

# Tufts Journal

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## Beyond Classical Music's Hit Parade

Pianist Donald Berman wants to get your ears into the 21st century

By Taylor McNeil

For many, classical music means Mozart, Brahms and Bach—music that is almost comforting in its familiarity. Pianist Donald Berman finds beauty more often in the unfamiliar, in works by contemporary composers who defy musical conventions and are unafraid to challenge listeners.

“My goal has always been to work with living composers, and then remember that when I’m playing Schubert and others, they were once living, too, and their music was once new music,” says Berman, who co-directs the Tufts New Music Ensemble and is a lecturer in music in the School of Arts and Sciences. “I’ve tried to bring the studiousness of playing traditional repertoire to new music.”



Pianist Donald Berman co-directs the Tufts New Music Ensemble. “We bring in all kinds of people, and it’s wonderful,” he says. Photo: Alonso Nichols

Berman does this in dozens of concerts each year and in recordings. In 2008 he released five albums, including a four-CD set for which he was artistic director and lead pianist. He lives in New York and commutes to Boston every other week to teach at Tufts and give private lessons. And he takes on new works, learning a repertoire that’s nobody’s canon, at least not yet.

The critics certainly like what they hear. Berman “is a pianist of stupendous abilities, both athletic and intellectual,” wrote one *Boston Globe* reviewer. In an article on a recording of piano works by the 20th-century American composer Carl Ruggles, the *New Yorker* said

that “Berman is an artist both forceful and discreet.” A *New York Times* critic called him “a robust, positive and persuasive pianist.”

## A Musical Think Tank

Berman brings that energy to the Tufts New Music Ensemble, “the avant-garde think tank of ensembles,” as it’s called in a course description. In the NME, classically trained musicians can let loose, and free-form players can feel very much at home.

“We have everyone across the board,” says Berman. That means graduate students in musicology and ethnomusicology, undergraduates with classical music training and those with rock and roll aspirations—“kids who are fluent readers and kids who play by ear,” he says. “We bring in all kinds of people, and it’s wonderful.”



Click the play button to hear an excerpt of Donald Berman playing Kamran Ince's *My Friend Mozart*, from *Americans in Rome* (Bridge, 2008).

Just as the piano recitals in, say, Liszt’s time took audience requests, the NME does, too, but with a twist. “We take requests that are about situations in people’s lives, and we play them back for them. It’s a very cathartic thing for everyone,” he says with a laugh.

For students taking music lessons, “it really frees up their playing,” Berman says. “A lot of what we do is without scores, and once you take that away, people are free to do what they hear and respond to one another.”

That’s what Alex Chichile, AO3, says. A music major, he was in NME for three years, which, he says, was “an essential part of my overall education. NME provided a platform to focus carefully on both improvising and listening.

“Coming up from New York, Don brought a wonderful slice of NYC New Music to Medford,” says Chechile, who received an M.F.A. in electronic art at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute and developed a system for incorporating biofeedback into his music.

“His approach was appropriately demanding; he knew what we were capable of producing, and he would consistently get us to play along the edge. The quality of music that resulted was outstanding, truly pushing musical ideas forward,” he says.

## Resisting Tradition

Berman’s interest in new music stems from his own path as a pianist. Growing up in White Plains, N.Y., he took lessons with Mildred Victor, who had studied with the legendary [Artur Schnabel](#). But he also had other music on his mind as a youngster, even sending in songs to the TV show *Don Kirshner’s Rock Concert*. Avoiding a conservatory, he went to Wesleyan University and got a liberal arts degree, though he still studied and played piano. “I resisted the traditional route, for better or worse,” he says.



Click the play button to hear an excerpt of Donald Berman playing Mark Wingate's *Sombras No. 3* from *Americans in Rome* (Bridge, 2008).

After college, he knew he would have a life in music, but also knew he wasn’t prepared. “I had done all these fun things, but I hadn’t done what you needed to do to be a pianist—spend six hours a day practicing for a few years.” He started taking weekly lessons with John Kirkpatrick, a pianist and composer then in his 80s who had long championed the work of early experimental American composer [Charles Ives](#) (1874–1954). “My lessons were six

hours long,” says Berman. “I studied Bach, Mozart, a lot of Fauré—because Kirkpatrick was a [Nadia Boulanger](#) student—and Stravinsky, who he knew.”

At age 24, Berman went to the New England Conservatory and studied with [Leonard Shure](#). “He was the complete, 180-degree opposite to Kirkpatrick, which I needed,” Berman says. “Another octogenarian, but completely different in all respects—external, not internal; a liberal, not conservative; Jewish, not Episcopalian.” With that training, Berman took fourth prize in the Third International Schubert Piano Competition in Germany in 1991, the only American among the finalists. His career as a pianist was launched.

## Fighting the Fear of the New

Later, Berman worked with Kirkpatrick on the final, unpublished works of Ives, whose musical techniques, such as polytonality and polyrhythm, were far ahead of his time. Berman went on to record two volumes of *The Unknown Ives*, which included premieres of unpublished works and new critical editions. Last year, with the soprano Susan Narucki, he released *The Light That Is Felt: Songs of Charles Ives* (New World Records). “My mission is to get that music out there,” he says.



Click the play button to hear an excerpt of Donald Berman playing David Rakowski's Etude No. 72 (“Chase”), recorded live at Tufts' Distler Performance Hall, October 2007.

What's frustrating, Berman says, is that people are often afraid of new music, even before they hear it. “They are the first ones to say, ‘I'm not sure I understood it.’ I say to them: do you need to understand the physics of a sunset to enjoy it? No.”

It's a kind of mental prejudice that affects how people listen to the music, Berman says. He tells how he loads his docked iPod with all sorts of music for his children, ages three and five. “I play everything from environmental sounds to arias to Latin music to kids' songs to [Don Byron](#),” Berman says. “They don't look at me like, ‘well, that is suddenly strange’—they just really hear it.”

Widely known for playing and recording new music, Berman receives at least 100 submissions a year from composers hoping he will take on their works. “I have piles of music I want to play that I haven't had the time for. And I have piles I haven't even looked at,” he says, pointing to stacks of scores in his office in the Granoff Music Center.

“It drives me crazy that people don't know that this music is out there,” he says. “I do master classes, residencies, demos, whatever I have to, to present people with this stuff. The comment I love is from people who say, ‘I didn't think I'd like this new music, but this was fantastic.’ ”

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