

Classical Music Unwound

By [Jessica Balik](#)

Is it possible to move in two directions simultaneously? Generally, you move either forward or backward. Moving in both directions at the same time seems appreciably trickier, and maybe even impossible outside the realm of quantum physics.

In a sense, though, moving in both directions at once was precisely the goal of “Rewind,” a concert given on Saturday by the New Century Chamber Orchestra. On the one hand, “Rewind” obviously aimed to move backward. Its title speaks to the order of the program’s pieces, which progressed in reverse chronological order. The concert thus began with 20th-century pieces ranging from Alfred Schnittke’s *Concerto Grosso No. 1* (1977) to Arnold Schoenberg’s *Verklärte Nacht* (1902; rev. 1943). It concluded with a piece from Henry Purcell’s opera *A Faerie Queen*, which dates from the last decade of the 17th century.

On the other hand, while the program moved back through time, conceptually it also aimed to move forward. Paul Haas, a New York City conductor, originally created “Rewind” for Sympho, his ensemble in that city. Sympho’s slogan is “Orchestra: Circa Now.” Both Sympho in general and “Rewind” in particular aim to update the traditional concert experience in an effort to appeal to audiences under the age of 40.

Even when transported to San Francisco’s Yerba Buena Center for the Arts for its West Coast premiere, “Rewind” fast-forwards the traditional concert via hip, multisensory stimulation that includes creative lighting, a kinetic sculpture suspended from the ceiling, electronic music, and innovative use of the performance space.

The kinetic installation was created by Reuben Margolin, a Berkeley-born artist whose sculpture was commissioned for the concert. His piece was an enigmatic conglomeration of white, rodlike pieces that undulated slowly, smoothly, and silently, like a giant mechanical jellyfish swimming above the performers. With the help of colored spotlights, the installation was an ambiance-changing chameleon, but its blend of grace and colossal scale was nonetheless mystifying.

Music From on High

While perched on a balcony, composer and DJ Mason Bates supplied electronic music that unwound at the start of the program, as well as occasionally between pieces. Other musicians, usually wind players, also performed from the balcony. Another innovative use of the performance space was the main-level concert setup: The musicians performed on an elevated box in the center of the room, while the audience sat in rows forming a square around them. Before the concert, Haas explained to me that such seating is one way that “Rewind” aims to dissolve any separation between performers and audience members.



Paul Haas



Mason Bates



Anne Akiko Meyers

The concert's programming innovation involved more than the reverse chronology of the pieces. First, the program was entirely continuous, with neither an intermission nor pauses between pieces. Short, specially commissioned works by three contemporary composers — Bates, Joshua Penman, and Judd Greenstein — filled the would-be pauses and connected the pieces. The program's continuity spoke to its goal of keeping the audience so engrossed in the performance as to eliminate the need for breaks.

Second, individual pieces were selected to reference multiple historical eras. For example, the *Serenata* from Stravinsky's *Pulcinella* referenced Pergolesi, an 18th-century composer, while Schnittke's *Concerto Grosso* referenced a genre that flourished in the late 17th century. Just as these pieces transported historical composers, genres, and styles into 20th-century compositions, "Rewind" aimed to convey classical music in a contemporary setting.

In short, from innovative programming to awe-inspiring visuals, "Rewind" sought to keep its audience engaged. But did the performance succeed in doing so? It certainly did, according to my date for the evening, a nonmusician whom I have dragged to countless concerts. He said "Rewind" was the best concert we have ever attended together. He is neither a classical music aficionado nor someone over the age of 40, and precisely for those reasons, he falls within the program's target audience. Judging by his opinion, "Rewind" resoundingly achieved its goal of engaging this group.

As much as I would love to endorse wholeheartedly a concert that makes music appeal to new audiences, I nonetheless have reservations about "Rewind." For example, I fully intended to pay careful attention to the violin solo in Alexander Raskatov's piece, which featured the guest artist Anne Akiko Myers. But she performed from the balcony, and Margolin's installation separated her from me. I did not pay her due attention, being distracted by the lights and moving art.

Music for a Multitasking Generation

Perhaps my multitasking and multiprocessing skills are simply below average for what the program notes dubbed the "iPod generation" to which I must belong. Then again, "Rewind" featured both multisensory stimulation and a large number of short pieces. (Schoenberg's piece was by far the longest of its 21 connected works.) So perhaps "Rewind" insinuates that these iPod shufflers are also a Ritalin generation that needs a variety of stimulation to stay engaged at a concert because it cannot stay focused on anything for long. Either way, I felt insulted.

Both the spectacle and the continuous, rapid-fire succession of pieces seemed to enhance my date's experience while simultaneously detracting from mine. It was indeed exciting to be within a few feet of the performers, particularly the violins, but ultimately while I was less physically separated from the performers, I felt musically estranged from the cellos.

In the end, I appreciated what "Rewind" aimed to do: make a concert of art music appeal to younger audiences who might find the traditional concert hall uninvitingly antiquated. Or, as Haas put it to me, "Rewind" aims to combine the best of classical music with the best of modern art and technology. I think it achieved this goal, while sacrificing what a traditional concert does well, which is to present complete, sometimes lengthy pieces in an environment in which you can focus intently.

For me, therefore, the program format seemed both a step forward and a step back. The youngish audience gave it a standing ovation.