



Constructing Thought, One Note at a Time

ADDRESS 3131 Connecticut Avenue NW, Apt. 2105 Washington, DC 20008-5001  
TEL 202-450-2173 CELL 347-731-3471 EMAIL joelfriedman@mac.com WEB www.joelfriedman.com

## Movable Home

### Program Note by the Composer

(NB: these notes are free for use but cannot be altered/edited without the permission of the composer)

*Movable Home is scored for string orchestra*

The genesis of *Movable Home* is the story of how art happens unplanned... when you are busy making plans. In 2013, while living in Palo Alto, California, I was commissioned by the *Irving M. Klein International String Competition* to compose a series of solo string pieces. Also on the panel was Maestra Barbara Day Turner. A few months later, while I was in residence at the Montalvo Arts Center in Saratoga, CA, Barbara visited and proposed I write something for her superb San José Chamber Orchestra.

I jumped at the chance and set out to form a consortium of three ensembles. Meanwhile, I had moved to Washington D.C. There I met Maestra Victoria Gau through mutual friends. She agreed that her Takoma Ensemble would join. Months later various friends pointed me to Monica Bauchwitz's String Orchestra of New York City (SONYC). Monica and I discussed the project and she joined as our third partner. Only later did it hit me: three organizations, all run by amazing women, based respectively in the areas I call/called home: NYC, the Bay area, and D.C. This was pure fortuitous and coincidental "unplanning" on my part and is the first meaning of the title "Movable Home" – reflecting how I've traveled and found my homes across this country.

The "unplanning" continued. The following summer I began sketching. I knew *exactly* what the piece was going to be, and went so far as to describe it to my partners who, understandably, wanted the title and program information ASAP. For some reason I hesitated. And then the year's teaching began and put the piece away. A year later when I pulled out my sketches... it just did not spring back to life. I spent a few weeks valiantly trying to resuscitate my planned piece, but I could not. Compositions are like organic, living *beings* with wants, needs, even personalities. Ah: "The best-laid plans of mice and men often go awry."

I decided to start afresh. What came to mind were small fragments of descending scales with an accompanying series of syncopated loud chords. Bang! Now the piece came to life. The small fragment kept growing: scales jumped to other string instruments; scales went up instead of down; they became harmonized; the syncopated chord rhythm filled in with faster repeated notes and expressed itself as a syncopated jittery complimentary rhythm in the bass; that bass rhythm migrated to other instruments. But I still had no idea what "it" was and where it was going. I would just have to trust that "it" knew better. That was late July 2015 and the piece was due soon: the beginning of September.

Luckily I had planned an August return residency at Montalvo specifically to finish before my semester began on September 2<sup>nd</sup>. Once there I started working again on this funny series of scales and chords that kept coming back, but always with some sorts of *changes*. I sat at my desk and thought: what is this? Maybe it's theme and variations! I love theme and variations and hadn't written them in years. Beethoven's examples in his late period works (e.g. the piano sonatas and string quartets) are some of my favorite pieces. But, where was the theme? Yet the piece kept on insisting on moving in whatever *this* direction was. So I kept writing not knowing exactly where I was headed. So much for plans.

A number of the early "variations" were short fragments based on shared materials and shared the same musical phrase length. A pattern was emerging. It wasn't a single "theme," but more materials that *could* make up a theme, and inhabiting the same gestural length. Eventually some phrases shared motives, and began to reflect upon each other, to relate, combining to form longer musical units. I thought of the passacaglia *finale* to Brahms *Fourth Symphony*. I love how Brahms wrote a massive movement from such a short chord progression (no theme!), stitching together multiple short variations into larger sections (think of the gorgeous central "slow movement" in E major), and how he never stopped developing his ideas within, and between, variations, even bringing back the opening theme from the first movement towards the end. Aha! From that point onward I started to write and mix-and-match these phrases creating both longer continuous musical sections and sharp contrasting cuts.

So what should you listen for in *Movable Home*? A starting point are the “main characters,” those scales and big chords – the non-theme, but I do think it is also possible to “hear,” no, more like “feel,” the slow passage of each iteration of the “themeless-theme,” like the way a clock striking on the hour has a slow rhythm. And, I do often give clues as to when one iteration ends and another begins by changing themes, harmony, texture, and character. But the variation process is a bit more like a “kaleidoscopic-funhouse-hall-of-mirrors-whodunit.” A series of thematic/motivic “clues” are planted throughout, fractured, and reflect on different surfaces as the music unfolds. Materials coalesce, bubble up, and recombine in surprising and varied ways. The syncopated chords and the jittery complimentary rhythm in the lower strings keep reappearing. A short, clear palindromic melodic phrase, first heard in the viola section, keeps poking through the texture in different musical settings. A soft series of tremolo chords return, each time varied. Melodic fragments are recycled, but their character changes. That impassioned conversational duet between the principal 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> violins? It returns as an Indian-tinged vocalise. *Movable Home* works just on sheer energy, as a series of contrasting chapters: playful, elegiac, unhinged, and jazzy. It also works as a puzzle – finding clues and connections. This is the second meaning of “Movable Home” – the musical “home” keeps moving and changing, not unlike me. This aspect, I assure you, was planned!

Two final points. One idea from my original conception of the piece remains: the principal players are a *concertino* section playing the flashier material, like in a Baroque *concerto grosso*. And, I finished at Montalvo, where the project had begun over dinner two years earlier. I beat my deadline by a matter of days, August 28<sup>th</sup>, to be exact. That part was also planned!

*Movable Home* is dedicated to the project’s lead commissioner “the remarkable Maestra Barbara Day Turner”

Joel Phillip Friedman–September 2015  
Washington, D.C.

GREY BIRD MUSIC 

[www.joelfriedman.com](http://www.joelfriedman.com)