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Putting Music Back Together Again

By ANTHONY TOMMASINI

The conductor Kristjan Jarvi was 7 when his family left Estonia for the United States in 1979. But even before, as a young boy in his home town of Tallinn, he was transfixed by the rock and pop music being broadcast over the one television station from Finland that reached Estonia.

Music was the family business, but not that kind of music. His father, the conductor Nemme Jarvi, was the music director of the Estonian National Opera and National Symphony Orchestra, though he spent a good deal of time away from home on guest-conducting stints. Mr. Jarvi not only approved of his youngest child's taste in pop and jazz but he also fed it, bringing home recordings of Tony Bennett, Frank Sinatra, Duke Ellington, the cast album of "Ain't Misbehavin'" and other things.

"It was all kind of subversive in Estonia," Kristjan Jarvi, now 28, said during a recent interview in his apartment near Lincoln Center. "I loved the Beatles. And Abba. When we moved to New York, I got into the rap group Run-D.M.C. Carla Bruni, she's amazing. The Police were huge then. Sting is one of the greatest musicians ever."

Given Mr. Jarvi's passion for contemporary music of all styles, it is not surprising that in 1993 he founded the Absolute Ensemble, an electro-acoustic "classical band," as he calls it, with 18 core members that performs a wide spectrum of modern music; chamber works by composers ranging from John Adams to John Zorn; innovative transcriptions of works by classical masters; music from composers whose roots are in jazz and rock and sometimes even something like the Schoenberg Chamber Symphony No. 1.

What unites the Absolute Ensemble performers, the diverse composers they play and the group's intrepid music director is a shared determination to dismantle the boundaries between different styles of contemporary music, boundaries they see as arbitrary and confining. Categorization is the Absolute Ensemble's enemy; open exploration is its mission.

The ensemble has been attracting enthusiastic audiences for contemporary music concerts to unconventional settings like the BAM Cafe at the Brooklyn Academy of Music. Interestingly, for a group so intent on abolishing categories, it presents its concerts under five different names, depending upon the orientation of the music.

Tonight at Columbia University's Miller Theater you can hear a concert by Scratchband, what the Absolute Ensemble calls itself when the program includes arrangements of rock, funk and jazz-influenced works. There will be music by the Beatles, James Brown, Charles Coleman, Miles Davis, Jimi Hendrix, Steve Reich and a Violin Concerto by John Adams with the dynamic violinist Leila Josefowicz, Mr. Jarvi's wife, as soloist.

In July at Joe's Pub in the East Village, you could have heard the Absolute Ensemble as Absolute Mix, playing a program of crosscultural, contemporary and jazz works in a nightclub setting, with lights lowered, lots of amplification and infectious energy. A highlight was Michael Daugherty's "Dead Elvis," a joyously raucous piece scored for



Kristjan Jarvi, an Estonian-born conductor and founder of Absolute Ensemble, which performs a wide spectrum of contemporary music.

squawking brass and winds, rock drums and amplified string bass.

The music combines tidbits of Presley tunes, even the saccharine standards like "It's Now or Never," with funeral intonations of the "Dies Irae" chant. It featured the ensemble's young bassoonist, Martin Kuuskmann, another Estonian-American, decked out like Elvis, prancing about the floor of the pub in glittery Las Vegas duds.

Yet on the same program there was an impressive chamber work by Mr. Coleman called "Rut Strut" that offered evidence that put audiences unused to "serious" contemporary music would accept a lot of atonal complexity if the piece contained a rock rhythm section. Presiding over this vibrantly diverse roster of musicians was Mr. Jarvi, a technically adroit conductor and kinetic stage presence, tall and trim with a wavy mane of long blondish hair and an impish smile that suggests he finds the job of smashing categories tons of fun.

"Categorization has been promoted by those on the commercial side of the music business," Mr. Jarvi explained, relaxing on his couch while in the next room Ms. Josefowicz tended to Lukas, their 6-month-old son ("totally the best thing I've ever done," Mr. Jarvi said).

Returning to the attack on categories, Mr. Jarvi said: "There is too much product out there, and the record companies don't know which bin to put which record in." Sadly, he thinks that many classically trained musicians, seeing no choice, accept the status quo. "They have, up until recently, been very much trying to fit into an institutionalized system of academic music," he said. "You must go through all your training with dead white guys. The money people who fund institutionalized music consider that stuff, the classical orchestra repertory, the cream of the crop. But Beethoven was an innovator."

Mr. Jarvi received a thorough training in the "dead white guys" tradition himself, first at the Manhattan School of Music in New York, where he studied piano intensively, and later at the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor, where he was enticed into conducting when composer-friends who needed someone to conduct their new pieces tapped the willing but inexperienced Mr. Jarvi. "I didn't know what I was doing," he said. "I was like Bambi on ice."

Before pursuing conducting as a career he had to face up to the family heritage, not just his father, who became the music director of the

Detroit Symphony in 1990, but his brother, Paavo Jarvi, 10 years older, who will become the music director of the Cincinnati Symphony in the fall of 2001. (His older sister, Maarika, is a flutist in Paris.)

So far Kristjan Jarvi has achieved notable success in what he calls the Establishment. Having just completed two years as an assistant conductor to Esa-Pekka Salonen at the Los Angeles Philharmonic, and earned guest-conducting appearances with the Netherlands Philharmonic and the Radio Turin Symphony in Italy, Mr. Jarvi recently assumed the music directorship of the Norrlands Opera Company and Symphony Orchestra in Umea, Sweden.

But right now the Absolute Ensemble is at the center of his work, and being in New York is critical to his vision. "The most positive thing for a group like ours is to be in this city surrounded by composers with this

For the Absolute Ensemble, it's time to break up all the categories that are breaking up music.

mind-set who are interested in many facets of music," he said. "I can't think of another city today that is as happening a town for new music as New York. Maybe Amsterdam."

America's multicultural tradition is part of what made the country attractive to the Jarvi family. But getting here was a struggle. Though only a child at the time, Mr. Jarvi remembers it well.

In the late 1970's, his father was conducting increasingly throughout Europe and the United States and earning good money, though most of the earnings were claimed, through fees and taxes, by the central government of the Soviet Union. The family moved here with two suitcases apiece and about \$200 in cash. There were severe restrictions on taking money out of Estonia. "It was worthless money, anyway," Mr. Jarvi said. "There was a picture of Lenin on it."

In the United States the Jarvis were taken in by a series of friends, first in New Jersey, then in New York, where the family finally settled. The elder Mr. Jarvi used the city as a base for his growing international career until he moved to Michigan for the Detroit Symphony post.

Kristjan Jarvi founded the Absolute Ensemble shortly after dropping out of the graduate program at the University of Michigan, which he found too constraining, and moving to New York. The ensemble, guided by its collective vision, has been thriving for seven years. In the process, it has broken up into five subgroups, each with its own name and programming agenda.

In addition to Scratchband and Absolute Mix, there is Architectonics, which plays original and modern compositions from the concert-music tradition. You might hear a piece by, say, the brainy serialist Milton Babbitt on one of these programs. Another subgroup, called Music in a Chamber, offers contemporary and even older works, often in unusual arrangements.

For example, last March the ensemble performed Mahler's Fourth Symphony in an arrangement for 12 instruments by Edwin Stein, a Schoenberg student, although Mr. Jarvi substituted a Yamaha DX-7 electronic keyboard for the harmonium of the original Stein arrangement. This is not as gimmicky as it sounds. In a review in The New York Times, Allan Kozinn observed that the chamber-scale performance "offered such a transparent, lucid view of the work that a listener could see how every strand of music fit into the whole."

The final group is Blood on the Floor, which takes its name from the title of a dramatic, cutting-edge 90-minute work by the composer Mark Anthony Turnage that the ensemble performs as a single program.

But isn't Mr. Jarvi bothered by the subgroups? Aren't they what he's been fighting against? He doesn't see it that way.

"The different names give each concert a frame," he said. "It's a good marketing frame for presenters that makes it easier to explain the individual events."

"We're not trying to confuse people," Mr. Jarvi added. "We're trying to get them to trust us. In a way, what we play is not the point."

What they play is not the point? Isn't this attitude at odds with the ensemble's mission to serve composers? No, Mr. Jarvi explained.

"People coming to see a show called Scratchband find out that the Absolute Ensemble is putting on the show," he said. "Maybe they will hear a work by a contemporary composer, mixed in, they would never have listened to otherwise," he said. And maybe, he hopes, they will then take a chance on an Absolute Mix concert or an Architectonics program.

Now that he is in charge of the Norrlands Opera Company and Symphony Orchestra, Mr. Jarvi wants to encourage that audience to move beyond categories as well. But he intends to move slowly. "You can't throw a glass of water on the face of someone who has been sleeping," he said.

For now Mr. Jarvi is looking forward to the release of some additional recordings by the Absolute Ensemble on a hip Gorman label called Cn/C Records, which stands for Cross Culture and Contemporary. He is especially pleased with a new recording featuring the bass trombonist David Taylor and the Absolute Ensemble performing a vibrant, wild and hard-driving concerto by the Swiss-born, New York composer Daniel Schnyder.

As his interviewer started to pack and leave, Mr. Jarvi could not stop talking about his latest discoveries, for one, an album called "Cafe Creole" on the Cn/C label, presenting a program of Haitian and Swedish traditional music performed by a contemporary-music vocal ensemble from Sweden called Amanda.

"You have to hear this," he said. He is also amazed by a new Latin pop record. "It's fantastic," he said, shaking his head in disbelief. "If I had a choice, I would start all over and become a samba guy."

Don't Fence Them In

Scratchband (the Absolute Ensemble) will appear tonight at 8 at the Miller Theater at Columbia University, 116th Street and Broadway, Morningside Heights. Tickets: \$17. Information: (212) 854-7799.