

March 14, 2000

Homeless Music Finds Home At New York's The Kitchen

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Kevin James

On Thursday (March 9), at New York's The Kitchen performance space, an evening-length new work in seven movements by young American composer Kevin James, *Portraits*, had its world premiere.

Based on the composer's taped interviews with 700

homeless Manhattanites, the work interweaves constant talking by the downtrodden poor with accompaniment written for the Meridian Arts Ensemble, a noted brass group, and the Sirius String Quartet, among other soloists.

James, a student of such renowned composers as David Del Tredici and John Harbison, wrote the new work as part of a three-year residency sponsored by the organization, Meet the Composer. Other young composers were assigned projects in neighborhoods from Watts to Chicago's South Side. James, although Michigan-born, has been a New Yorker for 15 years. He explains that the subject of homeless people became of concern his very first night in New York City, when a homeless man died on his Hell's Kitchen doorstep overnight: "When I came out in the morning, the police were bagging him up."

His work is inventively written for an ensemble including bamboo flute, which achieves a mournful sound, and "coin cup shakers" that echo the sound panhandlers make to attract attention. The speech of the homeless includes lucidity, raving, and numbingly repetitive begging formulas. In one particularly artful movement, the Sirius String Quartet plays spare melodies in the style of Webern and Luigi Nono as the recorded voice of a homeless man boasts with tragicomedy: "I'm kicking like a one-legged Rockette."

In no way an exploitation of human misery, the work contains bows to John Cage and concrete music, with brass writing to evoke incessant traffic noise. Like the old French theater genre of "melodrame" or music accompanying emotional speech, James' work frames and enhances the strongly rhythmic, loud, and distinct voices whose sing-song intonations make them all the more audible on the streets. Snatches of the old gospel song, "Sometimes I Feel Like a Motherless Child," work as a leitmotif, holding the work together. Not content with his already-impressive achievement, James is adding two more movements to the work, planning on a complete performance in spring 2002.

—Benjamin Ivry