

Bozzi Revamps Jazz & Strings, Featuring Jimmy Greene At Infinity



Saxophonist Jimmy Greene joins Jazz and Strings at Hartford's Infinity Hall on Nov. 29. (Jimmy Katz)

A revamped Jazz & Strings: 'It's Jimmy Greene's music, and we're all excited about doing it,' says Gene Bozzi

Gene Bozzi, drummer and principal timpanist with the Hartford Symphony Orchestra, knows how much jazz musicians love to play with strings.

"It's a kick for them," Bozzi says, "especially on their own tunes."

Listeners love it, too. But it's been awhile — two years, actually — since Hartford audiences have been able to soak up that sound. That changes on Sunday, Nov. 29, at 7:30 p.m., when Bozzi's Jazz and Strings heads to Hartford's Infinity Hall, with special guest Jimmy Greene on saxophone.

The revamped Jazz and Strings series was once affiliated with the HSO. In 2008, when the HSO was looking for new ideas, Bozzi pitched the idea of pairing jazz soloists with a rhythm section and small string ensemble, to re-create the sound of classic albums.

Bozzi hired Walter Gwardyak, pianist and musical director for the New England Jazz Orchestra, to handle the charts, and recruited five HSO string players — three violinists, a violist and a cellist — along with HSO bassist Rick Rozie.



Jazz and Strings drummer Gene Bozzi brings his ensemble to Hartford's Infinity Hall on Nov. 29. (Johnathon Henninger / Courant file photo)

The first concert took place in March 2009 at the Immanuel Church in Hartford and featured saxophonist Kris Allen leading a tribute to the album "[Charlie Parker and Strings](#)."

"[Allen] nailed it," Bozzi says. "He rode that line between sounding like Charlie Parker and sounding like Kris Allen. ... People were coming up to me with Charlie Parker albums that were autographed: 'I saw this guy, and I bought this record.' It was amazing."

In subsequent concerts, Jazz and Strings re-created classic albums by Art Pepper, Wes Montgomery, John Coltrane and Johnny Hartman, Billie Holiday, Clifford Brown, Stan Getz and others. Soloists have included Joel Frahm, Sue Terry, Wayne Escoffery,

Giacomo Gates, Tina Fabrique, Mike Stern, Brian Lynch, Shawnn Monteiro, Rosena Hill-Jackson, Claudio Roditi and Erica von Kleist.

From the beginning, Bozzi and Gwardyak wanted to challenge the string players. For a tribute to Coltrane and Hartman (featuring Escoffery and Gates), for example, Gwardyak wrote out a challenging chorus of Coltrane's "Giant Steps" solo for the string section.

"I told Walter, 'Give the strings something to play,'" Bozzi says. "It's great, because [the string players] all want that. They don't want to all play whole notes in the background. That's what they do at Pops concerts. We're trying to make a difference. These are strings in a jazz setting. ... We want them to be an integral part of the music, rather than being an afterthought."

Bozzi has noticed a special bond that forms between guest artists and the string section — which swelled to twice its original size during the run of the series but is now back to five players.

One night, in a program devoted to Stan Getz, saxophonist Joel Frahm performed a ballad, accompanied only by the piano. "The entire string section was just staring at him in disbelief," Bozzi says. "They couldn't believe that sound was coming out of a saxophone, the beautiful tone, the nuance, the phrasing. I don't think they'd ever heard anything like that live."

"Beautiful Life," the Hartford-born Greene's transcendent 2014 album, celebrates his daughter, Ana Grace, who lost her life at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown on Dec. 14, 2012. In addition to guest spots by Pat Metheny, Javier Colon, Kurt Elling, Kenny Barron, Christian McBride, Cyrus Chestnut and others, the recording also features a 13-piece HSO string ensemble on the gorgeous "Prayer," with vocals by Latanya Farrell.

"It's Jimmy Greene's music, and we're all excited about doing it," Bozzi says. "It's a smaller ensemble, but we're back."

The upcoming Infinity Hall concert almost didn't happen; following a change in administration, the HSO lost interest in renewing the Jazz and Strings program for 2014, even though Bozzi already had four concerts in the works.

"Everyone who played in the series loved doing it," Bozzi says. "I loved doing it. The guest artists had fun playing with strings. So I said, 'I'll keep it going and book it myself.'"

Infinity Hall was still under construction, but owner Dan Hincks, Bozzi says, attended the Billie Holiday program, and came away impressed. "He said, 'I want you [at Infinity Hall]," Bozzi says.

In the future, Bozzi would like to do more shows at Infinity.

"Dan is still excited about having us," Bozzi says. "But the whole jazz thing right now, at venues like that, is a little iffy. ... That's just the way Hartford is. I've seen this cycle happen in my jazz lifetime, many times: for a while, everybody has jazz. All of a sudden, a month later, it's all blues. It's a cycle, I guess, and I'm just hoping it turns back around."

But the club scene isn't where Bozzi thinks Jazz and Strings should live.

"We need to be in festivals because of the size of the thing," Bozzi says. "It's a little more financially involved. You've got a guest artist and 14 players. We need venues that are more concert-like and have better funding."

JAZZ & STRINGS WITH SPECIAL GUEST JIMMY GREENE *takes place Sunday, Nov. 29, at 7:30 p.m. at Infinity Hall in Hartford. Tickets are \$29 to \$44. Information: infinityhall.com.*