

**gabriel kahane**  
COMPOSER / PERFORMER



Photo by: Jen Snow

# biography

Born in Los Angeles in 1981, composer and performer Gabriel Kahane is a peerless musical polymath, invested equally in the worlds of concert, theater and popular music.

Launched by his 2006 song cycle *Craigslustlieder*—heard frequently in august concert halls and dirty bars alike--Kahane's rapid ascent as a composer of concert works comes into focus in the 2010-2011 season, which witnesses the premieres of three commissioned works: *The Red Book*, a string quartet for the Kronos Quartet inspired by Anne Carson's *Autobiography of Red*; a hybrid cello sonata/song cycle for cellist Alisa Weilerstein and himself; and a large chamber work for the Los Angeles Philharmonic, to be conducted by John Adams and performed on the orchestra's *Green Umbrella* series. Other concert works include the chamber song cycle *For the Union Dead* on poems by Robert Lowell; the *Piano Sonata* for Natasha Paremski; and *Django: Tiny Variations on a Big Dog*, written for his father, pianist Jeffrey Kahane, and heard in its New York premiere at Lincoln Center's Alice Tully Hall to great critical success.

As a performer, Kahane moves with ease between musical realms. His self-titled debut album, featuring performances by Sam Amidon, Sufjan Stevens and Chris Thile, was released in 2008 and will be followed up by a second LP in the fall of 2010. Among his various credits as a performer, he has appeared with

Rufus Wainwright on Elvis Costello's *Spectacle*, sung lieder with pianists Jonathan Biss and Jeremy Denk, and has, as a pianist, joined bass-baritone Thomas Quasthoff in recital throughout Europe. The spring of 2010 finds Kahane on a tour of his own music with multi-instrumentalist Rob Moose and the ensemble yMusic, beginning and ending in New York City on Lincoln Center's acclaimed American Songbook series and later in a live broadcast from Merkin Hall for WNYC's *New Sounds Live*.

Much in demand as a theater composer, Kahane was commissioned to write music and lyrics for *February House*, currently in development at The Public Theater, where he was named the inaugural Musical Theater Fellow in 2008. Four-time Tony Award winner Audra McDonald has performed and plans to record a song from that show for her upcoming album for Nonesuch Records. Kahane has also received commissions from the Signature Theater in Arlington, Virginia and the Williamstown Theater Festival, which produced his show *Caravan Man* in 2007.

A 2010 MacDowell Colony fellow and 2009 composer-in-residence at the Orcas Island Chamber Music Festival, Kahane makes his home in Brooklyn, New York, in close company with a century-old piano and many books.

# quotes

“ 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*

“ THERE IS NOBODY ELSE IN 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.”

— *Prefix Magazine*

“ 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.”

— *The 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*

“ WHERE FEW LISTENERS THESE DAYS CAN ACTUALLY hear the song of themselves in Schubert lieder, Kahane is telling us the simple and tragic stories of a life we can comprehend using just as much poetry.”

— *NewMusicBox*

“ EXCEPT FOR A STRONGLY ETCHED RACHMANINOFF group, which closed the recital, [Jeffrey] Kahane devoted the second half of his program to an appealing sampling of new works. The most striking, if only for the virtuosity and varied stylistic sensibility it demanded, was “Django: Tiny Variations on a Big Dog” (2009), a work by his son, Gabriel Kahane. (Django is Jeffrey Kahane’s dog.) Brief as it is, the piece takes an imaginative, finger-twisting route from 12-tone to ragtime, and Mr. Kahane played it dazzlingly.”

— *The New York Times*

# 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.

## Honestly Sincere

By Zachary Woolfe

*March 2, 2010*

Gabriel Kahane is trying to be less sincere. Which is hard for him. Irony isn't his posture of choice. He refers to his songs as his children. He tweets things like "in love with Los Angeles" and "there are a lot of attractive people in Williamsburg, as well as delicious dumplings." He says that he's like a walking shadow in Park Slope, where he's lived for six years, and he means it. His 2008 self-titled debut album contains conspicuously emotional lyrics--"I want to watch them tear down that building with you / And watch them watch you tear me down too"--and he means them, too.

Mr. Kahane, who is 28 years old, has already achieved considerable success as a composer of both classical music and musical theater. His 2006 song cycle, *Craig's Listlieder*--he's more successful being half-ironic in his classical compositions--was a breakthrough hit; he's currently working on commissions for the Los Angeles Philharmonic, the Kronos Quartet and the cellist Alisa Weilerstein; and, next week, the Public Theater will be work-shopping his new musical about a building in Brooklyn Heights that housed, among others, W.H. Auden,

Benjamin Britten, Carson McCullers and Gypsy Rose Lee.

The classical and theater work is going great, but the harder nut to crack has been gaining wider recognition for his artful, erudite and unabashedly sentimental pop songs. Which is why he has been waging a war on his own sincerity as he records his second album, due out early next year. While his classical, theater and pop projects feed each other, their different audiences have very different expectations, about earnestness and other things. He was especially stung that Gabriel Kahane didn't get the kind of traction he had hoped for, and he thinks he knows why.

"I really feel very emotionally connected to the first record," Mr. Kahane said recently in an interview with *The Observer* at a cafe near his apartment, "but the degree to which it's sincere is alienating to a lot of people. I guess just because it feels out of step with the highly ironized hipster culture."

Mr. Kahane is small and scruffy, with a mass of dirty blond curls and tight burgundy pants. He'd been out late the night before with his cousin, who was in town DJ-ing a Fashion Week party at the W, and he was hung over. He vented his frustration with some of the reaction to the first album (Pitchfork gave it a 5.1 and lethally concluded, "Gabriel Kahane is an NPR programmer's wet dream").

"The thing is," he said, "in the theater world and the concert music world, nobody gives a fuck if you're sincere. That's not

talked about, there aren't these fascistic rules about irony and the New Sincerity and so on and so forth. And it's just like, it takes up so much brain space and emotional energy to think about that. I'm just fucking tired of it. I'm tired of wasting my energy thinking about that rather than writing the most beautiful music I can write."

It's the undeniable beauty of Mr. Kahane's music that makes the sincerity of the first album—not to mention its casually dropped literary references and elevated diction, and his airy, seductive voice—not just palatable but pleasurable. Simultaneously guileless and melancholy, the songs have the easy grace of pop standards. They're naturals for Lincoln Center's American Songbook series, which programs contemporary singer-songwriters like Sufjan Stevens and Neko Case alongside Broadway and cabaret artists interpreting the greats of the past.

Mr. Kahane will play a mixture of old and new songs on Wednesday night at the Allen Room. The show will be a good opportunity to see whether, and how, he has altered his style; but it won't be able to answer the question of whether there's a mass audience out there for Gabriel Kahane, Indie Rock Star. And, despite the concert commissions and musical theater work, there's a sense that that's what Mr. Kahane wants to be more than anything.

He's certainly never lacked for confidence. It was a combination, he said, of "undiagnosed A.D.D. and hubris" that led to his failing out of high school. He ended up, GED in hand, at

Brown. (There was a girl involved.) While he wrote songs and played jazz piano, he tended bar to make rent, notably at Siberia, a gross and massive place by the Port Authority where a bartender once took a shit behind the bar. He landed some music directing gigs, played the piano on tour with Mark Morris and then got the idea for *Craigslustlied*.

All the while, he's been in Park Slope. Things could be better right now in Mr. Kahane's domestic life. Specifically, there are mice, which are giving new fuel to his long-standing desire to move to quieter, cheaper Ditmas Park. After all, there's a lot of baggage that accumulates around a neighborhood you've lived in for a while. There are the girls Mr. Kahane dated, the girls he didn't, the old and new boyfriends of each. "There are a lot of ghosts in the hood," he said, sincerely. And at the end of the day, there's no separating Gabriel Kahane from his sincerity.

Recalling a story about the Hungarian composer Béla Bartók, he said, "In the '30s, Bartók saw these currents, you know, he's a few feet in the ocean and the current's going this way and that, and he had the strength and resolve and courage to keep doing what he was doing. Most of the music being made around him has been forgotten, and even though he sort of perceived himself as an anachronism at the time, he's not anymore. His music could not be any more contemporary than it is now. I have struggles with confidence and self-esteem, but when I'm having a good day, I really believe in what I do and I believe in the integrity of what I do. And I think I just want to get out there more and play."



Photo by: Matt Licari

# 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 — “Craigslitlieder,” 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 “Craigslitlieder” easier to appreciate than some of Mr. Kahane’s more vulnerable, emotionally direct pop songs.)

One of Mr. Kahane’s “Craigslitlieder” 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.”



Photo by: Jen Snow

# THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

## A Changing of the Guard

Sons of classical composers are a different breed

By Greg Sandow

*October 18, 2008*

Not long ago, Lukas Ligeti -- a classical composer -- got up at a concert and said that he isn't only a composer. He's also a drummer, and he especially loves African music. So he'd toured around Africa with bands playing African pop. We were about to hear a piece of his, one that he said reflected all of this. He was especially glad, he said, that the group that would play the piece -- the Bang on a Can All-Stars, based in New York -- could easily handle pop and African rhythms, as well as complexities that come from the classical side. The group's guitarist, Mark Stewart, also played in Paul Simon's band, Mr. Ligeti said. As most of us know, Mr. Simon, ever since his great album "Graceland," has written songs with an African beat. So Mr. Stewart was perfect for Mr. Ligeti's piece.

Musicians who play with him are completely devoted. From the other side of the pop-classical fence, indie rock star Sufjan Stevens shows up as a sideman. Something really good is starting to happen here, and it's well worth checking out.

And there we have a melting pot of musical traits, classical, pop and African, not uncommon, these days, in classical composition. But now add something else, that Mr. Ligeti's father, Györgi Ligeti, was, up to his death in 2006, one of the world's absolutely top classical composers, a titan of the generation that came to prominence after World War II. So now what we've got is a changing of the guard, a father-son progression that shows how classical composing has changed (though Ligeti the elder sometimes also wrote music that showed an African influence, expressed, however, at a greater distance and with more restraint).

And the Ligetis aren't alone in their parade of generations. Jeffrey Kahane, a notable pianist and music director of the Colorado Symphony, has a son named Gabriel who just released an album that hangs on the edge between classical music and singer/songwriter pop. Mr. Kahane, too, released an album this year. How do these records compare?

Well, of course Mr. Ligeti's album -- "Afrikan Machinery," on the Tadzik label (also downloadable from iTunes and Amazon) -- sounds more African. It sounds very African, in fact, with rhythms and a kind of outgoing verve that anyone who's heard African music will immediately recognize. Though the rhythms grow wildly complex, as if African music had been chopped and split apart, and the pieces reassembled at odd angles to each other.

But still there's a typically African sense of community in each of the album's six- to 13-minute tracks. Almost all of the

music, as it happens, is performed live, but with electronic enhancements that let Mr. Ligeti start something going, and then have it continue on its own while he starts something else. So many things happen at once, and the resulting tangle sounds like the life of a community. One track, "Great Circle's Tune I," made me think of an open market where craftspeople work (loudly) with metal, while a passerby strolls through it all, whistling. Other tracks sound like narratives, with shifting scenes, or with people (in the form of recorded voices) coming and going, sounding on one of the tracks as if they're tuning radios to stations lost in the ether. It's absorbing to hear, from start to finish.

[Lukas Ligeti] Chris Woltmann

Mr. Kahane's self-titled album (also downloadable from iTunes and Amazon) might at first strike you as pure pop, of a sophisticated kind, sung in a husky and supple purely pop voice. You can't miss its sincerity; Mr. Kahane is wry, at times, but very serious.

What's classical, though, is the instrumental accompaniment, featuring classical instruments (strings, brass, winds), along with Mr. Kahane's piano and light pop drums. 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.

There are also obvious classical references -- a little fugue for strings that shows up at one point as an interlude and also a Bach chorale (a hymn tune harmonized by Bach), with deft decorations that Mr. Kahane adds on the piano. The chorale then shows up at the start of the next track, soberly played by the brass.

Sometimes it's all a bit much. The lyrics -- always about things in life that don't quite work out -- are oblique; they never quite say what they mean. And against that, the music sometimes has a bit too much going on, so the whole can seem less than the sum of its parts. A simpler, country-style song toward the end of the album, "Villanelles," comes as a welcome relief.

But there's no denying the talent involved, or the very deep feeling, or the blend of styles that, at its best, seems uncanny. I've seen classical-music professionals go into ecstasies when Mr. Kahane sings these songs live, and the young classical musicians who play with him are completely devoted. From the other side of the pop-classical fence, indie rock star Sufjan Stevens shows up as a sideman. Something really good is starting to happen here, and it's well worth checking out.



Photo by: Jen Snow



## 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.”

---

# NEW YORK

---

## The Ditmas Park Crew

A group of classically trained musicians is remaking pop in their own image.

By Rebecca Milzoff

*November 2, 2008*

Gabriel Kahane does not suffer from artistic schizophrenia, his current slate of projects notwithstanding. There's the piano sonata he's composing; the "arts-presentery" musical genealogy of his family he's writing; a fellowship with the Public Theater to write a show based on the book *February House*; and, of course, the tour for his self-titled new album, which showcases his warm tenor in a set of immaculate pop songs. It's a sound that speaks to the company he keeps—a group of music-school graduates (in Kahane's case, a year at New England Conservatory, then Brown) who, as he puts it, are "making themselves indispensable" to all sorts of musicians. There's Rob Moose, a jack-of-all-strings on speed dial for Antony and the Johnsons, Beth Orton, and the Orchestra of St. Luke's, among countless others; Shara Worden, who's putting her opera degree to use as the singer of *My Brightest*

*Diamond*; and winds player Hideaki Aomori and his Juilliard mate, trumpeter C.J. Camerieri, who play with Moose on Kahane's album. The silent partner of the crew, Sufjan Stevens (Moose introduced him to Kahane), has played with each of the above at one point or another.

These musicians aren't playing with rock bands to pay the bills, says Kahane. "They genuinely believe in everything they're doing." But there's also a sense that classical avenues can be confining. "I'd see people in major orchestras," Moose ventures, "and they seemed a little ... jaded? I don't want to feel that way about music." The mini-family of musicians is paving the way toward a more expansive definition of pop. "The idea that there are no rules," says Kahane. "More broadly, this generation of musicians are just finding their outlet, and it's not playing assistant principal in X Orchestra."

Ditmas Park—the quiet, decidedly un-sceney Brooklyn neighborhood the musicians have adopted as their creative base—is the physical manifestation of their music, providing an escape from parts of the city that feel trendy and creatively overextended. The crew often hangs at Camerieri's "really awesome" house. Recently, Kahane recalls, some of the group "listened to the slow movement of *Opus 132*, Beethoven, on vinyl at three in the morning, and it was so fucking beautiful." He still grudgingly lives in Park Slope. "When you're down here, it's incredibly intoxicating. It's just, do you have the courage to move really far away from convenience?"



Photo by: Matt Licari



# 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 Cuts the Genre Cord

By Molly Sheridan

*September 22, 2008*

The list of guest artists gracing Gabriel Kahane's new self-titled album reads like a Who's Who of great indie/classical/pop/chamber wherever-you-want-to-file-it performers. Sam Amidon, Rob Moose, CJ Camerieri, Chris Thile, Sam Sadigursky, Sufjan Stephens. The inquiring mind just has to know: Did Kahane post a "desperately seeking" ad on the right bulletin boards, or do these guys all just happen to drink at the same Brooklyn bar?

"Well, there is actually a restaurant in Ditmas Park called The Farm where we do tend to congregate," Kahane confesses through his laughter. More accurately, however, he says the musicians involved are linked by a shared creative impulse. "If you're interested in making music that is sort of genre-less or if you want to shuffle between the concert music world and playing pop songs and playing for different kinds of audiences, I think naturally you're going to gravitate towards this community of musicians."

Photo by: Paula Court



From there, the road to inspired collaboration is not so long, and the mixed-genre aesthetics the group shares paradoxically paint the perimeter of a chic, if loosely defined, emerging scene all its own. And whether trained at Juilliard or in a childhood bedroom, participation is hardly dictated by a musician's C.V. As Kahane tells it, "You just tend to meet people at shows or whatever and then you hand them a CD and say, 'Hey, want to play a show at The Living Room?' And then one thing leads to another, and you're making a record."

Maybe it's the pressures of current culture, maybe it's personal experience—Kahane did a year at the New England Conservatory before transferring to Brown—but he actually comes down fairly hard on the conservatory model for training young musical artists. "Conservatories tend to neglect the global nature of what it means to be an artist, that is to say making art that is a sounding board for what's going on in the world," he explains. "To me the idea of making music in a vacuum, where it's just about the notes on the page, is obviously really unappealing."

Notes on the page aren't even necessary depending on the complexity of the passage and the limits of his memory. The performers themselves walk into the studio with a huge range of previous technical and musical experience, and he then takes it as his job to devise a method for communicating with each of them. It's all tucked neatly under the music in the end, and the results make for some exceptionally sophisticated pop, if that's the lens you look at it through, and some unusually addictive

art song if those are the glasses you're more at home wearing. Kahane's own mash-up of approaches is most striking when he throws complex musical ideas against straightforward lyrical storytelling. And his lines often feel intimately personal, though he clarifies that "it's all to a certain extent fiction—but to sort of borrow a cliché from writer's workshops, it's all in the service of truth." That said, his Craigslistlieder, an eight-part song cycle currently available on his website, was developed entirely from actual classified listings—want ads from people seeking everything from a roommate to forgiveness. "Neurotic and Lonely," for example, is a post from a 20-year-old guy living with his parents while dealing with emotional issues and longing for love with a beautiful woman, preferably one who also owns the video game system he also seeks.

It's heartbreaking, and Kahane works it for all it's worth. "I get the sense that the kid was being utterly sincere, and I think it's what makes that particular movement of the cycle particularly poignant. It's one of those instances of humor emerging from something that is depressingly honest."

It's an honesty he continues to slip into the songs on his current album in small, fierce ways. Where few listeners these days can actually hear the song of themselves in Schubert lieder, Kahane is telling us the simple and tragic stories of a life we can comprehend using just as much poetry. "We bought each other hardback books/inscribed them with ice cream that dripped while we ate" he sings in "Villanelles", "but petrified by your writerly looks/I simply wrote XO love Gabe."



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 *Craigslustlieder* 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.

## contact

Booking, please contact:

James Egelhofer

IMG Artists

Carnegie Hall Tower

152 West 57th Street, 5th Floor

New York, NY 10019

Phone: 212.994.3507

E mail: [jegelhofer@imgartists.com](mailto:jegelhofer@imgartists.com)

Publicity, please contact:

Amanda Ameer

First Chair Promotion

3333 Broadway – D23B

New York, NY 10031

Phone: 212.368.5949

E mail: [amanda@firstchairpromo.com](mailto:amanda@firstchairpromo.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](mailto:bill@holabmusic.com)