

## Keyboard wizards

**Masters of contemporary improvisation play Halifax**

By STEPHEN COOKE Entertainment Reporter  
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Piano duo Andy Milne and Benoit Delbecq, who perform as Crystal Magnets, are at the Sir James Dunn Theatre in the Dalhousie Arts Centre for a show Saturday, 8 p.m. There is also a workshop with the duo, Saturday at noon, which is open to all musicians. For info, contact JazzEast at 492-2225 or [www.jazzeast.com](http://www.jazzeast.com). (LAURA VANAGS)

COMBINE the acoustic range of a piano with an active and exploratory imagination, and you have unlimited sonic possibilities.

Then double that equation, and you've jumped into musical hyperspace.

That's the feeling you get listening to Crystal Magnets, performing on Saturday at 8 p.m. at the Sir James Dunn Theatre in the Dalhousie Arts Centre. The transatlantic team-up between Toronto pianist Andy Milne and France's Benoit Delbecq hovers between improvisational jazz and modern composition, fuelled by the daring synergy of these two longtime friends.

Friends for two decades, in fact, but never collaborators, until they were invited to take part in a cultural exchange commissioned by Chamber Music America, which resulted in the Songlines Records release *Where Is Pannonica?* created at The Banff Centre where Milne is also an instructor.

Released in the SACD format, which allows for digital surround sound playback, *Where Is Pannonica?* ranges from atmospheric expressionism to the kind of complex rhythmic and harmonic dovetailing that occurs when a groove specialist like Milne goes keyboard-to-keyboard with Delbecq, whose music incorporates ideas from Steve Lacy and Gyorgi Ligeti, especially when they have an incubator like The Banff Centre, Alberta's prestigious cultural institution.

"We both had the same kind of freedom to spend as much time as we needed," says Milne from his home in the northeast corner of Pennsylvania.

"It's not like we had to worry about waking up the neighbours, or dealing with the pressures of our regular schedules.

"We're there, we're conceptualizing, and each of us has a room with two pianos in it. So I can go knock on Benoit's door and say, 'Check this out, what do you think? What are you working on?'

"And then two hours later, he's coming over to my room, 'Lemme try this out.' And you're able to do this spontaneous back and forth, and you can filter it all in a natural way; you couldn't have asked for a better set of circumstances than what we had in Banff."

Spontaneity abounds in Milne's and Delbecq's creations, but there's also a sense of rigorous concentration in their manipulation of tonal colour, harmonic theory and rhythmic conventions. But for each musician, the rare chance to work with another pianist also brought a high level of enjoyment to the project.

"There was definitely a lot of fun in the process," says Milne. "Sure, the music can have a serious overtone to it, but in reality artists can be very serious about their work, while having a sense of humour about life or about themselves. . . . We've been friends for a very long time, but this was a unique opportunity to work together and discover things about ourselves — both in regard to how we collaborate and how we relate to each other.

"Because it was such an intense window of time, the kind of intimacy and trust and the depth of sharing were touching. The humour comes up because it filters through how we exchange and how we process ideas."

While certain aspects of creating these pieces were painstaking, Milne found that for the most part, writing with Delbecq and matching up their separate approaches came quite easily.

For *Pyramides*, Delbecq took Milne's initial ideas back to his studio and within 15 minutes had fleshed them out into something matching their dual aspect.

"To our astonishment, I realized what I wrote and what he wrote perfectly complemented each other. That's when we looked at each other and thought, 'Wow, we're really in sync, aren't we? We're like this old married couple.' "

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Tickets for Crystal Magnets at the Sir James Dunn Theatre are \$25/\$22 students/\$20 JazzEast members, and free for Dalhousie Music students. They are available through Ticketpro ( [www.ticketpro.ca](http://www.ticketpro.ca) or 1-888-311-9090).