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Jazz and classical: the twain shall meet

What happened when one of jazz's top stars – Tim Garland – was asked to write a concerto for the London Symphony Orchestra?

Organised chaos

Nick Shave

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François-Xavier Roth (left), Tim Garland and Neil Percy. Photograph: Sarah Lee for the Guardian

It's not long in conversation with saxophonist and composer Tim Garland before it seems necessary to place quotation marks around the words "jazz" and "classical", particularly when discussing his latest work, the Double Concerto for Percussion and Saxophone. Premiered by the London Symphony Orchestra and its principal percussionist Neil Percy in London next week, Garland's piece features passages in which the solo soprano sax – also performed by Garland – breaks away from the written score and launches into free flights of improvisation. So is this jazz? "If you treat jazz as a genre, then you come against these academic arguments about what jazz is and what it isn't," he says. "When Charlie Parker came along, people were saying that's not real jazz, and the same happened when Dizzy Gillespie started to use Latin American music

within bebop."

Tim Garland

World premiere of Concerto for Percussion, Saxophone and Orchestra

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And so to the nitty-gritty of definitions: in Garland parlance, "classical" refers to "music from the 18th-century period, or pretty much anything written with a violin in it", while "jazz" is more about "an approach". "Jazz is like language, really," he says. "I mean, if you think about it, even now as we're talking, there's a certain element of improvisation in this. As you begin your next sentence, you don't actually know what the last word of that sentence is going to be until you finally get there ... stop."

For the sake of academic argument, then, Garland's concerto belongs to the classical tradition. Classical, because it is scored in conventional three-movement form: its lively opening movement draws from the first and second symphonies of Henri Dutilleux – himself a huge fan of jazz – followed by a slow middle movement and an uplifting finale (called "click track") that pulses with a steady beat. Classical, too, because in it Garland connects with that long-lost tradition of composer-performers, such as Mozart and Beethoven, who would improvise when performing their own works. "Imagine being in the string section while Mozart did his cadenza," he says. "You'd probably be sitting there saying, 'Ooh, what is he going to do tonight? – last night's one was killing'. You can imagine loads of humour in a person like that – his sort of attitude, there's nothing po-faced about it."

It's with a sense of humour that Garland, too, has looked for ways to free up his approach to classical repertoire over the years. He started learning the clarinet and piano aged six, initially improvising around the Czerny studies and rearranging Debussy's *Études* before emulating the classical-meets-improvised-jazz grooves of Keith Jarrett and Jan Garbarek. After switching to saxophone at the Guildhall School of Music and Drama, it was with that other great "crossover" pianist, Chick Corea, that he would launch his international playing career, touring with his Origin sextet in the late 1990s. "The first opportunity we had to rehearse together was in a hotel room just before our first gig in north Germany," recalls Garland. "There wasn't a piano for Chick to play, so he just tapped out the rhythms with a teacup and spoon." Garland has since gone on to forge new and personal sounds from a diverse range of idioms with his own ensembles,

exploring Balinese, Spanish and Brazilian music with his Lighthouse Project and classical elements in his Storms/Nocturnes Trio. "Jazz is about inclusivity, eclecticism and [being] welcoming," he says.

Historically, it's this openness among jazz musicians to experiment with new approaches that has fuelled such a lively exchange of ideas between jazz and classical repertoire: John Philip Sousa's marching bands influenced New Orleans jazz, Duke Ellington learned from the orchestrations of Ravel (himself influenced by George Gershwin) and countless great jazz artists have honed their techniques in the classical conservatoire – Miles Davis at Juilliard, Quincy Jones with Messiaen and Nadia Boulanger, and so the list goes on. In the late 50s, composer and teacher Gunther Schuller noted this process of cross-fertilisation between genres: after playing horn alongside Davis and conducting Ellington, he identified a "third stream" – "a new genre, halfway between jazz and classical music" – where jazz became avant garde. Garland says: "Most jazz musicians that have reached a very high level on their instrument ... have had classical input at some point."

But jazz has also been relatively slow to find acceptance on the UK's classical music circuit: it wasn't until 1986 (in Bath) that jazz musicians were for the first time invited to perform at a classical music festival; things were hardly better in America. "Jazz was played in the bigger concert halls like Carnegie, but of course there has been a race issue," says Garland. "Add to that the history of drugs and the poverty and you've got a whole seething mass of stuff just waiting to ostracise jazz musicians from the concert hall." But what distinguishes the jazz and classical sensibilities now, he believes, has to do with approach – and in particular, an emphasis in jazz on the spontaneous. "Traditionally, jazz has also been very comfortable with the use of the words 'art' and 'entertainment' in a way in which perhaps some areas of contemporary music are not," he says.

Ideally, those who watch Garland perform this piece at the Barbican next week will be unaware of those passages that he's making up and those he's written down: aided by French conductor François-Xavier Roth, the piece should sound spontaneous throughout. It's a familiar role for Garland, who has performed as improvising soloist in all but one of his previous three concertos (written for sax; cello and sax; and piano, with Lighthouse Project member, Gwilym Simcock, the soloist). But much of the success of the Percussion Concerto will also pivot upon Garland's rapport with Percy, for whom the piece has been specifically tailored: in addition to a bespoke drum kit, Percy plays marimba and hang drum – a metal instrument, shaped like a flying saucer, that has been tuned to a south-east Asian scale for the Concerto. Everything in the piece grows out of Percy's solo line – his rhythmic pitches are mirrored by Garland's saxophone, and

shared out between the different sections of the orchestra. "Symbolically, we represent the two worlds: he's the classical side of the equation and I'm the jazz," says Garland.

When asked about this equation, Roth later likens Garland's relationship with Percy more to that of Brahms and his violinist Joseph Joachim: "He's a composer who knows very well the performer," he says. Perhaps emphasising the concerto's classical heritage, too, Roth has programmed the works alongside popular jazzy pieces such as Gershwin's Rhapsody in Blue and Aaron Copland's Billy the Kid, but there are plenty of pieces it could happily sit with: Leonard Bernstein's Prelude, Fugue and Riffs, or Darius Milhaud's Creation du Monde – soupçons from Erik Satie and his modernist followers, or Mark-Anthony Turnage perhaps. "In a way, it's about bringing elements of jazz to a different world," explains Roth. "And maybe that's the point: to bring the intimacy of this music that can appear in small places to a big audience and a large venue like the Barbican, we have to listen to each other all of the time."

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