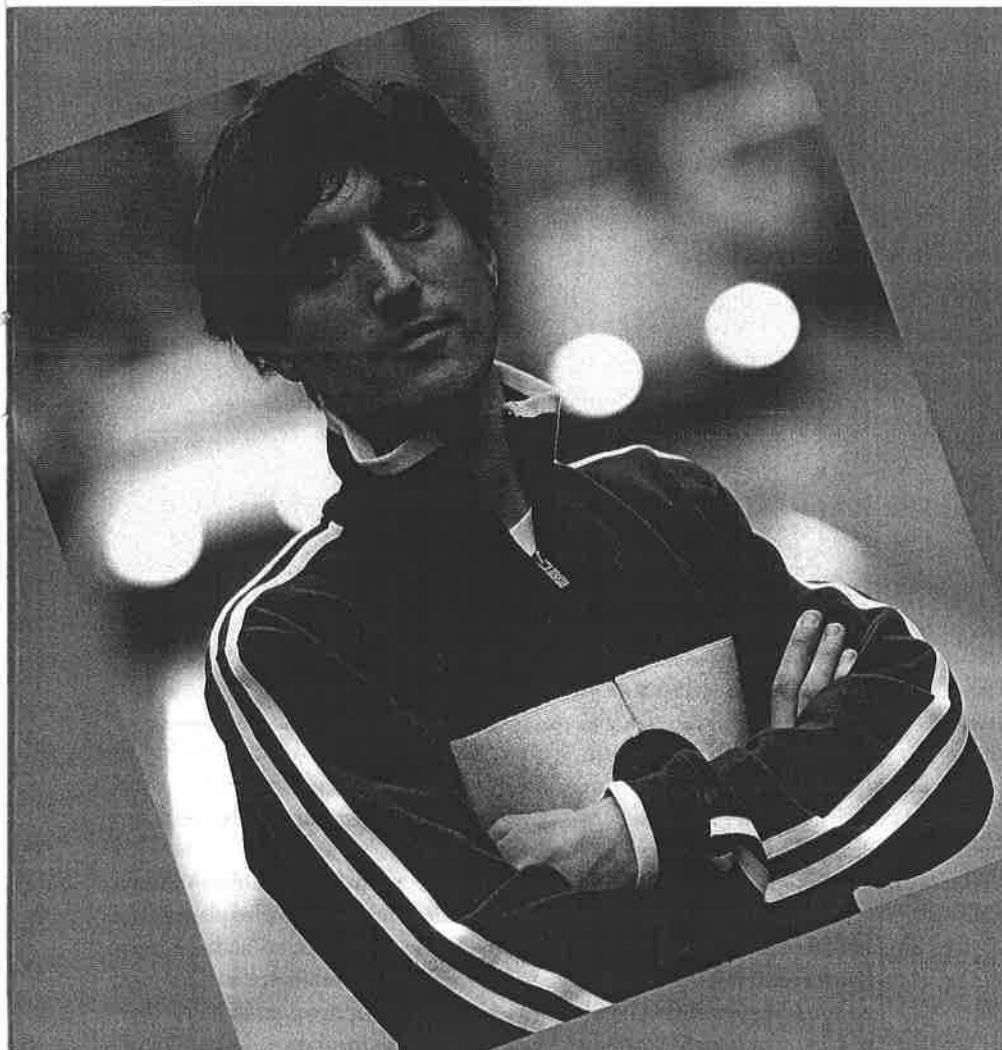


# The Bilingualist

Classically trained but keenly attuned to the possibilities of electronica, composer Mason Bates is making waves in both the club scene and the orchestra world.

by Kyle Gann



Mason Bates, or someone like him, was bound to appear sooner or later. Bates is a fast-rising young composer of orchestral music, and also a deejay. In the latter guise, he performs at electronica clubs under the nom-de-laptop DJ Masonic. His

electronica has a quasi-classical fluidity, and in his orchestra music, he performs on laptop computer and drum pads as a soloist, eliciting much the same kind of noise grooves that he uses as a deejay. Many artists in one of these worlds have dabbled in the

other. But Bates is the first to carry on two careers in tandem, and win credibility in both arenas.

As I say, it was only a matter of time. Throughout the 1970s, the pop, classical, and jazz worlds were meticulously distinct. Musicians who were trained in more than one field knew not to mix. In the 1980s that all changed. Punk guitarists started working with minimalist drones, classical composers played rock clubs, symphonies for electric guitars appeared. The crossovers were sometimes amateurish. When the pop audience was impressed, the classical fans generally weren't, and vice versa. But eventually, someone was bound to grow up so immersed in genre-mixing that they would get both sides of the equation right.

Bates has. Born in 1977, he never knew a world in which playing pop disqualified him from classical, or vice versa. He acknowledges that they're still separate: His web site, [www.masonicelectronica.com](http://www.masonicelectronica.com), opens with the command, "Choose one: electronica / classical." Both routes, however, lead to kudos. In classical music he's won the Rome Prize, the Berlin prize, the Charles Ives Award, and a Naumburg commission, plus a string of orchestral commissions. In the pop arena, he performs his own blend of hip-hop, trip-hop, funk, and electronica at clubs like the Roter Salon in Berlin, Cloud 9 in San Francisco, and Scarabocchio in Rome. He has patrons on one side, fans on the other. The most impressive thing is how comfortably his two idioms mix.

For instance, Juilliard, Bates's alma mater, commissioned a piece from him to celebrate their 100th anniversary. The resulting work, *Digital Loom* for organ and electronics—or as he terms it, "electronica"—was premiered at New York's Peter Jay Sharp Theater on February 2. *Digital Loom* starts with a drone chord on the organ. Over it come various pops, clicks, and scratchy sounds that could be mistaken for background noise on a vinyl record. Eventually you realize that those little noises have formed a groove, to which new noises keep adding. The chord metamorphoses unnoticeably at first, but finally breaks into syncopations that have their own complex relation to the groove. Every pop and click is

meticulously notated in the score. It's a well-thought-out piece.

And it works because, for Bates, the organ and club-dance beats aren't really in opposition. He's seen through to their underlying similarity, not of musical materials, but of social function. "After all," he says of the organ, "it is the world's oldest synthesizer. Indeed the organist—like his modern-day club counterpart, the deejay—is simultaneously perceived as background accompaniment to various activities, and as the invisible hand controlling the choreography within its belly."

degrees in composition and literature. (In the latter discipline he gravitated toward the English medieval mystery plays, drawn to their "combination of folksiness and complicated symbolism.") At Juilliard his composition teachers were John Corigliano and David Del Tredici, who encouraged him even if they weren't always simpatico to his static rhythms. Conservative Juilliard was a strange place to get the electronica bug, but Bates did.

"Juilliard has this really cool electronic studio," he says, noting that the facility is on a more "commercial level" than the

from six months in Berlin, Bates is now completing a doctorate at Berkeley—and receiving the kind of attention that very few composers receive while still students.

Part of this was due to further encouragements from Moody. "Mason and I had discussed that once I became music director of an orchestra he would be my first commission," he says. "We conductors have a short shelf life, but composers live forever, and I wanted to be remembered for my association with him." The opportunity came when Moody became resident conductor of the Phoenix Symphony, which commissioned five young composers to write pieces that would precede Beethoven symphonies on concerts. "The references to Beethoven," Moody recalls, "could be obvious or extremely subtle. We picked Mason to write the companion piece to Beethoven's Ninth, and he wrote *Ode*." Cleverly, *Ode* ends with the same quiet tremolo fifth,

"What I do in [*Omnivorous Furniture*] is in-between a live performer and a technician," says Bates. "I call it a 'dynamic tape part.' Because I really believe that it's important for any electronic element to have a life to it."

#### A Curious Genesis

You might assume that Bates was a pop musician who tried his hand at classical, but actually it was the opposite: He loved classical music in high school and came to electronica only later. Growing up in culturally conservative Virginia, Bates studied composition with Dika Newlin, the formidable composer and musicologist who's a leading authority on Austrian music from Bruckner through Webern, and who was teaching at Virginia Commonwealth University. At fifteen he came to the attention of Robert Moody, then chorus master of the Brevard Music Center Festival. Bates was in the chorus, and as Moody recalls today, "He had written an *a cappella* choral work, and came to me and asked, 'Would you be interested in taking a look at it?' It was a piece on the Latin text 'Timor et tremor.' As soon as I saw it, I realized what a talent he was." Moody requested a work from Bates for another group he was directing, the Evansville Philharmonic Youth Orchestra, and received *Free Variations* for orchestra.

Such a premiere for a seventeen-year-old helped propel the young composer to Juilliard—and to the culture shock of New York. Still afraid to commit fully to a musical career, Bates enrolled in the Columbia-Juilliard program, simultaneously earning



Bates appeared out front with conductor Alexander Mickelthwate and the Los Angeles Philharmonic New Music Group after performing as "electronica soloist" in his *Omnivorous Furniture* last season.

Center for New Music and Audio Technologies at Berkeley, where he now studies. "It was a huge room with all this equipment, empty all the time." Bates took advantage of that, and he also soon found himself soloing in the Lower East Side's simmering electronica scene. After graduation he headed for Berkeley, and started calling himself DJ Masonic. With Corigliano and Del Tredici as mentors, he won the Rome Prize and Berlin Prize in quick succession, and participated in the electronica worlds of both cities, the latter especially known as a hotbed of technopop. Recently back

A and E, with which the Ninth Symphony opens.

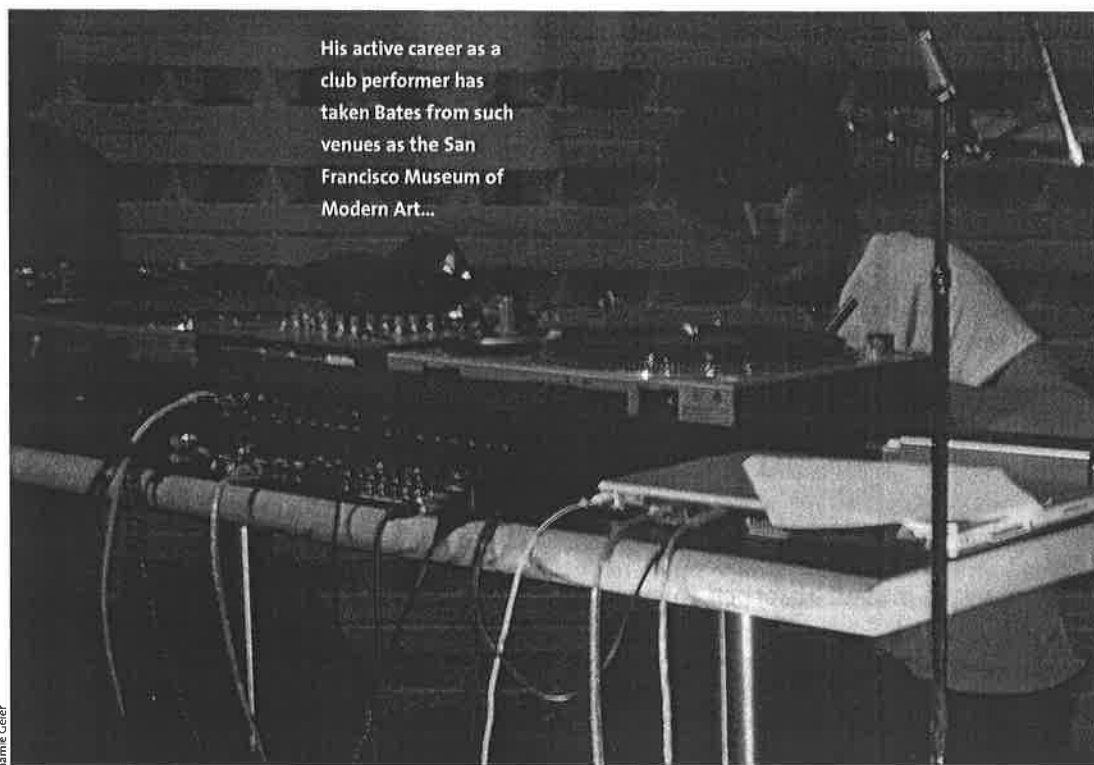
Bates's first attempt to mix his worlds was a synthesizer concerto that he played with the orchestras of Atlanta and Phoenix. Wilder and more ambitious was his piece *Omnivorous Furniture*, premiered in November 2004 by the Los Angeles Philharmonic New Music Group. Bates was one of the composers included in a composer-conductor symposium sponsored by the orchestra. As Edward Yim, the Philharmonic's then-director of artistic planning, recalls, Music Director Esa-Pekka Salonen "saw a

lot of promise in his work. It made such a great impression that we wanted to be involved with the development of his career. It's exciting to see a young composer combining craftsmanship and taking the tradition in new directions."

*Omnivorous Furniture* had Bates sitting in the percussion section playing a drum machine, a concerto soloist buried in the back. The orchestra part looks and sounds as though it was written by "orchestrating" the drum machine groove, with dramatic bass lines in the piano and repeating staccato interjections in the strings. Meanwhile, the electronica part ("I think of it as a super percussion section that can do anything," he says) is carefully notated—after he figures out what he's basically going to play—but is not carefully followed in performance. The piece will receive its New York premiere March 17 by the American Composers Orchestra.

"The point of the notation is to have something there that the performer can look at," he explains. "There's a lot going on in the electronica, and it's not assumed that the performer will be following along, but it is assumed that there will be moments where the orchestra will line up with the beat. What I do is in-between a live performer and a technician. I call it a 'dynamic tape part.' Because I really believe that it's important for any electronic element to have a life to it. That way if there's an alignment problem, I can kind of help things out electronically. It so happens that with this kind of music, a click-track isn't necessary, because the beat is a click-track in itself."

At this writing, Bates, along with Kenji Bunch and Kevin Puts, is in the initial stage of a three-year Music Alive residency with the Mobile Symphony sponsored by Meet The Composer and the American Symphony Orchestra League. "Our goal was to show our audience that 'modern music' has many different facets,



His active career as a club performer has taken Bates from such venues as the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art...



...to Berlin's Zu Mir Oder Zu Dir (My Place or Yours).

that not all new music sounds the same," says the orchestra's music director, Scott Speck. "We have found three young composers with compelling musical worldviews, each of whom is completely different from the others."

Christina Littlejohn, Mobile's CEO from 1995 until February 2006, elaborates. "Mason's music is edgier, interesting in terms of its form and instruments. We wanted to highlight our percussion ensemble, and thought Mason's music was perfect for that. We also do a lot of education programs, and Mason is very articulate about his music and about music in general." Along with writing a commissioned piece, Bates will work with local third-graders, helping them make their own music score into a video.

### Dancing with Orchestras

Meanwhile Moody, recently named music director of the Winston-Salem Symphony, has commissioned another Bates opus: *Rusty Air in Carolina*, for orchestra and electronica. "Since he's from Virginia, and this is a piece for Winston-Salem," Moody says, "he started thinking about life in the Appalachians, and camping, and the sounds you hear when you're camping. He's trying to capture the quality of ambient sound that exists in the Carolina mountains. 'Rusty' doesn't mean corroded in this case, but refers to the color of the sound. He'll be in the percussion section running the electronic side of things. He told me to trust him, and I do."

What separates Bates from a lot of other would-be crossovers is his authenticity in both fields. He and I discuss a couple of other classical composers who have notably introduced pop beats into orchestra music, and Bates's diagnosis of them is dead-on: Not knowing electronica from the inside, they assume the loud 4/4 beat is everything, and ape only the most commercial aspects of the music. What's impressive about both *Omnivorous Furniture* and *Digital Loom* is how subtly the rhythm is portrayed, how unobtrusive the grooves are, how long it

takes to notice that things are repeating. Only someone who has spent night after night mesmerizing dancers in clubs would know to go to the most interesting kernel of the music and leave the clichés behind.

Transferred to the orchestra, the electronica style results in a kind of postminimalism, not all that different from a lot of other, slightly older composers who were deeply impressed by minimalism. One could name Bates's fellow San Franciscans John Adams, Belinda Reynolds, Dan Becker, and Paul Drescher—along with Paul

all the time. There are parts in *Omnivorous Furniture* and *Digital Loom* where the rhythm becomes a blob, arrhythmic." That explains why in every Bates piece the momentum subsides now and then to make room for an expansive lyricism—a reminder, perhaps, that his background includes studies with arch-romanticist Corigliano.

Likewise, Bates steers away from the more mechanical aspects of electronica. His deejay music isn't as grittily "electronic-sounding" as similar work by post-rock

So, fine. Juilliard and Cloud 9 have finally collaborated to create the pop/classical hybrid that we all knew was coming. What do we do with him? Are electronica fans going to be lured into the concert hall? Are orchestra patrons going to wave their hips to the drum machine? "It is two audiences," Bates readily admits, "and it's not like they have any overlap. But I've found that people are pretty receptive if you have a clear idea of what you're doing. The electronica audience is very curious. They don't usually listen to music with vocals, so it's a group very attuned to listening to harmony and texture. The best-case scenario is that you see someone in the concert hall who's kind of punked out next to someone with blue hair. But they're not going to morph into the same person. Trying to figure out what this audience wants, or that one, is a recipe for madness."

Bates admits that the most sophisticated classical fans put up the most resistance to what he's doing, but notes that a lot of orchestra members, after initial skepticism, have melted into an absorbed interest in how his equipment works. Clearly no rapprochement is going to happen overnight, and an influx of electronica will bring no miraculous reprieve from box-office ills. But for now, Bates has developed a practical means for bridging pop and classical practices, and has done so with enough bilingual panache that neither audience can afford to laugh at the results. He's certainly getting a lot of play: In addition to the Juilliard and ACO gigs, the Mobile Symphony will play his *Ode* on March 11, the Winston-Salem Symphony will premiere *Rusty Air* in Carolina on May 21, and he's writing a half-hour work with electronica for the National Symphony Orchestra, with a planned premiere in February 2007. Bates may be a genius, a flash in the pan, or just a sign of the times. But I'd expect a lot more like him coming around the corner. ∞

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Epstein, Mary Jane Leach, William Duckworth, and many others—as composers whose music is similarly often gradually self-transformational, with a steady beat and a diatonic pitch language. (One might also note that another composer, Anthony De Ritis, has already written a concerto for deejay, which the orchestras of Oakland and Hartford have per-

formed.) One thing that's different about Bates—and ironically so, given his electronica background—is that he shies away from a relentless motoric pulse.

"I love certain pieces of John Adams," says Bates, "but his music could be conducted by a sequencer. It has zero flexibility in the rhythm. The temptation is to have a minimalist piece that pulses along forever. For me, the power of minimalism, or the power of these very static beats, is in what kind of expectation you create that you can play with. When I was working on *Omnivorous Furniture*, I wanted to avoid the trap of the rhythm being completely mechanical

bands like Autechre, Godspeed You Black Emperor!, and Bardo Pond. It's even grounded in jazz harmony. "It's important for me to make something that has a little more animal warmth. This has two ramifications. One is that I want to use a mix of acoustic and electronic sound sources. That may mean adding [prerecorded samples of] jazz piano or upright bass, so that it has acoustic warmth. Jazz harmony is a great way to bring a little bit of life to something that could otherwise become mechanical. The other is that the music needs to be more lyrical, have a little more dynamic and not be so repetitious."



Visitors to Bates's web site are directed to "choose one: electronica / classical."