

How a classical musician turned 400-year-old French songs into a modern hit

By [Anne Midgette](#)

Emi Ferguson is a Juilliard-trained flutist — a career that requires many hours and years of practice. But her most recent album, "Amour Cruel," is vocal music, and when she recorded it, she had never sung in public. It's based on 400-year-old French songs, adapted from manuscripts Ferguson stumbled across in the Juilliard library. And as a classical crossover album it landed her on the Billboard charts.

Classical music is very particular about its categories. Any classical purist will tell you that the teen singer Jackie Evancho or the pop-opera group Il Divo are not "real" classical artists. Hence the designation "classical crossover," which for the past 25 years has striven to ensure that the Billboard classical charts are not sullied with the offerings of mere "Britain's Got Talent" winners and movie-soundtrack composers. [Classical crossover projects](#), you see, lack the high seriousness and the artistic standing of sanctified classical music tradition. They also sell more copies.

As classical music searches for a wider audience, classical crossover poses an increasing conundrum — not least because it's attracting exactly the audience that "straight" classical claims to be seeking. The mass audience is generally put off by classical music, which seems, to many outsiders, to present a facade of unwelcoming elitism. The crossover genre, however, offers the same kinds of mellow tonal sounds and rich buttery voices — music to relax to, if you will — without classical music's perceived strictures or judgments.

And it isn't only audiences looking outside the classical-music box. Many

younger artists are, like Ferguson, seeking more agency and autonomy than they can find by focusing exclusively on the great works of the past. They are also looking for ways to incorporate more of the musical styles they love into their performances. Electric guitars and indie-rock singers have become regular features of the new-music scene, where Ferguson is a member in good standing: Along with promoting her new crossover album, she's one of 17 members in the inaugural season of the intriguing experimental repertory opera company AMOC. Also participating: singers Julia Bullock and Anthony Roth Costanzo. "Amour Cruel," therefore, isn't simply the gesture of someone longing for the reality-TV, "America's Got Talent" brand of recognition.

"It's part of where my whole psyche has been," Ferguson says, "trying to reinvent and bring the music I love to audiences in ways that will stick."

"Amour Cruel" is a kind of baroque pop, music about love and heartache presented with a direct, melodious, earthy singer-songwriter vibe — Lana Del Rey channeling Louis XIV's court. The backing band, with its funky rhythms, comprises other classical artists on early instruments, including the long-necked lute called the theorbo. On first hearing, you might not recognize these songs as archaic, although you'll notice that they're sung in French. Ferguson compares herself to "a chef that takes your traditional French dish and reinvents it in this crazy way, so it feels like a new dish but has that essence of the old one."

There's nothing new about contemporary versions of baroque music, from 1960s-era harpsichord renditions of Beatles tunes through to the Belgian group Baroque Orchestration X, which commissions new "baroque" works from young composers, such as the 2014 opera "You Us We All," by the singer-composer Shara Nova. Indeed, there are natural points of connection between historically informed performance and contemporary work. For singers, both generally call for lighter voices than the fuller, vibrato-rich styles of 19th-century opera (which is how Ferguson can get away with her

lack of vocal training). Also, early-music performers today are [well-versed in improvisational skills](#), once a cornerstone of classical music performance and now more the province of jazz and pop. Indeed, classical music doesn't know what to do with improvisation: When the pianist Gabriela Montero recorded an album of improvisations on famous baroque works, it went straight to the classical crossover charts.

But it's striking that Ferguson deliberately embraced the crossover format from the start.

"I'd originally been approached by some people to do a crossover album," she says. "I had a CD when I was younger of [acclaimed flutist James] Galway doing Bette Midler and Mariah Carey. They were thinking more like that. I thought, 'I don't think I can do that and be authentic to myself.' I started dreaming, 'What could I do that felt authentic to me, and that I could take a lot of pride in but that could situate itself to be accessible to lots of music lovers.' This was the project that grew out of that."

Unless you're Lindsey Stirling, the best-selling pop violinist (and veteran of "Dancing With the Stars"), the economics of any classical chart, crossover or straight, leave something to be desired. From a purely practical standpoint, "the traditional classical product sells less, so if people want a higher chart position, they want to be on the traditional chart," says Alex Vitoulis, the associate director of chart production and the archive research manager at Billboard, who manages a number of the Billboard charts. (Ferguson charted at No. 10, as opposed to No. 17 on the classical crossover chart.) All it takes to get on the classical charts, however, [are sales of a few hundred copies](#).

"It's unfortunate, as sales continue to dwindle, that things are so anemic," Vitoulis says.

But as classical crossover albums continue to dominate the regular classical charts — take a look at Amazon's 100 top-selling "classical" releases and

you'll see only a handful of straight classical fare — it's encouraging to see the crossover genre's increasing potential as a haven for creativity in a field that often inadvertently limits it.

"What I've learned through this process," Ferguson says, "is our training as classical musicians is about preserving tradition and the canonized repertoire. You can put your own stamp on it to an extent. But what has been so exciting about this is to have complete ownership of the material. It's scary, but so rewarding at the same time."

And when Ferguson finally performed the material in public, it was at Juilliard — and it got a positive reaction.

"This is starting slowly to get into conservatory culture," she says, "encouraging students to find their individual voice." Hopefully, she adds, it's "taking the art form in a new direction."

Anne Midgette

Anne Midgette came to The Washington Post in 2008, when she consolidated her various cultural interests under the single title of chief classical music critic. She can be found online as The Classical Beat. [Follow](#) 

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