

A rich, somewhat unexpected approach to jazz

J.D. CONSIDINE
FROM THURSDAY'S GLOBE AND MAIL
JUNE 28, 2007 AT 3:59 AM EDT

In classical music, cello and piano are a time-honoured combination, with a repertoire of works by Beethoven, Schubert, Franck, and Stravinsky, among others.

In jazz, however, performances by cello and piano are as rare as hen's teeth, and pianist David Braid, who is about to release a duo album with cellist Matt Brubeck, can't help but wonder why. "I think we might be the only cello/piano jazz duo in the world," he says over the phone from his Toronto home. "If there are other ones, you could probably count them on the fingers of one hand. And it's surprising there aren't a lot more, because there seems to be a lot of potential there."

For one thing, the cello is "quite orchestral," Braid says. It has a huge range - over five octaves, compared with the two or three a typical saxophonist or trumpeter commands - offers a wealth of possible colours and textures, and can assume a wide variety of roles, particularly in jazz.

"Matt can approach it like he's playing a bass, so it's a more traditional sound where he's playing a bass line and I'm playing over top of it," Braid says. "Or he can play like a melodic instrument, bowing up high so I'm accompanying more as if it were a horn player. Or Matt has got all these neat things he can do when he's playing the cello like it's a guitar, which will change the way I play the piano again.

"So there are many, many different ways we can contribute to the music to produce quite a wide range of textures, because of the flexibility of the cello."

Not that Braid knew any of this before he began playing with Brubeck. Although he studied classical music as a child, he doesn't have an extensive background in the world of Bach and Brahms. "People seem to think I do," he says, explaining that his experience with classical music is limited to "just the garden salad piano training - learning how to read and going through the method books."

Braid was introduced to Brubeck - the youngest son of jazz legend Dave Brubeck - in 2003, at the now-defunct Top of the Senator, after a performance by Braid's sextet. "About a week later, he phoned me," Braid says. "He had an extra ticket to see Herbie Hancock at Massey Hall. So we ended up chatting, talked a lot about music, and realized that we saw a lot of things the same way. I think that's when we became intrigued about trying to do some playing together."

Because Brubeck teaches at York University while Braid teaches at the University of Toronto, both were around enough to rehearse casually. "We realized that there was something simpatico there, so we started working on some repertoire, and the opportunity for a concert came up." Things went well enough in performance that the two decided to record an album, *Twotet/Deuxtet*. (Their performance tomorrow is a record release show, as well as a Toronto Jazz Festival date.) "It's very much an equal collaboration, in terms of selection of repertoire and the approach that we take in building arrangements," he says.

Launching a new album during jazz festival season certainly is a great way to get exposure, but given the acoustic limitations of the piano and cello format - specifically, the fact that neither instrument is tremendously loud - Braid and Brubeck were cautious about where and how they'd play.

"This isn't the sort of music that should be on an outdoor stage, because it's very intimate," Braid says. In Toronto, Brubeck and Braid are playing at Live@Courthouse, a small club well suited to acoustic instruments, while at Jazz East in Halifax, they'll be performing at the Cathedral of All Saints -- "a small church, which should be lovely." Their only outdoor date is at the Festival International de Jazz de Montréal, where they'll be at Hydro-Québec Park. "It's an outdoor space, but it's for a small audience, so it should be okay."

Besides, this is just the beginning for the duo. "There's a lot of unexplored potential with it, so I see this going on, for sure."

Brubeck/Braid performs at the Toronto Jazz Festival tomorrow night, in Montreal on July 5 and in Halifax on July 18.

© Copyright 2007 CTVglobemedia Publishing Inc. All Rights Reserved.

CTVglobemedia

globeandmail.com and The Globe and Mail are divisions of CTVglobemedia Publishing Inc., 444 Front St. W., Toronto, ON Canada M5V 2S9
Phillip Crawley, Publisher