

MUSIC

Because jazz is forever

The Brussels Jazz Orchestra turns 15 with a bit of the old bling-bling



Alan Hope

The Brussels Jazz Orchestra (BJO) knows how to celebrate an anniversary. Not content to fill November with a series of star concerts and a new CD, they've had top designers in Antwerp produce a line of jewellery especially for the occasion.

Celebrating 15 years this month, the jazz band came into being when the Belgian Radio Television big band broke up, leaving composers and musicians with nowhere to ply their trade. One of them was saxophonist Frank Vaganée, who, together with trumpeter Serge Plume and trombonist Marc Godfroid, formed the BJO. Vaganée (pictured, left) has been artistic director from the start, and I spoke to him at their headquarters in Mechelen.

Mechelen? "In the past we were in Brussels; Mechelen has been a practical step more than anything," explains Vaganée. When the band's four-year residency at Flagey ran out, it based itself in the city in Antwerp province because some of its members live there. "We actually began in Sounds Jazz Club in Brussels," continues Vaganée, "because Brussels is a melting pot, where everyone who was into jazz came together. And that's why we're called the BJO. The name-recognition of Brussels was something we wanted to take with us."

The birthday concerts on 19, 20 and 21 November feature Richard Galliano, the French accordion virtuoso, who's as much at home playing with a big band or a symphony orchestra as he is his

own ensemble. Everyone in the audience will receive a copy of BJO's new CD, *Ten Years Ago*, recorded with Galliano. The concerts take place in Ghent, Antwerp and Brussels, respectively.

"In the past we would invite someone, they'd turn up with their own music, and we'd rehearse it for a concert," explains Vaganée. "But in the last couple of years, we've been going about it another way."

With a building confidence that 15 years brings, they asked Galliano to collaborate, and he agreed. "We went looking for good pieces by him, then found an

arranger who could arrange the work to suit the concert," says Vaganée.

The BJO is a traditional big band set-up: four trumpets, four trombones, five saxophones and a rhythm section of piano, drums and bass. So why do they call themselves an orchestra? "Because we wanted to be much broader than a big band," explains Vaganée. Big band is a reference to the composition of the musicians and to a style of music. We want to be broader, to bring in other types of music. We're set up like a big-band, but we don't only play big-band music."

This is evidenced on *Changing Faces*, their CD from last year featuring Paris vocalist David Linx. With a contemporary Latin feel, it's very different from the project with

Galliano, where you find more of a Balkan style – which is "not typical big-band," notes Vaganée.

There have been 10 CDs in all, and from listening to a few – one with Brussels pianist Michel Herr, for instance, and one with the Royal Flemish Philharmonic, the lasting impression is the unity of sound: BJO is made up of individual musicians in the way a sea-wave is made of droplets of water,

and it buoys you up and washes over you as a single powerful movement.

But is there still a demand for that type of music in these niche times?

Vaganée, a

teacher at the Lemmens Institute in Leuven, assures me that there is. "I think young people these days don't pay enough attention to tradition, to the roots, where the music comes from," he says. "But there are always exceptions. The kids we have at school always try to stay aware of what came before."

He also says that, contrary to popular belief, young people are still coming to jazz, "even if it's via more commercial music with a jazzy feel to it. Then you have crossover music, like Amy Winehouse, for instance. If you listen to her first CD, that's quite simply jazz. And if young people hear that and become interested in that sort of music, then they're going to start digging to find out where it comes from and find their way to jazz that way."

And then there's the sparkle and shine. In the week before the concert, the new line of jewellery – called BJOux – will go on show at the Zwijsprong Gallery in Antwerp. It was designed by Peter Vermandere and is made up of pieces of used instruments. "Chopping an instrument into bits is pretty drastic," Vermandere comments, "but anything for art – kill your darlings!"

Vermandere visited the BJO, talked to members and attended concerts to "get an idea of what we're about," Vaganée says. The range includes clarinet rings in ebony and silver, earrings, brooches and a limited edition set of sax cufflinks.

Brussels Jazz Orchestra with Richard Galliano, 19 November, De Bijloke, Ghent. Check the website for listings in other cities. See page 13 for more on the jewellery line BJOux

online
www.brusselsjazzorchestra.com

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