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Nigel Wood

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Jon Rebbeck
PHOTO: ALI GHORBANI

Funding drive for #lockthesaxdown album

Composer Jennifer Watson and saxophonist Emma McPhilemy have launched a Kickstarter campaign to record and release an album of Watson's music based on their #lockthesaxdown challenge series. Watson and McPhilemy created #lockthesaxdown during the Covid-19 lockdown, featuring weekly one-minute extracts of Watson's music for classical saxophone, released as free downloads.

The downloads, in different styles and comprising a saxophone part and backing track, are designed to be used as practice tools, with McPhilemy giving demonstrations online. Players were encouraged to 'lock the sax down' and upload videos of their performances to social media with the tag #lockthesaxdown.

Watson said: 'After having seen such a positive response to the series, we decided to push the parameters of our current concept and begin the process of releasing a high-quality artistic album, to include all the current works from the series and more. The feedback on the music, Emma's playing and our collaboration has given us the confidence to realise that this is very much an album of music that is resonating with people, whether they are saxophone players or not.'

The Kickstarter campaign runs until 12 October. To donate, visit www.kickstarter.com and search for 'lockthesaxdown'.

Jenni Watson and Emma McPhilemy (saxophone) performing Arabesque on a theme by Debussy



Ulster Clarinet Choir launches

The Ulster Clarinet Choir, created during lockdown by the clarinetist and educator Anne Harper, has launched with a video performance of 'Simple Gifts', the traditional Shaker song featured in Copland's *Appalachian Spring*.

Harper said that the aim of the ensemble is to 'encourage clarinet players of all ages and abilities to pick up their instruments and make music together for pleasure and progress.' She added: 'The Ulster Clarinet Choir will help to grow a supportive clarinet network throughout Ulster so we can continue to develop our instrument here in the future.'

Participants recorded their parts remotely, with some recording multiple parts. The video has been dedicated to the former head of woodwind at the City of Belfast School of Music, Arthur Acheson, who taught throughout the Troubles.

Future plans include a weekend of clarinet workshops and chamber music, including a real-world performance of 'Simple Gifts'. For more information please contact ulsterclarinetchoir@gmail.com

Online bass clarinet choir announced for 10 October

Bass clarinetist Sarah Watts has joined forces with conductor Sinead Hayes for a three-hour bass clarinet choir session, to be held online on 10 October.

The session will include warm-ups, folk music and an online rehearsal of the final movement of *St Paul's Suite* by Holst (arranged by Watts). All participants will be allocated a part the week before and given until 14 October to video-record their part. The videos will be edited together for release in November.

The event is for all players, from intermediate to advanced level. Students, adults and professionals are all invited to take part. The event will run from 6pm to 9pm UK time. A Zoom link will be provided, and there will be a fee of £50 (or £35 for students in full-time education). Book at www.eventbrite.co.uk/e/international-online-bass-clarinet-choir-tickets-118146454225 or search Eventbrite.

Légère Reeds launches new jazz sax reed

Légère has announced a new reed for alto and tenor jazz saxophone: the American Cut.

According to Légère, 'The American Cut is the culmination of a six-year research project to advance the popular Signature Series technology and create a reed that answers the needs of the world's most demanding jazz artists. The reed's unmistakable character is thanks to an entirely reinvented profile and heart, and a shorter and wider vamp. By drawing material from the edges toward the centre spine, the reed strikes a harmonious balance of responsiveness and control. Ultra-fine edges allow unrestrained vibration rewarding the player with a clear low-register and vibrant altissimo.'

All reeds are accompanied by a reusable reed case, made with a floating-tip design for greater reed protection. The package, reed and case are all 100% recyclable.



PHOTO: SHERVIN LAINEZ

It's not the instrument
– the instrument is just
the tool, and the music
comes from within us

Of her initial visit, Cohen recalls the atmosphere of a carefree time. 'Rio was really prosperous and the country was doing well. There were a lot of places to hear and play music. You could go to a bar, sit around a table and just play all night. Basically, all of these elements of Brazil – the people, the culture, the music, the clarinet, the *rhoda*. It's so many things that made me fall in love with choro.'

Cohen took her experiences of Rio back to New York. 'Maybe I just caught Rio in a really great time. I know the world 20 years ago seemed a little bit more optimistic than it does today. I came back to New York from this trip and said to Pedro, we have to do this choro! It needs to be this feeling of community that I never felt before. We need to create this. I want people to know.'

'We played every week in a French bistro in the East Village called Joules. Of the jazz musicians, I can count on one hand the people that had the guts to come and sit in with us, because when you are a jazz musician you want to hear the chord changes and play a solo. But to come and play choro and *not* play a solo, and instead just play the melody – there's no point. Then, if you are a classical musician, you're too afraid because there is something to lose. Only a few brave people actually came in and played with us, but the choro ensemble became a real weekly gathering of people. We became a band, I became a clarinet player and in 2004 we played at Carnegie Hall with the Rio Pops. That was a significant moment for choro. Now it's much more common, and other people are doing it.'

Much of Cohen's own feelings and attitudes towards choro are echoed in the 2005 film called *Brasileirinho*. Cohen recommends watching it: 'Marcello Gonçalves was the musical director. It captures Rio and the choro form.' The film has a relaxed documentary feel, following instrumentalists and singers in the lead-up to a concert on National Day of Choro. This is on 23 April, the birthday of the composer Pixinguinha, who was one of the leading exponents of Brazilian music. The musicians interviewed express their feelings about their playing, training and experiences, and we hear music played in all settings – in concert, at a *rhoda* or just on the bus! The joy of being involved in the culture shines through all of those featured.

PHOTO: GABRIELE LUGLI



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Stanley Drucker

I'm doing some research at the moment on certain well-known players' 'dynasties' – a fascinating exercise made popular by the wonderful Pamela Weston. Among other players, my list includes the outstanding American clarinetist Stanley Drucker. I managed to trace his musical lineage back to Heinrich Baermann, and still further to Baermann's teacher, Franz Tausch, the father of German clarinet playing. As a lad myself, I remember listening with awe to Stanley Drucker's brilliant recording of the Nielsen Concerto. I began to think how splendid it would be to share my findings with the great man and wondered if I could possibly find him.

Putting on my detective hat (I do sometimes, and it has resulted in many fascinating experiences) I found someone who I thought might know Stanley. To my huge delight, the next morning an email dropped into my inbox from Stanley himself. We organised a phone call and then had a couple of long, mesmerising conversations.

Stanley played in the New York Philharmonic for a truly remarkable 61 years, 49 of them as principal. Like so many musicians, taking up an instrument in the first place was his parents' idea. And as a beginner, Stanley's attitude was not unlike that of many other beginners...

'My first teacher was Arthur Small. He would come to our apartment; it was slow going for me because at that age one doesn't want to practise the way one really ought!'

As in so many life stories, serendipity then played its part. Arthur went off on a band tour and never returned. The young Stanley, for all his lack of practice, was still doing pretty well, and friends recommended he go and have lessons with the distinguished teacher Leon Russianoff, himself a pupil of Simeon Bellison, who was then principal clarinetist of the New York Philharmonic. Things continued to go well:

'I was 11, and already after some time with Leon, the die was cast and I knew I was going to continue with it.'

Russianoff taught at the Julliard and wrote an influential clarinet method. I asked Stanley what he could remember from those early and clearly formative years:

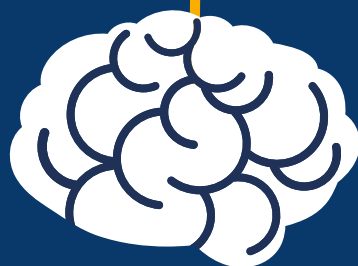
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Shaking it up

Musician and teacher *Guy Passey* argues that making your practice more challenging can actually make learning more permanent – a concept known as ‘desirable difficulty’. He explains the idea here and offers a selection of ways to try it out



All musicians would like to know how to make practice more efficient. Although common sense gets us some of the way, scientists in the field of cognitive psychology have been making fascinating progress in uncovering techniques that can help us learn faster and more efficiently, transforming our understanding of how our memories work.

The most interesting recent developments in this field come from the work of Elizabeth and Robert Bjork at the University of California, Los Angeles, who have pioneered the concept of ‘desirable difficulties’ – the idea that a certain amount of mental struggle when learning can actually cause stronger memories to form, aiding long-term retention of knowledge and skills. This concept has been thoroughly tested experimentally, leading to some bizarre findings, such as readers demonstrating better retention of written information when it was presented in a *less* clear font. Of course, not every difficulty is desirable – practising on a wrecked reed or with next door’s pneumatic drill ringing in your ears is unlikely to help you retain what you’re learning. The key is to focus the difficulty in the right

places, giving your brain a workout so that when you come back the next day, the gains you’ve made won’t have fallen away.

The most interesting thing about the ‘desirable difficulties’ concept is that it is highly counterintuitive. Humans naturally look for the path of least resistance and enjoy the sensations of fluency and familiarity when learning. We are drawn to approaches such as the block repetition of phrases, which quickly and pleasingly seem to increase our fluency, appearing to make us ‘better’ almost instantly. However, the research says that good learning should be a struggle, and by making our tasks too easy – eg repeating the same bit five times in a row – we are making it *less* likely to be correctly recalled when we need it.

The four strategies set out below will not always make your practice feel easier – in fact, they are designed not to. But they will make your practice more interesting, requiring focus and creativity rather than adherence to a set schedule of robotic repetition. Most importantly, they will make your practice incredibly impactful, allowing you to feel concrete, long-term gains from each session, and giving you the motivation of knowing that every minute of work you do is contributing to making you a better player. ➡

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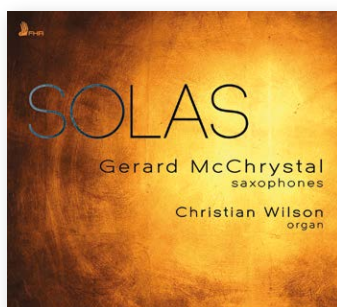
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CD

CD REVIEWS

Saxophone



SOLAS

Gerard McChrystal (sopranino, soprano and alto saxophones)
Christian Wilson (organ)
First Hand Records

An overlooked casualty of the streaming era is the CD booklet, or liner notes. Some people like to let music speak for itself, but I've always felt a little context and the odd factual nugget can help enhance the listening experience.

Take this disc, a collection of works for saxophone and organ ranging from baroque arrangements to original contemporary works. In the liner notes, saxophonist Gerard McChrystal explains that *Solas* (Gaelic for light) is the result of a homemade pesto he made for the late clarinetist Alan Hacker. McChrystal took a few clarinet lessons with Hacker at the Royal Northern College of Music in the 1980s and met him again when they were both teaching at a summer school in 2010. Hacker told McChrystal about a sopranino saxophone he wanted him to try, but only in exchange for some of the saxophonist's beloved homemade pesto. A few weeks later, the deal was done. 'No one else has made it sound like that, so you should have it,' Hacker said.

Ten years later, McChrystal's new disc features three arrangements of baroque works for the sopranino, plus a multi-tracked arrangement of Handel's aria *Eternal Source of light Divine* for soprano and sopranino saxophones, the latter assuming the role of obbligato trumpet.

Rarely seen outside sax choirs, the sopranino has found a fine torchbearer in Derry-born McChrystal. There is no better case in point than the opening two notes of the disc: a simple upbeat to a high note that sings so exquisitely – with no sense of the strain or 'bite' you often hear with higher-pitched instruments – that it immediately erases any thought of the sopranino as a mere novelty instrument.

Eight out of ten works on this disc have been arranged by McChrystal and his duo partner on the CD, the concert organist Christian Wilson, while an arrangement of Barbara Thompson's 'Green' – the fourth movement of her saxophone quartet *Darkness into Light* – for soprano sax and organ comes from the composer herself. The original's solo melodic lines and soft, gently pulsating blanket of sound underneath are perfectly suited to the organ's softer registers.

The balance between saxophone and organ is outstanding throughout and must have been difficult to achieve in the church acoustic with an instrument emitting sound from varying-sized pipes. Recorded at the Chapel Royal at The Tower of London, a photo of the recording session in the CD booklet shows both players on ground level, with McChrystal stood a few feet behind Wilson, presumably in sight line of the organ's rear-view mirror.

As a fan of bold, all-stops-out organ playing, I was delighted by the inclusion of James Whitbourn's *A Brief Story of Peter Abelard*. Much of the rest of the disc features – as is stylistically appropriate – softer organ registers, so it was great to hear both players have a chance to let rip on this eight-minute exploration on the life of the medieval French philosopher, poet and musician. Inspired by the piece, I've since discovered Whitbourn's fantastic *Requiem Cantorum* for soprano sax, choir and organ; an excellent recording featuring saxophonist Jeremy Powell and Westminster Williamson Voices is available on Naxos.

Underpinning all these talking points, crammed into a running time of 53 minutes, is McChrystal's impeccable technical control and intonation on all three saxophones, particularly the volatile sopranino.

There are many aspects to this disc: an exploration into the sound world of sax and organ, validation of the saxophone's ability to interpret baroque music, an essay into the versatility of the sopranino, or a window to new repertoire and further listening. Whichever way you look at it, this is a valuable contribution to the recorded saxophone catalogue. Amazing what can come from a jar of pesto!

Michael Pearce