

Joel Phillip Friedman

Constructing **thought**, one **note** at a time

www.joelfriedman.com

BIOGRAPHY

For Washington, D.C.-based composer and educator Joel Phillip Friedman, synthesizing musical genres and eras has always been both an artistic imperative and the most natural thing in the world. As audiences and critics have experienced, Friedman has an uncanny ability to draw on the full range of his formative influences (classical music, jazz, fusion, musical theater, '60s rock, '70s soul, and more) in crafting works that are palpably hybrid yet fundamentally organic and cohesive.

Also crucial to Friedman's work, from both an intellectual and emotional perspective, are a range of influences beyond music, from the seamless poignancy and playfulness of Eastern and Central European literature to the late 1970s BBC TV series *Connections*, which emphasized the role of happenstance in science and history over the prevailing "Great Man" theory. Friedman's creative identity also stems from a number of foundational childhood experiences, from his fine-artist mother's enthusiastic spinning of records of all genres on the family stereo, absent any sense of musical hierarchy or pedigree, to the somber experience of his father's suicide just before Joel's senior year in high school.

Friedman's ranging among genres dates back to his earliest mature work: while a (classical) composition major at Boston University, he achieved his first public success with the musical revue *Personals* (1980), co-authored with his lyricist brother, Seth, and other collaborators. The show received honors from the New England Theater Conference and the American College Theater Festival and was selected for a European joint US-NATO USO tour. After earning Mus. B. and M.M. degrees at B.U., Friedman relocated to New York City, where, in 1985, *Personals* opened Off-Broadway. The *New York Post* proclaimed it "a winner...the brightest revue of the year, and indeed of many a year." The project solidified *collaboration* as a hallmark of his career.

Back in the classical vein, Friedman composed his *Concerto (in the Form of Variations) for Viola and Orchestra*—an elegiac work whose emotional depth Joel traces to his long-evolving response to his father's suicide—which premiered in 1990 at Carnegie Hall with Paul Neubauer (viola), Jorge Mester (conductor), and the National Orchestral Association. The *New Yorker* hailed the work's "poetic, beautiful, and intelligent exploration of a long, eloquent melody, through variations that are at first musing and gentle, then passionate, finally simple, confident, and serene." The concerto received the 1988 ASCAP Foundation Morton Gould Young Composer Award and was a winner of the 1989 New Music Orchestral Project competition.

While subsequently pursuing a doctorate in composition at Columbia University, Friedman realized a watershed work, *Elastic Band* (1996, rev. 2015) originally conceived while Friedman was a MacDowell Fellow and written for clarinet, string quartet, and percussion. It has proven to be one of his most popular, performed, and recorded compositions, now with many orchestrations, including one for chamber orchestra. Reviewing a performance in Northern California, the *San Jose Mercury News* praised *Elastic Band* as "a work of serious fun, which also draws on pop and jazz." In addition, Joel's setting of Marie Howe's searing and powerful poem *What The Living Do* (1995, rev. 2004) was recorded and extensively toured by soprano Susan Narucki and pianist Alan Feinberg. The virtuosic work for cello and piano *Pas de Deux* (1994, rev. 2001) also dates from this period.

In addition to propelling his creative work forward, Joel began teaching at the university level, which continues today. From 1996 through 2006 he was Assistant and then Visiting Assistant Professor at Seton Hall University and

Swarthmore Colleges, respectively. During this time, he launched what would become signature specialties: courses on The Beatles and Stephen Sondheim.

In 2006, Friedman and his wife and daughter relocated to Stanford, CA, where Friedman divided his time between composing and holding a number of teaching positions at institutions such as Santa Clara University, Stanford University (Continuing Studies Program—through which he continues to teach his courses on The Beatles and Sondheim), and Notre Dame de Namur University in Belmont. Among the works he produced in this period was a true outlier in his oeuvre to date: the score for the independent feature film *Red Ice* (2011), a supernatural horror thriller that was screened at festivals in San Francisco and Chicago. Being commissioned by, and adjudicating for, the 2013 Irving M. Klein International String Competition resulted in a set of three solo string pieces—*Uncle Hokum's Fiddle*, *When The World Disintegrates Before Your Eyes*, and *Triptych* (for violin, viola, and cello, respectively)—that have been performed worldwide. It was here that Joel's work was heard by Maestra Barbara Day Turner of the San José Chamber Orchestra, who has since championed his work, commissioning him for the quirky, energetic *Movable Home* (2015) for string orchestra, mostly composed while a Lucas Fellow at the Montalvo Arts Center, and then the double concerto *Inferno*.

In 2013, Friedman and his family relocated once again, to their current D.C. residence. Friedman continued to teach at Stanford Continuing Studies and, closer to his new home, added academic positions at Georgetown University and now Catholic University. Energized by the new setting—and inspired by an increased sense of activism, which included captaining the Democratic National Committee's Voter Assistance and Protection Hotlines—he began producing new works at an accelerated pace, including two works composed while in residence at the Hermitage Artist Retreat: *Continuance* for mezzo soprano and tenor viol (2016) and *All Things Are Set Ablaze* for the vocal trio ModernMedieval (2017), with the latter hailed by the *Washington Post* as “a diverse yet cohesive work of considerable power.” The Klein Competition later commissioned his theatrical *Arias With Dance Glitch* (2016) for young laureates Ariel Horowitz and Lauren Seiss. Politics and activism also inspired Friedman's double concerto *Inferno* (2020), loosely based on Dante's classic poem, along with musings on authoritarianism and the moral consequences of our decisions. Starting in 2018, Joel began a fruitful and long-standing theatrical collaboration as Resident Composer with the New York-based puppetry troupe *Evolve Puppets*, scoring their environmental- and humanist-themed plays and short films, which have been seen at La MaMa and The Tank and screened at international film festivals.

As with most musicians, Friedman found himself sidelined by the COVID-19 pandemic in 2019-20. The central years of the pandemic were followed by his mother's decline and ultimate demise from Alzheimer's disease in 2023. Despite—or perhaps because of—these great emotional trials, Friedman now finds in himself a new appreciation in both his life and work for the role of *joy*. He has pushed himself into the immediacy of rock music and other areas in which he was not so comfortable, leading to a burst of creativity including the rock songs *Dream* and *Right in Front of Our Nose!* (both 2021). He has recently revisited a long-dormant work for chamber opera/musical theater, *Fallings* (with his brother, Seth, as librettist). He has also composed the fleet concert opener *The Horizon Beyond* (2021) for orchestra, a musical theater setting of William Blake's poem *The Angel* (2023) for mezzo-soprano and chamber ensemble for the Pierrot ensemble Balance Campaign, along with *Sweet Stillness* (2023), a choral work with strings offered as a plea for peace, understanding, contemplation, and kindness. Most recently his score to *Evolve Puppets' Secrets History Remembers* premiered at La MaMa in November 2024.

On the near horizon for Friedman in 2025 are a new string quartet commission from the Music Teachers National Association for Sound Impact about the effects of disinformation on society, plus Tommy Mesa and Yoon Lee's January 19th performance of *Pas de Deux* on the 2024-25 Phillips Music series in Washington, D.C. Joel is a proud member of ASCAP, Chamber Music America, and the Dramatist Guild.

Revised December 3, 2024