

COVER STORY



MUSIC

Making Up the Classics

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in the 18th century, we make it up on the spot," Mr. Haimovitz says.

Just last weekend at the Boston Philharmonic, Algerian-born violinist Gilles Apap dazzled the audience with an improvisation on Bach's fourth cello suite, segueing from Baroque to Celtic melodies to Appalachian fiddle tunes. This weekend, the classically trained string trio Time for Three will play a freewheeling program with the Florida Orchestra in Tampa Bay, mixing Bach, the Beatles, bluegrass and jazz and

A new generation of performers has embraced improvisation in ways Bach and Mozart couldn't have imagined, videotaping themselves and posting the results on YouTube. Eric Barnhill, a Juilliard-trained pianist in New York, records a daily improvisation in the style of Brahms or Schubert and posts audio files on his blog. Graduates of the country's top conservatories have formed classical garage bands that leapfrog across genres and use improvisation to blend classical motifs with jazz, folk and hip-hop.

'There are no wrong notes,' a professor says. If you play a wrong note, play it again. Then it's not wrong anymore.

leaving room for their own melodic riffs. "We're not inventing anything. This was done in Mozart's time," says Zach De Pue, the 29-year-old concertmaster of the Indianapolis Symphony and one of Time for Three's two violinists.

Throughout the 1700s and 1800s, improvisation was a vital aspect of musical performances. Bach's spontaneous melodies often lasted half an hour and ended with complex, three-part fugues. Beethoven famously battled German pia-

nist Daniel Steibelt in heated improvisation duels. When Franz Liszt performed, the audience suggested melodies and themes for him to riff on—at an 1838 concert in Milan, he improvised based on such wide-ranging themes as marriage and railroads, according to Kenneth Hamilton's 2007 book "After the Golden Age: Romantic Pianism and Modern Performance."

Concerts began to change in the 1850s. Audiences came to prefer composers' iconic masterpieces. The growth of the music publishing business gave musicians identical, mass-produced scores. Later, the recording industry enabled listeners to memorize the nuances of famous performances. By the mid-20th century, improvisation had all but vanished among classical performers. Classical music ceded spontaneity to jazz.

Improvisation's unlikely rebirth comes at a pivotal moment. Symphony orchestras are struggling to attract the next-generation audience, but the genre is flourishing in unexpected places. Nightclubs and other pop music venues are booking new, cross-pollinating ensembles that attract young



Clockwise, top left: Richard Fields; Rahav Segov for The Wall Street Journal; Vanessa Briceno-Scherzer; Jim McGuire