

LATVIAN RADIO BIG BAND – PROVIDING A BREATH OF FRESH AIR

KASPARS ZAVIĻEISKIS

KĀRLIS VANAGS – A SEEMINGLY INTROVERTED THINKER WITH AN UNEXPECTEDLY BROAD RANGE OF EXPRESSION IN VARIOUS STYLES OF JAZZ MUSIC. HE IS THE MUSICAL DIRECTOR OF THE RECENTLY REBORN LATVIAN RADIO BIG BAND AND IS ALSO AN ARRANGER, COMPOSER AND SAXOPHONE PLAYER FOR THE BAND.



Please give us a short description of what the Latvian Radio Big Band is right now.

I'd like to say that we're moving forward with great strides. On all fronts. We're now considered full-blooded, professional musicians on the Latvian cultural scene. Meaning, the big band is now 100% financed by the state, just like Latvia's symphonic orchestras and professional choirs. The big dream has been fulfilled! And our musicians themselves are a source of joy, too. We're developing all the time, the orchestra is sounding better and better. We're able to spend more time developing programmes, offering listeners more variety. For example, recently at the Saxophonia festival we were very excited to play two concerts together with New York-based saxophonist Seamus Blake, who is currently one of the best saxophone players in the world. The repertoire was 100% his original music that had been prepared specially for us. That makes a big difference, whether a programme has already been played before and we're just repeating it, or whether we've generated it together with the artist. The satisfaction is much greater.

You are the musical director of the band. So it's primarily your job to seek out projects for collaboration, create programmes together with guest artists and, in addition, arrange and compose works for the band.

I work closely with our artistic director, Māris Briežkalns. We plan the programmes, find guest artists, generate ideas. My job is to make everything happen on the music end of things. I arrange, compose and work with the big band musicians.

Can you brag a little and tell us what have been some of the band's highlights over the past few years?

Every project has contributed something important. We've made several recordings, and we're very pleased about that. We've prepared programmes that have covered a great variety of genres. For example, last year we recorded some arrangements of opera music together with a string section and the legendary Latvian popular music composer Raimonds Pauls on piano. That was a challenging project, because the boundary between the classical interpretation and jazz was very fragile. All of us – myself and the musicians, too – had to really immerse ourselves in the classical sound and find the transition to jazz. We had wonderful arrangements, created by the British musician and arranger Callum Au. He took world-famous opera arias and channelled them through the sound of Count Basie and Duke Ellington.

I also want to mention our own original music project, Latvian Jazz Suite. It's our own individual view on what's important to us, how we feel music. Our newest album was made together with the Swedish big band specialist Mats Holmquist. In a way,

the album is a search for new directions – minimalism in a big band sound. It's daring to create something new. The soloists on the album are the American trumpeter Randy Brecker and the American saxophonist Dick Oatts. Playing together on an album with greats of the jazz world like these two men is a very big accomplishment for a band like ours.

Of course, we've also played a great variety of concerts. We celebrated Raimonds Pauls' 80th birthday with a series of concerts, in which I had the honour of creating arrangements for a very diverse group. We also played together with several soloists from abroad for our band's 50th anniversary. We met again with the American vocalists Allan Harris and China Moses as well as the Swedish trumpeter Lasse Lindgren, whose energy and life story contributed greatly to our band's sound. I could go on and on.

Here I should add that the Latvian Radio Big Band hasn't quite existed for 50 years without interruption. It ceased to exist in 1996 due to the economic crisis. And only in 2007 you established the City Jazz Big Band, which later turned into the professional group playing today.

Yes, the gap was long. I'm quite young myself – I'm 33 years old – and I did not play in the earlier Latvian Radio Big Band. So, the big band of the earlier years is something of a mystery to those of us playing today. But there's a huge library of music and also recordings that have been preserved from those days.

When I began the City Jazz Big Band, I never dreamed it could develop into something like the band we have today. Because back then it seemed that big band traditions in Latvia had pretty much died out. But, together with some likeminded people, we began to cultivate those traditions again, we began thinking about how to find the right methods to entice musicians who had come from a completely academic environment. Very many people have passed through this project over the past ten years, and the learning curve has been immense, the changes have been radical. A new generation of professional jazz musicians has emerged.

What's the source of this phenomenon? Because this isn't quite New Orleans we're living in, is it?

It's difficult to give a definite answer. I've thought about it a lot. I believe that swift progress is possible when something new and exciting is being created. If certain traditions are long-lived, you can sometimes notice a situation in which only the past is truly glorious and today the idea of the group is really only maintained because of the orchestra's name and legend. What drives us, however, is the fact that the people who are taking part in this project are for the most part young. They've still got that feeling of maximalism and the desire to achieve more and

more. They haven't fallen into a routine in which the big band is just another job. It's interesting how useful modern technologies have become. Musicians can fulfil tasks and exchange ideas on WhatsApp. That means that they can work alone, each in their own room, but at the same time they're working collectively, sending audio and video to each other. That helps them to constantly develop and improve.

How much experimentation can a state-financed big band allow?

We're not bound to a specific framework. We have a certain number of concerts that we have to do, we take part in national events, but we don't have any limits in terms of style and content. We can offer new ideas to listeners. Of course, we need to see to it that we have listeners in the first place. We can't play in such an avantgarde way that in the end we ourselves don't even understand the music. But new ideas are always exciting both for us and for the listeners.

In this context, it's also good to know that playing in the big band is a respected thing among musicians. Everyone recognises that it's a huge investment, an immense amount of work. It's one thing to prepare a programme and organise a concert for a quartet. But it's quite another thing to do the same for an 18-piece band. It's important to bring cohesion to the group. Seamus Blake complimented us by saying that he could feel that everyone in our group thinks in a very similar way, and quickly, too – the group can react deftly to any necessary changes in a programme.

What sections comprise your team right now?

We have four instrument sections. There's the rhythm section, led by drummer Artis Orubs. Actually, he's the conductor of the whole band, because he directs both the dynamics and the tempos. Also in the rhythm group is guitarist Rihards Goba, bassist Edvins Ozols and pianist Viktors Ritovs, who also arranges and composes pieces for the band.

Then there's a five-piece saxophone section – Dāvis Jurka plays the lead and directs the phrasing and musical things, and Gints Pabērzs is responsible for various technical stuff. Our saxophonists also play other instruments, which is a very important aspect of the group. Not all big bands have that range of instrumentation, which Callum Au also commented on. He was very happy that we were able to make use of several woodwinds, such as clarinets and flutes.

We also have two brass sections: four trombonists and five trumpeters. Laura Rozenberga leads the trombone section, and guest musicians have been happy to see a young woman in that position. At the top of the pyramid is the trumpet section, which isn't that easy to put together in Latvia. But I think we've



managed to put together a good team. I'm especially pleased with our lead trumpet, Andris Augstkalns, who is young but has accepted a difficult role and taken on great responsibility. It's also physically a difficult job to have precise command of the upper register, with good articulation and intonation.

You did not mention that you yourself are in fact one of the leading saxophonists in the band. Sometimes in concerts you also take on the role of conductor.

I develop the musical material in rehearsals, but I don't play the lead in the saxophone section, because I often have to pay attention to a lot of other nuances going on in the band. I play the second part, and during freer rubato parts I tend to conduct a bit where necessary. Of course, when we do projects like the opera arrangements, then we need a conductor up front.

Where does the big band find new-generation talent?

It's great to see that some of the new musicians are kids who began playing in the Big Band School when they were teenagers. That's the school I established together with a few other colleagues. I got the idea when I became the director of the City Jazz Big Band, because I understood that we need to create our own resources. It's important that kids start learning big band skills already at age 14 or 15, because it's a lot harder to influence a musician's thinking and perception when he's older.

The Big Band School is still going strong. It's a privately run programme operated by the City Jazz Riga rhythmic music society. It's now already got three groups: we've retained the name City Jazz Big Band, which is the highest level at the school and consists of youngsters from the age of 13–14 to 19–20; then there's the City Jazz Late Night Band, which are the so-called free-time musicians; and then there's also the City Jazz Youth Band, which are the youngest musicians, beginning around age 12–13.

Sounds like a finely structured system that obviously works well. How do you envision the future of the Latvian Radio Big Band? You no doubt have some even higher goals and dreams.

We're already achieving our goals and living our dreams. But it requires a lot of work. New programmes need to be developed, new compositions written, recordings made, many concerts performed both in Latvia and beyond its borders. Our main goal is for the Latvian Radio Big Band to be as well known as, say, the WDR Big Band in Cologne, Germany, or the Danish Radio Jazz Orchestra. It's a great pleasure that several guest soloists who've played with us have genuinely declared that our big band is in no way worse than those of certain other countries. And sometimes we're even more interesting because of our fresh outlook, because of the breath of fresh air we provide...