

**CITY SOUNDS: BROOKLYN BOY MAKES GOOD**

# Pic maestro draws upon Flatbush education

By **STUART MILLER**

The sounds and textures of Elliot Goldenthal's movie scores span the globe — from the Ireland of his Oscar-nominated “Michael Collins” and the Mexico of his Oscar-winning “Frida” to the Chicago of Michael Mann’s forthcoming “Public Enemies” and the fictional island of “The Tempest,” the music for which he is still creating. The 54-year-old composer has a unique ability to synthesize the sounds of the world while avoiding cliché and producing something original.

Not bad for a kid from working-class Brooklyn, you might say. But Goldenthal might respond that it is precisely his life as a New Yorker that informs his composing.

“Flatbush was a wonderful place to grow up,” he says, exposing him to the sights, sounds and tastes of Jewish, Italian, Latino, Caribbean and other cultures. “And I went to high school in Coney Island — it was kind of Fellini-esque studying trigonometry in this world of the theatrical and grotesque, of cotton candy and Nathan’s.”

It all nurtured his love of the new and the different and a willingness to experiment that has become a hallmark of his career. “Even now the word ‘experimental’ has a bubbly attraction. I like that idea,” he says.

As a teen in the late 1960s he was listening to psychedelic rock (an older brother lived with Janis Joplin in Haight-Asbury) but also to John Coltrane and Stravinsky. While the subways

were “dismal and dangerous” then, for the price of a token, he could travel the world culturally, going to Greenwich Village to hear Sonny Rollins, to the Metropolitan Opera or to the Thalia movie theater to see French, Russian and Japanese films.

“This was not the Hollywood fare at the neighborhood theater,” he says. “Those alternative movies were a mecca for me.”

By then, Goldenthal knew music would be his life’s work; he graduated from the Manhattan School of Music and studied under John Corigliano and Aaron Copland, both success stories from Brooklyn. Goldenthal may now be best known for his film work, but his career began with music “performed live between the exit signs,” work that excites him to this day.

“When I do it, it has the feeling of running away to join the circus,” says Goldenthal, whose range encompasses orchestra compositions (“Fire Water Paper: A Vietnam Oratorio”), legit scores (the Tony-nominated “A Carnival Mass”), opera (“Grendel”) and ballet (“Othello”). “I respond very strongly to that.”

Early on, Goldenthal encountered a theater director with a similar boundary-pushing sensibility: Julie Taymor. They worked on several projects, then began dating; they’ve lived together for a quarter-century, remaining in New York, in a Manhattan apartment. “I feel comfortable here, walking and reacting, getting to see and smell the humanity,” Goldenthal says.

Not surprisingly, Goldenthal, whose first break in movies came on Gus Van Sant’s “Drugstore Cowboy,” has worked on

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**GOTHAM LIFER:** Goldenthal segues from Michael Mann’s “Public Enemies” to Julie Taymor’s “The Tempest.”

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Taymor’s films, from “Titus,” “Frida” and “Across the Universe” to the forthcoming “Tempest.”

“He is an extraordinary dramatist who thoroughly absorbs the context of the work as a story,” says Taymor.

Goldenthal also has developed relationships with Neil Jordan (five films including “Interview With a Vampire,” “Michael Collins,” and “Butcher Boy”) and Michael Mann (“Heat” and now

“Public Enemies”). Neither director is as avant-garde as Taymor, yet Goldenthal says they give him freedom to create in his scores, adding that relationships provide “ease of communication. The first time, you’re usually a little reticent about offering strong opinions.”

Jordan has publicly admired the fact that Goldenthal doesn’t have “a house style,” and Mann, Goldenthal says, “relishes the idea of experimentation, saying for ‘Public Enemies’ that I should go off and experiment with 15-20 electric guitars.”

Mann, for his part, says Goldenthal’s

compositions “draw from a deep encompassing artistic and intellectual range.”

Goldenthal rarely telegraphs emotion. He often underplays scenes, sometimes using silence in certain situations to give his music extra weight in the next.

“You have to think of the big picture all the time, even from note to note,” Goldenthal says.

He was drawn to “Enemies,” starring Johnny Depp as John Dillinger and Christian Bale as Melvin Purvis, because he is “attracted to mythic things,” be it Grendel or Batman. And, Goldenthal says, every-

thing about this story, from the architecture of 1930s Chicago to the very notion of gangster movies, is of mythic proportions. The challenge he then revels in, he says, is to go beyond “the pomp” and find the “shared humanity.”

“I don’t come in with a concept but with an ability and a willingness to react,” he says. “The most important thing is reacting to what you see, in the design, the editing, the lighting. In one scene, the actor’s eyes might be so much more important than the script, but it may be the script that’s most important in the next scene. You need nimble feet.”