

NEA



AMERICAN
MASTERPIECES

CHAMBER
MUSIC

A Jazz Clarinetist's Legacy

Benny Goodman, the first major artist with a dual-genre career, also helped bring back the small ensemble in the big-band era.

by John McDonough

Part of an ongoing series spotlighting performances supported by the NEA's AMERICAN MASTERPIECES: CHAMBER MUSIC initiative

The May and June calendar of AMERICAN MASTERPIECES activities can be seen on page 12. Some of the works being performed are acknowledged American classics, others are worthy but little known and rarely performed, and still others are very recent commissions.

One measurement of the changing fortunes of jazz in recent decades is the inescapable fact that it has been more than four decades since the music last produced a genuine household name. The ones we still have with us survive from a time when jazz was actually popular and actively promoted by record companies. But Dave Brubeck is now in his 90s; Sonny Rollins and Ornette Coleman in their 80s; Herbie Hancock and Chick Corea, their 70s; and Keith Jarrett, his mid 60s.

Offhand, I cannot think of a single jazz instrumentalist under 50 today whose name would be widely known outside the cloistered readership of *Down Beat* or *Jazz Times*. Remember just last February when the young jazz bassist Esperanza Spalding prevailed over Justin Bieber as “best new artist” at the Grammy Awards? The biggest news of the night seemed to be that no one knew who she was.

This is not to clang the familiar jazz-is-dead alarm. Clearly many young performers are enjoying successful careers today in jazz. And this is largely because there are now far more efficient and cost-effective ways to seek out a loyal niche audience than the lavish promotional dragnets that were once bankrolled by huge labels in pursuit of everybody. So a toast to efficiency, but a farewell, perhaps, to the household jazz name.

Maybe this is why jazz, like Broadway, spends so much of its time looking back upon itself and revisiting its pantheon of immortals, who may be long departed but are anything but dead. When Newport Jazz Festival founder George Wein needs to fill Carnegie Hall, it's often Billie Holiday, Charlie Parker, Miles Davis, or John Coltrane who rides to the rescue as the posthumous object of a “salute,” a “tribute” or a “music of” evening. Once, such events were occasions for reunions. But now it falls increasingly to younger musicians, one or two generations removed, to either recreate or reinterpret as they see fit a music they never experienced. This is good, not only for audiences but musicians. History is an asset, not an encumbrance.

It helps that we have now entered a long cycle of celebrity centennials. It more or less began for jazz with Ellington in 1999 and could continue for another 20 years or more. Hancock's centennial is due in 2040. But right now we are in the real thick of it. It was between around 1909 and 1919 that many of the most iconic stars of the swing era were born. They would come of age in the late '30s as network broadcasting, sound movies, the ribbon microphone, and electronic recording matured—technology that would

BENNY GOODMAN, c. 1968; HIS RECORDING, WITH
THE BUDAPEST STRING QUARTET, OF MOZART'S
QUINTET FOR STRINGS, K. 581



embed their performance legacy in our cultural memory with a clarity and permanence earlier generations missed out on.

None were more acclaimed than Benny Goodman, whose centennial in May 2009 prompted many remembrances, CDs and concerts. One artist who took her admiration for Goodman on the road was clarinetist Anat Cohen, who launched her Goodman retrospective (“Benny Goodman and Beyond”) with *Clarinetwork: Live at the Village Vanguard* (on her own Anzic label) in April 2010 and has performed it widely since. Last December it took her to Houston, Texas, and the annual Da Camera of Houston jazz concert series, supported in part by an *American Masterpieces: Chamber Music* grant from the NEA.

Cohen is the latest and currently youngest (at about 36) in a select line of remarkable clarinetists who have consciously walked in Goodman’s footprints. Early on it was Bob Wilber and Peanuts Hucko who came closest to Goodman’s emotional and technical particulars. In the 1950s Buddy DeFranco tuned the BG repertoire into bebop, but without losing its essential drive. When Eddie Daniels and vibist Gary Burton tackled Goodman in 1992, they found still new doors to pry open. Since then Ken Peplowski, Paquito D’Rivera, Allan Vaché, Dave Bennett and others have all made the debts to Goodman explicit. As for Cohen, who began as a Coltrane-influenced tenor saxophonist, she has no wish to play the proxy. Her fingers fly over all those little rings and holes with a quirky and fearless abandon, referencing Goodman more as a lighthouse than a roadmap.

But perhaps the real worth of these homages is how they draw us back to the original article—out of either curiosity or maybe the enduring wonder of his mark. Before Goodman, jazz was seldom reviewed, written about, or appreciated as an “art.” But all that changed with Goodman’s breakthrough in 1935–36. Not only did jazz suddenly become popular. It intersected with first generation of young, motivated, Ivy League-educated jazz critics—Marshall Stearns, Otis Ferguson, George Frazier, Leonard Feather, George Avakian, Wilder Hobson and others. And they had a mission: “Recognition,” Ferguson wrote with unconditional certainty, “of the *art* of jazz music.” Writing about jazz was suddenly laced with references to Bach and Mozart.

There were a lot of arguments along this line in the late ’30s. The jazz activists invoked names like Ellington, Beiderbecke, and Armstrong. But more than anyone, Goodman became the clincher in any dust-up over the “legitimacy” of jazz. Earlier jazz musicians had found their strengths by working around their weaknesses. Goodman was a different breed, a complete virtuoso whose touch, technique and temperament were negotiable any-



where. They had carried him to Carnegie Hall in 1938, hadn’t they, and on his own terms? Yes, but that was only the symbolic flag everybody saluted. Perhaps the real marrow lay in his comprehensive triumphs in

the world of the miniature—the small ensemble.

Jazz began as a chamber music, of course. In 1924 even Duke Ellington had only five men. But it swept the country like a sandstorm a decade later as big-band swing. It wasn’t until 1936 when the Goodman Trio and Quartet and the diminutive lacework of Benny, Teddy Wilson and Lionel Hampton rediscovered the virtues of intimacy in jazz. Pressing their argument for respect, jazz critics called it “chamber jazz.” Fair enough. Ellington, Basie, Artie Shaw and others promptly found small-scale marvels hiding within their ranks. And when Goodman stepped up to a sextet, it wasn’t because bigger was better. He had found a genius with a new sound—Charlie Christian and the electric guitar—and he knew where it belonged and what to do. The 1939-41 Goodman Sextets rank among the wonders of small-group jazz, alongside the Armstrong Hot Sevens and Miles Davis’s *Kind of Blue*.

While all this was going on, though, Goodman was quietly awakening to another kind of chamber sound on the classical

side. This went public two days after his Carnegie Hall debut when he delivered a startlingly poised reading of the first movement of the Mozart Clarinet Quintet with the Coolidge String Quartet on CBS. It was clearly a one-two punch to all those stuffed shirts who smirked at jazz. Three months later he recorded the work with the Budapest String Quartet. The *New York Times* gave the snobs no succor. "Exceptionally fine," it proclaimed, looking past the "stunt" factor. "A beautifully proportioned performance."

Thus having breached the high ground of classical clarinet literature, Goodman immediately took it upon himself to expand it. Early that summer, at the suggestion of a friend, the violinist Josef Szigeti, Goodman commissioned a chamber work from Bela Bartók, then still in Hungary, for a January 1939 recital in Carnegie Hall. "It was less than \$100, I think," Goodman once told me. The result was Bartók's *Rhapsody for Clarinet and Violin*, re-titled simply *Contrasts* by the time Goodman, Bartók and Szigeti recorded it in April 1940. It would be the first of many Goodman commissions to come, and the beginning of the first great trans-generational career in modern American music.

But the jazz world is suspicious of divided loyalties, especially when the renegade is draped with garlands of popularity, wealth and fame that bring kings to heel. Accordingly, the rank of the Goodman name can still kick up an unexpected fuss when humble jazz critics gather, though much of the controversy is essentially generational. But for all the quarreling that still may sputter over the height of his pedestal in the jazz canon, Benny Goodman remains a household name. And how long has it been since we've seen one of those in jazz?

John McDonough is a contributing editor to Down Beat magazine, is heard on NPR's All Things Considered, and received a Deems Taylor ASCAP award in 2006.

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Performances in May & June

MAY 1 New York, NY

PRESENTING ARTISTS **Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center** PROGRAM Crumb, *Music for a Summer Evening* (Makrocosmos III), for two amplified pianos and two percussion ARTISTS Wu Han and Gilbert Kalish, pianos; Daniel Druckman and Ayano Kataoka, percussion www.chambermusicsociety.org

MAY 8 Birmingham, MI

PRESENTING ARTISTS **Detroit Chamber Winds & Strings** PROGRAM Bolcom, *Chalumeau* for solo clarinet www.detroitchamberwinds.org

MAY 10 Chicago, IL

PRESENTER **Ensemble Dal Niente** PROGRAM E. Carter, *Tempo e Tempi*, for soprano voice, oboe/English horn, clarinet, violin and cello; J. Eckhardt, *Tongues*, for soprano voice, flute, clarinet, guitar, viola, percussion; Nancarrow, *Tango?* for piano; Hyla, *Amnesia Breaks*, for woodwind quintet; Sessions, *Duo for Violin and Violoncello* FEATURED ARTISTS Tony Arnold, soprano; Winston Choi, piano <http://dalniente.com>

MAY 14 Chicago, IL

PRESENTING ARTISTS **Ensemble Dal Niente** PROGRAM Zorn, *Forbidden Fruit*, for voice, string quartet, and turntable; Zappa, *G-Spot Tornado* (arr. M. Lewanski) and *The Duke of Prunes* (arr. A. Wulliman); Cage, *The Perilous Night*, for prepared piano, and "But what about the noise of crumpling paper..." for percussion; Lucier, *Nothing Is Real (Strawberry Fields Forever)*, for piano, amplified teapot, tape recorder, and miniature sound system; Sublime, *Under My Voodoo* (arr. M. Lewanski) FEATURED ARTIST Mabel Kwan, piano <http://dalniente.com>

MAY 22 Boston, MA

PRESENTER **Ashmont Hill Chamber Music** PROGRAM R. C. Seeger, *Three Songs* (texts by Carl Sandburg) and *Sonata for Violin and Piano*; Kirchner, *Trio No. 1*; Barber, *Sonata for Cello and Piano*, Op. 6; Wilder, *Piece for Oboe and Improvisatory Percussion*; a selection of songs by Barber, Seeger and Ives. www.ashmonthillchambermusic.org

MAY 24 Atlanta, GA

PRESENTING ARTISTS **Atlanta Chamber Players** PROGRAM Rorem, *Trio for Flute, Cello, Piano* ARTISTS Paula Peace, piano; Christina Smith, flute; Brad Ritchie, cello www.atlantachamberplayers.com

JUNE 5 & 6 Chicago, IL

PRESENTING ARTISTS **Chicago Chamber Musicians** PROGRAM Peter Lieberman, *The Coming of Light* ARTISTS John Michael Moore, baritone; Michael Henoch, oboe; Joseph Genualdi, violin; Jasmine Lin, violin; Rame Solmonow, viola; Clancy Newman, cello www.chicagochambermusic.org

JUNE 9 Charleston, SC

PRESENTER **Chamber Music Charleston** PROGRAM Sandra Nikolajevs' adaptation of M.T. Raven's *Circle Unbroken*, set to the music of William Grant Still; Dvorák, *String Quartet No. 12 in F*; ARTISTS Frances Hsieh, Alan Molina and Megan Molina, violins; Nonoko Okada, violin and viola; Benn Weiss, viola; Timothy O'Malley, cello; Regina Helcher Yost, flute; Mark Gainer, oboe; Charles Messersmith, clarinet; Sandra Nikolajevs, bassoon; Debra Sherrill, horn; Irina Pevzner, piano; Suzanne Atwood, piano www.chambermusiccharleston.org

JUNE 24 & 26

ENSEMBLE **The Western Wind** PROGRAM *The Happy Journey*: Diverse American vocal music, including New England anthems and folk hymns; Shaker songs; Southern spirituals; 19th-century parlor songs; new music, pop, and jazz www.westernwind.org