

Classical meets jazz: A world premiere with sax appeal

STEVEN MAZEY

Published on: January 23, 2015



Mike Murley plays with his Septet at Ontario Scene.
KAZ EHARA / NATIONAL POST

TORONTO • In his home in Toronto's Danforth neighbourhood, Mike Murley cued the string orchestra recording, lifted his saxophone and offered a preview of the world premiere that's about to happen in Ottawa.

Murley was performing the opening of Concerto for Tenor Saxophone, the piece by Halifax composer Peter-Anthony Togni that Murley will play Jan. 26 with Ottawa's Thirteen Strings and conductor Kevin Mallon. Offering some of the warm and lyrical first movement, the sax player filled the room with the singing tone Citizen jazz critic Peter Hum has praised for its "vulnerable, nuanced loveliness."

"It's pretty, eh?," said Murley, 52, who's been practising the concerto since September, first on his own and then with a string orchestra track Togni sent to give him an idea of how the piece will sound when he joins Thirteen Strings at St. Andrew's Church.

"It's a little different from what I normally do. But I feel very comfortable playing it. It has a classical feeling, but the harmonies are quite jazzy."

The concert will include typical Thirteen Strings fare by Handel, Thomas Canning and John Burge alongside the piece Togni describes as "a classical work that is influenced by jazz but is not jazz." For Ottawa audiences, it's a welcome chance to hear Murley, who has won three Junos and been named saxophonist of the year eight times by the Jazz Report/National Jazz Awards.

The concerto has what Togni describes as a warm and emotional first movement, an introspective second movement that's "a little bit Russian with a slightly blue section" and a third movement with "a dark Gypsy feel, mixed with velvet elegance." It ends, Murley says, with "the kind of big, exciting finish a traditional concerto would have."

Unlike traditional classical pieces, this concerto nods to jazz by allowing Murley to improvise in each movement.

In these sections, Murley says he hopes the transitions are smooth and the audience "might not know what's improvised and what's not." Because parts of the piece are improvised, the audience in Ottawa will hear something different from what the audience in Toronto will hear when Murley performs it with Orchestra Toronto Feb. 22.

Murley grew up in Nova Scotia's Annapolis Valley, studied music at Acadia and York University and now teaches at the University of Toronto. He usually performs in small jazz groups and along with his burnished sound is particularly acclaimed for his gifts as an improviser.

Togni says Murley has long been "one of my favourite musicians on the planet. I heard him play many times in Halifax and was always blown away," he said in an email.

"I love his range, from wonderfully smooth and lyrical to blood-on-the-floor raw sound. He caresses a melody in such a personal, velvety way," says Togni, an organist and pianist who also likes to improvise in performance. He has written pieces for others that include improvisation, and says he admires Murley's skills in the art form.

"The main aspect of his playing that sets him apart is his sense of rhythm, spot on and always in the groove. His improvisations are brilliant, from the heart but also well conceived, almost like compositions."

The composer says he was inspired after Murley joined Togni's trio at a Toronto club a year ago for an evening of jazz in a classical context.

"We even included some of Stravinsky's Petrushka. The way Mike treated those thorny Stravinsky melodies and worked them into his brilliant improvisation was absolutely astounding," Togni says in his programme notes for the concerto.

"Right then and there, I thought, 'I have to write this man a concerto.' I wanted to work with the jazz language and draw it into my own harmonic world, which is influenced by jazz but is not jazz."

The Ottawa concert will mark Murley's first as a concerto soloist, and he says he was flattered when Togni told him he wanted to write a piece for him that would include opportunities to improvise.

Murley had heard clarinetist Jeff Reilly's performance of a piece Togni wrote for Reilly, and says "I liked that piece and I could hear myself doing something like that. I like the lyrical quality of Peter's music, and that it goes to different places. It isn't just lyrical. Since I am an improviser and that's what Peter is interested in, that appealed to me a lot."

Murley worked with the composer last summer in Halifax so that Togni could get to know his sound and the things he likes to do on the sax.

"I always write for a person, not an instrument," Togni says. "In this case, it's Mike and his sound, and imagining what he will do with the materials and how he will transcend the materials. With the improvisation, the challenge is to play in and out of the improvisation section in a smooth way. In some way, the written material could sound improvised and the improvised material written. Mike does this in an amazing way."

Murley says he's delighted with the music Togni sent him, a few months after they met.

"There are soaring melodies and beautiful harmonies, and he weaves in and out well, from the melodies to me being able to improvise."

When he's improvising, Murley says, he loves "the freedom and also the challenge. You have an open canvas, but with that canvas comes the responsibility to do something that makes sense with the piece. You're working within a certain framework. It's like instant composing. I think it's going to be a lot of fun."

He's looking forward to sharing the stage with Thirteen Strings. (The Canning and Burge pieces will actually include 26 strings, when the players are joined by the Junior Thirteen Strings_ Ottawa-area teen players who have been coached by Mallon and the professional players for the concert).

Jazz musicians don't often get to work with string orchestra, and Murley says he loved performing with a string ensemble for his CD, *The Melody Lingers On*.

"Anytime I get a chance to work with strings, I get excited. It's such a beautiful sound. That recording I did with strings was one of the highlights of my career. This will be another one. I think it's going to be a lot of fun."