

Making Up the Classics

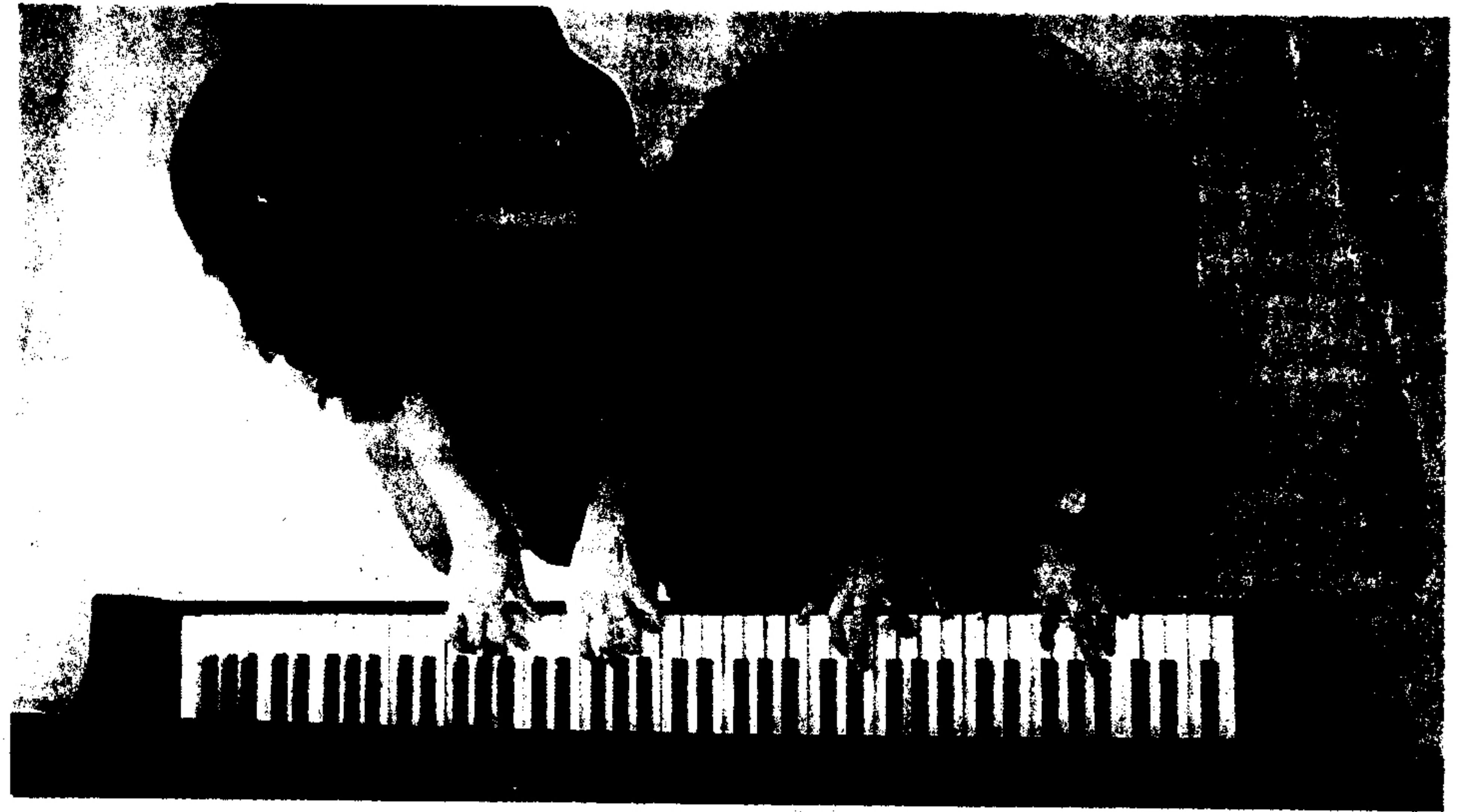
The return of improvisation in classical music is stirring up concert halls and conservatories—and changing how audiences listen to masterpieces.

BY ALEXANDRA ALTER

At a recital last month in Seoul, the pianist and musicologist Robert Levin began the program's second half by pulling four slips of paper out of a basket. Then he launched into a musical fantasy that, to a layman's ear, sounded just like Mozart. It was Mr. Levin's own spontaneous composition, invented on the spot using suggestions gathered from the audience.

The art of improvisation, long dormant in classical music, is undergoing a revival in concert halls, conservatories and recording studios. A handful of performers say they're restoring a lost tradition that stretches back to Bach, Mozart and Beethoven—composer-performers and improvisers whose impromptu creations were almost as celebrated as their written masterpieces.

"We're seen as revolutionaries, but we're bringing back something that's very old, actually," says Gabriela Montero, a Venezuelan pianist known for ending programs of Rachmaninoff, Bach, Chopin and Liszt with improvisations based on audience requests, rang-



ing from ringtones to nursery rhymes to "La Cucaracha." During a concert tour of the Northwest last month, Ms. Montero gave several fully improvised performances, each lasting more than an hour.

This season, at least half a dozen classical concerts have incorporated improvisation, and more are cropping up, often in unconventional venues. At a packed downtown Manhattan nightclub earlier this month, the cellist Matt Haimovitz teamed up with DJ Olive in an eclectic mash-up that veered from a

Beethoven cello sonata to a strange duet that set Mr. Haimovitz's frenetic bowing against the turntable's hallucinatory electronic sounds. A crowd sipped beers and looked spellbound as Mr. Haimovitz improvised seamless transitions between movements, building up to a fully improvised cadenza. "There are certain movements where, as it would happen

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At top: DePauw University students (from left) John Craft, Bradkey King and Carolyn-Anne Templeton, performing as part of a class in improvisation; above, students Rebecca Janvrin and Phillip Blaine.