

Jazz and Strings Ensemble to Perform 'Ella & Gershwin' In Hartford Show Friday

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In the most lavish project of her nearly six-decade career, **vocalist Ella Fitzgerald** collaborated with celebrated conductor Nelson Riddle and his king-size orchestra in 1959 to produce the blockbuster release "Ella Fitzgerald Sings the George and **Ira Gershwin** Songbook."

The massively ambitious studio project for Verve Records featured 53 tracks artfully packaged in a five-LP set, which won the jazz superstar a Grammy Award in 1960 for best female vocal performance.

Thanks to the **HSO** and its percussionist Gene Bozzi, the Jazz and Strings ensemble will celebrate Ella's landmark album in an "Ella & Gershwin" concert Friday at 7:30 p.m. at Hartford's Immanuel Congregational Church.

Cast as Ella will be Shawnn Monteiro, one of New England's finest jazz vocalists. A globe-trotting singer and noted educator who teaches at the **Hartt School** at the **University of Hartford**, Monteiro has performed around the world, from Rome and Moscow to Barcelona and Dubai.

She and the HSO ensemble will tap into such Gershwin classics as "The Man I Love," "I Got Rhythm," "I've Got a Crush on You" and "S'Wonderful" in a repertoire culled from the original release, which is widely regarded as the finest album in Ella's legendary Songbook Series. The jazz diva recorded eight now-classic songbook tributes to other songwriters, from **Cole Porter** in 1956 to Johnny Mercer in 1964

Monteiro, a savvy, charismatic singer, will be backed by the ensemble of five HSO string players, a four-person brass and woodwind section and a jazz trio in the rhythm section.

Walter Gwardyak, one of the region's top arrangers, adapted the original Riddle orchestrations for the HSO ensemble, capturing the essence of the lush big-band bite in those timeless charts.

Much like Ella, Monteiro prefers to sing in the relaxed intimacy of her trio. Nonetheless, she is "absolutely delighted" to sing the Gershwin classics amid

such rich orchestral accompaniment.

"I've got all these Gershwin verses and choruses running around madly in my head, even when I'm driving in my car," Monteiro says by phone from her home in Cranston, R.I. "I just finished a 10-day gig in Asbury Park [N.J.], where I sang 12 standards every night in a tribute to Nelson Riddle in which none of the Gershwin songs we performed were the same as the ones for the Hartford date."

Gershwin standards, she says, are not only exquisite but also complex. This intricacy, she says, includes not only **George Gershwin's** beautiful music but also the brilliant, clever lyrics of his brother, Ira.

Also, Monteiro says, you've got to adjust to the demands of collaborating with a string- and horn-based ensemble.

"You're up front and on your own at the mike, with no arrangements in front of you," she explains. "You've got to be on your toes so that you come in and out at precisely the right brain coordination with the string and horn passages."

The most s'wonderful moments, she says, occur when everything clicks and you're swinging in sync with Gwardyak's finely crafted charts.

A key, yet relatively unsung, element is Gwardyak's deft adaptation of Riddle's revered charts.

Among his many tasks, he had to transpose the keys used on the original songs because Ella was a soprano and Monteiro is a contralto, with a lower range.

Monteiro is a big fan of Gwardyak's Riddle-solving skills, which created vibrant arrangements for a 12-piece ensemble without diminishing the brilliance and resonance of the original orchestral charts.

"It's kind of scary, in fact, just how wonderful the HSO ensemble sound is," Monteiro says. "But once you get in front of those strings, you become Ella."

Recalling an earlier occasion when she sang a Gershwin tune with HSO strings soaring behind her, Monteiro said, "I thought I was floating on a cloud. It was surreal — absolutely surreal — to have all that power, all that musicianship behind me, all that beautiful music, all those gorgeous strings and horns. It's unbelievable!"

Ella — known as the First Lady of Song, and arguably the most renowned jazz singer ever — won 13 Grammys, Monteiro notes. Ella recorded more than 200 albums that sold over 40 million; she sang with superstars ranging from **Louis Armstrong** to **Frank Sinatra** and developed scatting (wordless vocal improvisation) "to its highest art form," Monteiro says.

Because of Ella's constant touring — a habit she couldn't quit even in her later years, when nearly blind and desperately ill with diabetes and circulatory problems — she seemed to have played virtually everywhere, including more than two dozen appearances at **Carnegie Hall**, before her death in 1996 at 79.

All of these dramatic triumphs, Monteiro says, were earned by a soft-spoken, painfully shy, extremely sweet, gentle woman who agonized over her large physical appearance and suffered from virtually perpetual stage fright.

Ella's inner spunk and transcendent musical gifts, admired by jazz vocalists and **opera singers** alike, won out, Monteiro says.

Other HSO Ventures

Besides the Gershwin concert, the HSO's classical and jazz fusion project — the brainchild of percussionist Bozzi — has presented two earlier, well-received concerts featuring adaptations of **Charlie Parker's** album "Charlie Parker with Strings" and **Stan Getz's** "Focus" with strings.

In its biggest public venue ever, the HSO Jazz and Strings will present a free encore performance of its Getz project July 18 at the Greater Hartford Festival Jazz at Hartford's **Bushnell Park**. Joel Frahm, an acclaimed **New York** tenor saxophonist who grew up in **West Hartford**, will handle the demanding Getz role.

Kristen Phillips, the HSO's executive director, believes that the series, with its lustrous strings paired with classic jazz retrospectives, might well draw new faces to the symphony's classical offerings.

"Even if just a fraction of the audience decides to test us out, that's a victory in our minds. What we're seeing now — particularly now that our 'Masterwork Series' is in the Belding Theater — is that if we can get people in the door, more than likely they're going to come back. It's getting them in the door that first time that's the hardest," she says.

The ensemble's string section, all HSO members, consists of Leonid Sigal, Jaroslaw Lis and Millie Pickos, violin; Michael Wheeler, viola; and Jeffrey Kreiger, cello; horn section: John Mastroianni, alto saxophone/flute, and Bob DePalma, tenor saxophone/flute; Eric Berlin, trumpet; **George Sanders**, HSO assistant principal trombonist; rhythm section: Gene Bozzi, HSO timpanist, drums; Edward "Rick" Rozie, HSO principal bassist, double bass; and Walter Gwardyak, pianist/arranger.