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Donal Fox Will Close the Tanglewood Jazz Weekend

By Owen McNally | September 2, 2010

In today's world of rampant musical hybridization, all genres freely mix in a giant melting pot whose motto could be: E pluribus unum, one out of many.

Jazz, America's original fusion and world music, melds with classical, rock, funk, pop, hip-hop, rap, commercial pop, country, blues, R&B and a United Nations' worth of exciting world music.

One of today's practitioners of the mixed genre is the versatile pianist/composer Donal Fox. A seamless blender of jazz and classical music, Fox premieres his "Piazzolla to Bach Project" Sunday night in the grand finale of the Tanglewood Jazz Festival, the 23rd annual Labor Day Weekend jazz bash in the Berkshire Hills in Lenox, Mass. Fox, a free-spirited, classically trained virtuoso who loves Bach and Stravinsky as much as he does Miles and Trane, leads his genre-bending chamber quartet, joined by his guest, the celebrated, Israeli-born classical cellist Maya Beiser.



Called "a cello goddess" by *The New Yorker* magazine, Beiser has been the cellist of choice for such iconic, iconoclastic modern classical composers as Steve Reich and Philip Glass. Discovered as a youngster in a kibbutz by the legendary Isaac Stern, Beiser has a deep-seated love for innovation and cross-cultural influences that makes her the ideal collaborative guest for Fox's exploratory quartet.

What distinguishes Fox's acclaimed blends of jazz and classical is that they have a fluent, natural voice all their own.

Jazz musicians are increasingly at home on the worldwide range, freely mixing jazz with every genre from Afro-Cuban to zydeco and beyond. Successful cross-fertilizations can lead to revelations. Failures, however, sound like prefabricated, patchwork pastiches, terminally pompous and vacuous.

Fox fans have tried to account for the organic, natural, unaffected sound that graces his jazz/classical projects. Some fans think Fox's "organic" quality can be explained by heredity. Others credit it to environment.

Fox, a 58-year-old Boston native who grew up in a home saturated with the sound of music by Bach and Bird, favors his mother's homespun theory about the origin of his musical gift.

"Both my parents loved Bach," Fox says by phone from Boston, "and every Sunday they would listen on the radio to E. Power Biggs, one of the great organists of the period, who would play Bach and other classical pieces.

"My mother was pregnant with me then, and years later would joke to me, 'You love Bach because I listened to Bach when you were in my womb'," Fox says.

Beyond his mother's "Bach to the Womb" theory, there are, of course, more obvious influences.

These range from the impact of his parents' diverse record collection to his studies at the New England Conservatory of Music and Berklee College of Music. Other influences include such famous mentors as Gunther Schuller, a pioneering force in mixing jazz with classical; the noted jazz educator David Baker, as well as boundary-stretching pianist/composer John Lewis of the Modern Jazz Quartet.

Music itself has been a core element in Fox's life as far back as he can remember.

As a precocious 6-year-old, he became fascinated with his parents' voluminous record collection. In particular, he recalls becoming hooked on Stravinsky's "The Rite of Spring," "The Firebird" and "Petrushka," monumental masterworks of 20th-century modernism.

"I'd just take the vinyl LPs out of their beautiful album covers and place them on my little record player and listen to that stuff over and over again. Even today, when I'm just jamming around at the piano, I'll play those 'Rite of Spring' chords," he says.

Illustrating his point on a keyboard close to the phone, he plays those scary Stravinsky chords, thump, thump, thumping ominously like the familiar primal pounding signature rhythms from the soundtrack for the great shark horror flick, "Jaws."

"My father was a clarinet player who was very much into bebop," Fox says, "So along with Bach, Stravinsky and all the classical music, there was plenty of Charlie Parker, Miles Davis and Thelonious Monk."

Beginning piano at 5 or 6, Fox devoutly immersed himself in the classical repertoire until age 10.

"I started rebelling against all that around then. I thought there was something confining about it.

"I had my favorite 'Rite of Spring' playing in my head and my piano teacher was just giving me Chopin. So I began jamming around on Chopin. I guess that the creative composing side was coming out pretty early," he says.

"I'd be playing a Bach piece, for example," he adds as he dashes off an illustrative Bach partita on the nearby keyboard. "But automatically I'd hear other things going on in my head, ideas for improvisations." Once again, in the instructive manner of Leonard Bernstein, he illustrates his point on the keyboard.

Fox, who would become a Guggenheim fellow and the first African-American composer-in-residence with the St. Louis Symphony in 1991, followed his selected jazz/classical path, becoming an important bridge-builder between the two genres. Instead of two segregated worlds, he views classical and jazz as equals, as a common language for his expression.

"I wanted to use classical forms, which are so much more involved, and bring them into the improvisational realm. I wanted to use classical material the way jazz musicians use the Great American Songbook. And I wanted to do this with music I've always loved," he says.

With today's widespread melding, Fox acknowledges there can be aesthetic hazards, including the formulaic approach that randomly glues genres together.

"That gives these blends a bad name. It's a real pitfall for someone who, as in fusion cooking, starts putting flavors together without thinking carefully about how they tie together," he says.

To illustrate this point, he plays a few bars of a Bartok piece that randomly, even joltingly transforms into a funky, down-home, blues, instantaneously creating a funny, witty send up of the foibles of fusion.

With his new project on Piazzolla, the legendary Argentinian master of the tango who lived in both the worlds of improvisation and composition, Fox has found a kindred spirit.

Piazzolla (1921-1992) was a composer and a working musician, a bandleader and sideman who played gigs on the bandoneon, the Argentine accordion. A student of the famous French

composer/conductor/teacher Nadia Boulanger and admirer of bebop genius Charlie Parker, the renowned tango innovator loved Bach, jazz and extended compositional forms.

Fox's quartet collaborators in his Piazzolla project are the great Cuban-born drummer Dafnis Prieto, vibraphonist Warren Wolf and bassist John Lockwood.

Fox performs in the festival's closing concert, which opens Sunday at 8 p.m. with a performance by the young guitar wizard Julian Lage.