

Two Rivers and Fourteen Vacant Buildings

for solo organ

Stephen F. Lilly

(2018)

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Program Notes:

Two rivers, fourteen vacant buildings, three half-functioning and partially condemned edifices, and the remnants of decommissioned infrastructure. In the eighteen-plus years I've lived in DC, it has always been described in terms of how much it has changed by residents and visitors alike—politics, of course, but also demographics, the cost of housing, culture, crime, development, pollution, and infrastructure. This graphic score captures a snapshot of the city. In five years, some of the structures memorialized here will cease to exist as negotiations with developers, some protracted out over decades, are concluded; some will remain in half-inhabited limbo; and some will continue their return to nature despite being honored as historical landmarks. Many view this city in flux as a rising phoenix and welcome the rebirth of schools, churches, hardware stores, factories, and warehouses as national retailers and luxurious living. Others contemplate how to stop the ebb of affordable housing and the loss of character and diversity among its neighborhoods. As I have always associated the organ with either the past—the soundtrack of the silent film era—or religious ceremony, it seemed fitting to use it to eulogize these twenty-four monuments of a bygone city.

Performance Instructions:

Polygons and Starbursts:

- These shapes should be the primary influence in the selecting, combining, and sequencing of pitches.
- In addition to pitch, the color, size, form, and textual description of a shape can also influence the number and/or type of stops that are drawn, which manuals are to be played, as well as the performer's choice of dynamics. Of course, some of these parameters can be further influenced by (or entirely left to) one's interpretation of the rivers (see below).
- The size of the shape should not influence its duration (see below).
- The shapes should be performed sequentially, not simultaneously. However, one shape may interrupt the performance of another—this occurs whenever shapes intersect. For example, let say one starts by moving outward on lines emanating from a starburst. When interrupted by a triangle, one immediately starts interpreting the triangle starting from the nearest vertex. The performer can return to the first starburst later but should move inward from the endpoints instead of outward from the burst so that the interpretation is not simply a repetition of how the piece began.
- While shapes can be resumed as indicated above, they should not be repeated.

- Once a shape has been completed, it can no longer interrupt another shape.
- Shapes can be traversed in any direction, but the performer should always move from point to point—e.g., given a triangle, the performer would begin at one of the vertices and move along one edge (or two edges simultaneously) toward another vertex. Assuming there are no interruptions, one would then continue until all three edges have been interpreted. If one had started by simultaneously interpreting both edges emanating from the first vertex, one would follow this by simultaneously interpreting the final edge in opposing directions, having the two interpretations cross and eventually exchange vertices.
- The piece is complete when all endpoints and vertices have been used as either starting or ending points. It is not necessary to traverse all lines completely, but all lines/edges should have at least been started, if only abandoned due to an intersecting shape.

The Rivers:

- The rivers are wild cards. Each performer must decide how to interpret their presence. Within a performance, this must remain consistent—a performer should not change their interpretation from shape to shape. However, the two rivers can each mean something different to the performance—e.g., the Potomac, running from right to left along the top of the page, could determine the order in which the shapes are interpreted, while the Anacostia, running from bottom to top, could determine the register used while interpreting each shape. Alternatively, the distance from the rivers could influence an aspect of the performance—e.g., the closer one gets to either river, the more stops are drawn.
- Both starbursts and one of the triangles run underneath the river. Additionally, the largest triangle runs underneath the MacMillian Reservoir. These occurrences should influence the performer's interpretation in some fashion—e.g., the piece could stop and drop into silence for an appropriate length of time.
- The Georgetown and Dalecarlia Reservoirs are also present, but they do not intersect with any shape. It is up to the performer to decide if and how these will influence the piece.

Elevation and Cost of Housing:

- Elevation should primarily influence the breadth of available pitch space. So, the highest point—at Fort Reno, occurring near the right-hand side of the graph—indicates that the entire range of the organ is available to the performer, whereas, the lowest point—along the banks of the Anacostia, a quarter of the way in from the left—indicates that only a single pitch is available. Where that pitch is on the organ is left to the performer.
- The shading of the graph (i.e., Cost of Housing) indicates pitch density. The darker the shading, the more pitches held. The lighter the shading, the more sparse the texture.

- As a shape is traversed, the Elevation and Cost of Housing graph is simultaneously interpreted—i.e., as one moves along a shape, one should mentally drop a plum down to the Elevation and Cost of Housing graph and change breadth of pitch space and pitch density accordingly.

Other Considerations:

- This piece is slow and funereal.
- Durations are predominantly long and changes slowly unfold.
- The piece should be non-metric and avoid a systemic organization of pitch—e.g., twelve-tone, major or minor, octatonic, pentatonic, whole-tone, or spectral. If in interpreting the score, one should incidentally evoke one of these scales/systems that is fine and unavoidable, but one should not aim for them.
- Do not quote or emulate pre-existing musical works.
- The overall length of a complete performance should be no shorter than six minutes and no longer than twelve minutes.
- All sounds should emanate from the organ—i.e., avoid verbal utterances or using external noisemakers. On the other hand, should the organ contain unpitched stops, these may be incorporated into one's interpretation.
- The score may be projected or printed for the audience to see.

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