

at what price?  
program note

*at what price?* was commissioned in 2004 by the Ohio Music Teachers' Association, and was played by the composer in Dayton, Ohio that same year. It has since been performed by various pianists in Berlin, Lodz, Beijing, Seoul, Boston and Cincinnati among others.

There are a few rather unusual characteristics of this piece: to begin with, it is the first time in any non-vocal piece in which I have asked a musician to use his voice. There are a number of composers who have done this, but it's a first for me. Secondly, I am making use of yet a third instrument (besides the piano and the pianist's voice): a device known as an "E-bow" (more on this in a moment). And thirdly, I am making a political statement with this piece—also something I have never done before; at least not in a direct way. But the current American political situation has moved me, as it has many others, to speak out in protest of a national foreign policy that is, in my opinion, substantially misguided. I concede that to speak out in an artistic work is not without its problems and risks, but I felt compelled by current events to do so anyway. In *at what price?* I have quoted a phrase spoken by Donald Rumsfeld not long before the Iraq war began last year. In this statement, Rumsfeld seemed to be saying that the US would initiate the invasion of Iraq regardless of world opinion. And if there were objections to US military policy, they could and should be considered "isolated pockets of international hyperventilation..." (the phrase quoted in the piece). I interpret this as meaning that such objections could be discounted, not on the basis of whether they were valid or not, but simply because they posed no meaningful threat to American military and political power. In my opinion, Rumsfeld's point of view opens up an important debate that needs to happen. It is not the purpose of either the piece or this program note to provide a detailed analysis or alternative policy on this subject—that would be impossible. The purpose of the piece—beyond its traditional artistic purpose—is to underline the seriousness of our political situation and to cry for a more intelligent and comprehensive debate than that which we have had so far.

Returning to strictly musical matters: the "E-bow" is a delightful little gadget that was designed for use with electric guitars. I heard it used not long ago in a piece for piano, and was immediately struck by its potential value in this piece which, coincidentally, I was in the middle of composing. The E-bow, as its name suggests, is an electronic version of a bow—it was designed to let a guitar player play any kind of material with the fingers of the right hand while simultaneously producing a sustained sound (the kind you'd hear if the strings were played with a bow, violin-style). The effect works about the same way on a piano and so gives us something we've never had on this instrument before—a truly sustained sound!

A final note: the musical materials from this piece are drawn in part from a slightly earlier piece for piano which I composed in memory of a dear friend and colleague, the pianist William Black. I am sure many in the audience will recognize Bill as a distinguished pianist and head of the piano department at the College-Conservatory of Music at the University of Cincinnati until his death about a year ago.

Joel Hoffman

