

A musical missionary

Bandleader Adrian Cho hopes his cross-genre orchestra will convert listeners to jazz

Doug Fischer

The Ottawa Citizen

Wednesday, April 16, 2008

Adrian Cho always seems to have his fingers in a dozen pies.

This spring alone, the Ottawa jazz bassist and bandleader premiered a bass and piano work written by composer Eldon Rathburn, recorded a solo bass soundtrack for a dance film, will perform Jewish Sephardic folk music, improvise on the bass for a dance show, play at a wine-tasting dinner and present jazz vespers in a Lutheran church.

That's not a complete list. It does not include the activity for which Cho is best known -- leading the Impressions in Jazz Orchestra (IJO), an ambitious repertory ensemble he founded in 2005 to perform a broad range of what he calls "jazz-centric music," taken from sources as far back as the 1850s up to the present day.

Cho says all of these activities help him avoid the "tunnel vision" he thinks keeps a lot of jazz musicians from expanding their creative horizons.

They're part and parcel of his campaign to find and convert music lovers out there who like jazz but don't realize they do -- the people who aren't aware there's a lot more to jazz than "loud, dissonant music played at fast tempos in basement clubs."

Cho has no problem with that kind of jazz. He says he plays it regularly himself. But he believes many other styles on the jazz spectrum -- some that fellow musicians are quick to dismiss -- will appeal to the thousands of people who go to see classical concerts.

That's been his ambitious approach with the IJO: create programs of music designed to attract a broader audience and perform them in large, attractive venues.

Over the past three years, for example, Cho and his orchestra, working in both small and large ensembles and with guest singers and dancers, have presented evenings of Duke Ellington's musical connections to Shakespeare, Miles Davis' extended works with arranger Gil Evans and traced black history through songs associated with Africa, slavery, the American Civil War and the civil rights movement of the 1960s. Cho accompanies the shows with snippets of background and anecdotes intended to place the music in context.

"There's nothing complicated about what I'm trying to do," says the 38-year-old native of Australia. "My goal is to do whatever the hell it takes to get people through the door. If I can help to increase the size of the jazz audience in Ottawa, that will benefit the whole jazz community, not just the orchestra."

On Friday, the IJO will perform an evening of music Cho is promoting as Cult Fiction Classics. It will feature theme music from crime shows, spy thrillers and science fiction movies, but the heart of the concert will be the first Canadian

presentation of music from Johnny Richards' arrangements for the popular 1964 album, *My Fair Lady*.

Richards, perhaps best known as the co-writer of *Young at Heart*, one of Frank Sinatra's signature songs, was also an in-demand arranger whose heavily orchestrated, Latin-inspired scores were used by Dizzy Gillespie, Sarah Vaughan, Charlie Barnet and most famously by Stan Kenton in the 1950s.

He died in 1968, and many of his scores were thought to be lost. But when Cho learned Richards' long-time music copyist and friend Mark Freeh had boxes of arrangements sitting in his New York apartment, he went down last year to see for himself.

Freeh, pleased to learn there was still interest in his old friend's work, provided Cho with full access to the material.

"I basically stood in front of a photocopier for three days copying all of this stuff," he says. "It was amazing -- the charts were 50 years old, on very large paper that was falling apart or held together with rusted paper clips."

Even at that, he came away with only a small portion of the material, including the charts for *My Fair Lady*. The 35-minute excerpt the IJO will perform Friday "just has so much going on -- so many notes, so much rhythm and some really interesting instrumentation," Cho says.

For instance, Richards' four-piece saxophone section requires a bass saxophone in addition to the usual tenor, alto and baritone saxes. The score also calls for a mellophonium, a rare french horn-like instrument with a forward-facing bell used in marching bands, and for a time in the Kenton band.

Although mellophoniums have three valves and are fingered like a trumpet, they are notoriously hard to play in pitch. Cho managed to track down one of the instruments on eBay, but in the end it was too difficult to master in the time before the concert. So this week the orchestra will use the French horn instead.

"I always try to get as close to the spirit of the composer or arranger's original intent as possible," Cho says. "You look for a similar ensemble sound, similar tempos, the right kind of feel. But you also want to leave room for interpretation and improvisation."

The IJO, which varies in size according to the music being played, consists of freelance jazz musicians from around the area, some from the Central Forces and RCMP bands, as well as classical players from the Ottawa Symphony Orchestra and the National Arts Centre Orchestra.

Cho has high hopes for the IJO. Repertory jazz orchestras are fixtures in many cities, particularly in Europe. The most famous is New York's Lincoln Center Jazz Orchestra, led by trumpeter Wynton Marsalis. The LCJO plays original compositions, but its main goal is to perform music from the jazz canon, from the likes of Duke Ellington, Thelonious Monk and Charles Mingus.

"That where the whole thing starts for me," Cho says. "I want to share music with people, I want them to hear live performances of music the way it was meant to be played. That's what I think turns people on to jazz."

Some of Cho's shows have lost money -- it can cost a lot to mount an event featuring up to 50 people -- but he's had success attracting audiences. Between 400 and 500 people turned out at the ballroom in the Crowne Plaza Hotel last year for an IJO show.

He still does a lot of the detail work required for his shows -- finding and transcribing scores, organizing musicians, booking rehearsal time and space, finding money to pay the artists, researching his speaking notes, printing programs, doing promotion. The burden, however, eased last year when he

formed a non-profit that generated a few donations and a core of volunteers.

All in all, it's not bad for someone who's only lived in Ottawa for eight years, and only picked up the bass after he arrived here from Australia to work in the high-tech field.

He's proud of what he's accomplished, but has also picked up some detractors along the way. That's his view, anyway.

He won't name names, but he says he's tired of people "crapping on me and saying I'm not serious." Cho says these are mostly "older people who are stuck in their ways," a group that includes other musicians, media critics and "some well-known jazzophiles" who either resent his success or think he has a swelled head.

Other musicians don't want to publicly criticize Cho, but it's fair to say the negative feelings that do exist are focused on his inexperience as a bass player and bandleader and the perception that's he too much of a self-promoter.

Cho raised the issue himself last month on his blog (at www.adriancho.com).

"By and large, the response to the IJO has been overwhelmingly positive," Cho wrote. "There are, however, a few people who begrudge me for both the success of the orchestra and for attempting to bring jazz to the masses. The success is not warranted because these folks apparently see me as more of a 'businessman' than a 'real musician.'"

Cho says that if some people can't live with his main point -- that there is more one type of jazz and more than one way to present it -- that's fine with him.

"The thing that keeps me going is when people come up to me after a show ... not just jazz people, and they tell me they really enjoyed themselves and they learned something, too. That's what it's all about in the end."

Adrian Cho's Impressions in Jazz Orchestra performs Cult Fiction Classics Friday at 7:30 p.m. at Dominion-Chalmers United Church, 355 Cooper St. Tickets at TicketWeb.ca, Compact Music and CD Warehouse stores or 613-858-7904.

© The Ottawa Citizen 2008

CLOSE WINDOW

Copyright © 2008 CanWest Interactive, a division of [CanWest MediaWorks Publications, Inc.](#). All rights reserved.
CanWest Interactive, a division of [CanWest MediaWorks Publications, Inc.](#). All rights reserved.