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ENTERTAINMENT

NEWS YOU CAN USE

Tearing down musical walls

You won't find the Absolute Ensemble neatly pigeonholed in record-store bins. The 18-member group is an "electro-acoustic classical band," says conductor Kristjan Järvi. The band mixes classical music with jazz, rock, and modern atonality—tossing in a show tune or two. Critics rave about the "daredevil" group's "mix of discipline and raucousness."

Järvi, 28, whose father and brother direct traditional orchestras, founded the ensemble in 1993 after listening to composer friends incorporate grunge rock into their "classical" pieces. Two new CDs, released last week by Enja Records, testify to Järvi's ambition to "break down the segregation of music." On *Habanera*, the ensemble teams with Cuban composer and clarinetist Paquito D'Rivera, elegantly weaving classical sounds into Latin jazz and George Gershwin tunes. *Absolution* is an adventurous performance of contemporary pieces, ending with a rocking rendition of Jimi Hendrix's "Purple Haze" on strings. "These guys are conservatory trained, but they're improvising [like jazz musicians]," says



Järvi (second from left) and his classically rocking musicians

Frank Oteri, editor of *NewMusicBox*, a Web magazine.

"You can play Debussy back to back with Hendrix if you present it in an unstuffy, informal way," Järvi says. His concerts, often in clubs, are lit like rock shows. Fans of all ages attend. And the band tries to give them what they'd get at a rock concert: "musicians playing the hell out of the music." Roll over, Beethoven. —Rachel Hartigan

• The group plays on National Public Radio's Performance Today on February 20; check local listings for times.