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Joel Friedman in conversation with Frank J. Oteri

Recently, Frank J. Oteri (editor of AMC's New Music Box's editor and well known new music writier) had the opportunity to speak with Joel about his work, philosphy and life.

Chapter 1.

"Parking Your Ego at the Door"

FJO: The one thing that seems to connect all the very different kinds of music you do, is the openness to the collaborative process: whether it's writing show music with a lyricist or working with a director, with actors, or sort of a multi-media thing, working with dance, or working with a film maker, or even in the process of writing a piece of classical music, like writing a concerto where the soloist has to be a star, maybe even more so than the composer. You're willing to share the limelight, and even get creative fuel from it.

JF: It's interesting because I think you have to park your ego at the door in trying to do any kind of collaboration. I don't think of composing as Moses coming down from the mountaintop with the tablets! Yes, I know what I want, I can get opinionated, I can get pissed off when somebody says something I think is wrong. But, on the other hand, I like input from other people. It's exciting and it fuels and focuses my creativity. . . and I can't claim to know all the ideas, all the best ideas. So therefore whether it's a lyricist, a director, a soloist, or choreographer, it is interesting to get other perspectives. Sometimes it's as simple as it is right in front of your face and it takes the other person to say "don't you see it's that!".

FJO: So you're willing to bend for the sake of the better end result?

JF: Yes, absolutely, whether it's working with the musician who'll say: "I know what you want, but listen to the way it sounds as you've written it. Now if you try it this way. . . " Or a director who might say, "Yes, but the audience won't catch that. . . " No matter how much you write, there will always be parts that in your head or on paper work, but in reality they don't. And so the question is, what gives? I can say to the performer "No, it's your fault", but you work with really good people, like a Susan Narucki or a Fred Sherry, and chances are if they say "Don't do that" they're right, don't do that. Something's got to give. Either the concept remains the same, and the details change (e.g. the musical notes, fingerings, the chord voicings, etc.), or I've got to be willing to modify my concept: this is what

the instrument does best, or this is what the sound, not paper result is, and therefore my original idea isn't valid. The process is both exciting and difficult. But often better things come out that way. I like getting the input.

FJO: To take this back then to the very beginning, to your training. . . you went to two different universities. . .

JF: Right. . .

FJO: You went to official music school university and you went to rock 'n' roll university. . . right. . .

JF: [J laugh]: Right. . . Actually, you could say four different universities: you can throw both jazz and musical theater in the mix as well.

FJO: Yeah, And in the official music school university they teach you that Moses came down from the Mountaintop. . .

JF: Yes.

FJO: And "Oh we're writing really complex music and people don't understand it, but hey, people didn't understand Beethoven quartets when they were first written , and the world will one day catch up". And Rock 'n' Roll university says "Ok we've got this set list, you've got a small group of guys together and what can we do best with their abilities. Everybody is part of that process [JF: Right. . .], and the group creates the musical auteurship."

JF: Right. And the creation is much more visceral. And the feedback is much more visceral, much more immediate. But, I have to add that there is a difference between collaborating, bouncing ideas off each other, and being a full co-author. Brahms relied on Joachim for advice but it's still Brahms' violin concerto! One of the things I actually love about rock 'n' roll, pop, and theater is the combination of how immediate the result is both internally (for me), as well as potentially externally (for the audience). The communication is so direct, something I think it's important not to lose in a symphony or in a rock song. And also, there really is no place to "hide," because it's a known language whose building blocks are simpler, when something is wrong, whether it's the composition or the performance, it's much more obvious. . . and there's something very refreshing about that. It keeps you honest and less self-indulgent. Sort of a system of "checks and balances."

Chapter 2.

"A Jigsaw Puzzle with Overlapping Pieces"

FJO: Yet, that said, you write music for the concert hall, that aspires to be part of the so-called "classical music tradition", that is the world you come from. . .

JF: That's very true. I very happily think of my work as a continuation and expansion of that tradition. But my work is very much a jigsaw puzzle with a number of different overlapping pieces: concert, theater, etc. Sometimes too many pieces! It is interesting that a number of my pieces have been revised, I'm very big, maybe too big, on revising things. I thrive on the feedback from the rehearsal process and performance - whether it comes from the performers, the audience, friends, or from myself internally. The realization, after hearing, feeling a work, that something just doesn't work as planned, It is amazing how every tiny flaw seems magnified in performance. So, when I sense that something it wrong, I go back and I fix. For example: Elastic Band, (scored for clarinet, string quartet and percussion, kind of the "Mozart Quintet with a twist"), has not only undergone some revisions in the outer movements, but I recently took the whole middle movement out and replaced it. I did some stuff with What Living Do (a setting of Marie Howe's poem recorded by Susan Narucki and Alan Feinberg). It's a remarkable poem, about Marie's brother Johnny dying of AIDS, but cast in everyday, not melodramatic images: the wind on my face reminds me I am alive, and you're not. But, it's really, really long. I felt there was a section where the text setting and dramatic pacing were too slow, so I took advantage of a series of upcoming performances by Susan and Alan did a rewrite. Pas de Deux, my cello and piano piece, is probably the most extreme example of revision. It was a 13-minute piece that I was never happy with. I liked the idea of what it should do but I didn't feel it did it, or did it well. So about six or seven years after writing the piece I finally got a chance to have another whack at it and it ended up being a 22-minute piece. It's one of my more lyrical works and now it's much more rich, varied, dark, and nuanced than before. A much better piece, I think.

FJO: Wow, so the other thing happened. . . it got longer. . .

JF: Yeah, it could go either way, because it's a question of "does the piece do what it's supposed to" in a very clear, interesting, hopefully very succinct way. I think writing for the theater teaches you that lesson.

FJO: You made me think of something I have never thought about before as

a composer, whenever I play a piece when no one's around, time is suspended and it goes by really quickly. Whenever I play a piece and there's an audience around, and that audience could be just somebody hearing it or it could be somebody in a hall, and it could me playing it or anybody playing it, time is also suspended but it feels slower.

JF: Yes, absolutely. It always makes me feel that every flaw is magnified!

FJO: That's a strange thing. Getting back to the notion of music being created for something rather that being created in its exalted form of tablets coming down. We have this whole tradition of going to a concert; it's almost like going to a religious service, to a synagogue or to a church, and we sit there to worship the pieces of music. But in fact that's not what music is.

JF: Right, I mean there are definitely pieces that do that, there are moments in Mahler that feel like an unearthly religious experience, but, I agree with you, whether it's the presentation or the actual piece, it should be more intimate, more earthy, and definitely more approachable. That's what Bernstein excelled in doing. I learned this lesson from him and from teaching non music majors, teaching music appreciation, lots of kids who haven't heard much live music of any sort, whether it is rap, rock, let alone classical. They were so put off by the protocol of classical concerts. Although oddly enough, ALL concerts do have their own protocol. Ever wonder how people know when to light their lighters? The students couldn't understand why the musicians weren't looking at them or smiling; why they don't talk to them. They thought the musicians were real snotty, and they also felt intimidated- they didn't know when to clap and why they had to be quiet.

FJO: So to bring this back to you then, as a composer, and I thought of this a lot, I was a high school teacher for four years not teaching music, I taught ESL and English in East New York, Brooklyn, and it was a real hard time for a composer, I hardly work anything and so I thought "why am I composing?" It really made me question that.

JF: Right. You're supposed to say: "because I have to!"

FJO: And, it makes me ask you the whole thing of, what you perceive of as an ideal listener? Who do you want to hear this music? Is it for the standard concert hall goer, or is it for a larger world beyond that?

JF: Both. I think one of the characteristics of me, and perhaps my music, is

a sort of straddling, of being part of different worlds. Sometimes I would love to have this ideal, or idealized educated audience of all musicians (all versions of me?) who could sit there and contemplate the structure and details of my piece. Yet, there are few things worse for us composers than to have our works performed for a room full of just composers. It's just death, and. . .

FJO: Especially since none of them would do it in the same way so. . . even your closest allies are going to think, "Well, I would have made that E-flat into a D natural". . .

JF: Yeah, exactly, and then you get into all the questions of aesthetics, and that some people just refuse to allow other things besides what they like. That's when I want to live with the "non-experts." In a way I like the rough and tumble aspect of music being outside its different little worlds. I'm not a Berg or Beethoven, but I prefer to be there with them, and with their sort of audience, as opposed to being relegated to just the new music community. Even though I love new music concerts, the ensembles and everything else, I think of myself very much as part of the continuation of a tradition. I think of myself as someone who is continuing traits of different kinds of music and still working within them.

FJO: At this point, at the early 21st century in New York City, there are many musical traditions that shape anybody who is seriously thinking about making music, and they are not limited to European classical traditions. We had a century of Broadway musicals, and that's a tradition. [JF: Yeah. . .] We had a century of jazz improvisation, that's a tradition. We've had half a century of rock group recordings, that's a tradition. You're younger than all of these things, so all of those musics are "classical" music to you [JF: Right. . .], in a way.

JF: Yes and each of these musics has also now reached the stage of "arteriosclerosis." There is now so much "Great History" behind them, even in rock, that there's a real danger of clogged arteries - the pipeline for the future is closed off by all the great past stuff! "Classic Rock," "Classic Jazz," "Classical Music," the "Golden Age of Musical Theater". . . It's funny, in a way, to go to Tower Records and buy a scholarly-boxed set not of Bach but of Hendrix! But as for the musical mix, I have my mother to thank. What I heard growing up was Beethoven, Charlie Parker, and The Beatles. So they were my "Three Bs." And there wasn't a sense of one thing being higher or better than the other. All of this music, for me, still has a very visceral, immediate emotional quality, and that's certainly something that is important to me. It is also really well crafted. Again, maybe this is the

straddling kind of thing: straddling influences and genres, the "mundane" and the esoteric; straddling the emotionally visceral and the intellectual. It's a balancing act: I'm really into the craft of composing, but, while the mechanics of the piece are crucial, they're crucial for me, not for the audience. There has to be something about the work itself that can grab the audience. Granted there are all sorts of ways of doing that. It's fine to do things that are esoteric as long as they sound. I had a teacher who once said "The problem with most music is it aims either too high or too low." The key is finding the middle: a fusion of mind and heart. You can look at Beethoven or Bach, who is an even more frightening example and see/hear how incredibly constructed the music is. But yes, unless you're talking about the intense canons and sort of study pieces, there's a lot of Bach that is sheerly beautiful, sensual, etc. So trying to capture both ends, going down the middle and grabbing parts of both "sides." That's very important to me. It's also a very intuitive process. I hope all these different musics show up in my music in very intuitive ways. I try not to make a big deal out of this, to make it too labored or obvious. For me, it's been a process of quietly realizing that all of this stuff is in me and that I can let it out, take advantage of it, let it all quietly meld together. I don't think of myself really as a revolutionary in composing, and if I were to be a revolutionary it would be like Debussy with a silk brush. Lots of great composers explode the world, "man the ramparts," and it's wonderful. But I'm not sure if I'm one of those composers who in an overt, obvious way is setting off fireworks and explosions. I'm more of a synthesizer than an explorer. I think. . .

FJO: In the long run, it's the subversive revolutionaries who make the lasting changes. . . Robespierre ultimately changed nothing in France. Gorbachev is what caused change for Russia, the Soviet Union collapsed from within, not from somebody throwing a bomb. That rarely happens.

JF: True. While there's always a tempting catharsis in "tearing the system down" the interesting question for me is: "and now what?" I think it's harder, and more satisfying, to build. Hey, I grew up in the 60's.

FJO: Whether it's politics or music, most of the people who tore down the system, wound up creating their own system which is just as rigid, if not more so. . . you know, whether it's Lenin, or Robert Mugabe in Zimbabwe or. . . Schoenberg [laugh]. . .

JF: Yeah. . .

FJO: Or even Cage. . .

JF: Yeah, right, you have to roll the dice.

FJO: In a way music can become its own sort of religious orthodoxy. But growing up in a polyglot environment of Beethoven, Bird and The Beatles, all of whom combine sophistication with audience awareness on a very high level. . . but for very different audiences, and through very different structures, but all very structural, very worked out stuff. Are there differences between musical styles that are valid? Can you say at this point "oh this is the good stuff, this is the vernacular stuff, this is obviously the sacred high art"?

JF: That's tough. I have a hard time with the "high" and "low" categories. Are there differences or not? Part of me still can't get over treating pop music in a scholarly fashion. But, you can see that it started with classical stuff, then went to jazz and theater, and now it's blues and rock, even disco. It seems a bit ridiculous but I guess it's about respect for the work, which is a good thing. I often feel I'm caught between the worlds, pop and classical. I have sympathy for both sides of the argument. I love the tradition of Classical music and hate seeing it marginalized by the sheer economic weight and volume of that "800 pound gorilla" - pop. But, I love a lot of pop too. Perhaps it's more a case of function and purpose for music and we only get in trouble when we confuse these functions - dance versus contemplation, for example - and apply them to the "wrong" music. Beethoven's Op. 111 ain't ever gonna be as "big" as "Good Vibrations." But, I basically want it all. I want music to co-exist as opposed to being in competition. But I do think there are differences and the shifting of gears between the worlds can be treacherous for either the creator of the listener. I had a set of songs performed at both Miller Theater and then about 4 days later at a small theater as part of a Golden Fleece Chamber Opera concert. The same performers did the same three songs at Miller Theater with a room full of composers and then at Golden Fleece for a room full of more or less musical theater people. At Miller it was a little bit like, I was talking about Rachmaninoff or Tchaikovsky to Charles Wuorinen.

FJO: [Laugh]

JF: Okay, then, 4 days later. . .

FJO: You became Charles Wuorinen. . . talking to Tchaikovsky. . .

JF: Yeah. . . [FJO: Big Laugh]. . . I literally had an audience member coming up to me accusing me of being Schoenberg, "Why did I write that

Schoenberg music?" I know that there are unfortunately some things about classical music - the length of pieces, the complexities of the forms and texture, the materials - that cannot work necessarily with a rock audience in many cases. And there certainly is a difference between a 45-minute symphony and a 4-minute song. Both can be gems, but there unquestionably is a difference. . . there certainly seems to be in the audience's expectations! Still, I guess I like the tension created trying to straddle both sides.

Chapter 3.

"Multiple Interpretations Are Wonderful"

FJO: Let's talk again about the composer as an authoritarian figure versus the composer as a facilitator, the composer as a facilitator really comes out in the collaborative process. . .

JF: Yeah, absolutely. Again it goes back to the idea that, first of all, I would just do solo performance, or electronic music, if I didn't need performers. But I need performers and part of the reason is because they bring things to my work that I wouldn't have thought of myself. And the idea that there are multiple possibilities, multiple interpretations of a work is wonderful. I'm always open to any different interpretation, provided they can convince me that it is valid. Like everyone I've had some really "bad" interpretations, where the performers just didn't get it at all. But you have to take chances and you have to let players do their jobs. Even with Bartok, who often specified the exact timings of his works, different recordings of the same work have different timings, which means different interpretations. People find things in a piece and then they make themselves a director, as if the piece were a play, and say "this is what the piece is about, this is what it means to me", and sure you can go overboard, and you can make bad choices that are self aggrandizing and not honest to the work. But if the musician comes to a work, brings what they have to the table, and they're technically good, they're sincere, they're intelligent, I think that's an incredible thing. And there've been times when I've been knocked back on my heels and thought, "wow, that's not what I thought it was about, but I thought that's really cool."

FJO: Right.

JF: What a great thing.

FJO: Oh, you know what, we say "oh Beethoven is a sublime composer",

but part of why Beethoven is so wonderful is because he makes other people sound good. He makes the people who are playing him sound good. He gives people a platform in which to excel. And that's true of any music that's worth its salt.

JF: Right. Although you can writer music that flatters the performer but isn't good music! It also brings up an interesting little side point: difficulties in performance. I think, hearing and looking at what I write you would never mistake it for Wuorinen or Fernyhough. Theirs is a perfectly fine aesthetic, which I appreciate and respect, but it's not mine. You look at their work and you say "wow this is difficult!", you talk to performers who excel in that, it's a wonderful, incredible challenge for them to get inside that kind of music. Much to my surprise, some performers have found similar difficulties in performing my own works. Looks can be deceiving. Some of the difficulties are the usual "this passage is really hard," but sometimes there is something else at work. I think it goes back to what I was saying about "not hiding," writing works that are, hopefully, clear and emotionally visceral. It demands a lot of a musician. I think there is a difference between the challenges facing a performer doing a Carter premiere and those facing a late Beethoven Sonata. One problem is obvious: to really understand a work, not just play the mostly correct notes, you need to spend six months with it, just like many do with a Brahms Sonata. But can you imagine spending that much time with a piece of new music? I want the performer to be the director: "this is my interpretation." I also demand that the performers be totally emotionally committed to the music, I push them, which is draining (think of how players feel finishing a Mahler Symphony). There's also the problem of style. It is really hard to get classically trained musicians to swing or groove and that's important in some of my pieces. There's a certain feel to the way rhythms lie and interlock, the ways in which attacks and timbre interact. And again, if I use and combine musical languages that are somewhat familiar there is a level of exposure that makes it really obvious when a performance doesn't happen. Not to say that these aren't the same issues that a Babbitt faces, but there the musical language is still more novel, and the technical difficulties are so much more obvious that it's hard not to congratulate yourself for just finishing a piece.

FJO: Well in terms of getting it, not getting it, you know, that was a comment you made before, and in a way getting it is being part of today's society, growing up today and hearing the polyglot influence is that it influenced you, it may need to be there for the performers as well. Now you were saying, you were at Miller, and all these composers were saying "now what's this Rachmaninoff, this pop music", and you go to the more

pop outlet and they're saying "what's this Schoenberg", and in a way, anybody who is really thinking of music at this point and time is somewhere in between.

JF: Yes.

FJO: Because there's all this stuff going on, I'm just like flipping randomly through the pages of the Elastic Band here and it's a really, really cool piece, and you have a direction on p.49 that said "with a funk feel". You know, that's not something you're going to see in a Wuorinen score.

JF: No. Elastic Band is meant to be a fun, funky piece. There's a bit of Earth, Wind, & Fire in it! As I mentioned, it's actually something that's really hard to get, less so now, but it's really hard to get hard-core classical musicians to do: be funky. Thankfully, people our age and younger have experienced and played in jazz and rock bands etc., but, I mean, one of the biggest issues of Elastic Band isn't some of the ensemble difficulties in the third movement, although they might be difficult, it's the feel of the different rhythmic patterns throughout the piece.

FJO: Right.

JF: . . . and trying to get a string section, a string quartet to do that is hard, it's about feel, rhythmic feel, which also comes from timbre, the sound, and it's about doing things that many classical players were told not to do. The training that a lot of conservatory musicians received, and somewhat still receive, doesn't work for pieces like this. There are performances of my works that I'm very unhappy with because, while it was technically competent and even wonderful, in a way they didn't "get it." And I would've preferred if they could have a little more dirt and a few more mistakes and let the shirt tails hang out, "sell the piece," tell me what it's about, let me understand it viscerally, emotionally , even if you screw up some stuff. Imagine going to a play and seeing an actor just recite all the correct words without conviction and meaning. We wouldn't congratulate them for not mispronouncing the words! We'd scream that the performance was a bore!

Chapter 4.

Musicals, Operas, Revues and "Revuesicals"

FJO: This gets us to the question of vocal music, theater, opera, music theater vs. opera. Is there a difference between opera and musical theater?. . . This is a question that has haunted me for my whole life, and I know it must haunt you; you flow in both of those worlds.

JF: Right. They both can be wonderful, if handled well. I guess in a nutshell, musical theater is word-driven and not music-driven, and that's its strength as well as its weakness. It's a strength because it creates clear narratives, semi-realistic pacing, strong characters who want something and who you care for, relate to, and understand. It's potentially a weakness because it can inhibit the music, make it "too rational," not let it soar. It's kind of like text setting for the Mass. Do you limit your setting to what is easily understandable, can function in a church - homophony, or do you enrich the music, let it rip, but possibly cloud the intelligibility of the words - polyphony? In theater, or a musical, you only have one chance to hear something, or set something up. The audience has to understand it in order to be with you and want to see/hear the second act. I'm not sure if opera has to work that way. You can still love that famous duet scene even if you don't know Italian, or you can't understand the words because the music, in general terms, tells you what is going on. Perhaps the action and characters are also simpler and "larger than life," I don't know. There is something very "melodramatic," in the true sense of the term, about opera. Opera has a wonderful magical way of suspending time that is totally unrealistic. And one of its great strengths - I'm again trying to find that middle path - is, yes, you can have a five-minute chorus on "we're going fishing. . . in the morning we're going fishing, Oh! We're going fishing", just because the music is beautiful. The people are just standing there doing nothing but singing, and you've learned nothing about them, they're a bunch of peasants, they're generic peasants, whatever that might be. . . But starting with the Rodgers and Hammerstein model of the modern musical, - basically from late 30s and 40s, starting with Oklahoma! and going well into the 70s, 80s and still propagated in its own ways by Sondheim - it's all driven by the book, text, and by the characters so that you don't tend to have those big, flashy numbers whose only purpose is to "bring out the girls!," for example, or the big rousing chorus number that tells you nothing, where the action grinds to a halt. Even Officer Krupke, a classic Shakespeare "Porter Scene" that relieves the intensity of West Side Story, and a total hoot, illuminates a huge amount about who these gang members are and what they face in society. Yeah, you can still have those show stoppers, but the idea is that

the bar has been raised. "Let's dance!. . . for no reason!" is now considered sloppy or cheap, like rhyming "mind" and "time" in a theater song. The big production number now has to do something else: the plot has to be propelled through the music, by the music and the words, so that you learn something about the characters and the situation through the number and arrive at a different place at the end. It's really amazing to think that with the best musicals, for example Gypsy or West Side Story, nothing is wasted. They cover so much ground in a mere 90 minutes or so, with such concise books. They are so succinct compared to most operas. Imagine: Ring!, the Wagner musical would be two acts and take only 90 minutes! Find ring, give up on love, burn your house down, . . . The End.

FJO: And that succinctness clearly happens in the best of opera too. Nothing is wasted in the best operas, either. They work as music and as theater.

JF: Yeah, that's true. Imagine all the amazing music you would miss out on from the Ring Cycle if it were "just" a musical. Again, it's that operatic idea of letting the music soar and of suspending time. Opera can be so much more metaphorical and symbolic while musicals tend to have the trappings of realism. Their danger is being mundane. It also touches on the "high versus low" argument again. I guess I'm thinking more about older opera: opera libretti that just repeat the same text over and over in ensemble numbers and so forth. Da capo repeats. . . indulgences for the singers. It's not so much the case with 20th Century opera. There are probably more great operas that have okay-to-bad libretti and plots than there are musicals. . . you know. . . well that might not be entirely true. The older style shows. . . you know, Gershwin musicals, have incredible scores and some wonderful lyrics, but the plots can be stupid. I worked on the piano-vocal score for Pardon My English for the Library of Congress a few years ago. A gangster gets hit on the head and becomes a sweetheart. Gets hit again and reverts to gangster. . . and on it goes. Now there's a plot! Many of those shows aren't really integrated with the book. The songs are simply wonderful diversions from, or amplifications of, what has already happened.

FJO: You cannot revive them anymore without completely revising the story.

JF: Exactly, exactly. But maybe that proves my point: those shows are more like traditional operas, while the "modern" musical is different. You know I was mentioning the lineage of Rodgers and Hammerstein going into Sondheim, and maybe it's potentially a liability of Sondheim that things are

too word driven, too integrated, he doesn't let the music soar enough. People talk about him being cold-blooded, which isn't true, and I don't think that has anything to do with plot or the brilliancy of his words, or even his music, 'cause it's all brilliant. If anything, it's emotionally too sharp, it cuts a little bit too deep, it doesn't just make you feel good, and that just may be the issue. Perhaps he's the "modernist of musicals" waiting to be understood in "the future!" But, contrary to what I've been saying about integration, there are times that the music needs to "irrationally" soar in a musical, where you want to have that big dance number. . . hopefully you still justify why and how they dance, that in the process of the dancing the plot and the audience is gaining something. But Sondheim maybe doesn't do that enough, while someone like Bernstein did.

FJO: Except you've got to die for beautiful melodies like "Johanna" in Sweeney Todd, or "Not a Day Goes By" from Merrily We Roll Along. . . they're just so beautiful.

JF: And you know what's interesting. . . I totally agree with you, and yet when I have taught Broadway classes, they do not go over, and don't know exactly why.

FJO: Those songs?

JF: Yeah. . .

FJO: And you've used those songs in. . .

JF: Ah-huh. Oh yeah.

FJO: Wow. . .

JF: Yeah, yeah. There's gorgeous music in Company, in Sweeney Todd, in Merrily, all those shows, and it's maybe because they're less familiar than Cats or Oklahoma! to many, maybe the styles are less familiar, maybe it demands too much emotionally as well as intellectually from the audiences. . . Sondheim himself talks about the joy of doing something like Gypsy where the audience laughs and taps their feet only to go home and not be able to sleep because they're so upset. What a great thing to do in theater, to get somebody like that. I don't think The Lion King does that to you. It demonstrates again this idea of combining two opposite poles, to somehow going down in the middle. Gypsy is a great example, the acid of Arthur Laurents' book and Sondheim's lyrics are coupled with the gorgeous, warm syrup of Jules Stein's score. . . what a great mix. And there's

a lesson to be learned in that. . . Sometimes, you can make your point more effectively with a "spoonful of sugar" as opposed to writing the big, didactic Brechtian number, which might be musically wonderful, but pounds you into the ground. Theater teaches you about the possibility of not being so didactic all the time, to sometimes cut against the grain with the music, making the scene much more effective, even funny - while you're crying. There are usually so many ways of doing something, so many choices. Sometimes it's the difference between being "dramatic" and "theatrical." I think this is a difference between musical theater on one hand, and opera and concert music on the other. Many 20th Century works are highly charged and "dramatic" in a didactic and unfocused way: "this piece is about. . . Death and Horror!" In good theater it's about specific death and horror that befalls a person you know and care about. So, while it isn't as much of a universal statement, I think you feel more, or relate more to theater. I'm beginning to think this is one of the reasons I don't like some of the recent mega-musicals, "poperettas," they're too based on generalities and "universal themes." Theater also shows you, it doesn't tell you. Very important. You know, now that I think about it, maybe I overstated something: songs can function in other ways in a musical or an opera. They can comment on the action, think of Company, they can also act as inserted diversions, like in Singing in the Rain. Both of those pieces are amazing so I have to take back some of what I said. You can't say those pieces don't work!

FJO: So, to bring this to your own work, to a show like Personals. That's an unusual piece in terms of its collaboration 'cause you only wrote about half of the songs for it, that's odd.

JF: It's an odd piece in a lot of ways., It started off as a college show at Brandeis University where my brother, Seth, and a bunch of friends were theater majors. They weren't getting cast, and the obvious thing they said was "let's write a show for ourselves and cast ourselves". At the same time I had been wanting to work with my brother, we had played together in school and in jazz and rock bands.

FJO: So he is a musician as well?

JF: Yeah, a very fine instinctual musician. And so when we collaborated it was absolutely wonderful, not just because we're brothers and there was a certain "communication shorthand" there, but because we shared so much musical history together. I can make a musical reference, whether it's a verbal or a playing one, and he gets it. And vice versa. So that's really fabulous to have that kind of collaboration. And the trust, because a col-

laboration is like a marriage. I should add that I've also worked with my sister, Bela-Lisa and set some of her poetry. It's a family sort of thing. So, since Seth and I wanted to work together I joined their group. There were many, many versions of the show, in some ways the older versions were much more raw and experimental, and musically more interesting. The score was also much more jazz influenced than the final version which was very good and very successful but did become a little bit more mainstream pop because of economics, the directors, producers, etc. So Personals is a real hodgepodge of different things. As for some of the other composers, frankly, we were unknowns when we came to New York, and the producers said "well, you know, we need somebody to help sell the show". So we had a series of conversations with Steven Schwartz and Alan Menken, pre-Disney, and asked them if they would write a couple of songs for this piece with the realization that they had much bigger names than us.

FJO: So that's how that happened.

JF: Yeah.

FJO: Ha. So it's like the old days of Herbert Stothart coming in and doing some of the music for shows by Sigmund Romberg. . .

JF: It's true, and what's interesting also about it is you can get away with it because Personals was nominally a revue, it's common to have a number of different writers working on a single piece. But, what very few people picked up in the criticism of the show was that it lived in. . . well, somebody once called it a "revuesical". . . a place midway between a revue and a book musical. Book musicals have set characters and a through line. Revues are more free, loose, episodic. They're usually based on a theme, a topic, or a writer. In Personals the theme was relationships and personal ads but there also were characters with through lines that wove in and out so that an actor plays both "Man 2" and the "Typesetter." The difference is that "Man 2" isn't a returning, identifiable, fixed character like the "Typesetter," he's just the unknown guy in the bar, someone who sings in an ensemble number or does a skit. The Typesetter is someone you come to know, who has a story. It was really very fluid and an inventive form to work with, trying to get a little bit of both worlds. There was an attempt, at one point, and it was misguided. . . to make the show into a book musical. It became a soap opera. We were smart enough to say no to it.

FJO: To get it back to Sondheim and the influence of Sondheim, there's a song on your demo that I absolutely adored. . . the song about the woman

who picks up this guy, and she hasn't slept with anybody for a while. . .

JF: "I Think You Should Know." Kim's a recent divorcee who has doubts about her decision.

FJO: It's just brilliant in that Sondheim way of the character totally driving it. I had this visceral picture in my mind of exactly what that scene was on stage. . . and it's just her, it's a monologue. . .

JF: Right, and it's been done a couple of ways. It's been done where it's just her, it's been done where there's basically a mime, the guy who is dancing with her, and when she sings "Oh, don't kiss my neck it makes me nauseous" he's kissing her, but you don't know who he is, he's just the guy she's bringing home. I guess he's "Man 2." Sondheim was really big for us, when I mentioned influences I didn't get into theater. . . I mean, I grew up with West Side Story and Funny Girl and all sorts of other musicals, but coming of age in the 70s how could you not know and love Sondheim: A Little Night Music, Sweeney, Pacific Overtures. . . it's incredibly influential stuff, somewhat in the attitude of urbane wittiness, a sharp, dark undertone, the emotional twists and turns, but also in the brilliance and literacy - both in lyrics and music. It occurs to me now that Personals was a "concept musical," not unlike Company in form (and originally in tone). A kind of early Hal Prince-Sondheim show. We probably knew all of that in school years ago. . .

FJO: We mentioned "Not a Day Goes By" a few minutes ago, and here's a prime example. Did you see Merrily We Roll Along?

JF: I saw the last performance. . . When they are up on the rooftop and "point" to Sputnik someone had placed a balloon on the ceiling so the spotlight went to that. That little prank brought the house down.

FJO: I had the weird luxury of getting to see that show three times. . . out of its two-week run. I saw the first night of previews, and then I saw another preview, and then I saw the opening night. . . and then it only ran for about a week and a half. And it was because I was a part of this music theater workshop. . . What was interesting is that "Not a Day Goes By" began as a duet between a man and a woman getting married, and it ended up being the husband singing to the woman he was marrying juxtaposed against another woman who was secretly in love with him and watching the wedding from a table in the corner, singing with him. . . It was an amazing theatrical moment. But that wasn't the original conception, that came about through collaboration, through somebody saying

"well this isn't working as theater." I had a very similar reaction to your song, "I Think You Should Know." It's a solo that functions as a duet, it's only half of the conversation and the other half isn't necessary, but that's the theatrical aspect of it. . .

JF: Yeah, that's what happens when you work with people who know theater. . . When writing music for the theater you have to have a sense of character, who this person is and what they need to do, whether the words are already written, being written or not written, etc. As a composer you deal with people with whom you have conversations like "No, that person wouldn't do it" or "No, that doesn't work" etc. It all starts with the theatrical/character situation. When I mentioned the earlier versions of Personals, that some of the best music was cut. . . if it was the "best" music, how come it was cut? Well, because it ended up that the show took a turn in a very different direction, and the situation, the character, etc. that called for that type of music disappeared. Sometimes the music was portable, you could just keep recasting it as such, as in the case you were talking about, "Not a Day Goes By.,". Sometimes it can't work so they just end up being "trunk songs", the tone of the show alters in such a way that they no longer fit. But, I was thinking of another difference between opera and musical theater, going back to the idea of the chorus singing for 5 minutes about fishing., There's this classic Sondheim story where. . . or actually maybe it was Hammerstein who said it. . . "What is the person doing on stage during a specific musical moment?" "Well, this is a really cool modulation, I'm going from C minor to A major, isn't that great?" "What are they doing on stage?" "I don't know" "Cut it!" [FJO: Laughs.] And you lose some of your best "children" in that sense, because, musically it might make sense but if it doesn't make theatrical sense it goes, Yes, there are exceptions, including scene-change music or indulgences, again that sort of irrationality that sometimes just works. Even Sondheim talks about there being "real time" and "theater time," you can suspend this belief and just have people dance and it's a great moment. But, so many things are character-driven, and even circumscribed by this, that it is both a strength as well as a limitation. And what I would love to do is to find a way to incorporate both ideals. . . Basically to have a musical that is concise and book-character driven yet can draw upon the power of opera music, and potentially the sophistication of it, whether that means the musical language, the overall length, inclusion of instrumental music, the ensemble numbers, and so on. Obviously a lot of people have done that and done that successfully, whether it's Bernstein or Sondheim, or Gershwin. But it's a great place to try to live in because the language and the parameters are so broad. . . I think opera tends to allow more of those cool modulations.

Chapter 5.

"Putting On Different Hats"

FJO: So you take this experience back to your workshop, back to where you're in right now. . . and it isn't the workshop where this particular piece was created, but metaphorically speaking. You've written a successful viola concerto. . .

JF: It was a really important work for me: my first extended orchestral piece, it got great critical reception, it was my Carnegie Hall debut, I had the chance to work with Paul Neubauer and Jorge Mester, and, most importantly, it was how I met my wife. I do think there's a little bit of a difference. . . it is like putting on a different hat to go from a musical to a concerto. Actually, what's rather ironic is that when I was doing my Masters at BU, now we're talking about the early 80s, I was actually told by some to write for theater under a different name because it would "ruin my career" as a concert composer. . .

FJO: Yeah, people might like your music. . . [laughs]

JF: Exactly [laughs]. . . it's just funny how things have changed in the last twenty years. . . There's no question I've been perceived as a much stronger candidate in the teaching job market, have received job offers, and have taken jobs precisely because I'm this Columbia doctoral composer who can teach musical theater, as well as rock and jazz. Anyway, there are differences and similarities writing the two styles. A difference is, obviously, the lack of a "plot" and "characters" - although instrumental pieces can be programmatic. Another is that songs in a musical are more expository themes, or tunes, while concert works are more developmental, built more from smaller motives. However, I do think of both as drama. I think of expectations, and I think that comes from theater. . . maybe it's only internal, in my working process. It may not be something readily apparent to the listener, I don't know. But what I mean is musically setting up something, perhaps by being clear, by being simple so the listener is in on it too, and then not necessarily following through, twisting or deflecting it. It's the old Haydn trick where you set up phrases that are 4 + 4, so the expectation is for more of the same. But, when it's repeated it's 4 + 3. The fourth bar of the second half of the phrase has become the first bar of the next section. So it feels like stepping off the curb without looking and realizing that it was much shorter, or taller, than you thought. You get an unexpected jolt. I think of music, instrumental or abstract music, in those terms, as if I were writing for characters, trying to play with expectations. . . "this sonority is

familiar and has always resolved this way, but now I'm going to stretch it, I'm going to interrupt, I'm going to deflect it," and so on. Or maybe it's the moment to finally follow through and just let it do what it's been hinting at doing. That idea of trying to create, and either play with, or defeat expectation is important to me.

FJO: So, you've got this amazing section that goes from C minor to A major. . . [JF: Laughs. . . And I. . .] And it doesn't work for some reason. Does it get cut out of the instrumental piece as well? For the same reasons, in a way. . .

JF: Yes, absolutely! There is a internal logic to the piece and its proportions. Sometimes those are the very things I revise in a work. Mentioning someone like Rachmaninoff who obviously, for all of the dirt that gets heaped on him could be a wonderful composer, very skilled, etc, perhaps illustrates what happens when a composer doesn't edit enough: going for that moment too many times in a piece. . . I would save it; make it special, unique. It's another Hammerstein musical theater lesson: never reprise a song just because it's the hit song. Make it count, make it do something new. It's the same in an instrumental piece. By the way, I think large-scale hearing, proportions and so forth, is the hardest kind of hearing for a composer.

FJO: So let's talk about your vocabulary. . . You got accused, proverbially speaking, of being a Rachmaninoff by a Charles Wuorinen; accused of being a Schoenberg by an Alan Menken. . . So what is your musical vocabulary? What are the kinds of formal linguistic techniques that you're using, that inform all these pieces. . . are they different from piece to piece?

JF: Yes, they can be. It's all some form of extended tonality. Going "in and out of focus" with tonal sounds and syntax. It can be very different from piece to piece. Each piece demands its own internal logic and sound world. It comes from the materials themselves, if you let it. It also goes back to the function of music: what's this piece for? So, I guess there's a quasi-theatrical aspect there too: it's like finding out who the character is or what they want. Once I know the details of the sound, language, etc. it will fall into place if I'm open and honest about the work. Although that process isn't necessarily fast! Perhaps this is just my "mental trick" which allows me to adjust from one project or another. The interesting thing is I think all of these pieces are me: the piano trio, the pop song, the orchestra piece, a musical. I'm the one making the musical choices. At times there can be a very clear sense of shifting gears when going from writing a pop song to an extended instrumental piece. It's funny that something that can

work in a more pop idiom can be death in a "concert" idiom. In some cases I'm baffled, I'm not always sure why it's that way. But a progression that works in a rock song is incredibly corny when part of an orchestral piece. It comes down to taste and inclination as I think you can do anything, if you do it well. But, more and more I've been finding ways to accommodate and fuse the different sides to my writing so there is more of a continuum in my work, less changing hats. I do think of music in rather traditional ways: melody, harmony, counterpoint. I also try to be clear in terms of intent, emotion, and technique in my writing and try not to fall into that trap of "Schoenbergian density" • over-writing. I'm not a theorist although I obviously teach theory. But, I think like a composer. . . So my definition of "extended tonality" isn't quite how a theorist might define it, it's simply how I hear my music. It's not restricted to the parameters of any period: say the 17th or 19th centuries. Obviously if you listen to what I write I don't necessarily write functional, tonal music, especially in my concert works. But, all of it is certainly referential, it certainly uses sonorities that are tonal. It's funny, but it actually took me a while to realize how much jazz there was in my writing: harmonies, syncopations, gestures, extended tonality. Maybe it was a holdover from being told that "you can't do this, it will ruin your name" that initially kept me from consciously incorporating into my concert music all these jazz chords floating around in my head. It's another divide between worlds. The difference is the jazzer will just say "Well, this is a C7 altered" while a concert composer will say "Well that's using the Octatonic scale". . . But again there's something kind of fun about playing in the shadows between those two worlds. Melody is very important to me, as is feeling the pulse and rhythm, having clear form, and a sense of consonance, dissonance, although that's relative, right? I could be a Schoenberg or a Rachmaninoff on any given night!. So, I am a traditionalist in some ways. I mentioned clarity before, clarity of intent is important, that goes back to expectations, setting up materials, knowing the difference between confusing an audience and being confused yourself. Generally I think rather organically as a composer • one idea is derived from another, development and use of motives, that sort of thing. It's all of that Beethoven and my classical training. On the other hand, I have a piece Extreme Measures (for violin, cello, and prepared piano) in which I tried not to be that way and it really pushed me compositionally. It was very hard to write, it's also probably the hardest piece of mine to perform. It's full of cuts and jumps, I was thinking of film splicing. The idea was "chop!," you're suddenly somewhere else, that kind of thing. I didn't want it to feel "inevitable" or organic. I wanted it to feel like after a splice the music abruptly jumped to an unexpected place, that ideas would be cut off, not finished. But, I didn't want it to be a confusing mess. The challenge was to make the spices audible, could I set up expectations as well? Of course, in

retrospect, oops!, it ended up being a lot more organic than I had thought at the time. There are more connections and more developmental ideas than I had imagined. Much of my composing is initially very intuitive, not so systematic. Then I often go back and see where things are heading so I can take better advantage of those tendencies. Sometimes I'm amazed at what I find after a work is done; the connections and so forth. I can't say I'm unaware but I'm also not entirely conscious of everything while it's happening, which, in and of itself, is fun.

FJO: Do you ever use tone rows?

JF: No, I did do that in school assignments, but I just don't hear that way. The closest I come is to use intervals, or sonorities, or themes/motives and develop them as "families" - as a series of related versions of an idea. I can be quite systematic about their use but I have to be careful as sometimes that creates music that doesn't "breathe." It's too logical and predictable. So I try to be a bit less pedantic. Also, my intuition seems to pick these things up and use them regardless.

Chapter 6.

"The Challenge of Finding Your Own Voice in Everything You Do"

FJO: One thing that I find fascinating, getting back to the question of audiences, is that you wrote a musical piece for kids and I think this is something that more people should be doing. In the last few years, you've become a father yourself, and this piece, I think, predates that. . .

JF: Yeah, Yeah. . . it did, it did.

FJO: But, talk a little bit about what that experience was and what you feel, what you bring to that. . .

JF: That was an incredible amount of fun. Again it was a challenge. . . it's actually one of the few things I've written lyrics for. I wrote the book, the lyrics, and the score for this children's theater piece called Stew!. It was a commission and educational residency from Meet the Composer and the National Orchestral Association for the Manhattan Wind Quintet. The quintet and I were in residence with a 5th grade class at a public school in Yonkers (P.S. 25) doing various educational activities that culminated in this piece. There's a challenge writing for a soloist, there's a challenge writing for characters, there's a challenge writing for kids, figuring out when the

adults, the quintet and the teachers, have to carry things, and what roles the kids could have., Since the residency was so short, and I needed to wait to see the kids in action and find out what the teachers were willing to do before writing much of the piece, everything was telescoped and happened at the last minute. It was very much like those stories about an out of town tryout of a musical: the second act is written the night before opening. It was incredibly pressure-packed in that way. Next time it would be great to have a longer, more spread out residency, more time with the kids, and then a longer period to actually write the piece.

FJO: Is the music simpler that the rest of your music?

JF: Generally yes, it is, but there are moments for the quintet that are very "Elliott Carter," where there were detailed effects, independent parts at different speeds, or where I wrote models for them to kind of improvise on, things like that. There was also a big, simple song, which was a kind of pop, anthem-like thing that the kids sing. Of course I had to develop the song like theme and variations throughout Stew!. That's the classical guy in me coming out! So it was quite varied, sometimes it got to be a bit complex. But I was careful not to let it get too involved because of not just the young students, but the lack of time to prepare. It's a piece I wouldn't mind revising at some point. The premise of Stew! was that only by allowing different foods - representing the different cultures and peoples - to blend together can you make something really good: stew. It was great to have a professional ensemble performing it and working with kids. Educationally a lot of territory was covered with the piece and the residency: music, dance, theater, the nature of collaboration, food and nutrition, different cultures, and so on. I feel it's important to do projects like this, to be part of the community. I'm hearing that more composers are now writing works for students, for bands and choirs, etc.. That's good. I have a band piece, Incontrovertible Counterpoint, in the pipeline. All those years of high school band will finally pay off!

FJO: That's great. . .

JF: You do the best you can and find yourself, your own voice in every piece you do, that's part of the challenge, whether to do a musical or a rock song, and so on, it's finding the sensibility saying "this is me, those are my choices", "I like those, within the parameters". . . it's always interesting and challenging for me.

FJO: One thing we didn't talk about yet is your new piece, Fallings. . .

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JF: The plot is interesting as it deals with issues of secrecy, deciding whether to be loyal to your friends or yourself, and how to put your life back together after traumatic events. It's very dark at moments, but it also finds the humor in trying to cope with everything. The main characters, all sung/acted by Susan Narucki - live or on tape, are people in music, which like in Showboat or Gypsy is always a fun situation. The members of Contrasts will do more than just play their instruments. They'll be onstage and will play minor roles, doing some speaking, singing, moving, etc. It's so great working with these people: Contrasts and Susan. Their enthusiasm and flexibility are infectious. There we go with that collaboration thing again! A couple of things have really struck me about working on Fallings. I obviously do a lot of different kind of things musically. I think it's sometimes hard for a person approaching my work to see exactly what it is I actually do because it doesn't fit neatly into a category, into an-"ism." Fallings is just like this. It's a hybrid. It isn't exactly opera or musical theater; it's neither strictly chamber music nor full-scale theater in its length or the forces used; it will use live performance and technology (prerecorded sound, MIDI, etc.). Plus, I don't want to fall into the expectations game - theater people thinking one thing, the new music crowd another. So I'm calling it a "neutral" genre name: "chamber music theater." The genesis of the piece is a case of me not connecting the dots. It actually started with Evelyne Luest, the pianist with the Contrasts Quartet (formerly the Eberli Ensemble). Evelyne played in Extreme Measures, and her ensemble performed the third movement of Elastic Band. She liked my music, so it was natural for me to write a piece for her group. Out of practicality lately I've been writing a lot of chamber works. But, what I really have wanted to do was to write something orchestral or theatrical in nature. It had been a while since I had a beginning, middle, and end of a piece like that. So, I was sitting, talking to you, Frank, of all people, about a year and a half ago, saying "I have to write this chamber piece, and I don't know. . . we've talked about doing something with narration but I'm not sure exactly what to do. My instinct is telling me that I don't want to write another chamber piece." And you're the one who said "Oh, you do theater, you've worked with Susan Narucki, why don't you put them together and write a theater piece for Susan and the Contrasts Quartet?" And literally, the light bulb went off in my head. That put everything into gear and connected the dots. I give Evelyne a huge amount of credit for allowing this project to evolve into a theater piece. But, I am also finding that there are a lot of things that are near and dear, and important to me, that are coming together in this piece - along the lines of how you put things together in our conversation about the project. Obviously it's theater, I'm calling it a chamber music theater piece because of the language and form, and because it's scored for one solo singer, four acoustic instruments (Contrasts Quartet: clarinet, vio-

lin, cello, piano), and pre-recorded sound. The pre-recorded sound is going to rely very heavily on those five musicians, plus additional ones being recorded and then edited and manipulated. So it's not just sampled sounds, but whole passages recorded and altered so the live musicians will be playing stage with their doppelgangers coming out of the speakers, etc. I have this huge, endless palette - basically an orchestra. Not only can write for five trombones, even though there aren't any trombones in Contrasts, but the music can be realized whole using live players, from samples of trombones, MIDI, as well combinations of these. I can use all of this material in naturalistic ways or in very "un-tromboney" ways so that I can come up with a timbre or gesture and effect that is nothing like a trombone. But it's this palette that goes on forever, which has totally excited me, and somewhat frightened me. So, it's basically both a chamber piece and an orchestra piece. Of course, what's driving it is theater, words. So it's that too. One of the things that occurred to me is that in the past I would invariably get to a point in a piece where I wanted something, I wanted a gesture, a sound, and really couldn't get it, and I would always think, "Well, you just don't have the orchestral chops of a Jacob Druckman!" But in starting this piece, it occurred to me that the world that I hear is not strictly acoustic instruments. Light bulb! I grew up hearing recorded sound, and it's not just recorded sounds, but sounds that were designed to be recorded. In particular think of middle-period Beatles, which was so influential for me. Everything they did then was slow downed, filtered, put through Leslie speakers, played backwards. . .

FJO: They stopped playing live. . .

JF: Right. . .

FJO: They became studio electronic composers. . .

JF: Right, absolutely. . .

FJO: For three years.

JF: Yeah, and the wonderful textures/timbre that came out of that, plus, for example, what one can do with electric guitar, you can't do that with a solo acoustic clarinet. And so I'm now finding that how important those sounds are to me, and no wonder I was frustrated, I was kind of barking up the wrong tree, and now, yes, in Fallings I can realize the sounds I've been hearing, because I can either take the real clarinet and make it into something that it's not by manipulating it in my computer, or I can have any instrument that physically can't be on stage and have them on the pre-

recorded part. I can have that huge, pounding percussion section which sounds like it's playing under water keep shifting from speaker to speaker as it slides down thirds of tones over a minute. I said, "my God, all that stuff I always wanted to do", and could not figure out how to do is all there. It really didn't occur to me that while I've been writing these traditional chamber pieces, which is something that I adore doing, that there's been a big component missing. It's exciting to think where this may lead in both Fallings and future pieces.

FJO: That would actually make me come back to something you've said at the very beginning. . . I always find this very ironic, it is sort of very weird. At the beginning of our talk, you talked about wanting this collaborative process, writing for people rather than creating solo music on a synthesizer, and now you've come full circle, and have learned to work with people and create electronic music that involves the input of people, so collaboration is still going on, but it is a fixed form.

JF: In some ways. The pre-recorded part may be fixed, we haven't totally decided on that yet. But don't forget it is still a piece derived from collaboration: with my librettist, with the live musicians (whether they are playing live or pre-recorded); with my audio engineer, and so on. I'm still not a hundred percent sure about is the final realization of the work. I think it's very possible that all of this stuff could be played/controlled through software on a laptop onstage triggered by the musicians, as opposed to coming from a fixed CD. The CD is in some ways easier, but it's also less musically interesting, more rigid. If the musicians trigger the pre-recorded sounds then it becomes more like traditional chamber music and that would be another level of collaboration.

FJO: Now you're talking about theater, you're talking about mixed media components; how involved are you in the non-musical elements in this piece?

JF: In this piece, very involved. I tend to want, or need, to be involved in any theatrical piece, to not just be a "hired hand" writing music. With Fallings I went to Seth and pitched a semi-formed idea to him. But, I think it also depends on both the piece and the collaboration, with whom I'm collaborating with, because it is a marriage relationship. You have to be comfortable, to be willing to give and take, and to be embarrassed, but not be made a fool of, and obviously I can do that with my brother. There are scenes that are very much instinctual for me. I'm not entirely sure of how the details work - that will be his job - but I know it's emotionally and dramatically right. I'm saying "Yeah, I want this". . . Recently we were talking

about a possible funeral scene, my brother hasn't delved into yet, certainly hasn't written it, and yet I've been throwing things at him. I can see where it's going, what the characters are doing, even if I don't have all the details yet. Of course, all of this will probably change as we go forward. Again that's the collaboration, he may come back and say: "No, we really need to do this instead", or the scene might take a dramatically different turn and so we'll argue back and forth.

FJO: So, this begs a final audience question again. . . How is an audience, for a piece that has other sensory input-visual input, theatrical narrative input, in additional to musical input, how is their perception of the musical content different in your estimation? Fallings is a music theater work, and in a lot of your pieces, there are these other components going on that are competing for sensory attention on the part of the audience.

JF: For me, they should all be serving one purpose, they should be unified, and create a clear emotional, dramatic world. I try to always think of the theatrical and the dramatic elements. I don't like heaping effects on top of something. It's distracting clutter and doesn't usually help. It can be more about how clever I am than what is needed for the scene so, for me, that type of thing is not honest. Again, it's like the difference between being confused and confusing an audience. Are you lost or deliberately trying to make the audience feel they're lost? Very different things. But, going back to your point, think of what audience is listening to in a film score, they listen to 12-tone music, they listen to something that makes Ligeti seems like child's play. It doesn't seem to faze them. Some of it is clearly watching and not paying attention to the music, but, if there's a relation between the action and the music, a correlation, then it can fly with an audience.

FJO: To bring it back to your example of a C minor going back to A major. . . it's great, but it gotta go. And, perhaps, to bring that thought to a ritornello one last time here, maybe what has to happen in a theater piece, in order for that C minor to A major modulation to stay, without getting cut, is that what's happening on stage also has to modulate from C minor to A major. What's happening with the visual and the narrative has to also be happening in the music and vice versa; one can't exist without the other.

JF: Exactly, that might be another way of defining the difference between "dramatic" and "theatrical." This is what happens when something is text-driven, meaning that it's not just about the words, and it's certainly not just about pretty music for music's sake, but that the words are about specific dramatic situations, about characters. Fallings will not be musical theater, certainly not in the pop language or economic sense, but if Seth and I cre-

ate characters that are real, that you care about, that you have a stake in, that's musical theater in the good sense. To me, everything is much more meaningful that way. It's creating those interesting, complex three-dimensional characters, having them in situations where their wants, their needs, and their desires are clear to the audience, that to me, is really interesting. I think Fallings is interesting in how it brings so many ideas in my work together, full circle. It will be a real watershed for me, a kind of summation or arrival piece.

–Frank J. Oteri

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