



Top left: Music 130, improvisation, at DePauw, Matt Haimovitz (above) performing at Le Poisson Rouge, New York, Mark O'Connor (left).

crowds. The Metropolitan Opera is reaching fans in movie theaters with screenings of live, high-definition broadcasts. InstantEncore.com, a year-old Web site, has free video of more than 1,000 classical concerts; visitors have watched nearly 60,000 streaming videos since February. In this unruly landscape, improvisation has double appeal: It offers something that's fresh and unique to each performance while steering the classical repertoire back to its roots.

"It's not like these are museum pieces under glass," says Benjamin Zander, conductor of the 29-year-old Boston Philharmonic and an advocate of reviving improvisation. "These are living, breathing pieces, and our job is to bring them to life."

Efforts to restore improvisation have stirred controversy. Ms. Montero, the Venezuelan pianist, says people occasionally walk out when she starts to improvise. Mr. Haimovitz says he was booed by an audience in Paris in the early 1990s when he improvised with an electric guitarist. Some scholars and musicians say it's counterproductive, and slightly impious, to tinker with masterpieces. "The idea that when you improvise a cadenza you are doing what they did in the 18th century is a delusion," says pianist and author Charles Rosen. "There's no reason to think that if you improvise one, it's going to be better than the one Mozart wrote."

An improvisation revival could profoundly influence how classical music is taught and performed. Learning how to jam in the style of Beethoven may sound impossible, but musicians who dare to try say it enriches their understanding of rhythmic and harmonic structures and leads to livelier and more-nuanced interpretations. Improvisation could even help draw new audiences to the concert-hall format, by offering something that has never been played before.

Bringing it back won't be easy, though. There's no Suzuki method for improvisation. Few contemporary classical performers master the art, let alone try to teach it. Violinist and composer Mark O'Connor, who improvised a two-minute solo passage while performing one of his own compositions at Carnegie Hall last month, says performers have to relearn how to be creative, in part because their training places so much emphasis on the flawless execution of another person's creation.

"One of the reasons we don't see more improvisation in the academic setting is because at some point in our education system, the creative composers were separated from the virtuosic performers. Some of that is starting to be broken down now," says Mr. O'Connor, who learned to improvise by studying jazz and folk music and now coaches young musicians in improvisation at UCLA, Harvard and the Curtis Institute of Music in Philadelphia.

Once rare outside jazz departments, such workshops

have become more common in recent years. Last month, a group of piano majors at Juilliard gathered in a classroom with two grand pianos and took turns improvising in the style of Bach, Chopin and Beethoven. None had studied improvisation before, and most were hesitant. The teacher, visiting pianist David Dolan, chided them for playing too carefully and challenged the idea that the performer's job is merely to execute a composer's intentions perfectly. "Do you think Chopin would authorize you to change his text?" he asked the 10 students, who seemed stunned into silence. "Chopin wouldn't only authorize you, he would push you to do that."

Few teachers take improvisation further than Eric Edberg, a professor of music at DePauw University, in Greencastle, Ind. Prof. Edberg, a cellist, began improvising 15 years ago. He started by playing spontaneous, dissonant cello harmonies, then taught himself to improvise simple melodies. Now he teaches his cello students to improvise and coaches chamber music groups that play nothing but improvisations.

Prof. Edberg's unorthodox coaching sessions begin with freestyle humming, sighing, babbling and finger-wiggling. Sometimes he turns off the lights and instructs students to play in the dark to hone their instincts. His students say it helps them develop their own musical voice. "We're kind of like composers when we improvise," says Rebecca Janvrin, a junior majoring in vocal performance and history, who improvises with a chamber music group. "We have the whole gamut of techniques and styles from all of music history to draw from."

On a recent rainy afternoon, members of a string quartet rehearsed a loosely structured improvisation. They began plucking their strings in ascending notes that grew louder and faster. Then the cellist and viola player held down a rhythm, plucking and tapping their instruments, while the violinists took turns improvising solos. Jenna Bauer, a 19-year-old violin major, played smooth, drawn-out notes that sounded like Irish folk tunes. The other violinist, Jeremy Eberhard, a junior, played furious, dissonant chords that evoked the 20th century Russian composer Shostakovich.

The players locked eyes, looking for cues about when to switch tempos and when to end. Sometimes, they ended with a decisive swipe of their bows. Other times, they ground unexpectedly to a halt, seemingly out of ideas. Prof. Edberg told them to make more eye contact and have more confidence. "Repeat after me," he said. "There are no wrong notes. I embrace the surprises."

"They say that in jazz all the time," he continued. "If you play a wrong note, play it again, then it's not a wrong note anymore."

During a concert last week at DePauw, Prof. Edberg's chamber music students gave an hour-long performance without music stands or notes. At one point, the string quartet sat in a tight circle on stage, the lights went down and they played in complete darkness for two minutes, listening to each other's breathing to time their bowing and to match volume and rhythm. They ended with a quick, two-chord flourish, drawing applause and astonished