



# Judd Greenstein

by Kyle Gann

Judd Greenstein writes happy music. By that I don't mean simply that it's upbeat, energetic, in major keys, though it is often those things. I mean it's characterized by almost a prelapsarian innocence: it doesn't seem to bear scars from the fractures and antagonisms of 20th-century music. It doesn't have any "tough" structural elements to prove its intellectual bona fides, and neither does it indulge in audience-baiting comfortable grooves. It doesn't seem written either to heal or to exacerbate the infamous Audience-Composer Gap that was the defining precondition of my generation's careers. It has about it an air of unself-conscious forward-lookingness,

a feeling of devoting itself to musical materials without having been influenced, without having even been aware that there were ever sides to choose from. Schoenberg/Stravinsky, Babbitt/Glass—all irrelevant. You imagine that if you could ask one of Greenstein's pieces what we should do about the crisis that audiences have turned away from new classical music in droves, it would look at you benignly and respond, "I'm sorry. What was the problem again?"

It was bound to happen sooner or later. Greenstein is 30, I'm 54. My teachers remembered an era in which the importance of modern composers was taken for granted, no matter how increasingly off-putting their

music grew; they watched that world crumble, and they were bitter about the prestige they lost as pop music took center stage. My generation rushed into corrective mode with minimalism, rock influences, slogans like “New Music” and “accessibility,” festivals as marketing ploys. The war between that earlier generation and us left a scorched battlefield, and marked my generation with a lingering sense of failure that we were unable to revive a status quo for which we retain some nostalgia. But a generation was bound to come along for which the reduced status of modern classical music was no tragedy, simply a fact of life; pop music no corporate hegemon, but a fellow traveler; aesthetics no life-or-death agon, but a shopping mall of viable brands. That generation has arrived. And Greenstein ([www.juddgreenstein.com](http://www.juddgreenstein.com)) is emerging as one of its chief spokespersons.

Along with William Britelle and Sarah Kirkland Snider, Greenstein is one of the directors of New Amsterdam records, an aggressive New York label serving younger composers. He also directs the NOW ensemble, a group of expert Yale alums, and his access to lots of fine young, new-music-minded virtuosos has brought him a ton of performances. He deserves them. His music is bright, clever, inventive, playful. Blessedly absent is the academic conceit that *We Live in Troubled, Anxious Times* and need to reflect that in every piece to show how Serious we are. His music is largely diatonic in harmonic language, and polymetric in rhythm. Non-ideological as it feels, it clearly comes down on the Stravinsky/Glass side of American music’s great divide. A string quartet like his *Four on the Floor* (2005), for example, will repeat a small group of harmonies, using rhythmic surprise as its driving element—a paradigm that Copland derived from Stravinsky, and that I find running through American music in music by a wide range of American composers from Adams to Cage.

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What’s different about Greenstein is his subtle closeness to pop idiom. What I call an *ur*-American fusion of triadic harmony and Stravinskian rhythm, he explains as having grown up writing hip-hop beats and playing Romantic piano music. His quartet for electric guitars *Elastic Iridescence* (2006) contains expression markings like “a little bit Californian” and “transitioning from lyrical to funky.” On the other hand, his *First Ballade* for piano (2008—*sic*, though there doesn’t seem to be a second yet) is truly Chopinesque in its pianism, despite some tricky cross-rhythms running through Coplandian harmonies. A 2006 piano piece called *Boulez Is Alive*, a playful reference to that composer’s infamous 1954 “Schoenberg Is Dead” article, abounds in exploded Boulezian textures, though in charmingly tinkly B major. (Tellingly, this less groove-oriented work is the one that got Greenstein onto this year’s Contemporary Music Festival at Tanglewood.)

The mainspring of Greenstein’s music, though, is often a polymetric conception. *Four on the Floor* ushers you into it intricacies by mixing phrase lengths of 15, 13, and 11 eighth-notes in a heavily marked 4/4 meter. *Folk Music* (2004) for flute, bass clarinet, guitar, bass, and piano (the NOW ensemble) gives the ear quite a ride on the ambiguity of whether it’s in 3/4, as notated, or 12/16, as heard. Scan through the doodly background patterns in jazzy *Get Up Get Down* for orchestra (2006) and you’ll notice that some of the ones running through triplet eighth-notes repeat every 13 notes, keeping the ear constantly off balance without intruding into the smooth musical flow. In my generation, this kind of foot-tapping pop surface in

front of a background rhythmic complexity was called totalism, and was associated with composers like Michael Gordon, Mikel Rouse, Evan Ziporyn, John Luther Adams. One guesses Greenstein has listened to that music too, but it is part of New Amsterdam’s and the younger generation’s credo that the new, genre-less music has no name and shouldn’t be anointed with one.

A clue to why Greenstein’s music seems so fresh, so unconcerned with history, comes in the middle of his 2004 orchestra piece *Today and Everyday*. The orchestra jitterbugs to an abrupt halt, making room for a stately brass chorale that would have sounded serenely at home in a work by some mild early-20th-century master like Holst or Kodály. A composer of my generation would have been screamed at by teachers, peers, and his own conscience, “You can’t do that! It sounds too normal!” But Greenstein’s willingness to indulge a little normalcy, along with some hip-hop grooves, California guitar licks, the occasional dollop of Romanticism, and Boulezian explosions, is why he sounds like he’s not looking backward. What he does may have precedents, but what he refuses to avoid is indicative of a welcome new post-prohibitive generation.

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