

With its Mile High Voltage Festival, the Newman Center makes classical music more accessible to the masses

By **Dave Herrera** Thursday, Feb 18 2010

Quick: When you think of classical music, what are the first things that come to mind? Okay, time's up. We're gonna guess you conjured up images of stoic academicians playing stodgy, archaic music by dead guys for a roomful of well-heeled intellectuals within the impeccable confines of a sterile music hall. You probably didn't dial up words like *young*, *hip* or *progressive*. Are we close?

Thought so. And that's exactly the mindset that the folks at the **Newman Center** are aiming to change with the inaugural Mile High Voltage Festival, an event geared toward making classical music accessible to the mainstream.

Although neo-classical is a relatively new thing in Denver, in New York there's a burgeoning scene of young classical musicians who are helping bring classical music into the modern era. Many of the acts are on the Cantaloupe Records imprint (born out of the **Bang on a Can Festival**) or have worked with festival curator **Peter Robles**. And the Newman Center is working with both to create this weekend's event.

We spoke with former Skull Flux frontman **Conrad Kehn**, who now performs with the chamber group Playground, the only non-New York act appearing at the fest, and asked him to break down the movement to make classical music exciting and relevant for neophytes.

Westword: *Most folks only know the classic composers. How do you think this concept is going to alter their perception of classical music?*

Conrad Kehn: There's a lot of pop crossover here, trying to break down stereotypes. The two nights of the festival, Friday and Saturday night, people are allowed to wander in and out of the concert hall, get up, talk. There will be a lounge where audio and video will be piped in. They can buy drinks and food and still watch the concert — things that don't normally happen in a classical concert hall.

It appeals to a younger audience. It's just a lot more interesting and live and exciting than going to see the symphony. The experience is different, too. It's not such a "sit down and be quiet or we're going to beat you" kind of thing, so I think that's part of it. And I think the fact that these artists so readily embrace elements of pop music — whether that's repeated grooves or even just a little bit of hipness factor in the way they present themselves.

What else is unique about this endeavor?

Sö Percussion's set is a commission, a brand-new piece, a Newman Center commission. It's got video and music, and they're going to build an instrument on stage. It's called "Imaginary City." There's going to be two brand-new Newman Center commissions on this program. We're playing the other one.

For more of our interview with Conrad Kehn, visit Backbeatblog.com.