



SYMPHONIC JAZZ ORCHESTRA LOOKING FORWARD, LOOKING BACK

The phrase 'symphonic jazz' was coined by bandleader Paul Whiteman in 1924 following the wildly successful premiere of "Rhapsody in Blue," a work he commissioned from a then little-known composer named George Gershwin. Fast forward to 2015, and the 67-member **Symphonic Jazz Orchestra** continues this important tradition through 14 years of commissioning new works and performing music that combines the worlds of jazz and classical. Their debut recording, **Looking Forward, Looking Back**, completes their historically focused mission originally conceived by founding Music Director Mitch Glickman and famed keyboardist/composer/producer George Duke.

Founded by Glickman in 2002, the non-profit Symphonic Jazz Orchestra (SJO) was joined two years later by Duke as a co-music director, who helped to shape the orchestra over the next decade. Duke was featured in concert with the SJO throughout his involvement and was commissioned to write a new work for the orchestra featuring bassist Christian McBride. The work was premiered in 2011 and instantly, everyone knew this was a work that needed to be recorded.

The following year, plans were underway to record Duke's commission along with another newly commissioned work from guitarist and composer Lee Ritenour entitled "Symphonic Captain's Journey." The work that launched the symphonic jazz tradition "Rhapsody in Blue," is also included on the recording with piano soloist Bill Cunliffe. In 2013, Duke captured the arc of the works they planned to record by naming the album **Looking Forward, Looking Back**; but as pre-production plans were underway, the recording project took on a new personal meaning after the premature passing of Duke.

"George's musical legacy is incredibly diverse and deep. From his work with Cannonball Adderley to Frank Zappa, from Miles Davis to Dianne Reeves, to his more than 40 solo recordings, he brilliantly fused many genres, including classical music," reflects Glickman. "The gift he left us was his 'Bass Concerto' written for Christian McBride and the SJO, and we knew we had to share this remarkable work with the world."

The recording opens with the work that inspired this project, Duke's commission "Dark Wood: Bass Concerto for McBride." The two-movement concerto features McBride playing on three different basses throughout the course of the piece (upright bass, electric bass and fretless electric). Duke wrote this extremely challenging piece as a showcase of McBride's enormous talents. It includes notes that are not even on the bass (high Fs that McBride has to bend up to) as well as rhythmic passages that would scare off most bass players. On the recording, the rhythm section is rounded out by two incredibly supportive musicians, pianist John Beasley and drummer Marvin 'Smitty' Smith.

The second commissioned work on the recording is Ritenour's "Symphonic Captain's Journey." Based on an older work by Ritenour, this two-movement piece also features the talents of pianist Dave Grusin, drummer Chris Coleman, with McBride returning to play bass. The opening movement "Calm" is an apt description as Ritenour is featured in a long lyrical melody. The second movement "Storm" opens with a piano cadenza by Grusin that connects the two movements as the rhythmic intensity builds throughout the second half of the piece.

Gershwin's landmark "Rhapsody in Blue" concludes **Looking Forward, Looking Back**. The SJO takes a most interesting approach to this groundbreaking work, using the original 1924 orchestration, which only calls for 26 players, including banjo. Over the course of the work, Cunliffe is joined by bassist Robert

Hurst and drummer Peter Erskine as each cadenza section develops the idea of a piano trio. It is an interpretation both historic and progressive. The SJO version reinstates much of the piano improvisation that was lost as “Rhapsody in Blue” became popular and subsequently edited.

“George (Duke) left us with a tremendous legacy,” SJO Glickman commented. “His commission ‘Dark Wood: Bass Concerto for McBride’ was a decade in the making. We spoke early on about a 12-minute piece that would feature Christian first on the acoustic and then electric bass. Well with George’s insanely busy schedule touring and producing, it took a project cancellation to open up significant time in his schedule where he could focus on finishing the piece. And the more he got into the piece, the longer it grew. When it was finally done, a 23-minute tour-de-force showcase was finished that so wonderfully displays Christian’s vast talents as a performer and improviser.”

Co-Producer and engineer on the record Erik Zobler (who was Duke’s engineer for over 30 years) reflected, “While we are all still so saddened by George’s death, we are so gratified to be able to finally share this incredible work with the rest of the world. Most people did not know George’s orchestral side. George composed and orchestrated the entire work himself and it shows so many of the multi-faceted styles he loved – everything from Stravinsky to funk, Spanish to R&B.”

Looking Forward, Looking Back brilliantly captures the finest in new symphonic jazz works, while paying homage to its past. The forces of this special 67-member Symphonic Jazz Orchestra under the baton of Mitch Glickman bring to life works deserving of a wider audience as they continue to serve as the torchbearer of this unique genre of music.

About the Symphonic Jazz Orchestra:

The Symphonic Jazz Orchestra (SJO) is comprised of Los Angeles’s finest studio musicians and jazz soloists. Over the years, such world-class soloists as Dave Grusin, Christian McBride, Raul Midón, Luciana Souza, Lee Ritenour, and Yellowjackets have joined the ensemble. The SJO has commissioned twelve new symphonic jazz works, along with six world premieres and three U.S. premieres.

This summer the SJO launched the George Duke Commissioning Prize, an international competition that will select a composer to write a new work for the SJO in Duke’s honor. The competition deadline is July 17, 2015 and the winner will be announced in conjunction with the SJO’s album release in mid-September.

The SJO also maintains a very active “Music in the Schools” residency program. Having served over 40,000 students across Southern California, the SJO’s music residencies inspire and educate the next generation of music lovers.

**Symphonic Jazz Orchestra • *Looking Forward, Looking Back*
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For more information on **Symphonic Jazz Orchestra**, please visit sjomusic.org

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