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Composer makes musical meal of favorite diners

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By Ronni Reich



Robert Sirota hangs out at the Miss Florence Diner in Northampton, Mass.

“Have you ever seen ‘Zorba the Greek,’ seen how the men dance?”

At Robert Sirota’s question, the four men playing saxophones in the basement of Montclair State University’s Cali School of Music on Monday night confer among themselves. The music needs to be freer, sexier and above all, more evocative of the subject at hand — the Neptune Diner in Astoria, Queens.

With “Diners,” Sirota has composed a musical reminiscence of road trips, neon lights and all the bustle and charm of his favorite places to stop for coffee and eggs. The New Hudson Saxophone Quartet, including Montclair State faculty member Paul Cohen, will premiere the work Friday in a concert that also includes works by Copland, Sauter and Morril.

“Everything doesn’t have to be ‘Tristan and Isolde,’” says Sirota, who is president of the Manhattan School of Music and a member of the school’s composition faculty. “Every once in a while, you want to write something that’s just fun.”

“I hope it has integrity, but the truth is, this is not an unimportant part of my life.”

For the past 10 years, Sirota had toyed with the idea of paying tribute to places like the Miss Florence in Northampton, Mass., and Moody’s in Waldboro, Maine. When Cohen approached him about writing a piece for the quartet, he knew he had found his chance.

“I’ve always heard saxophones as being identifiable with diners,” Sirota says. “I think it’s because it’s kind of a proletarian instrument and has this metallic quality and complexity of sound — and it kind of looks like it could be attached to a diner somehow.”

While the curving brass of the instruments can, at least on suggestion, call to mind a winding chrome exterior or swirling fluorescent sign, Sirota thought about much more than architecture and food when writing the piece.

“They’re these kind of self-contained communities,” he says. “I always feel safe when I walk into a diner, like somebody’s going to take care of me.”

Each of the three diners within the five-movement piece has a special resonance for Sirota. A pastorale representing Moody’s is what the composer calls his version of “The Alcotts” movement from Charles Ives’ “Concord” Sonata. The diner, run by the same family since the 1920s, is “a semi-shrine” for Sirota and his family.

The Miss Florence, recreated by a movement that swings and slinks, takes a retro-cool vibe to recall a 1940s diner on the National Register of Historic Places. And with the Neptune, Sirota captures a classic New York Greek diner with allusions to bouzouki music and the elevated subway rumbling by right outside the window.

In the remaining two sections, “Road Trip” and the brief “Neon” movement, he makes sure that even in the absence of doting waitstaffs, full booths, or busy kitchens, the music has plenty of energy and activity.

“‘Neon’ was kind of a study of the running lights,” he says, and the flickering and flashing can be heard in its repeated staccatos and quick motion. “It would be minimalist music if I had any patience.”

As the rehearsal comes to a close, it’s clear that there’s just one thing missing. “I didn’t know we were going to premiere this in New Jersey,” says Sirota of the omission of local venues. “I’ll have to write ‘Diners: Volume Two.’”

http://www.nj.com/entertainment/music/index.ssf/2010/02/new_hudson_saxophone_quartet_r.html