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Filling in the blanks

Concert to eliminate breaks that let people's focus drift

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Orchestra. Circa Now.

That's the logo at the home page of REWIND, an experimental concert being put together by conductor Paul Haas and a legion of his musical friends at a converted synagogue in Manhattan this week.

REWIND is not a group so much as a concept. Seeking to shake up the static nature of a typical classical music concert, Haas has assembled a 90-minute stream of music that eliminates the obligatory pauses and intermissions in order to better keep audience attention.

For instance, performers in a chamber orchestra, two violin soloists, and a "laptop" real-time player will move freely among several discrete locations throughout the Angel Orensanz Center hall during the program. Newly written material weaves the unlike styles of Schnittke, Stravinsky, Schoenberg, Mozart and Purcell into a continuous flow. From his laptop, composer Joel Morales will use live, ambient sound from the audience to mix in a real-time feedback. Large, hanging sculptures by Kate Raudenbush will be placed overhead.

The idea is to add spatial interest and eliminate dead air.

"Basically, I've been to so many 'normal' orchestra concerts, I kept getting ideas on how to make them better," says Haas, a Juilliard School grad who conducts the New York Youth Symphony in his "legit" gig. "I've found myself not as engaged as I would like to be in the performances, and began to ask myself why."

Haas started with the obvious: that pauses between movements of a work, or between pieces, or during intermission, allowed audiences to disengage emotionally, unlike in the two-hour, uninterrupted screening of a movie.

"You sort of lose the musical narrative, if you will, with all these interruptions; in fact, classical music doesn't require a narrative at all," Haas says.

Haas will try to rectify this lapse with nine newly written short scores, to be played by a chamber orchestra, which will act as a bridge, for instance, between works such as Schnittke's Concerto Grosso for Two Violins (with Anne Akiko Meyers and Colin Jacobsen) to Schoenberg's "Verklaerte Nacht" and ultimately to Corelli -- hence the term "rewind."

"It's the idea of going backward through time, five centuries of music, and viewing it through a contemporary perspective," Haas says.

Princeton University doctoral student Judd Greenstein is one of three composers Haas asked to write the transitions, a task Greenstein understood immediately.

"Coming from a hip-hop and electronic dance music background, my idea is of a DJ who keeps the beat going, so to speak," says Greenstein, 26, a New York native.

"Sometimes you know when a DJ is cutting a new record, sometimes you don't sense it right away -- in the same way, you may not hear exactly where the Corelli score begins after my piece."

Music lovers today, Greenstein says, no longer hear the juxtaposition of unlike pieces as something unappealing.

"Most people I know listen to iPods and move constantly from one genre to another -- people are used to listening experiences that are a constant flow of one type of music on top of another," Greenstein says. "With this format, you really can't lose, since we've stacked the deck in (the listener's) favor with good music -- what's interesting is to hear how we've recontextualized it."

iPods, of course, randomly mix one pre-recorded, self-contained piece of music next to another. RE WIND attempts more sensitivity with transitional scores that form a bridge between, say, Schnittke's harmonic language and Stravinsky's biting rhythms, says Haas. The narrative, he adds, will not be a story thread, as much as a link of musical ideas that morph into each other.

"Tying together various pieces of music goes back to medieval times, with the idea of troping pieces of secular music into the Mass," Haas says. "Obviously, we're creating a different sound, but it's the same idea."