing program that could become the centerpiece of their year-round youth services to kids. I had already been in touch with Police Athletic League in terms of setting up informative concerts for their kids, and since they have facilities, the Coalition has access to the kids who are most at risk in the city, and I have access to musicians, we've been able to combine our efforts in an extremely unusual partnership that's a win-win situation for everyone involved."

Kevin James was born in East Lansing, Michigan, and raised in and around Philadelphia, going to Haverford High. He finished high school in suburban Chicago at Glenbard West High School. James received his Bachelors of Music degree in Performance as well as a Bachelors of Art degree in philosophy and religion from Depauw University. He earned a Master of Music degree in Performance at Brooklyn College.

Usually when we think of a classical composer, we envision someone who is mainly a pianist -- but you're a trombone player.

My playing trombone was the result of collusion between my elementary school band teacher and my mother, for which I'm grateful (I won't even mention what instrument I thought I was getting when I came to school on the day they arrived, but when they handed me a trombone I initially said no, this isn't what I asked for. To that the band director showed me my mother's

signature on the sign up sheet and the rest is history). At that point, I should note, I had already been studying classical guitar and had very clear intentions of being a musician for life.

When did you start composing music, and what is it about composing that is attractive to you?

I suppose I began attempting to compose early in high school, and dabbled in it throughout college, studying with David Ott at Depauw and Robert Starer at Brooklyn. And although I always got a lot of encouragement from them, nobody with any sense of conscience tells you to become a "composer". So it wasn't until I was fairly successful with my playing and I began to have musicians asking me to write pieces for them that I took composing seriously as a career option. It's hard to express what's attractive about composing as it applies to being a professional with ongoing deadlines. George Crumb (a personal hero) describes the process of composing like walking into a dark room with a very clear idea of where all the furniture and obstacles are located, only to find that it's not even the room you thought it was and having to grope your way along until you reach a light switch on the far wall. Generally you end up on your knees and it's not until you've covered every inch of the room in the dark that you find the light. It can be wrenchingly difficult and I find it all very humbling, but the satisfaction of doing it well, and the possibility even of occasionally stumbling onto something innovative really is quite thrilling.

What inspired you to begin The Portraits Project?

The Portraits Project is the result of the coming together of so many experiences, feelings, thought processes and far flung opportunities that it would be impossible to convey my debt to providence, but the simple answer is that I was very interested in creating a piece using "environmental" sounds (perhaps a down and dirty Messian or something) and was thinking a great deal about various possibilities for that type of project at the same time that I was asked to write a solo piece for flute using tape and having some sort of social context to it. It was a time in my life in which many of my more intense personal experiences were beginning to come full circle (including but not limited to experiences I'd had with the homeless), so I decided to explore the possibility of story telling on tape that used the voice of the story tellers themselves. However the more I explored the more I came to the conclusion that this wasn't a simple 8 minute flute piece and my ideas began to snowball.

One experience that was key to my approach to this was my first night living in New York. I lived my first few months at 8th Ave. & 48th St. which in the early 80's was a fairly rough drugs and prostitution corner. I was in New York on a student program and I arrived in the evening a day before any of the other students. As I went up the step to the brownstone where I'd be living I had to step over a man who was semi-conscious and getting sick on the landing. I had a terrible almost sleepless night, mostly due to the fact that there were no window-shades and there was a street light several feet from my window and the business activity in front of the house was at it's busiest from about 1 - 4am. So I got up very early the next morning and headed out in search of food, but as I walked out the door I was greeted by the police who were just bagging up the man from the night before. He had died in the night and they wanted to know if I had any idea who he was. It's likely that he was never identified and nobody outside of city officials ever knew that he was dead.

Specifically, when did you begin work on this project?

I had the idea for the project about 5 years ago, but didn't really get into the dirty work until about a year later. As it exists now it is a nine movement work. However I do expect to do quite a bit more revision and am currently assembling a creative team to "gel" it into a more complete theatrical experience (don't ask me to define that).

Several of the movements that you've already finished have already had performances outside of the production. Why did you choose to premiere portions of the piece before the premiere of the entire work?

This is a massive and massively complex piece and I frankly need to experiment with putting it in front of audiences as much as possible. It has always been the design of the piece to be able to make the individual movements stand alone and I certainly hope that they each have a performance life outside of full productions. It can be awfully nerve racking trying to make production decisions on movements I've never heard played in front of an audience. It's also a great way to develop a following for the piece.

Of interest to brass players will be the fact that three movements, Midnight-Avenue A, Mother Theresa, and Connie, Kaity, Dan & Don, are appropriate for various types of brass chamber groups (including brass quintet).

What has audience reaction been like?

Audience reaction has been mostly strong and favorable - this is a difficult piece for audiences on a lot of levels. We're not used to listening so intently and it's disturbing for some people not to see the faces of the people they hear talking on the tape. Most audiences have never heard anything like it before and can't prepare for the experiential nature of it. So it's a very intense experience, but by the same token it's extremely engaging. I actually have something like 50 responses between e-mail and letters from people who have attended. I think that speaks for itself.

Over a period of 14 months, you conducted more than 700 interviews with homeless people living on the streets of New York for this piece. Did you realize at the onset that this was going to be such a massive undertaking?

Yes, absolutely and no, not even close. I think I was pretty realistic at each stage in the process, but the project has been growing since the day of inception and it hasn't stopped even now. So what was realistic yesterday is no longer valid and what's realistic today won't be valid tomorrow- Look at the mentorship program. It wasn't even on the screen until I was nearly three years in. At this point it has the potential to become a city-wide model for volunteer-based high quality education programs.

How did you feel approaching your first interviewees?

Nervous and excited and thrilled to be starting the process.

Did you find, overall, that most people were reticent to talk to you at first, then eventually warmed up? Or were they eager to talk straight away?

Most homeless people have been hurt or taken advantage of and of course are suspicious, but in general I had no problem getting quality interviews. There were some who wouldn't talk to me and only very occasionally someone who was hostile. But it is the sad fact that it was not difficult find people who were willing to talk to me. I should emphasize that this is in part due to the fact that I was extremely honest and up front with everyone as to exactly what I was doing and why and how I would use it. That said, there were certainly people who took convincing and there were people who were anxious to tell their story and every shade and variation in between.

Can you describe the living conditions of the people you interviewed?

You name it. I did try to limit my "sampling" to those who were actually actively sleeping on the streets. There are several levels of homelessness, including those drifting from friends to relatives, those living in shelters, those living in SRO's and hotels who, because of a bizarre New York state law limiting length of stay, are on the streets three days a month, those living in abandoned buildings. Anyway, living conditions could be anything from a wood shanty made from construction site leftovers with electricity from a nearby streetlight and quasi-running water from a fire hydrant right down to sleeping on subway grates, cardboard pallets and much, much worse. There was a reasonable number of people who were not recognizable as homeless to the general public because they are so meticulous about hygiene and cleanliness, and there are just as

many with serious health problems due to the profusion of dirt on their skin. It really is impossible to generalize. It ranges from better than anyone would imagine to worse than anyone could imagine.

What kind of emotional experience was this for you, knowing that you'd be heading to a home at night, and they wouldn't?

That was a very difficult part of the process. I tried hard to have a journalistic sense of detachment, but I have to admit that I may have taken many more risks (emotional and otherwise) were I not recently married when I began the process. That notwithstanding, it was also hard to balance my objectives with the desire to do something immediate for the people I was interviewing. I usually did about 4 hours of interviewing at a time, and it was hardest at the end - when I ran out of batteries or tape or energy and said good-bye to last person and headed to the subway or back to my car. It's a poignant and ascerbic emotion that's hard to describe, but prior to that I was always completely immersed in what I was doing and not really aware of other realities. But, especially on cold nights or in the rain, it was quite a jarring rush of... i don't know... irony, reality, paradox -- to sit down somewhere warm and dry without fear of harassment. It's hard to imagine the level of stress that is present in these people's lives on a moment by moment basis.

What stage of the project are you in now? Writing music? Editing taped material? Are you working on this piece exclusively, or are you working on other commissions simultaneously?

I've now finished all of the music for the piece but continue to revise. Some of the movements will get only minor revision at this point, others will go through several more incarnations. The tape material is pretty complete, but technology continues to improve at an amazing rate, so I'll return to some of that material mostly for the sake of improving the sound quality and fidelity. Like I mentioned, I'm also beginning to assemble a creative team to work on the theatrical aspects (director, choreographer, videographer). It's possible that my work with those people will inspire me to go deeper in my revisions or to add material. I have no way of knowing, but am looking forward to fresh perspectives.

I am working on other commissions, including a woodwind quintet with narrator, a string quartet, and a dance theater piece in collaboration with a choreographer (Henning Rubsam and SenseDance) and playwright (Florence Weintraub).

What do you hope will be the results of The Portraits Project?

Well - I want to see the piece performed. I'd like to see it tour and expect it to be commercially recorded, perhaps with a video release. I hope to capture a moment in our history, to create a unique and effective piece of art, to increase public awareness, embarrassment, outrage. I hope that people who see the show will come away with a sense of the humanity of people who live on the street, a sense of the complexity of the issue, perhaps the ability not to define those people by their condition. I have a personal vision that goes far beyond this, but art's revolutions tend to be slow and solitary, so I won't pin my societal hopes on my artistic fervor. But I do hope to touch some kids lives and to use music and musicians to create a model for reaching those kids.

What have you gained, personally, from working on this project?

I've been asked this before and still don't know how to answer. It has made me a grown-up. But I don't know if I consider that something gained or something lost.