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## Classical Musicians Learn to Improvise

By Corinna da Fonseca-Wollheim | May 21, 2008

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.**