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**"If classical music is dying, let's help kill it. Because what comes afterward could be amazing."**  
— Conrad Kehn

## Big Ears

A UNIVERSITY OF DENVER MUSIC PROFESSOR AND FORMER TWIST & SHOUT BUYER CHANNELS HIS BAD BOY ENERGY INTO PRODUCING NEW MUSIC. by Bill Gallo

**It's** been seven years since Conrad Kehn gave up a life filled with loud bars, late nights, and the assorted excesses that go with angry rockstardom. Kehn's earsplitting Denver band Skull Flux, in which he was lead singer, broke up in 1999. His more nuanced, writerly group Kallisti, which once dabbled in local film scoring, is also defunct. Even Kehn's solo-performance persona MacroCephalic Boy, who dazzled with computer-generated music, is on the shelf — at least for now.

At age 38, Kehn has just earned his third academic degree — an MBA from the University of Denver's Daniels College of Business. He's a devoted husband and the father of two girls as well.

But rebellion dies hard. Kehn now teaches theory, composition, and music technology at DU's Lamont School of Music, where he is likely the only male faculty member who wears a double silver earring and sports midnight-blue toenails. (He also once starred in a low-budget horror movie as a banana bent on mass murder.) Given his left-of-center ethos, it's not surprising that Kehn's ideas about contemporary music often rankle colleagues. His freewheeling composition seminar, in

particular, has sometimes been controversial. "Teaching is a tough job," he says. "You have to respect tradition while trying to inspire creativity." Kehn's own work as a composer and player, he says, exists largely outside the walls of the university.

### The Bending of Genres

"If classical music is dying," Kehn recently wrote in a blog post that seeks to redefine concepts of musical structure and tonality, "let's help kill it. Because what comes afterward could be amazing."

For the ahead-of-his-time Kehn, afterward is now. His genre-bending pieces are rooted in Western musical tradition but reflect a restless spirit that embraces everything from Chopin and Stravinsky to Jane's Addiction and Nick Cave, the sonic assaults of industrial rock, the possibilities of computer-generated sound, and the free-jazz experiments of Ornette Coleman and Cecil Taylor. Kehn produces his own small-batch CDs and reports that he has five full albums of music ready for release (if only he had the resources), including a collection of piano ballads, an electro-acoustic sampler, six duets with San Francisco-based vibes player Mark Clifford,

and an audio/visual concept piece called *Chapter One*, based on a questing male character who's hopelessly in love with a girl who has one eye, no mouth, and a pair of blond pig-tails. It derives from his relationship with a former girlfriend, he says.

If Kehn's many directions sound bewildering, he has an explanation: His tastes were vastly expanded between 1997 and 2004 when he served as a manager and buyer for Denver's Twist & Shout Records. There, he was immersed in a rich stew of musical influences and a constant exchange of ideas with customers and fellow employees.

Kehn has performed his work in Boulder and Colorado Springs and at small experimental-music venues such as New York's Issue Project Room and Austin's Audio Inversions.

"He's fearless," says cellist Richard von Foerster, a cofounder with Kehn of the Playground, a DU-based chamber ensemble that performs all kinds of "New Music," from the pregnant silences of avant-garde pioneer John Cage to the audience-participation "clapping music" of innovative composer Steve Reich. At a recent Playground concert, the versatile Kehn happily took up a new instrument — the power drill — for experimental German band Einstürzende Neubauten's raucous "noise" piece *Tabula Rasa*. "A lot of the things I like, I've had people say, 'Well, that's not music,'" Kehn says. "My response is, 'Well, then maybe you can tell me what music is.' No one has an answer for that."

### Scattered Focus

"Conrad likes the persona of the bad boy, and he likes to confront people," von Foerster says. "But there are also very beautiful, comforting elements in his work. He's insatiable in a way, always looking for new ideas and perspectives."

Kehn acknowledges a certain unruliness. "I'm all over the place," he says. "I can never seem to narrow my focus." A Nebraska farm boy who began soloing at age 4 in the church choir, he later fled the cornfields for his unforeseen double life in rock 'n' roll and academia. Today, the contradictions in his life



continue to nourish his art. The proud owner of a shotgun and a nine-millimeter pistol, he's parlayed that interest into creating an open-ended "graphic score" called *Gunshot*, which eschews traditional musical notation and encourages broad improvisation. Kehnian to the core, the manuscript comes complete with a simulated bullet hole and fake bloodstains.


A political independent, he avoids all creeds but believes fervently in musical community: As director of the Playground and the Lamont Composers Concert Series, he encourages new musicians and writers (most of them still unknown), and he's helped organize a dozen festivals featuring New Music in all its forms and fashions.

### Double Life

In Kehn's office, there are pictures of Beethoven, but John Coltrane's *A Love Supreme* is likely to be wailing. Even in the glowering Skull Flux days, Kehn found himself moved by the Kronos Quartet playing the work of Polish composer Henryk Gorecki. He still loves dark, aggressive music, but his key inspirations these days are his daughters Brianna, 8, and Eris, 5, who is named for the ancient Greek god of chaos. "They give me the openness of childhood," he says.

One longtime friend admires the way Kehn juggles his disparate lives. "He's managed to balance the important things — community, creative demands, his professional responsibilities, family," says fellow composer Brandon Vaccaro, who met Kehn when they were both Lamont undergraduates in the early 1990s. "In his compositions, too, he's able to combine in compelling ways the many musical influences that bombard him. He's got big ears."

Armed with degrees from Lamont, his new MBA, and an eight-page resume, Kehn doesn't quite know where to channel his boundless energy. Expand the reach of the Playground, which already plays 30 dates a year? Shoot for a higher perch in a university? Found a community arts school? Write a cycle of pieces based on his German-Russian family's trials on the Great Plains?

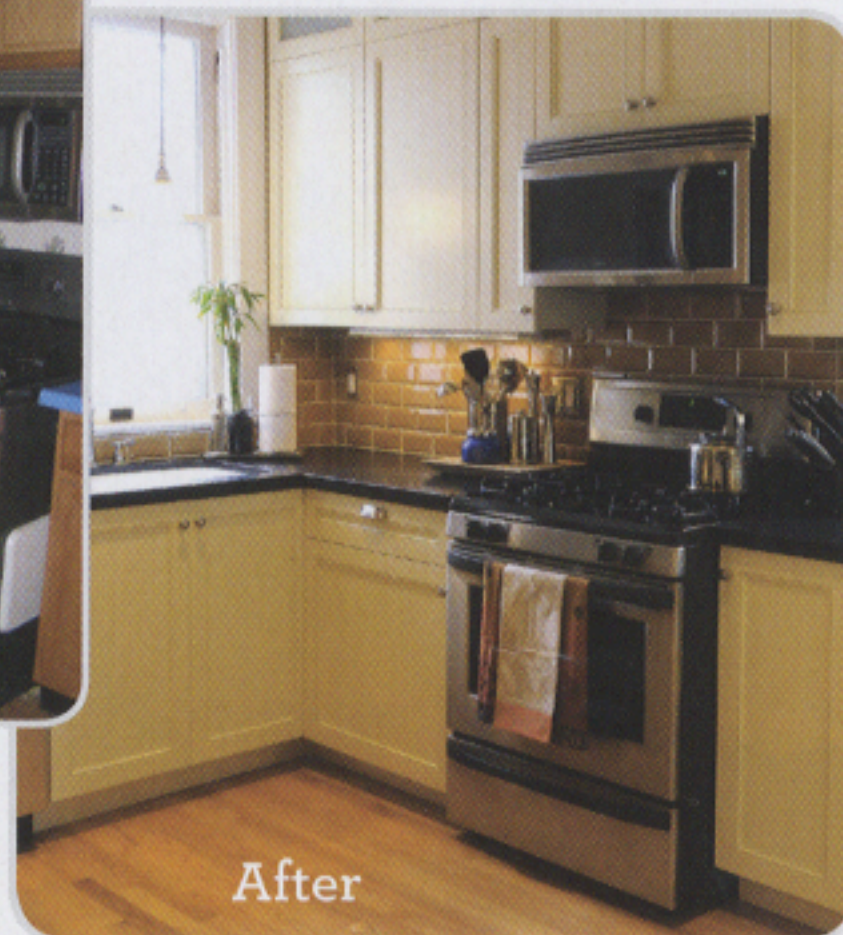
"Should I get a real job?" the old rock star asks. "I don't know." In the end, the essential spirituality of music will likely point the way. "As I sometimes say to my students," Kehn says, "if you don't find God when you're singing or playing, you may be doing it wrong." 

Bill Gallo, a Denver-based journalist, has a longstanding obsession with all things musical, especially the far edges of jazz, electronica, and experimental composition.

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