

David Garrett carries the torch for classical crossover

The bestselling violinist believes that he's winning converts with his orchestral covers of rock tunes. But rock is in the DNA of many of today's composers.

Reporting from New York —



David Garrett mixes Beethoven with Kurt Cobain on his new album, “Rock Symphonies.” (Philipp Müller / Decca Label Group / August 22, 2010)

Recent forays into rock by [Renee Fleming](#) and [classical music](#) by [Sting](#) have revived the spotlight on artists crossing from one musical genre to another. But neither [opera](#) empress nor pop icon embody crossover music quite like 28-year-old David Garrett.

In 2009 the frightfully handsome violinist, a star in classical music, hit the top of Billboard's Classical Crossover chart after a glossy film of one of his concerts — during which he, rock band and orchestra raved-up songs by [AC/DC](#) and [Michael Jackson](#) — was broadcast on [PBS](#) stations, including KCET.

On his new album, "Rock Symphonies," accompanied by a new PBS concert film, Garrett and his Stradivarius hot-wire Beethoven's Fifth and Vivaldi's "Four Seasons" as well as [Guns N' Roses'](#) "November Rain" and [Nirvana's](#) "Smells Like Teen Spirit."

Garrett is a captivating champion of the right of rock and classical music to share chords. Yet as he careens around stages, arpeggios flying from his fingers, he exposes cracks in a relationship that has been shaky from the days the Boston Pops first fluffed up "Hey Jude."

It's often painfully apparent that when rock and classical music meet for a date, they have no chemistry. Together, each is diminished.

"You can't put [Halle Berry](#) with [Roger Federer](#), expect them to mate and have a super human being — it doesn't work that way," said Bramwell Tovey, music director of the Vancouver Symphony Orchestra and principal guest conductor of the Los Angeles Philharmonic at the Hollywood Bowl, whose son Ben plays guitar in the heavy metal band Rise to Remain.

"Rock is an amplified world, classical is an acoustic one. An orchestra is a very organic thing. It can turn on a dime. Amplifying it, locking it inside a rock drum kit, can destroy it."

Uniting pop and classical music, though, doesn't have to result in a shadow of both worlds. Beyond "popera" stars like Il Divo thrives a community of young composers, such as William Brittelle and Sarah [Kirkland](#) Snider, who are conjoining genres to produce culturally electric new music.

On a recent afternoon in his New York City apartment, Garrett defended crossover with the conviction of a young minister. It was hard not to sympathize with him. His passion for rock is deep and true.

Garrett grew up in [Germany](#), where, Mozart style, the prodigy wowed classical music fans. But he hated always being surrounded by old people. "I felt lost," he said. "I wanted to be part of my own generation and connect to the culture and music around me."

His German father, a lawyer, and American mother, a retired ballet dancer, forbade him to listen to rock. So late at night in his room he donned headphones and listened to rock stations. He loved Queen, but when he heard Nirvana his whole world opened up.

"I felt very close to the struggle of [Kurt Cobain](#)," Garrett said.

Garrett earned his kinship to Cobain, so terribly haunted by his fame. In 1994, the year the lead singer of Nirvana committed suicide, the 13-year-old Garrett was bound to a record contract with Deutsche Grammophon and booked to concerts for years to come.

In 1994, Martin Bernheimer, then The Times' classical music critic, reviewed Garrett's performance of Mozart's Violin Concerto No. 3 with the Los Angeles

Philharmonic, [Zubin Mehta](#) at the podium. The teenager "played Mozart with telling mastery of both score and style," Bernheimer wrote. "David Garrett. Remember the name."

Garrett still plays Mozart with top symphony orchestras, but he is proud to have made a new name for himself. As a result of his popular crossover shows, he said, he had begun seeing more young people at his classical concerts. (He tours internationally and will be performing in Los Angeles in February.)

"That's the wonderful opportunity I have as a young musician — to use crossover to connect with people and lead them to a music type they didn't grow up with it," he said. "Classical music is wonderful, and once you have their attention, they will fall in love."

It's a lovely sentiment, and classical music can certainly use all the listeners it can get without gray [hair](#). But it turns out "Live and Let Die" is not a gateway to "The Rite of Spring."

Crossover has long been "seen as the future of audience development for classical music," said Deborah Borda, president and CEO of the Los Angeles Philharmonic. "But you cannot remotely prove it in any quantitative or analytical way." Record company executives who still claim crossover is a savior of classical music are proof, she added, "of why the recording industry is going down the tubes."

Jesse Rosen, president and CEO of the League of American Orchestras, an advocacy organization, agreed. "If you go back to the days of the Boston Pops, the pops audience was always completely different than the audience that came to the classical subscription series," he said. But today, Rosen explained, the division between pop and classical was vanishing, and classical music was experiencing a renaissance on its own.

"We're now seeing a new generation of composers who grew up in a vernacular world and are rejecting the academic straitjacket that plagued earlier generations of composers," Rosen said. "It's wonderful that composers are writing in a way that takes in so much of the musical language that runs through American life today."

The L.A. Philharmonic reflects this vitality with its Green Umbrella new music series and venturesome programs, such as one in February that featured polymath Brooklyn rockers Dirty Projectors.

At the [heart](#) of the new community of rock and classical music is the Brooklyn label New Amsterdam, run by composers Brittelle, Snider and Judd Greenstein.

Recently, at a cafe near their Brooklyn office, the engaging Brittelle, 33, and Snider, 36, described how their artistic lives were forged as much by Chopin as [Radiohead](#).

"What bothered me about Renee Fleming's recent 'indie rock' album is she seemed to be saying, 'I do this one thing and now I'm going to try on this very

separate thing," Snider said. "It was like she was trying on a new shirt. Whereas we grew up loving both classical music and rock. They're naturally part of our DNA, they coexist. Composing for us is not crossing from one side to the other. It's just the way we hear music and the way we want it to go."

Classical music and rock blend in seamless and fascinating ways on new albums by Brittelle and Snider.

Brittelle called his new album, "Television Landscape," "my L.A. album," because he wrote much of it while temporarily living in Los Feliz and reading [Charles Bukowski](#). It evokes an earthquake-weather mood along a painterly musical landscape of searing rock, shaded by tonal passages of strings and French horns, flutes and, in one emotional spot, a children's choir. You might wonder if [Jane's Addiction](#) had discovered the soul of Debussy.

"My experience of creating 'Television Landscape' was entirely classical," Brittelle said. "I'm thinking about melody, harmony and writing down parts for every instrument. I want people to think about the music with thoughtfulness and thoroughness. I want to have the same opportunities that other music of intellectual interest has, even though mine has guitar solos."

Snider's album, "Penelope," due out this fall, is a cycle of haunting art songs based on Homer's "Odyssey." Her music, beautifully sung by Shara Warden and expertly played by Signal, a chamber orchestra, echoes the piercing melancholy of a Chopin nocturne and spacious rhythms of minimalism. Snaking out of the pastoral backdrop are instantly hummable pop melodies.

Although, Snider admitted, letting her pop influences show didn't come easy. She often heard her classical music professors in her head, scolding her.

"I'm hearing them say, 'You can't bring in this four-bar chorus here!' So I was constantly trying to tamp down my rock influences.

But with 'Penelope' I didn't feel like I had my teachers and critics watching. I didn't feel like I was drawing from one camp or the other. The music felt like it all came from the same realm."

As Snider and Brittelle saw it, classical artists didn't need to cover rock songs to excite young audiences and echo the world around them.

"People writing the music of 'now' are unplugging from all this mess about genre and just writing from their hearts," Brittelle said.

"It's about being honest to your influences and allowing your whole musical world to be present in the music you create."

"Classical music is a continuum," Snider said. "It's exciting to feel we're part of that."

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