

Homes Away from Home

For a singer-songwriter, **Gabriel Kahane** has been spending a lot of time with orchestras. He is composer in residence at Florida's Orlando Philharmonic this season, and creative chair at the Oregon Symphony through the 2021-22 season. But Kahane, who lives in Brooklyn, New York, straddles multiple musical worlds. As singer, pianist, and guitarist, he has performed with the Punch Brothers band and indie-rock singer Andrew Bird—and as a composer he has been commissioned by the Los Angeles Philharmonic, Saint Paul Chamber Orchestra, Orpheus Chamber Orchestra, and Carnegie Hall. If his last name sounds familiar, that's because his father is conductor and pianist Jeffrey Kahane. Several orchestras have performed his orchestral oratorio *emergency shelter intake form*, which focuses on homelessness and was premiered by the Oregon Symphony. For 2020-21, the Oregon Symphony and Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra have co-commissioned his next orchestral work, *The Right to Be Forgotten*.

Here, he speaks about what he hopes to achieve with his music, addressing the issues of our day, and his orchestral learning curve. [Note: Some performances discussed may have been cancelled or postponed, due to the coronavirus pandemic. Check orchestra websites for the most up-to-date information.]

I like to reach into the experience of people whose lives are different than my own, in pieces like *emergency shelter intake form*, which is a meditation on inequality through the lens of housing. We try to avoid saying “homeless people” as an adjective, because for the vast majority of people who experience homelessness, it's a transitory condition: you're not defined by the experience of homelessness. When I said that I felt we needed to include the voices of people whose lived experience could bear witness to what the piece is about, Monica Hayes, the Oregon Symphony's director of education and outreach, immediately knew where to turn and contacted the Maybelle Community Center in Portland. Maybelle is an incredible organization that for almost three decades has sought to create community living. They were way ahead in recognizing that social isolation leads to bad health outcomes. One of their programs is a community chorus, which sang in the final movement of *emergency shelter*.

I was emotionally pulverized by writing



Norman Timonera

Gabriel Kahane (center) performs with bandmates Holcombe Waller (left) and Holland Andrews (right) in *emergency shelter intake form* with the Grant Park Orchestra in Chicago's Millennium Park, led by Grant Park Music Festival Artistic Director Carlos Kalmar, July 5, 2019.

emergency shelter intake form. But it has been transformative to see other orchestras pick up the piece. We did it in 2018 at the Britt Festival, which co-commissioned it, and in Chicago last summer at the Grant Park Music Festival. There were three performances this March—the Orlando Philharmonic, Detroit Symphony Orchestra, and Milwaukee Symphony Orchestra—and a number are scheduled for next season.

Charles Calmer, the Oregon Symphony's vice president for artistic planning, has been so generous in carrying out my



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ideas for the orchestra's new chamber series and indie series, which are under my control. Next season, there are a number of works on subscription that I had a hand in. I had said to Charles and Music Director Carlos

Kalmar, we've got to commission Gabriella Smith—and this season Gabriella has a piece that's being premiered.

I got my first commission for large ensemble, *Orinoco Sketches*, after John Adams had heard my first album, which has some string quartet and brass quintet writing.

He said I should write a piece for the Los Angeles Philharmonic's “Green Umbrella” new-music program. That was true trial by fire. I was sending him drafts of the score in progress, and he saved me from a certain amount of embarrassment. You have to write practical music if your work is going to be performed. I've gotten better at it. If you use extended techniques, you need to find ways that aren't going to eat up a huge amount of rehearsal time.

My mom is a psychologist as well as a very fine amateur singer. Something that has become apparent to me is the extent to which her craft as an empath has become increasingly central to what I do as a songwriter. My 2018 album *Book of Travelers* chronicled my train trip in the aftermath of the 2016 presidential election. Those songs seem to have continued staying power as our divisions harden. That work's implicit thesis, to the extent that there is one, is about getting out from behind our screens and talking to people and trying to recover a sense of what is shared even in the face of deep divisions. **S**