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## One Life to Live? Composer Has More

By ALLAN KOZINN

**N**EW YORK -- Double lives are usually led by spies and philanderers, not doctors and musicians. But Dr. David **Sulzer**, an assistant professor of neurology and psychiatry at Columbia University's medical school, is leading so many lives -- one medical, several musical -- that you have to wonder where he finds the time to be all the people he is.

By day, **Sulzer**, 42, investigates "how synapses are modulated during behavior and learning," as he put it, adding a loose translation: "It's very basic research about how the brain works." Laboratory work, he said, takes up most of his time, and he speaks of it with considerable excitement, noting that neurobiology is a "fascinating field that's undergoing a revolution right now."



Edward Keating/The New York Times

Dave Soldier pursues his musical career after his work at a neurobiology lab.

But when Dr. **Sulzer** takes off his lab coat and leaves New York-Presbyterian Hospital in upper Manhattan, he becomes Dave Soldier, a prolific composer and arranger and a busy violinist, guitarist and banjo player. Soldier is the name on the buzzer of his TriBeCa apartment, and it is how he is known in the downtown arts world, where the boundaries of avant-garde classical music, rhythm and blues, jazz and alternative rock are porous.

His two principal ensembles are the Soldier String Quartet -- a quartet that was at first augmented by a drummer, and now by blues and gospel singers -- and the Kropotkins, an acoustic country blues sextet. Both groups play his own works, as well as his arrangements of classic blues tunes; the quartet also plays works by rock composers from Jimi Hendrix to John Cale.

Soldier has also toured and recorded with Cale and has written arrangements for several of Cale's recent projects, including the 1996 "Walking on Locusts" album and a ballet, "Nico."

"What got me paying attention to him," Cale said, "was that in his blues transcriptions, and his own works too, when he writes for strings he makes them something to be reckoned with. As a fiddler, he manhandles his instrument, really brutalizes it, in a way that's entertaining and refreshing, and in improvisations, he can handle anything you throw at him."

As an arranger, he "has a very careful ear," Cale said. "We did some work together on my "Nico" ballet, and I think he was uncomfortable with that because there was a lot of elegant intertwining of parts. He's more into spiky transcriptions in which he can give every instrument its day in the sun and really get gymnastic. His arrangements are often like a string player's crunch session."

This summer Soldier has been concentrating on several new recordings. The second Kropotkins album, "Five Points Crawl," is due in stores next month, and the quartet's latest, "Inspect for Damaged Gods," in September, both on the independent new Mulatta label. Also due from Mulatta next month is "Ice-9 Ballads," an orchestral album with Richard Auldson Clark and the Manhattan Chamber Orchestra, which has performed virtually all of Soldier's symphonic scores.

"What turned me on about Dave's music from the first time I heard it was that he walks so easily between styles," said Clark, who before meeting Soldier had performed only traditional repertory and new music by academicians.

"Ice-9 Ballads," the title work on Soldier's new orchestral disk, is based on Kurt Vonnegut's "Cat's Cradle." It weaves together calypso with an early 20th-century salon style and a touch of modernist angularity. Vonnegut narrates sections of the recording, and Jimmy Justice, one of the vocalists in the current incarnation of the Soldier String Quartet, sings the ballads.

"Music is undergoing the same kind of growth as neurology," Soldier said when asked how he was able to juggle so many diverse projects. "We listen to so many kinds of music now, from medieval music to music from Asia, Africa, South America and all over the world. And because things don't move in ways they did before, we can grab from here and from there, and we get these weird things happening. We can now use any sound, any rhythm, any kind of polyphony, any kind of phrasing. And the computer has made it possible to record anything we can imagine."

Indeed, Soldier's orchestral scores and his work with the quartet and the Kropotkins seem conventional compared with some of his other projects. He has, for example, undertaken several collaborations with the Russian-born conceptual artists Vitaly Komar and Alex Melamid.

Last year they released "The People's Choice Music," a recording based on a survey asking people what they liked and hated in music, similar to a project the artists had done with paintings. Soldier filled both orders: "The Most Wanted Song" is a gooey five-minute ballad; "The Most Unwanted Song" is a 22-minute compendium of everything respondents hated, including bagpipe and accordion music, opera and children singing chain-store jingles.

Soldier's eclecticism is reflected in his apartment, a jungle of classical, pop and world culture artifacts. Instruments hanging on his walls include ancient Greek and Babylonian lyres, Chinese erhus, fiddles and a set of Star Trek-worthy electric quartet instruments made for him by Ken Butler. A broken-down upright piano sits beside a computer on which Soldier edits his recordings.

Behind the piano, Godzilla, Bart Simpson and Pee-wee Herman preside over a table of kitschy statuary. The scores of "Boris Godunov" and "Tosca" share space with "Great Songs of Broadway" and chemistry texts on his packed bookshelves. And LPs by Stevie Wonder and Bill Monroe sit atop the stacks of discs near his stereo system.

"Yeah, I'm in a Stevie Wonder phase now," he said. "I play his music for my musician friends, and they say, 'But it's so simple.' And I say, 'oh yeah? Play this part on the piano.' And they realize real fast that he's very deep harmonically, and that he's doing some wild stuff that you don't notice because he makes it sound so smooth."

His early musical influences -- what was in the air when he was in junior high school in Carbondale, Ill., around 1970 -- were Isaac Hayes, James Brown, country and western music and heavy metal. But he also played the viola, the violin and the piano and listened to classical music.

"At one point I just thought, 'This music is dead,'" he said of the classics, "so I stopped taking lessons and started playing the guitar. It took me a long time to realize that the music wasn't dead -- it was just played as if it were dead."

At 16, he moved with his family to Storrs, Conn., and became fascinated with the complicated brass writing in salsa after hearing an Eddie Palmieri recording on the radio. He hoped to learn that kind of scoring when he enrolled in a composition class at Michigan State University, but he found the course work unappealingly academic. Instead, he looked up Roscoe Mitchell, the avant-garde saxophonist, and studied composition with him privately.

In 1981, after a brief sojourn in Florida, where he was a backing guitarist for Bo Diddley, Soldier -- then **Sulzer** -- came to New York and established the pattern of his current life: he attended the College of Physicians and Surgeons at Columbia, took courses at the Juilliard School and private composition lessons with Otto Luening, and spent his nights playing with several bands, including the Ordinaires. He formed the Soldier String Quartet in 1985.

"I had thought of the string quartet almost as a dead form," Soldier said. "But I liked quartet music, and when I thought about why I was into the quartets of Haydn and Beethoven, I realized it was because it was so polyphonic. And I thought, what's the greatest American addition to polyphony? It's the drum sound. You've got a single player holding down one beat here and another beat there. They don't do that in African or Asian drumming; it's an American thing. So by adding drums, I had both kinds of polyphony."

Replacing the drums with singers, he said, "was a way to get a more interesting kind of phrasing happening." He continued: "And I find that when we play for audiences that aren't either bohemians or intellectuals, the singers speak directly to people. The music can be quite advanced and challenging, but there's something about the voice: people get it right away."

In virtually every regard but its core instrumentation, the Soldier String Quartet is a rock band. Having a drummer meant that the string players had to be amplified, and they played standing and with a vibrancy bordering on ferocity. Soldier has written and arranged many pieces for the group, but he has also put it at the service of other composers, most notably Elliott Sharp, whose music fills six of its CDs.

More recently the quartet has collaborated with the flutist Robert Dick on a pair of adventurous albums, "Third Stone From the Sun," a collection of Hendrix arrangements, and "Jazz Standards From Mars," and it plays on "Do the Collapse," the new album by the rock band Guided by Voices. Maintaining a steady roster has been Soldier's biggest difficulty with the quartet. The reasons, he says, are financial.

"We played in Finland a few months ago," he said, "and everyone in the quartet was paid \$1,500, which is great for classical musicians who are not stars. But that doesn't happen frequently, and it's not easy to find people who can do this indefinitely. You need players with a special attitude, or who have day jobs, like me, and are doing it for the love of the music."

The Kropotkins specialize in a quirky twist on Delta blues. On their debut recording, "The Kropotkins," standards like Bukka White's "Parchman Farm" nestle up against Soldier's alluringly angular "Nasadiya," a setting of a passage from an ancient Hindu text, the "Rig Veda." The group is geographically far-flung: most of the players live in New York, but the band's drummer, Maureen Tucker -- who, like Cale, was an original member of the Velvet Underground -- lives in Douglas, Ga., and Lorrette Velvette, its lead singer, lives in Memphis.

"It was a kind of epiphany," Soldier said of his idea for the Kropotkins, which came to him while touring in Germany with Cale several years ago. "The music was great, but we had to

carry all this equipment, and we had to have a sound check every day. But when I was walking through Stuttgart, there was a Japanese band playing Bill Monroe bluegrass out in the street. And I thought, isn't this great -- no setups, no amplification, you just play."

A large white message board hanging over Soldier's computer conveys what else he is up to. It lists a gospel choral work commissioned by Paul Hillier and the Hilliard Ensemble. About half finished is an arrangement of Schoenberg's String Quartet No. 2 that "uses all the notes, but makes the rhythms funky, like James Brown." And he is considering a second opera, having learned from the response to his first, "Naked Revolution," a collaboration with Komar and Melamid that was performed at the Kitchen to mixed reviews in 1997.

"Apparently it is very common for people who come from countries with authoritarian governments to dream about the leaders," he said, "so these guys would dream about Stalin and Washington. And I thought, what could be more interesting as an opera?"

"But as it turns out, that was too esoteric and it confused people. So I looked closely at the operas that were successful, new and old, and I realized that what people really want in an opera is a woman who dies so that you can feel terrible and cry for her. Even my own favorite operas do that, and you ignore it at your peril."

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