Music of Place: YOUR Place

Part One: Find Your Local Motive
Activities by Daniel Felsenfeld, New York Philharmonic Teaching Artist

For this activity, you will need:
- Paper and pencil
- A keyboard or other pitched instrument

One of the most influential and important composers of his age was Duke Ellington. He wrote music in many genres, including music for the orchestra, popular songs, and charts for his own band. And while he is associated with the beautiful flowering of arts and culture we call the Harlem Renaissance, his music thrives today, serving both to help us understand the period and thrill us with how good it is.

In his piece Harlem, the composer makes quite a case for his own neighborhood, immortalizing it in a little musical nugget called a motif (or motive). It looks like this:
With these two notes, Ellington manages to capture the sound of his own neighborhood — Harlem of the early 20th century — and uses that little tune as the basis for an entire piece,

Now let’s try creating our own neighborhood motif!

For example, I live in Prospect Heights, Brooklyn, and so I might make something that takes a certain twist at the end to leave you hanging.

Try playing this at a keyboard or other instrument:

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Clarinet

Prospect Heights, Brooklyn
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Hmm, I am not sure I like that. I’d like to imagine it played by a different instrument. And I really want to change one note — seems just a little too optimistic. What happens if we play B-natural, rather than B-flat?

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French Horn

Prospect Heights, Brooklyn
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While I do like that better — my friend who plays the horn let me know that this might be a little high for her to play easily. So I’m going to try a
higher sounding instrument, like the flute, and perhaps change the rhythm a little . . .

Here I tried syncopating the rhythm! Syncopation is when you play notes off the beat to give a more interesting (and jazzy!) feel to a motif. My friend who plays the flute tells me this fits perfectly on their instrument.

So now I have my local motive and am ready to start composing!

Now it’s your turn! Where do you live?

Time for you to create your own musical motif using the name of your neighborhood!