

Classical Tradition, but a Fascination With Pop

By ALLAN KOZINN

Young composers -- those who grew up in the 1960's and later -- are often as passionate about popular music as they are about the classical tradition, and many have been determined to find outlets for this fascination.

Some, like Christopher Rouse and Richard Danielpour, have woven fragments of Led Zeppelin or Beatles tunes into their symphonic works. Others, like Scott Johnson and Steve Mackey, compose for rock instruments. And a few, like Neil Rolnick, have started bands in which their nonclassical interests can run wild.

Mr. Rolnick is best known for computer works and pieces that combine computers and live instruments, and his band, Fish Love That, started out as the ensemble for his 1995 work "Home Game." For its performance at Independent Art Here (145 Avenue of the Americas, at Spring Street, South Village) on Monday evening, the group included Mr. Rolnick on synthesizer and computer, Todd Reynolds on violin, Andrew Sterman on flute and tenor saxophone, Michael Lowenstern on bass clarinet, Steve Rust on bass, Dean Sharp on percussion and A. J. Jannone on samplers and video devices.

All but Mr. Sharp and Mr. Lowenstern, who recently joined the band, contributed pieces on Monday. Their influences were varied. Mr. Rust toyed with Stravinsky in his "Histoire du Old Hat," a set of lovely improvisations that comes to rest on an expansion of "L'Histoire du Soldat."

Mr. Reynolds's "Those Cows, They Never Came Home" recalled Frank Zappa's music of the mid-1970's, both in its angular melodies and its instrumentation. And "A Different Pleasure," by Mr. Sterman, had the dark, atmospheric quality of some of Jan Garbarek's early ECM recordings.

Mr. Rolnick's "Calypso," which opened the set, had a freewheeling, slightly circusy character; his "Hush," by contrast, was built on pianissimo sustained sounds, and his "Ratchet" combined attractive melodic lines, energetic rhythmic grooves and sustained chordal sections that were backdrops for improvisation.

An undercurrent of humor enlivened several works. A component of "Ratchet," for examples, was coughing by the band members. Mr. Reynolds, Mr. Jannone and Mr. Lowenstern also improvised inventively around sound samples from what sounded like a 1960's vintage educational program about energy.

And amid the frenetic welter of Mr. Reynolds's "Monkey Mind," Mr. Lowenstern and Mr. Reynolds traded mimed solos, an idea that worked mainly because both players had already demonstrated inventiveness and virtuosity, but also because their silent solos were no longer than the joke could sustain.