John Stetch

The Juno-nominated jazz pianist talks about his path-breaking career—and his decision to go back to school
Jazz visionary John Stetch goes back to school

Over the past three decades, John Stetch has made a name for himself as one of Canada’s most innovative jazz pianists and composers. He has performed with contemporary greats such as Mark Turner and Chris Cheek and has recorded sixteen albums, including his most recent release, *Ballads*. Yet in the middle of a successful career that has earned him critical acclaim and half a dozen Juno Award nominations, he made the extraordinary decision to come to UBC to pursue an MMus in Composition.

“I wanted to get a Master’s because the nature of work and teaching [in music] has changed in many places, and often requires more than just a Bachelor’s degree. I knew I was going to be living in Vancouver, and I’d heard of UBC and its beautiful campus. There wasn’t really a jazz program around, so I thought a Composition Master’s would be a great fit, since I’ve been starting to write some classical chamber music, not just jazz,” he says.

Stetch is no stranger to change. Ambitious and experimental, he has always forged his own path, inventing new techniques and musical styles—for instance, fusing classical and jazz music in his compositions. Reinterpreting well-known classical works by Mozart, Bach and Chopin through the language of jazz, he is fearless in altering the chords and rhythms, adding new textures with techniques like plucking the inside of the piano to create exciting new renditions, while still keeping the originals recognizable.

“I have this instinct to want to play a little differently every day,” he says. “There are so many interesting possibilities. What if you double up the octaves? What if you play the scale down instead of up? Or change the ending completely?”

Stetch was inspired to play classical music, especially after listening to Glenn Gould playing Bach. Gould’s daring, percussive style pointed to interesting possibilities within the classical canon. But Stetch, a jazz musician, wasn’t sure how to approach the material at first.

“It was too strange to play Chopin in a jazz club,” he says. “So I ended up rearranging the classical pieces, making them my own style, and treating them as homages to the original composers. Now I can perform them in both jazz and classical contexts.”

Stetch has reworked pieces such as Mozart’s *Sonata No. 13 in B-Flat*, Chopin’s *A-Flat Major Polonaise* and Bach’s *Italian Concerto*, which he recently performed in a Wednesday Noon Hours concert. The Mozart Sonata is a bluegrass arrangement, inspired by a banjo concert he attended. The Chopin and Bach arrangements are jazz-influenced—in Chopin, he plays with odd rhythms to vary and contrast with the original; in Bach, he mixes time signatures to elongate or shorten the theme.

“Mozart and bluegrass were a perfect match. Bluegrass usually has a lot of fast notes, an obvious pulse, and the kind of tonic-dominant-subdominant chord progression that Mozart’s pieces also have,” he says.

For Stetch, the interaction between jazz and classical is a two-way street. While bringing jazz improvisation techniques to classical pieces, he also admires classical music for its emphasis on organization, and tries to bring that into his jazz playing.

Read the whole story at music.ubc.ca/blog.
Improvising the music of glaciers

Director of Orchestras Dr. Jonathan Girard and artist Deborah Carruthers discuss slippages, an exciting new collaboration that tackles climate change from an unusual angle.

How do you create the music of a glacier?

Artist Deborah Carruthers was grappling with this question when she met Dr. Jonathan Girard, the School of Music’s Director of Orchestras, at a talk last year at the Peter Wall Institute for Advanced Study. Carruthers was just emerging from months of intensive research into glaciers, on everything from their topography and ecology to their significance in different cultures and the threat they face from climate change.

In her talk she outlined an idea for a ‘graphic’ score—a sequence of images inspired by these enigmatic and threatened landscapes—that musicians could then interpret and perform.

The project seemed a little crazy, even to her. “I am not a musician, so the score was going to have no actual musical notation,” Carruthers says. “But when I explained all of this to Jonathan, he said—”

“I said, Tell me more!” Girard interjects, laughing. A crazy idea, maybe, but he was struck by Carruthers’s sense of urgency. “So we started talking, and we quickly realized that together we could do something that no one had done before: create an orchestral work about climate change that would be totally improvised from abstract visual art.”

At the time, Carruthers was the Wall Institute’s inaugural artist-in-residence; together she and Girard decided that the Institute was an ideal place to incubate the collaboration. Girard quickly applied for, and received, a Wall Scholar Research Award, which “provides support for UBC faculty to spend one year in residence at the Peter Wall Institute, in a collaborative, interdisciplinary environment.”

Working with a palette of yellows, blues and greys similar to the hues she observed during her fieldwork in the Columbia Icefields, Carruthers painted the scores on special paper perforated at random with small holes. The idea was that, when stacked, they would mimic the layers of a glacier.

“Glaciers form slowly over thousands of years, layer by layer, from bottom to top. There are all these miniature ecologies that make each one unique, holes within the ice and on the surface. So as a glacier changes and holes form between the layers, the past is always revealing itself,” she says.

This notion of the past influencing the present would become one of the guiding principles behind the work.

But how do you go about translating abstract images into music? With their subtle colours and mixture of slashing lines and dribbly curls—not to mention the holes in the paper—the scores presented an unusual challenge.

Girard and Carruthers struck upon an ingenious solution. First, they created a sort of geography of the orchestra by mapping the seating arrangement onto the images themselves: “We created a transparent overlay of the seating chart and went page by page, figuring out which instruments would take responsibility for which parts of the images,” Girard explains.

“The fascinating thing was how, through this lens, the images suddenly made musical sense. The musicians started to look at the depth and the saturation of the colours and began translating those into musical intensity, texture, and so on. They used the different types of brushstrokes as interpretive cues, too.”

In August, composer Michael Park (DMA’15) staged a wildly creative concert fundraiser for the Holy Trinity Anglican Church in Vancouver. With the help of organ builder David Quinton, he combined a bouncy castle with organ parts to create a one-of-a-kind instrument that makes music as kids jump inside it.

Conductor Al Cannon (DMA’12) recently accepted the position of Assistant Conductor with the Kitchener-Waterloo Symphony Orchestra.

Soprano Emily Cheung (BMus’06) was recently featured in television ads for Volvo’s 2019 SUV campaign.

This November, Carter Johnson (BMus’18) won the grand prize in the 2018 Orchestre Symphonique de Montreal (OSM) Manulife Piano Competition, with his outstanding performance of Prokofiev’s Concerto No. 3 in C major, Op. 26.

Catch up on all the latest alumni news on the High Notes blog.
Suzanne Windsor-Liscombe is passionate about music and education. She is also deaf. Having suddenly lost her hearing in 2010, she can no longer hear music or sing in tune, or do many of the things she used to enjoy as a skilled pianist and singer. But in the aftermath of this life-changing event, she has found her unique calling as an educator-composer and librettist, working around her hearing loss to write children's operas for elementary students in B.C.’s Lower Mainland.

As Head Teacher at Confederation Park Elementary in the Burnaby School District, she and a few colleagues founded an arts-integrated program which saved the school from being shut down—the student body had dropped to only 90 students when they first took over in 2006. She began to compose children's operas for the curriculum in 2011.

"While there’s some recitative in my works”—that is, dialogue which is sung to move the story along—"it’s too challenging and unreasonable to expect untrained elementary students to take on recitative fully. So the pieces I compose have considerably more spoken dialogue than an opera.”

Her first project was based on a children’s book: Mean Jean the Recess Queen, about bullying on the playground. Working in close collaboration with Bonnie Ishii, Confederation Park’s music and dance educator, she adapted the story for grade four and five students to perform.

"Writing the music and re-crafting the story into song lyrics was just a lot of fun—and very gratifying," she says. "It worked really well for the kids, so I wanted to keep writing more.”

"I love playing with and for others and seeing the joy it brings to everyone involved," says BMus student Zeta Gesme. A third-year double major in Cello Performance and Economics (Honours), Zeta is one of hundreds of students who have discovered joy at the new grand piano in the MAA at the Irving K. Barber Learning Centre (IKBLC). It’s all dressed up in black and white, like a butler waiting. At your service. Zeta uses the piano to practice for her piano exams.

Five new pianos in locations across campus are waiting to be played

By Joel Bentley

A student sits at the new grand piano in the Music, Art and Architecture Library (MAA). She has headphones on, concealing the sound, so all you hear is the tapping of keys, rhythmic patterns. It feels like a pre-concert ritual—the quiet excitement of something about to be born. Behind the piano there are rows upon rows of sheet music, the largest collection of scores in Western Canada, waiting to be played. The library is muted and subdued, but the piano calls out to music lovers—beckoning them into the world of sound.

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It’s one of five new pianos that Tom Lee Music provided to UBC this year. The pianos can be found at the Walter C. Koerner Library, David Lam Management Research Library, Woodward Library, and the Nobel Biocare Oral Health Centre—the dental clinic.

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