

# British and German youth orchestras celebrate 100 years of jazz

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Over the past few weeks, a series of concerts has been performed in Germany and the UK by the National Youth Jazz Orchestra of the UK (NYJO), under their Music Director Mark Armstrong, and the Youth Jazz Orchestra of Germany (BuJazzO), under Jiggs Whigham.

These talented young musicians came together to celebrate “Freedom and Friendship: A Century of Jazz”. The published programme explained, “The project celebrates 100 years since jazz started with the publication of [W.C. Handy’s] *St Louis Blues* in 1914 and marks the freedom and friendship between our two nations with this partnership between Europe’s two leading youth big bands”.

The project began at the Music Academy in Heek, in North Rhine-Westphalia, Germany, near the border with the Netherlands, in September. After four days of rehearsal, the combined orchestra gave three concerts, in Heek, Cologne and Hamburg, plus a “pop-up concert” in the tube station in Cologne with a 20-piece band. The two UK concerts took place at the Leeds College of Music (LCM) on November 17 and at the Purcell Rooms in London on November 19, as part of the recent London Jazz Festival, plus a jazz workshop at London’s Royal College of Music.

BuJazzO is state-funded and is made up of young musicians from 17 to 24 years of age. Players are selected by audition from the jazz orchestras in each of Germany’s sixteen states. NYJO has no lower age limit and goes up to the age of 25, selecting players from open auditions, but usually with recommendations from the conservatoires in the UK.

This international collaboration is entirely new. It began when the organisers of the two bands met at a jazz conference in Bremen in April 2013. Nigel Tully, Executive Chair of NYJO, told the WSWs how it all

started:

“When we were first introduced in Bremen, it felt really exciting. Both bands are made up of musicians who are the very best of their age group in the country. If you are the national ‘first team’ as it were, who can you learn from? I suppose the answer is obvious, you can learn from corresponding young people in another country. And the Germans were very welcoming. Our guys loved it to bits.

“Jazz is a generous art form. It’s much more than individual improvisation, because you have to respond to what others play. Jazz is essentially collaborative because the better others play, the better you play”.

Explaining how the organisers hit on the idea of celebrating a century of jazz as a theme for the project, Tully continued, “Two years ago I read about the celebrations being planned in the UK for the hundredth anniversary of the beginning of the First World War. I thought it could be awful. It could just be English triumphalism. We decided we had to do something. We had to find a way of bringing young musicians together, and together say that war must never happen again. And it’s been wonderful.

“Playing together, both bands were expressing their commitment to the value of music, reinforcing the idea that as young people they think that music is worthwhile. And we want to build on this success, to go to town in Italy, France and Spain where they don’t have national youth big bands, and ask people if we can help them to achieve similar results.”

The celebratory mood and youthful joy in playing together were clearly evident at the concert in Leeds. The concert began with a joint rendition of *St Louis Blues* arranged by Mark Armstrong. This was followed by well-loved standards like *After You’ve Gone*, *Body and Soul*, *I’ve Got Rhythm*, *Shine* and *Smack Dab in the*

*Middle*, some featuring the individual bands and some played together. *My Romance* was sung unaccompanied by BuJazzO's close harmony group and exuded great confidence and musicianship.

It was wonderful to see how closely the two bands listened to each other and appreciated each other's creativity. The standard of solo playing was so high that it is hard to pick out individuals. But trombone player Owen Dawson for NYJO and tenor saxophone player Florian Boos for BuJazzO each deserve a mention.

NYJO guitarist Rob Luft played a brilliant solo in *Rush Hour*. His technical skill was matched by his wild and wonderful improvisation. According to a review for *London Jazz* by Sebastian Scotney, at the London gig, the BuJazzO trombone section "were all smiling and giving him the rolling hand cue that they wanted him to continue with his mayhem. Similarly I watched tenor saxophonist Riley Stone-Lonergan, no mean soloist in his own right, coolly transfixed by a solo from his opposite number from the BuJazzO, Florian Boos."

At both venues in Britain the concert finished with Count Basie's *Jumpin' At The Woodside*. But in London the young musicians had prepared a surprise for their musical directors, who were "blown away" when they unexpectedly swung into their own version of *The Saints Go Marching In* and gave it their all. The audience went wild and gave them a standing ovation.

After the Leeds concert Jamil Sheriff, principal lecturer in jazz at the LCM, explained to the WSWS something about the commitment of these young artists that makes this music possible. He said, "This is a big deal for them. They represent the elite within their age bracket in Germany and the UK. They are committed and dedicated to their passion, jazz music."

Sheriff contrasted the situation today with that of 50 or 60 years ago when aspiring musicians had to wait for the Sunday record programme to come around or order a disc from the local shop and wait for a month until it arrived from the US. Jamil described the problems he had as a young musician, when it was difficult to get hold of jazz records. He used to wear out a single groove of a particular disc when he was struggling to internalise the jazz language. He laughed as he explained that he got so good at it that he could drop the needle straight on to the passage he needed.

"Now", he said, "these youngsters can carry the

whole of the back catalogue around with them on their mobile phone. They can slow it down and study it in detail and that's how we study the jazz language."

At this point, Jamil took out his mobile phone and played a jazz loop on it that he happened to be studying at the moment. "This is how young musicians develop their jazz sensibilities. They have to listen, work at it and make it their own."

Referring to the concert he said, "When you have play and response within a band or, in this case, between bands, players are saying to each other, 'OK, I respect you for playing that phrase or for hearing that idea and here is my response.' Or they enjoy playing a hook and repeating it back and forth. Through playing, they develop a hunger to improve and the necessity to listen at a deeper level."

It was this continuity that came across in the performances of the NYJO and BuJazzO, not just over generations but over national boundaries—continuity and development. As someone who has loved jazz since the European jazz revival of the 1950s, this writer felt privileged to be part of this celebration.

Links:

Bundesjazzorchester & National Youth Jazz Orchestra—I Got Rhythm  
NYJO at the Proms



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