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DEVELOPING AND PROMOTING BIG BAND JAZZ IN CANADA AND BEYOND



GILLIS, RICHARD
UNIVERSITY OF MANITOBA
WINNIPEG, MANITOBA
CANADA

Dr. Richard Gillis
University of Manitoba
Winnipeg, Manitoba
Canada

Developing and Promoting Big Band Jazz in Canada and Beyond

Synopsis:

Big Band jazz is very much alive in every city and on every college campus in the Western world. Professional organizations throughout North America are actively engaged in big band exploration, creation, performance, recording and education. This article will present what the Winnipeg Jazz Orchestra is doing to keep big band alive and thriving, and how it is developing ties to like-minded organizations in Canada and beyond.

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Preamble:

What comes to mind if you were asked to provide a definition of a “symphony orchestra”? Most people would respond with a description close to that in the Encyclopaedia Britannica... an ensemble “western classical” musical instruments - primarily strings, though usually complemented by brass, woodwinds and percussion¹. If there was one composer that most would associate with this ensemble, it would be Beethoven², but it is widely recognized that the symphony orchestra has a huge repertoire of masterworks from a great number of composers, with new works being created every year throughout the world.

What is a “big band”?

A collection of “jazz” musicians, to be sure, but after that the definition usually follows a style or aural concept.

The big band is the jazz musician’s “symphony orchestra”,³ and has had a long and vibrant history, beginning in New Orleans at the end of the 19th Century.⁴ The early history of big band is somewhat unclear⁵ and there are many reasons for the development of its size and instrumentation... one being that these were the instruments available to the average person⁶, and another was the need to produce sufficient volume (dynamics) for dance music or for concerts in large venues prior to the development of sophisticated sound amplification. Standard big band instrumentation is made up of four sections - typically four trumpets, four trombones, five woodwinds (alto, tenor & bari saxophones, but usually including at least one clarinet before 1945), and rhythm section - piano, bass, guitar and drum set.⁷

In terms of style the majority of people would associate big band with the swing dance music that was popular in the late 1930’s and early 1940’s. Depending on your background, one of several big band leaders may come to mind, but Glenn Miller or Duke Ellington would top the list of the most

¹ “Orchestra”, in Encyclopaedia Britannica, (Chicago, IL: 2018),

<https://www.britannica.com/art/orchestra-music>

² Raymond L. Knapp and Julian Medford, *Ludwig van Beethoven*.(Encyclopædia Britannica, inc.: 2018), <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Ludwig-van-Beethoven>

³ Stewart, Alex, *Making the Scene: Contemporary New York City Big Band Jazz* (University of California Press, 2007), 8.

⁴ Bob Thomas, “The Origins of Big Band Music: A History of Big Band Jazz,” <http://redhotjazz.com/bigband.html>,(1994).

⁵ H. Martin & Keith Waters, *Essential Jazz: The first 100 years / Henry Martin, Keith Waters*: 2nd ed. (Australia: United States: Schirmer CENGAGE Learning, 2009), 5.

⁶ Big Band Jazz, according to one historian, had its start in New Orleans in 1898 at the end of the Spanish-American war. Military bands returned to the port to decommission, flooding the city with used band instruments. Thomas, *The Origins of Big Band Music: A History of Big Band Jazz*, <http://redhotjazz.com/bigband.html>

⁷ Stewart, *Making the Scene: Contemporary New York City Big Band Jazz*, 33.

well-known of the band leaders from this period. However, the history of big band performance, as per the history of jazz, is complicated and style, approach and aesthetic can vary widely.⁸

Because of its origins in popular and dance music, the big band has been associated with individuals, like Miller, who had their own ensembles. Some arrangers wrote for more than one of the big bands (Billy May, Nelson Riddle, Billy Byers, Marion Evans, Bill Finegan, and others), but generally repertoire was unique to each ensemble, and each developed its own sound that reflected the leader (who was often the primary writer).⁹

Talented writers and arrangers soon discovered the rich variety of tone colors available in this ensemble, not only leading to fabulous arrangements of popular and dance music, but to pieces that were designed for the concert stage, as well as compositions that could be considered “art music”. One of the brightest stars to have come out of the last 100+ years of big band arrangers and composers was Duke Ellington. Many consider him to be one of the greatest American composer of the 20th century.¹⁰ Of course there are many composers that have produced significant and influential works for big band, including Carla Bley, Thad Jones, Bob Brookmeyer, Benny Goodman, Stan Kenton, Benny Carter, Gerald Wilson, Toshiko Akiyoshi, Charles Mingus, Billy Strayhorn, Sun Ra, Woody Herman, and many others. Canadian leaders/composers that have contributed to the development of big band include Rob McConnell, Phil Nimmons, Gil Evans, Ron Collier, Maynard Ferguson and Dave McMurdo.

The state of the big band today:

Big band is not presently associated with the popular music of today, as the swing bands were in the 1930's, but there are big bands in nearly every city and college campus in the Western world. A large number are amateur or educational organizations that perform dance music and arrangements from the “American Songbook”, though some search out more sophisticated compositions and many are involved in the creation of new repertoire. As Alex Stewart writes in *Making the Scene: Contemporary New York City Big Band Jazz*, “musicians often distinguish among big bands according to their functions... five remain fairly common in New York: rehearsal bands, working bands (mostly part-time...), dance bands, school bands, and, the newest rubric, repertoire

⁸ Goodman and Artie Shaw complained about the Ellington band's intonation. Schoenberg notes, “They [Ellington's band] played with a looseness and with less of the ‘professional’ sheen than Goodman and Shaw would have ever permitted.” Emphasis on individual autonomy in jazz and African American musics not only accentuated non-European or “African” elements in the racial imaginary; it also allowed creative intervention in dominant discourse that constructed all blacks and racial others as the same. Many jazz musicians, whatever their racial and ethnic backgrounds, continue to find jazz attractive for its emphasis on self-discovery and individuation.

Stewart, *Making the Scene: Contemporary New York City Big Band Jazz*, 12.

⁹ Compare Count Basie's: *Jive at Five*, Ellington's: *Cottontail*, Benny Goodman's: *Stealin' Apples*, and Artie Shaw's *Lady Be Good*, all from 1939-1940. Also compare *Take the A Train* arrangements performed by the big bands of Duke Ellington, Count Basie and Harry James.

¹⁰ “Duke Ellington lived long enough to hear himself named among our best composers. And since his death in 1974, it has become not at all uncommon to see him named, along with Charles Ives as the greatest composer we have produced, regardless of category.”

Martin Williams, liner notes, *Duke Ellington's Symphony in Black*, The Smithsonian Jazz Repertory Ensemble conducted by Gunther Schuller, (The Smithsonian Collections recording, 1980).

orchestras.”¹¹ The professional “working bands” tend to continue to be organized under a particular leader or composer and some, such as the Maria Schneider, Rufus Reid and John Clayton, are involved in the creation of new music and artistic collaborations. In Canada, creative writers-leaders include Christine Jensen, Darcy James Argue, Joe Sullivan, Jill Townsend, Fred Stride and John McLeod.

The ensembles I want to focus on are the city-based non-profit organizations organized in the fashion of today’s symphony orchestras. These professional repertory bands are presenting public concerts featuring the great big band literature, and are also creating exciting new works. In the United States, some of the most well-known examples of this ensemble are: the Jazz at Lincoln Centre Orchestra (<https://www.jazz.org/jlco-performances-and-tour-dates/>), The Vanguard Jazz Orchestra (<https://www.vanguardjazzorchestra.com/>), the Columbus Jazz Orchestra (<https://www.jazzartsgroup.org/>), and the Kansas City Jazz Orchestra (<https://www.kcjo.org/>).

North of the border, the Winnipeg Jazz Orchestra (<http://www.winnipegjazzorchestra.com/>), Orchestre National de Jazz de Montreal (<http://www.onjm.ca/>) and the Saskatoon Jazz Orchestra (<https://www.saskatoonjazzorchestra.com/>) are non-profit organizations that are developing the art of Canadian big band music. You can recognize an effort to identify as serious artistic ensembles in the names of each of the organizations just mentioned.

In Europe there are many excellent big bands that present innovative performance projects and are active in the production on new repertoire. Some of these include: the WDR Big Band (https://www.facebook.com/wdrbigband?_rdr=p), the Danish Radio Big Band (<https://www.facebook.com/drbigbandet>), the Brussels Jazz Orchestra (<https://www.brusselsjazzorchestra.com/en>), and the Reykjavik Big Band (<http://reykjavikbigband.com/>).

The Winnipeg Jazz Orchestra:

The Winnipeg Jazz Orchestra is a small non-profit organization based in Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada. Since its formation in 1997 the mandate of the Winnipeg Jazz Orchestra has been to be an instrumental force in the promotion and development of big band jazz in Canada and beyond, through performance, composition, recording and education.

The Winnipeg Jazz Orchestra is fulfilling this mandate in the following ways:

1. Through the presentation of a regular concert series that reflects the diversity of approaches to big band performance and repertoire. Obviously a wide variety of styles and historical periods need to be included, as well as projects that explore new directions.
2. In hiring the best professional jazz musicians available to make up the regular ensemble, and by allowing for a rotation of personnel in order to bring in “up and coming” musicians. It would be a mistake to think that the only consideration in choosing personnel would be to hire only the “best” musician for every performance (which in itself is subjective). The purpose of a professional civic organization is to build the community, as well as the art form. Being conscious of gender and minority inclusion is important, as is developing fine young musicians.

¹¹ Stewart, *Making the Scene: Contemporary New York City Big Band Jazz*, 20

3. By the presentation of the best big band jazz compositions and arrangements available: some very new, and some historically significant. This seems like an obvious point, but it requires constant research and application (transcribing, commission grant requests).
4. Through the commissioning of new compositions and arrangements for big band, especially by Canadian composers. The goal of the Winnipeg Jazz Orchestra is to have our concert programs made up of 50% new compositions and arrangements. For the WJO's November 19, 2017 concert eleven compositions were commissioned through the Canada Arts Council, Manitoba Arts Council and Ontario Arts Council.
5. In collaborations with guest performers and conductors that inform and develop the ensemble, musicians and audience. Guest artists-directors have served to broaden the knowledge and experience of the WJO, and have enabled us to develop connections and collaborations for the organization nationally and internationally.¹²
6. Through our educational outreach programs and projects. Our 2017/18 season included four big band workshops (involving over 550 students), five school/community performances (for over 750 listeners), an Honor Jazz Band project (with 53 out of 120 auditioned students), student pre-concert performances (involving eleven student bands), and six in-school rehearsals.
7. Through recording the ensemble and its original music, and releasing the music and scores. Over the past 20 years the WJO has commissioned and created over 150 new compositions and arrangements. Highlights include *Suite 150: A Big Band Portrait* (2017)¹³, a collection of eleven commissioned movements in recognition of Canada's 150 birthday. Composers were drawn from across Canada and represented several communities and ethnicities. Since 2004 the Winnipeg Jazz Orchestra has released four recordings containing all original compositions or arrangements: *Winnipeg Jazz Orchestra* (2004), *Steppin' Out* (2008), *Suite Messiah* (2014), and *Suite 150: A Big Band Portrait* (2018).

Until 2010, the WJO was the only jazz orchestra of its kind in Canada.¹⁴

Over the past 15 years the Winnipeg Jazz Orchestra has been in discussions with big band leaders and musicians throughout Canada - in Vancouver, Edmonton, Calgary, Saskatoon, Regina, Toronto, Hamilton and Montreal. The goal has been to see the establishment of professional civic jazz orchestras in these cities. After ongoing contact with Dean McNeill in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, the Saskatoon Jazz Orchestra gave its first performance in the spring of 2013. Since then the WJO has worked closely with the SJO, exchanging repertoire, programming and even musicians. In 2013, after discussions and collaborations with several Montreal musicians, the Orchestre National

¹² Some of the international guests that have performed with the Winnipeg Jazz Orchestra have been: Bob Brookmeyer, Rufus Reid, Michael Philip Mossman, Bert Joris, Nikolaj Bentzon, Dick Oatts, John Riley, Brent Fischer, Bobby Shew, Butch Miles, Curtis Fuller, Robert Breithaupt, Bjorn Thoroddesen, Andrea Brachfeld, Cornelius Bumpus, Sigurdur Flosason, Ted Nash, Andy Farber, Laurie Frink, Byron Stripling, Allan Harris, Miguel Zenon, Ken Peplowski, Cynthia Scott, Jimmy Greene, Vincent Gardner, and Kevin Mahogany. Canadian guests include: David Braid, Earl MacDonald, Jon MacLeod, Christine Jensen, Phil Dwyer, Dave Young, Phil Nimmons, Fred Stride, PJ Perry, David Braid, Tommy Banks, John McLeod, Al Kay, Chris Butcher, Dave McMurdo, Mike Herriot, Dean McNeill, Chase Sanborn, Kirk MacDonald, Tom Colclough, Campbell Ryga, Bill Mahar, Guido Basso, Denzal Sinclair, Hilario Duran, Jim Mair, Joani Taylor, Paul Ashwell, and Hugh Fraser.

¹³ See suite150.ca

¹⁴ Professional civic big band organized as a non-profit organization.

de Jazz de Montreal was formed. A collaborative concert with the ONJM is scheduled for May 4, 2019, in Montreal and projects are planned to follow in the 2019/20 season.

Together with the Saskatoon Jazz Orchestra and the Ochestra National de Jazz de Montreal, the Winnipeg Jazz Orchestra has begun to organize the Canadian Association of Jazz Orchestras.¹⁵ The goals of this collective is to:

- develop the art form through creation, preservation, revitalization and education;
- encourage the creation of similar professional civic concert big bands throughout Canada;
- increase collaborations between our organizations;
- share ideas, programming, repertoire, musicians;
- increase inclusiveness and cooperation: ethnic communities, gender equality, human rights;
- share our listeners – bring access to each other’s audience;
- strengthen grant and sponsorship applications for commissions, recordings and projects;
- to develop contacts with similar organizations in Europe¹⁶, United States and other countries.

The future of the big band:

Big bands will continue to have a strong presence on college campuses and throughout the world as long as there are jazz musicians and composers.¹⁷ Serious jazz musicians are drawn to big band¹⁸, even those that are known and solo and small group performers, (Roy Hargrove, Mulgrew Miller and Dave Holland, for example), and so new music will continue to be created and recorded. We are fortunate to have recordings of most of the finest big band music available to us, but like the masterworks of the symphony orchestra, the great big band literature needs to be revisited and presented anew to live audiences. In addition, opportunities for new creative big band work is limited only by imagination; the flexibility of its musicians and versatility of its instrumentation allow for constant renewal and collaborations with other styles, disciplines and cultures.

While there will always be an important place for great big bands organized under the name and leadership of an individual artist (as well as for rehearsal bands, educational ensembles and community groups), I believe that the establishment and growth of professional civic jazz orchestras is a valuable piece in the development of the big band art form, and the Winnipeg Jazz Orchestra will work to assist in its progression.

¹⁵ Other networks have existed (Big Bands International) or exist in a casual form (<https://bigbanddirectory.org/>).

¹⁶ The Winnipeg Jazz Orchestra has been in conversations with Walter Brolund, the General Manager of the Norrbotten Big Band and organizer of the European Music Circle, about a cooperative network. The WJO has also had a long relationship with the Reykjavik Big Band.

¹⁷ Some perceptive critics have noticed a changing emphasis in jazz. According to Ben Ratliff, “the music, across the board, is deep in its compositional phase, ...[which] doesn’t just mean old repertory; it means new music that can survive, as written, into the future.” Stewart, *Making the Scene: Contemporary New York City Big Band Jazz*, 2.

¹⁸ Even if big band music is not in vogue, ...there are so many big bands around because musicians love to play great arrangements. They will come to rehearse for nothing to play great arrangements. Stewart, Alex, *Making the Scene: Contemporary New York City Big Band Jazz*, 8.

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