

gabriel kahane
COMPOSER / PERFORMER



biography

Writing and performing music that moves effortlessly from dense modernism to vernacular song, Gabriel Kahane has established himself as a leading voice among a generation of young composers redefining music for the 21st century.

Hailed by the *Los Angeles Times* for “an all around dazzling performance” in his orchestral debut at Walt Disney Concert Hall with the Los Angeles Philharmonic earlier this year (in the premiere of his song cycle *Orinoco Sketches*, conducted by John Adams), Mr. Kahane moves with ease as a performer between musical realms. Performance highlights of the 2010-11 season included sold out concerts with artists as varied as Chris Thile and Brad Mehldau, the cellist Alisa Weilerstein, as well as with his father, the noted pianist and conductor Jeffrey Kahane, with whom he collaborated on a critically acclaimed duo recital. In addition, Kahane commissioned songs from ten composers—including Timo Andres, Ted Hearne, and Andrew Norman—for a solo recital presented by the MATA Festival, in which the new cycle was juxtaposed with a performance of Schumann’s *Dichterliebe*, for which Kahane accompanied himself at the piano. Gabriel has performed and/or recorded with Sufjan Stevens, Rufus Wainwright, Punch Brothers, and Audra McDonald, who has incorporated his songs into her repertoire.

The fall of 2011 witnesses the release of *Where Are the Arms*, Kahane’s second full album as a recording artist. *Where Are the Arms* picks up where his self-titled debut left off, refining the relationship between music and text while further marrying intricate chamber arrangements to intimate narrative driven songs, anchored by Kahane’s voice, described by Alex Ross of *The New Yorker* as “sonorous, mesmerizing”. A North American solo tour in support of the record is scheduled for the fall of 2011.

This summer, Gabriel serves as composer-in-residence at the Bravo Vail Valley Chamber Music Festival, where he will remount his critically acclaimed Lincoln Center American Songbook debut supported by an ensemble of eleven musicians, including the Calder Quartet, with whom he will premiere a new song cycle for voice and string quartet. Additional summer activities include recitals at Aspen and Caramoor, as well as a residency at Rockwood Music Hall in New York City.

Launched by his 2006 song cycle *Craigslistlieder*—heard from Vancouver to Virginia, by Mr Kahane and lieder singers alike—Gabriel’s rapid ascent as a composer of concert works continues to bloom in the 2011-2012 season, with the premiere

biography (cont'd)

of a concerto-like song cycle slated for performance in March with Kahane as soloist alongside the American Composers Orchestra at Carnegie's Zankel Hall. Additional performances of the work will be heard with the Los Angeles Chamber Orchestra, as well as at the Savannah Music Festival. *Little Sleep's Head Sprouting Hair in the Moonlight*, a cello sonata-cum-song cycle written for Alisa Weilerstein will be heard in a concert for Lincoln Center's Chamber Music Society with the composer as pianist and singer. A string quartet, *The Red Book*, written for the Kronos Quartet, will be premiered in the fall. Gabriel will serve as composer-in-residence for the Orpheus Chamber Orchestra from 2011 to 2013.

One of the most sought after theater composers of his generation, Kahane wrote music and lyrics for *February House*,

which will enjoy back to back productions in 2012, first at the Long Wharf Theater in New Haven before arriving at the Public Theater, which commissioned the work, for its New York premiere in the spring of 2012. The musical, with a book by Seth Bockley, chronicles the unlikely housing of a coterie of artists-- including W.H. Auden, Benjamin Britten, Carson McCullers, and Gypsy Rose Lee—within the walls of a single dilapidated Victorian mansion in Brooklyn Heights during World War II. Gabriel has also received theatrical commissions from the Signature Theater in Arlington VA and the Williamstown Theater Festival in Massachusetts.

A 2010 MacDowell Colony fellow, Kahane makes his home in Brooklyn, New York, in close company with a century-old piano and many books.



quotes

“ AN ALL AROUND DAZZLING PERFORMANCE... THIS IS MUSIC WITH SOMETHING TO SAY.”

— *The Los Angeles Times*

“ MR. KAHANE WRAPPED HIS STRONG CATCHY melodies and stylish piano playing in arrangements for strings, winds and brass that revealed a composer’s ear for color, balance and counterpoint. Mr. Kahane’s singing, comfortable and nuanced in past encounters, was a revelation here; at times he combined a pop balladeer’s directness with a jazz singer’s fluid phrasing, reaching new heights of expressiveness.”

— *The New York Times*

“ [T]HERE IS NOBODY ELSE WITHIN THE POP-MUSIC sphere making music even remotely as sophisticated as what you’ll hear on [the self-titled debut from] Gabriel Kahane. This is music for the ears, the intellect and the soul, and an auspicious debut LP from one of the most prodigious talents we’ve got.”

— *Prefix Magazine*

“ HIS MUSIC ABSORBS EVERYTHING FROM NINETEEN-twenties neoclassicism to blue-grass and modern indie pop with potent melodies bridging the disparate styles...in a setting of [Robert Lowell’s] *The Drinker* Kahane hit a vein of desolate beauty, dwelling obsessively on the phrase “foundering down.” His greatest asset is his sonorous, mesmerizing baritone; he brings to mind Sinatra in his wee-small-hours mood.”

— *The New Yorker*

“ KAHANE HAS ESTABLISHED A REPUTATION AS A musical chameleon producing works in a variety of genres from musical theater and pop songs to concert works. *Orinoco Sketches* is his largest orchestral work to date, but still takes the form of a song cycle, one of his preferred and most successful formats... It’s powerful stuff packaged in some fascinating music that mashes a kind of singer-songwriter confessional à la Nick Drake with the orchestral writing of Alban Berg. It is music that seems familiar but blooms periodically into something dark and wonderful... it was a starkly moving piece filled with the rhythms of Cuba and New Orleans before ending up on Fairfax Blvd. wondering about a hellish world on the other side of the earth. It was certainly the high-point of the program.”

— *OutWestArts.blogspot.com*



quotes (cont'd)

“ THE INSTRUMENTAL PARTS, AT TIMES, MIGHT BE purely classical compositions all by themselves, thoughtful, and above all wrought—carefully balanced, with contrasting melodies coexisting with each other, along with complex rhythms, and little strains of music that register like sharp, sure thoughts, or like images in a carefully crafted short story...

— *Wall Street Journal*

“ GABRIEL KAHANE IS AN NPR PROGRAMMER'S WET dream...From a sonic standpoint, Kahane's restlessness and ingenuity match the precociousness of his words, the album often abandoning pop's expected patterns of build and release with a less-predictable approach that comes closer to musical theatre.”

— *Pitchfork*

“ GABRIEL'S EVOCATIVE WORKS, WRITTEN WITH A contemporary singer-songwriter sensibility, contain sophisticated, classical-tinged accompaniments that seem to echo the Schubert at times. Gabriel has a light, buoyant voice with an air of vulnerability that suited these songs, as well as four classical art songs, including his poignant, transporting take on Charles Ives' "Tom Sails Away." Other highlights included two selections from the younger Kahane's witty and wonderfully inventive *Craiglistlieder*. (How soon can he come back to perform the work in its entirety?)”

— *The Denver Post*

The New York Times

Tied to a Time and Place, but Not a Single Style

By Steve Smith

March 4, 2010

Killing time between songs during a concert at the Allen Room on Wednesday night, Gabriel Kahane brightly announced that he had just signed a lease on an apartment in Ditmas Park, Brooklyn. What might have been a throwaway moment somehow felt significant for close watchers of Mr. Kahane, a singer, multi-instrumentalist and composer. Many of his best songs deal with a time and a place vividly sketched with what seems like an almost bewildering ease, then used as an anchor for reflections that can be achingly direct and personal.

Getting a geographical fix on Mr. Kahane has never been hard; Park Slope, where he has lived for the last six years, might well settle in among Los Angeles, the Boston Commons and the Taconic Parkway on one of his future set lists. Pinning him down stylistically is not as easy: Mr. Kahane writes pop songs, composes concert works and creates music for the theater. In his Allen Room concert, part of Lincoln Center's

American Songbook series, you encountered work in two of those modes, and evidence of all three.

Frequently you also got a sense of how inseparable those various strands can be in his work. In songs like "Villanelles" (from his self-titled 2008 debut album) he showed an enviable knack for capturing a moment and its emotional resonance:

We bought each other hardback books
Inscribed them with ice cream that dripped while we ate
But petrified by your writerly looks
I simply wrote XO love Gabe

That song featured a simple stripped-down setting: just Mr. Kahane's banjo and Rob Moose's tenor guitar. Elsewhere, as on his album, Mr. Kahane wrapped his strong catchy melodies and stylish piano playing in arrangements for strings, winds and brass that revealed a composer's ear for color, balance and counterpoint. Mr. Kahane's singing, comfortable and nuanced in past encounters, was a revelation here; at times he combined a pop balladeer's directness with a jazz singer's fluid phrasing, reaching new heights of expressiveness.

It was curious, then, that he mostly ceded that asset during selections from "For the Union Dead," a song cycle based on poems by Robert Lowell. Written for the versatile sextet yMusic, all of whose members were present in Mr. Kahane's



band at the Allen Room, the songs strike a beguiling balance among chamber-music refinement, a folksy rusticity provided by Mr. Kahane's banjo, and the striking friezes and whorls of Lowell's poetry.

The work is an audacious undertaking, and Mr. Kahane's writing rises to the occasion. But here he sang with a brassy, almost classical affectation that acted like fingers arched in the air to form quotation marks. When he shifted to his natural voice during one section of a song that shares its name with

the cycle, the words took on an emotional resonance missing elsewhere.

Not that Mr. Kahane should shun mannerisms altogether: "Neurotic and Lonely," from another cycle, "Craigslitlied," was an exuberant display of playful quirk. But it was when Mr. Kahane sang most naturally and intimately, abetted by an outstanding band of resourceful players, that his copious talents were most persuasive.

Los Angeles Times

John Adams Conducts Premieres By Emerging Brooklyn Composers

By Mark Swed

March 25, 2011

Brooklyn is the new Montmartre, John Adams proclaimed Tuesday night at Walt Disney Concert Hall as he introduced works from three emerging Brooklyn composers commissioned by the Los Angeles Philharmonic for its final Green Umbrella concert of the season. He's got a point.

Missy Mazzoli, Gabriel Kahane and Andrew Norman (all born between 1979 and 1981) have joined the influx of young American composers, painters, writers, chefs, beekeepers, brew masters and other creative types who are making a New York borough increasingly hip. The shared sensibility is eclecticism, entrepreneurship and user-friendliness. Anything and everything goes—and goes together — as they re-mold Rococo art in an effort to produce narrative sense out of an overstimulated Internet epoch.

Whether a lasting stylistic school will emerge remains to be seen, but Mazzoli, Kahane and Norman are big musical talents with distinctive voices...

The son of Los Angeles Chamber Orchestra music director Jeffrey Kahane, Gabriel Kahane wears many hats. He is a fluid pop singer of rare musicality and depth. He is an accomplished jazz pianist. He is a guitarist. He is at home in any number of classical and non-classical musical styles.

There was a little of all this in his *Orinoco Sketches*, titled for the ship his grandmother took to flee Nazi Germany on her way to Los Angeles, stopping off in Cuba and depositing her in New Orleans. Kahane evoked those worlds in four sweet songs, which he performed singing at the piano and accompanying himself on the guitar in an all-around dazzling performance, for which the orchestra was almost superfluous.

There is a lot of atmosphere in "Orinoco," be it a ship's lounge music, the sounds of Cuba, New Orleans and urban L.A.... This is music with something to say...

This... was a night for the hot composers of the next generation. And we're lucky to have them, even if they insist on settling on the other coast.



THE NEW YORKER

Cheap Seats

The affordable art of concertgoing

By Alex Ross

February 2, 2009

The image of the classical concert hall as a playground for the rich is planted deep in the cultural psyche. When Hollywood filmmakers set a scene at the symphony, twits in evening wear fill the frame, their jaws tight and their noses held high. The monocle returns to fashion for the first time since the death of Erich von Stroheim. One day, an intrepid art director will come to a concert and discover that the classical audience is well populated by schoolteachers, proofreaders, students, retirees, and others with no entry in the Social Register. They can afford to attend because classical events aren't nearly as expensive as most people assume, especially in comparison with the extravagant pricing schemes for elite pop acts. (Prince infamously charged more than three thousand dollars a seat for a series of shows in 2007; standing room was a mere three hundred.) The cheapest seats at the Metropolitan Opera are fifteen dollars, slightly more than the bleachers at Yankee Stadium. Chamber-music concerts at the Frick, the Met Museum, Tully Hall, and Bargemusic are in

the twenty-to-fifty-dollar range; most new-music events go for ten to twenty. Concerts at churches and music schools are usually free. Students can get in to the New York Philharmonic for the price of a movie.

How much music can you see for a hundred dollars? In the second week of January, I decided to find out, looking for the cheapest available tickets...

The audience at the Philharmonic might be described as hardcore classical: mostly people fifty and older. Later that day, a different crowd showed up to see the singer, songwriter, and composer Gabriel Kahane perform at Le Poisson Rouge, the lively Greenwich Village club that mixes classical music with other genres. Kahane is twenty-seven, and his listeners seem roughly the same age. He is well on his way to developing an original creative personality; his music absorbs everything from nineteen-twenties neoclassicism to blue-grass and modern indie pop, with potent melodies bridging the disparate styles. In league with a six-piece ensemble called yMusic, Kahane presented his song cycle "For the Union Dead," on poems of Robert Lowell. The texts challenged Kahane's knack for teasing singable lines out of complex language; at times, the music seemed verbally overstuffed. But in a setting of "The Drinker" Kahane hit a vein of desolate beauty, dwelling obsessively on the phrase "foundering down." His greatest asset is his sonorous, mesmerizing baritone; he brings to mind Sinatra in his wee-small-hours mood. Sinatra, of course, would have charged more than ten dollars...



Gabriel Kahane: Leader Of Indie Lieder

By WNYC Soundcheck
September 5, 2008

If you want to try to describe the singer, pianist and composer Gabriel Kahane, you could use a simple label, like chamber-pop or indie-classical.

Another way is to look at the company he keeps. He's performed with opera singer Thomas Quasthoff and classical violinist Hilary Hahn, but also with indie rockers such as Sufjan Stevens, My Brightest Diamond and Chris Thile.

Kahane's own songs blend wry personal stories with complex brass and string arrangements. His new self-titled debut album is due out on Sept. 16. Between previewing songs from the record live in studio, he spoke with Soundcheck host John Schaefer.

Many of the album's songs are named for places: Rochester (N.Y.), North Adams (Mass.), the Taconic State Parkway.

"Yeah, I find that it's easier to write a love song to a place rather than a person," Kahane says. "Maybe just because there are fewer of them."

Speaking of bizarre love affairs, Kahane once described himself as “the bastard child of Alban Berg and Rufus Wainwright.” Though he says he’s a bit embarrassed by that statement now, he does note that both musicians could be rich and romantic, in their own ways.

“I think that statement was me being a little bit glib, perhaps,” Kahane says. “But I think ultimately what fuels my music is I’m just always trying to be emotionally direct, whether it’s drawing from classical harmony or pop harmony or what-have-you.”

For many songwriters, that sort of appeal comes from pared-down, simple songs. Much of Kahane’s work is more involved by comparison.

“For me, things can be emotionally direct, whether they’re unbelievably complex or incredibly simple,” he says.

Between full songs on the album, Kahane wrote three instrumental interludes verging on chamber music. He says that he conceived the album as one large piece.

“I mean, if someone has the patience—God bless him—to listen to the entire album as a whole, I think that it’s actually more nourishing to the listener that way,” he says.

One of those interludes carries the ungainly title “Arnold Corrects the Papers, While My Grandmother Watches His Children.” The piece itself, however, is based on an old Lutheran

hymn, and was inspired by Kahane’s grandmother, who babysat for modernist composer Arnold Schoenberg.

“The deal was that the end of the previous song ends with that sort of quote from this chorale, ‘Wie soll ich dich empfangen,’” he says. “And I needed to get from B minor to F major. And then I had this vision of Schoenberg at UCLA giving this assignment to his composition people. So he’s like, ‘Now you must modulate from B minor into F major or you’ll get an F!’ The rest is history, I guess.”

If Kahane’s approach sounds something like that of Sufjan Stevens, it is. Stevens actually contributes guitar and piano lines and sings backup on Kahane’s album.

They both share something of a classical background, as well. In fact, Gabriel Kahane is actually composing a piece for his father Jeffrey Kahane, a noted classical pianist. Jeffrey plans to play it at the re-opening of Alice Tully Hall at New York’s Lincoln Center.

“He’s given me a title, which is ‘Django,’ after both his dog, Django—he has a very beloved Australian shepherd and sheep something-or-other mix, I don’t know—and that dog, of course, is named after Django Reinhardt,” Gabriel Kahane says. “So I’m going to try to find a way to synthesize his runs in the park with his dog and Django’s runs on the guitar.”

THE DENVER POST

Couple of Kahanes Deliver Uncommonly Creative Concert

By Kyle MacMillan

March 26, 2011

It was Kahane times 2, as father and son presented their first-ever formal concert together Friday evening at Gates Concert Hall as part of Newman Center Presents.

Jeffrey Kahane, former music director of the Colorado Symphony and a renowned pianist, is well known to Denver audiences. But most probably know little about his son, Gabriel, a fast-rising New York vocalist, pianist and composer.

The younger Kahane is part of an exciting new group of musicians who straddle the worlds of classical and popular music and give little, if any, thought to stylistic and historical boundaries.

It was in that spirit of musical openness that the two presented an engaging, refreshingly diverse 90-minute program, turning classical music inside out, mixing old and new and spicing it all with anecdotes and banter.

The heart of the program was Franz Schubert's Four Impromptus, Op. 90, D. 899 (played by the elder Kahane with his usual vibrancy and intelligence), interspersed, with hardly a pause, with four of Gabriel's amplified songs performed by him from the keyboard.

It was a startling yet ultimately revealing and complementary grouping. Gabriel's evocative works, written with a contemporary singer-songwriter sensibility, contain sophisticated, classical-tinged accompaniments that seem to echo the Schubert at times.

Gabriel has a light, buoyant voice with an air of vulnerability that suited these songs, as well as four classical art songs, including his poignant, transporting take on Charles Ives' "Tom Sails Away."

Other highlights included two selections from the younger Kahane's witty and wonderfully inventive "Craigslistlieder." (How soon can he come back to perform the work in its entirety?)

Wondering what Denver's classical scene needs more of? Unconventional, imaginative and crowd-pleasing programs like this one.



Album Art by: Jonathan O'Brien



Album Review

Rating: 9.0

By Etan Rosenbloom

September 24, 2008

Now is not the time for Gabriel Kahane. His heart belongs to fin-de-siècle Austrian art music and musical theater, not currently the hippest of musical hybrids. Kahane doesn't just play gigs and write records. He receives commissions, premieres works, accompanies renowned opera singers

and violinists, and gets written up by the classical-music critic in the *New Yorker*. And yet as unrelated to the pop culture mill his music may seem, Kahane's linked in with the now, by practice and by proxy. His song cycle *Craigslistlieder* (2006, downloadable for free here) married highbrow modernism to some rather lewd texts drawn from actual postings on Craigslist. He's recorded or performed with Rufus Wainwright, My Brightest Diamond and Sufjan Stevens, all of whom share his penchant for musical opulence.

The cheeky friction between art and trash of *Craigslistlieder* is long gone on Kahane's eponymous long player, replaced by a very different aesthetic concern: how to bridle the boundless ambition of an artist who can do almost anything. Objectively, Gabriel Kahane is a scrambled patchwork, with through-composed musical-theater numbers abutting string-quartet interludes, Billy Joel piano pop morphing into morose brass arrangements, Bergian art songs leading into acoustic bluegrass. Far more than an exercise in post-modernity though, the genre hopscotch finds Kahane dressing up his biggest talent -- melodies that lie just right no matter how labyrinthine they get -- in a variety of outfits, each of which fits just splendidly.

Kahane bridges album opener "Durrants" and "North Adams" with a short string interlude that incorporates themes from both, one of several instances of recycling and transforming motifs to lend the album a sense of narrative unity.

It's an age-old classical tradition, and on Gabriel Kahane, it's more a formal device than a necessity. Pop doesn't get more stylistically varied than this, and Kahane's playful sincerity is the thread that counts. His personable, untrained baritone buoys the elegiac piano ballad "Rochester" with a frankness that keeps it on the right side of maudlin; that same charisma takes the dissonant edge off the peculiar chamber piece "Side Streets," an homage to the late composer György Ligeti.

Like Sufjan Stevens, who contributes eerily pretty background vocals on "Slow Down," Kahane's most affecting songs map the human experience via physical geography. He and his father drive from Manhattan through New England in "North Adams," an ode to the Taconic Parkway and to passage in general, that thrills in the same way that Stevens's "Chicago" did. "Underberg" finds a bittersweet metaphor in the demolition of the Samuel Underberg building in Brooklyn's Prospect Heights ("In high school we would steal inside at night/ And make out by the glow of a traffic light/ When we tired of touching she would turn to me and say/ You know they'll tear down this building/ some bitter black day"). This is Kahane's New York, filled with Second Avenue bookstores ("Villanelles"), subway conductors who read Rumi in their off time ("Twice In the Night"), and the hijinks of Brooklyn's World War II-era cultural elite ("7 Middagh"). The specificity of each song is a beacon, fixing its emotional core to a single point in Kahane's experience so that we can search for it in our own.

Some fine guest musicians make already-vivid songs all the richer, most notably Antony & the Johnsons violinist Rob Moose, clarinetist Sam Sadigursky of the Mingus Orchestra, and Nickel Creek mandolinist Chris Thile. It's Kahane at the helm here, though. The piano-man austerity of both *Craiglistlieder* and his marvelous 5 Songs EP (2005) showed no warning sings that he was such a wonderful instrumental colorist—but there he goes, couching the wending course of "The Faithful" with a Jon Brion-worthy production of vintage keyboards and high-stepping horns, or carefully amplifying the uneasy harmonic changes of "Keene" with hanging dissonance in the strings and brass.

Kahane preserves the spirit of some of the greatest composers and songwriters in music history, from Bach to Schubert to Ives to Elton John, and yet there is nobody else within the pop-music sphere making music even remotely as sophisticated as what you'll hear on Gabriel Kahane. This is music for the ears, the intellect and the soul, and an auspicious debut LP from one of the most prodigious talents we've got.



The New York Times

A Singer-Songwriter Ignores Musical Boundaries

By Steve Smith
April 24, 2009

Nursing a cup of coffee at a Brooklyn Heights cafe one recent afternoon Gabriel Kahane looked every bit the part of a hip young singer-songwriter: tousled hair, sleepy eyes, a kitschy blue sweater embroidered with the names of golf resorts. That evening he would begin a short American concert tour with a show at Rockwood Music Hall, a Lower East Side club where he has often performed. When he last played there, several weeks before, his gentle, smoky baritone and heartfelt delivery mesmerized an audience that filled the room to busting.

That night Mr. Kahane had emphasized the sophisticated original songs from his newly released debut album, “Gabriel Kahane,” issued by the Brooklyn label Family Records. But his set also included a handful of Charles Ives songs, in which he was accompanied by Jeremy Denk, an estimable young classical pianist. Mr. Denk also played a brash miniature by Hindemith. The audience—which included Mr. Denk’s regular recital partner, the violinist Joshua Bell—ate it all up.

At 27, Mr. Kahane is part of a musically omnivorous generation. Young classical composers like Nico Muhly and Caleb Burhans are not crossing over to pop idioms so much as they are ignoring stylistic boundaries outright. Meeting them midway are adventurous musicians like Sufjan Stevens, an ambitious singer-songwriter, and Chris Thile, originally a bluegrass mandolin wunderkind. Both appear on Mr. Kahane’s CD.

Yet even by those standards, Mr. Kahane's versatility sets him apart. The day before the start of his concert tour, he wrote the score and lyrics for "Multiphobia," presented as part of "The 24 Hour Musicals" at the Gramercy Theater. Among his current projects is an evening-length work commissioned by Musical Theater Initiative for the Public Theater, based on "February House," Sherill Tippins's book about the history of a Brooklyn brownstone where W. H. Auden, Carson McCullers, Benjamin Britten and Gypsy Rose Lee all lived together.

Concert works are forming a larger part of Mr. Kahane's agenda. In January he collaborated with yMusic, a New York chamber-music sextet, for "For the Union Dead," a song cycle based on poems by Robert Lowell. Another recent commission, "Django: Tiny Variations on a Big Dog," is set to receive its New York premiere Sunday at Alice Tully Hall during a recital by Mr. Kahane's father, the renowned pianist and conductor Jeffrey Kahane.

Initially Gabriel Kahane was reluctant to accept the invitation. "Ever since I've been out doing my own thing, we've had real reservations about any accusations of nepotism," he said. "And for me, it was a confidence issue, not wanting to put myself out there unless the piece was going to stand up to whatever else was on the program."

By telephone from Colorado, Jeffrey Kahane said: "I explained to him that I wanted to devote a substantial part of my recital program to new American music." Along with music by Mendelssohn, Schubert and Rachmaninoff, the concert will include works composed for Jeffrey Kahane by Mr. Muhly and Kenneth Frazelle.

From his son, Mr. Kahane requested an étude inspired by their family dog, named after the great jazz guitarist Django Reinhardt. Instead the piece evolved into a set of miniature variations, one of which, "Mechanized Django," Jeffrey Kahane described as "35 of the most difficult bars of music I've ever learned."

"I called him and said, 'Gabe, this is unbelievably difficult,' " Mr. Kahane added. "And he said, 'You're just used to having everything be easy.' I called him again after another 15 hours of working on it, and I said, 'Are you sure you're not mad at me about something?' I did finally get it, and now it's a joy to play."

Though father never formally taught son, Gabriel Kahane's creative identity was surely shaped by a childhood spent in a musical household. His mother, a psychologist, sang in choruses. He received Suzuki-method violin training, sang in operas and acted in school plays. After rejecting piano lessons at 11, he discovered his parents' battered old acoustic guitars, remnants of their days in rock and folk bands during the 1960s, and started writing songs. Having failed out of high school, Gabriel Kahane pursued a jazz-piano infatuation with a year of study at the New England Conservatory.

"I was frustrated by the myopic conservatory thing, the lack of context for why it is we make art," he said. Transferring to Brown University, he resumed his acting. During his sophomore year a friend coaxed him to write a musical; the fledgling effort was honored by the Kennedy Center.

On graduating in 2003, Gabriel Kahane moved to New York with no firm plans beyond the goal of creating a body of work “that would be framed as pop music,” he said, “but was maybe a little bit more chromatic and adventurous harmonically and rhythmically.” Courting the press, he initially termed his work an unlikely mix of Alban Berg and Rufus Wainwright, a claim he came to regret.

“I love Rufus’s music,” he ruefully noted, “but we have so little in common.”

Tiring of comparisons to other singing pianists, Mr. Kahane assembled his first band in 2007. The songs on his disc—some with classic pop melodies and harmonies; others freely atonal or even based on a 12-tone row—feature airy, colorful wind and string arrangements not unlike those found on recent albums by Sufjan Stevens.

But one of Mr. Kahane’s works for voice and piano—“Craiglistlieder,” a quirky song cycle based on texts from personal ads found on the Web site Craigslist.com—opened unanticipated doors. Other artists began to program the piece in their recitals, even as Mr. Kahane was still performing it in clubs.

“It’s kind of a wonderful experience to sit in Weill Hall, in an audience that’s 60-plus, and hear audiences tittering over these sort of maudlin, weird assignments, and then to be able to do it for the hipsters on the Lower East Side and have the same response,” he said. (Perhaps paradoxically downtown

audiences seemed to find “Craiglistlieder” easier to appreciate than some of Mr. Kahane’s more vulnerable, emotionally direct pop songs.)

One of Mr. Kahane’s “Craiglistlieder” performances, during a benefit for the AIDS charity Classical Action, led to his first formal commission, when Natasha Paremski, the pianist with whom he shared the program, requested a sonata. Linda and Stuart Nelson, the benefactors who financed that work, have since commissioned a new piece from Mr. Kahane for the cellist Alisa Weilerstein, one of his childhood friends.

Rather than complying with a conventional piece, Mr. Kahane intends to bridge his disparate activities: three large instrumental movements will surround new songs based on poetry by the Polish writer Zbigniew Herbert, with Mr. Kahane serving as both pianist and vocalist.

“I’ve always wanted to do something with him, and also to branch out of my world a bit as well,” Ms. Weilerstein said. “Great music is great music. I don’t like to stay strictly in my niche. And I think for both of us it’s kind of a departure, which is very exciting.”

Mr. Kahane is hopeful that more such opportunities will arise. “I find that there are still distinct, separate-but-equal voices at work,” he said, “the ‘I’m going to write a pop song’ and the ‘I’m doing dense piano music.’ As a creative impulse, I would love to find a way to bring those languages together.”



Out West Arts

10 Questions for...Gabriel Kahane

March 4, 2010

I was particularly excited this week to get a chance to pose questions to one of America's most promising and exciting composers, Gabriel Kahane. It's easy for young composers to get lost in the shuffle. But Kahane is avoiding this pitfall not only by making great music, but doing so with an active and healthy disregard for some of the artificial boundaries that have built up over the years between various musical genres. Equally at home on the concert stage or with musical theater, Kahane has mounted significant works in both areas. He's also recorded collections of original songs that grow out of a long tradition of American singer/songwriters and feature collaborations with the likes of Sam Amidon and Chris Thile. Meanwhile he's found time to perform alongside the likes of Jeremy Denk and Thomas Quasthoff among many of classical music's best-known artists. Following an extremely ambitious and satisfying debut, *Orinoco Sketches*, with the Los Angeles Philharmonic this week, Kahane took a stab at the Out West Arts 10 Questions...

1. You've set the poetry of Robert Lowell as well as personal ads from Craigslist. What in particular do you look for when choosing a text to set to music?

I think I'm first and foremost always looking for something that's three dimensional, as well as something that has its own internal rhythmic logic. In the case of *Craigslistlieder*, for all of its irreverence, I think the majority of those texts are funny because of the poignant truths that lurk beneath the surface. There's a lot to do with isolation and social anxiety under the outlandish facade. In the case of Lowell, on the other hand-- well, of course the poetry is just phenomenal-- I had this intuition that while the scansion didn't seem to lend itself to music on first reading, there was some kind of deeper rhythm underneath, and I hope that's borne out in the settings I wrote. And then of course, I think there's just my appreciation of the challenge of setting text that doesn't fall into neat rhyming quatrains. As difficult as it sometimes is, it also provides a resource for fresh rhythmic and melodic ideas that are suggested by the irregularity of the meter of the text.

2. How important is technology to your creative process?

I think by comparison to most composers these days, very little. I still write a lot of my music long hand, though I do end up copying it all into Sibelius. I have fallen on the crutch of listening to MIDI playback with the last couple of pieces I've written, but I think it's incredibly lazy and doesn't lead to

real creativity. I was talking to John Adams this week about the use of technology in the composition of new music, and he was saying that in student works, he can always identify with a cursory glance of a score which pieces have been written with the computer. There are of course great ways to take advantage of technology in music today, but I think they need to be approached with caution.

3. When should I clap?

Whenever the fuck you want to.

4. What's your current obsession?

The iPad 2 on which I'm composing answers to your very thoughtful questions.

5. You've worked with a dizzying array of other artists from Alisa Weilerstein and Thomas Quasthoff to Sufjan Stevens and Audra McDonald. Who is on your wish list for future collaborators? 5b. And may I suggest Joanna Newsom?

Gosh. As I've delved more into this role of composer-performer, the performer aspect of it has made me want to commission works for me to do, either as singer or singer and instrumentalist. I'd love for Andrew Norman to write me a big piece... or John Adams... or Tom Adès. As far as the pop world is concerned—I adore Dave Longstreth (of Dirty Projectors)

but I'm not really sure what I could bring to that party. Same goes for Joanna Newsom... Sometimes personalities are so strong, that you want to just let them do their thing. But keep your recommendations coming. Collaborating is, for the most part, total joy.

6. Having written music drawing from so many different traditions and genres, is there anything musically that you're not interested in trying your hand at?



I think I'm really interested in drawing from traditions that were a part of my childhood, which is to say that the aesthetic worlds that I've drawn on represent an organic extension of who I am. And while I did listen to Dr. Dre's *The Chronic* a whole lot when I was twelve, I don't really see myself delving into early '90's rap as a model for new work.

7. What music made you want to be a composer?

I don't think I ever wanted to be a composer. I started writing songs during a rough spot after college, and they become more and more through composed to the point where people started asking me to write concert works. I think there's a misunderstanding sometimes about which direction my music flows—that is to say, a lot of people are under the impression that I'm a composer dabbling in pop music, when in fact it's largely the other way around. Except I'm trying not to dabble—I take concert music very seriously, but hopefully not too seriously.

8. What's your second favorite opera after Berg's *Lulu*?

Wozzeck.

9. You've scored a plum spot in the upcoming season at the Public Theater with the premiere of your newest musical, *February House*. What's the best thing about writing music for the theater?

The best thing about writing music for theater as opposed to writing pop songs qua pop songs is that no one will ever say that something is too heart on sleeve. I think emotional directness is valued in the theater as no where else. And furthermore, I think musical theater is the last arena in which real songwriting values are still prized. And as an old-fashioned songwriter, I really appreciate that. Also, no where else can you have Peter Pears sing a song about bedbugs, so there's that.

10. What's the next big thing we should be looking for from Gabriel Kahane?

Hmm... Well, my new album, *Where Are the Arms*, is going to be released this fall. You should be hearing more about that relatively soon. And then I'm writing a sort of companion piece to *Orinoco Sketches* which is going to be more of an examination of what Jewish émigrés did with regard to the adoption of America slash abandonment of Judaism. It'll be almost twice as long as *Orinoco Sketches*, and will probably draw both on my Grandmother's diaries (as in *Orinoco Sketches*) but also on the experience of my parents and even myself. Sort of a summit on the American Jewish experience?



All photos by: Josh Goleman

contact

Management, please contact:

Alicia J. Rose

Phone: 503.793.8126

E-mail: ajr@alaiciajrosethography.com

Booking, please contact:

Christianna LaBuz

Woodgrain Music

Phone: 734.834.9920

E-mail: christianna@woodgrainmusic.com

Publicity, please contact:

Matt Hanks

Shore Fire Media

32 Court Street, Suite 1600

Brooklyn, NY 11201

Phone: 718.522.7171

E-mail: mhanks@shorefire.com

Publishing, please contact:

Bill Holab

Bill Holab Music

377 Sterling Place, No. 4

Brooklyn, NY 11238

Phone: 718.499.3946

E-mail: bill@holabmusic.com