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Jazz and Classical Meet to Learn and Improvise

By STEVE SMITH

Improvisation, a fundamental quality of jazz, is by nature a risky business. The act usually involves a confrontation between two perspectives — that of a composer and that of a performer or performers — with the goal of achieving a combination informed and enriched by both perspectives. At its idealistic peak, as in recent large-ensemble works by the composer and bandleader [Anthony Braxton](#), improvisation can represent a vision of collaborative democracy.

Yet even when you approach improvisation with the purest of intentions and the sharpest of skills, you're never entirely certain what will happen. So it was no surprise that in two concerts presented by the first Jazz Composers Orchestra Institute in the Miller Theater at Columbia University on Friday and Saturday evenings, a feeling of agendas in uncertain collusion extended beyond the music performed by the [Wet Ink Ensemble](#) and the [American Composers Orchestra](#).

The institute, jointly presented by the orchestra and the university's [Center for Jazz Studies](#), brought together 34 jazz artists for a five-day crash course in writing for classical performers. Distinguished figures from the classical and jazz worlds — and some who flourish in both spheres, like the trombonist and composer George Lewis — led seminars dealing with instrumental techniques; modern repertory; practical concerns, like publishers and copyists; and, yes, improvisation.

For the [American Composers Orchestra](#) the institute was a new step in a process by which resources and performance opportunities are made available to an ever-broadening pool of composers, including those from outside the conventional classical world. Enlightened self-interest is involved: from this year's institute participants, five will be selected to have works performed by the orchestra during next year's event, scheduled for June.

Mr. Lewis, the director of the center, had another agenda: "just getting people up to speed on what's been happening since, let's say, 1970," he explained in a [video clip](#) the orchestra posted on

YouTube. In panel discussions during both concerts Mr. Lewis proposed the notion of a “postgenre” aesthetic. On Saturday he put it bluntly: “A stupid word like ‘jazz’ is not going to hold me back from doing what I want to do with a set of instruments, or with a set of people, or with an environment, or with discourse.”

That moment aside, the institute’s objective could be unclear if you attended only the concerts. Among the works Wet Ink played on Friday, only one, “Wonderlust” by Leroy Jenkins, embraced jazz improvisation as a primary concern. Joshua Modney, a violinist, played a flamboyant solo part over an ensemble mostly deployed as accompaniment.

Katharina Rosenberger’s “parcours III” matched crackling, burbling instrumental parts with recorded sounds from “Room V,” an earlier interactive sound installation. Bernhard Lang’s “DW5” derived a bracing vitality from obsessively repeated rhythmic cells.

Passages of luminous tenderness occasionally surfaced in the restless, abrasive flux of Richard Barrett’s “Codex V.” In Eric Wubbels’s “Euphony,” two saxophonists, Eliot Gattegno and Alex Mincek, used methods derived from post-1960s avant-garde jazz to chirrup and squall over a vivacious sequence of sharply contrasted episodes. Throughout, Carl Bettendorf conducted with exacting care, and the performers combined technical finesse with a palpable commitment that made these formidable works approachable.

A similar sense of conviction was missing during parts of Saturday night’s concert by the American Composers Orchestra. The program, conducted by Gil Rose, opened with a solid account of [John Zorn](#)’s zany “For Your Eyes Only,” a successful example of Mr. Zorn’s translating a jump-cut aesthetic and extended instrumental techniques, developed with fellow improvisers, for a conventional ensemble.

Energy and authority dipped slightly during Anthony Davis’s “You Have the Right to Remain Silent,” an imaginative concerto for improvising clarinetist (here, the excellent J. D. Parran) and interactive electronics (played on a keyboard by Earl Howard). [Earle Brown](#)’s “Available Forms 1,” an open-form score, sounded listless despite Mr. Rose’s thoughtful management. Roscoe Mitchell rearranged a trio version of his often-revisited “Nonaah” into an engaging concerto grosso, but again some of the playing sounded tentative.

Technical matters improved in Errollyn Wallen’s “Girl in My Alphabet,” a playfully quirky 1990 work originally for two pianos, four hands, which bloomed in a new orchestration. Near the end Ms. Wallen lavishly embraced a banal theme from a television commercial, only to jilt it for a last

twirl with “The Girl From Ipanema.” It was an audaciously funny gesture, but how much funnier might it have been had its tellers embraced it more boldly.