

# Classical Musicians Learn to Improvise

BY CORINNA DA FONSECA-WOLLHEIM

Bach employed it at the request of kings, Beethoven used it as a weapon in duels, and women swooned when Liszt got carried away. But at some point in the early 20th century, improvisation disappeared from classical-music performance. Now a new generation of composers and performers is rediscovering it as a central part of the creative process—and, quite possibly, as a remedy for the shrinking of classical-music audiences.

For Preston Stahly, a composer and 1982 winner of the Charles Ives Prize, it's one of the most important issues in music today. He uses the term "avant-pop" to describe his own music and that of a heterogeneous group of other composers who grew up playing rock and jazz while studying counterpoint and 12-tone music in college. The wall separating the two worlds turned many composers away from academia and into an alternative music scene that is driven by composer-performers and chamber-music ensembles capable of playing and improvising in a number of styles.

At the Tribeca New Music Festival in downtown New York earlier this month, curated by Mr. Stahly, a musical anthropologist might have studied some of the vital signs of this new scene: a jungle of cables connecting instruments to slim notebook computers, string quartets whose members perform standing up (and, at times, walking about), appreciative whoops from the wine-sipping audience in response to an improvised solo. And an audience that was, on average, younger than the performers.

One of the highlights of the festival, and an example of the melding of improvisation and progressive music, was the concert by the Sirius string quartet of compositions by two of its members, violinist Gregor Huebner and cellist Mike Block. The String Quartet No. 3 by Mr. Huebner, a German jazz violinist who traces his roots to Central European gypsy fiddlers, was inspired by New York, with each movement representing a different place in the city: Times Square was noisy and brash, Red Hook revealed its gypsy contingent, 125th Street pulsed with incandescent jazz solos.

The effect of these improvised passages felt far from random: Bound into a tightly constructed—and unmistakably modern—musical architecture, each breakout solo seemed as inevitable as it was spontaneous. Interestingly, a look at Mr. Huebner's score reveals few notes and many verbal cues to the performers. The final movement, in fact, ends with the single word "CHAOS" written across the last measure.

Not every classically trained musician would know how to respond to such instructions. Dutch composer Jacob ter Veldhuis—whose "Take a Wild

Guess" for string quartet and electronically distorted taped speech made many a hip-hop artist look sedate when it received its world premiere at the festival—recalls his own frustration when he began using improvised elements in the 1970s: "I found out that when you tell a classical musician to improvise you get strange results. . . . One guy played the Dutch national anthem!"

A consequence has been the growing number of composer-performers. In a way, this, too, is a return to the origins of concert music, when composers like Bach, Mozart and Chopin wrote, played and improvised their own music. The separate profession of the performer is a result of the 19th-century emergence of a middle class that fostered a greater demand for live music while at the same time canonizing the masters of the past. Eventually, performers stopped writing—let alone im-

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provising—their own cadenzas in concertos, while some composers began to write music for instruments of which they had little practical understanding. Improvisation, meanwhile, became intellectually suspect.

Today, it is increasingly back at the beginning of the creative process for composers, many of whom use computer software to record, notate and then edit a piece. When Michael Lowenstern, a bass clarinetist and composer from Brooklyn, received a commission from Meet the Composer to write a violin concerto for Todd Reynolds, he began by asking the violinist to improvise.

"I told him, improvise something that sounds country. And I would love it if you could do it in D. And I'd like it even better if you could do it in 90 beats per minute," the composer said. Mr. Reynolds recorded the result and Mr. Lowenstern worked with it.

As more composers expect instrumentalists to be able to improvise, music colleges are adjusting their curriculums. The National Association of Schools of Music, an umbrella organization that sets standards in music education, added improvisation to its list of required subjects for the bachelor's degree in the early 1990s. At the Manhattan School of Music, improvisation is part of a new graduate program in contemporary music, and is open on an elective basis to all classical-music students.

Justin diCioccio, the school's chairman of jazz studies, says that "improvisation calls on you to be not only a performer, but a composer, editor and arranger, too." As such, it is not just important in training instrumentalists

for the demands of new music, but for developing listening skills essential in any kind of ensemble work.

At Mannes College and the Curtis Institute, improvisation for classical musicians is taught by Israeli pianist and composer Noam Sivan, who incorporates improvisations into his concerts, for instance following a performance of Bach's "Goldberg Variations" with his own extemporization on the theme. "You learn music by always playing what is given to you," he says. "But how do you learn to be an *artist* if you don't practice that aspect of making up your own music?"

More pragmatically, colleges also have to prepare musicians for the changing realities of the business. Where traditionally the goal of most students was to land a job in an orchestra, the shrinking number of such positions calls for a new flexibility. Training in different genres, and an ability to play—and improvise—nonclassical music makes an instrumentalist more employable. Nadia Sirota, a violist on the faculty at the Manhattan School of Music who sometimes performs with rock

bands and songwriters, puts it this way: "The kiss of death for your career is when you turn up and say: 'Oh, I don't do that.'"

That Ms. Sirota, as a violist, is at all active in popular music highlights the other side of the coin. As classical music takes on some elements of pop, composers of indie rock are dipping into the classical-music tool box, using such traditionally uncool instruments as oboe and French horn to enhance their sound. "It's a development that bodes well for the song genre," says Ms. Sirota. "And as for us classical musicians, let's be honest: We all secretly want to be rock stars."

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