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Jazz elite flock to Banff Centre

Influential workshop attracts some of the best talent from all over the world

By Roger Levesque, Freelance February 27, 2010

Over the years I've been an enthusiastic cheerleader for the Banff Centre's jazz workshop. Albertans can take pride in the fact that we host a unique set of influential jazz programs at the Banff institute, which continue to draw international talents as both faculty and participants.

I first visited the Banff Centre to do a story for The Journal in 1990, and I still remember being amazed at the calibre of participants that year, especially one group that included a young French pianist named Benoit Delbecq.

Twenty years later, Delbecq is set to show up at the Yardbird Suite tonight, sharing a special two-piano date with Andy Milne, a Canadian pianist he also met at the Banff Centre workshop. Paris native Delbecq and Pennsylvania-based Milne both enjoy multi-faceted careers in jazz and have just released a CD of their two-piano project Crystal Magnets, titled Where Is Pannonica? (Songlines).

They returned to Banff last year to use the centre's digital studios to make that recording. As that rare two-piano context suggests, it's not conventional jazz music -- not to suggest the pianists have thrown conventions out the window.

You can still hear the elements of melody and rhythm, harmony and structure in the tunes they perform. But more often than not, they use "prepared" pianos, putting little bits of paper, metal and other things under the piano strings to alter the character of the instrument.

"As a kid I was a frustrated drummer," admits Delbecq, "so I'm always looking for ways to emphasize the piano as a percussive instrument."

In the end, it's really about using the broader capabilities of the piano, more like an orchestra, with the prepared effects sometimes reminding you of other instruments, such as a marimba.

Meanwhile, the twin-piano idea offers a whole extra set of possibilities for support or interaction.

Milne first proposed the idea to Delbecq about three years ago.

"I've had a few experiences playing with multiple keyboard players. One of them was kind of like playing in a rainforest, a bit like In A Silent Way. With the two pianos, Andy's sound next to me is very special, usually louder than me, but it pushed me to find a new way to play. Now our collaboration has an intense

but relaxed magical level that I have with very few people."

Local audiences may already know Milne from past appearances here, either solo or with his electric band Dapp Theory. He originally ramped up his solo career working in New York with saxophonist Steve Coleman, another Banff connection.

Back in Paris, Delbecq's star was rising on the European jazz scene, thanks in part to famous mentors like Steve Lacy and Mal Waldron. He still chooses to balance a few projects of his own with the sideman role and has played with a number of talented Canadian jazz musicians along the way.

Delbecq and Milne play 9 p.m. tonight at the Yardbird (86th Avenue and 102nd Street). Tickets are \$16 for members, \$20 for guests.

OTHER NOTES

- The music continues this spring with the Banff international workshop in jazz and creative music happening from mid-May to mid-June. New York trumpeter Dave Douglas returns this year to head up the program, with notable faculty including Myra Melford, Ravi Coltrane and others. Integral parts of the workshop include nightly club shows and weekend concerts, which are open to the public. If you plan a vacation in Banff at that time, check the Banff Centre event calendar beforehand at www.banffcentre.ca.

- Kent Sangster's Obsessions Octet (jazz quartet meets string quartet) play tunes from their forthcoming second CD Melodia, in a special non-jazz society CD release event at the Yardbird March 7.

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