

The New York Times

This copy is for your personal, noncommercial use only. You can order presentation-ready copies for distribution to your colleagues, clients or customers [here](#) or use the "Reprints" tool that appears next to any article. Visit www.nytreprints.com for samples and additional information. [Order a reprint of this article now.](#)

**August 9, 2009**

Mining Pop for Avant-Garde Inspiration

By [ALLAN KOZINN](#)

SOMETHING odd and fascinating is happening at the borders of classical music and pop right now. Particularly in new-music circles young musicians are searching for repertory in the pop avant-garde.

There were inklings of this in the early 1990s, when arrangements of [Frank Zappa](#) pieces turned up in programs by the Meridian Arts Ensemble, the [American Composers Orchestra](#) and, in Europe, Ensemble Modern and the Ensemble Intercontemporain. But that seemed only modestly remarkable. Zappa, after all, had been composing symphonic works since the late 1960s, and these transcriptions of his rock works shared the spirit of those scores. And transcriptions of [Jimi Hendrix](#) songs by the Kronos Quartet, and [Nirvana](#) tracks by the Bang on a Can All-Stars, seemed amusing stunts, offered as encores.

More recently the pianist Christopher O'Riley has devoted full CDs to transcriptions of songs by [Radiohead](#) and the melancholy songwriter [Nick Drake](#); and Alarm Will Sound, the inventive chamber orchestra, has been fascinated with electronica, having recorded an album of its own transcriptions of Aphex Twin's brashly amusing pieces and gone on to arrange works by Autechre, Mochipet and Preshish Moments, as well as proto-electronica oldies by the [Beatles](#) ("Revolution 9") and Varèse ("Poème Électronique").

Alarm Will Sound played a concert of these pieces at [Le Poisson Rouge](#) a couple of weeks ago and has a second transcribed-electronica (acoustica, as the group puts it) CD due in the fall. Mr. O'Riley is about to release a new disc with songs by Nirvana, Radiohead, [Pink Floyd](#) and other groups and will perform them at the Highline Ballroom on Aug. 24.

Suddenly, it seems, something new is happening: When they play this music (and they play more conventional repertory as well), Alarm Will Sound and Mr. O'Riley are a Bizarro World version of Arthur Fiedler and the Boston Pops. Granted, where symphonic pops orchestras typically take million-selling hits and coat them in sugary strings and lithe winds — in effect, eviscerating them — Mr. O'Riley and Alarm Will Sound aim for something closer to the spirit of the dark-hued and often rhythmically or harmonically complex originals they seem drawn to.

Given a choice, I prefer this new model, but I've never understood the appeal of symphonic pops. As a fan of symphonic music I find pops programs embarrassingly lightweight, and as a fan of rock I find the wimpy arrangements pops orchestras play execrable.

I guess I'm an original-instrument guy at heart. It's not just me. [Leonard Bernstein](#) loved the Beatles and other rock composers: he played snippets of their music at the piano in his Young People's Concerts, and in one of his last interviews he compared the songs of [John Lennon](#) and [Paul McCartney](#) to those of [Schubert](#). But you wouldn't have caught him waving a baton at the [New York Philharmonic](#) as it poured out a treacly,

bright-eyed version of “I Want to Hold Your Hand.”

I don't think you'd catch Alarm Will Sound playing that kind of thing either. It is no accident that the one Beatles song in its repertory is the group's least popular (if most adventurous) piece.

Mr. O'Riley has the tougher job. In reducing Radiohead's inventive palette to the keyboard, he risks making the music sound like [Chopin](#) or Debussy, with Radiohead themes substituted for the originals. Sometimes he succumbs. But when his arrangements work — in “Airbag” and “Black Star,” where he suggests the sonic grandeur of the originals if not the timbres, or in the gentle “Exit Music (for a Film)” — they put the music's disquieting essence in an unusual perspective and tell you something about its structure that you can miss in the kaleidoscopic originals.

Yet there is something to be said for the kaleidoscope, and you shortchange it at your peril. In that regard Alarm Will Sound has its limitations too. Electronica tends to draw on disparate sources, many so electronically modified that approximating them persuasively with orchestral instruments is impossible. It can be fascinating to watch Alarm Will Sound make the effort. At its Poisson Rouge concert it created effects by rubbing sheets of paper together before the microphones, and with percussion instruments large and small.

In “Revolution 9” it may have helped that Lennon sampled classical works (a Vaughan Williams choral piece, a climactic chord from Sibelius's Seventh Symphony). I admired the ingenuity of Matt Marks's arrangement, which captured most of the notes, sounds and idiosyncratic spoken sections of the Beatles track. Missing, though, was the mixing-board virtuosity that gives this piece its cinematic eeriness and makes it a visceral evocation of a revolution in progress. In the end the best you could say was “Nice try.”

I have nothing against Mr. O'Riley's interest in Radiohead and company or Alarm Will Sound's fascination with electronica (and off-the-edge nonelectronic rock groups like the Shaggs). I wish their versions uniformly worked better than they do. But you find yourself suspecting that Marshall McLuhan was right after all: where this music is concerned, at least, the medium is the message.

Still, I have a suggestion for these performers. Now that they have undoubtedly caught the attention of Radiohead, Aphex Twin and others in their borrowed repertory, why not commission those musicians to write works specifically for them and for the instruments they play? That would expand the repertory in a useful way and let the composers stretch as well.

[Copyright 2009 The New York Times Company](#)

[Privacy Policy](#) | [Terms of Service](#) | [Search](#) | [Corrections](#) | [RSS](#) | [First Look](#) | [Help](#) | [Contact Us](#) | [Work for Us](#) | [Site Map](#)