

CREATING A MORE COMPLETE ARTIST

Jazz musician-educator Ed Partyka finds a wealth of creative work in Europe

BY JAMES HALE

“If you love big bands, like I do,” said trombonist, composer, arranger and jazz educator Ed Partyka, “Europe is the place to be in the 21st century.”

The 47-year-old Chicago native was speaking via cellphone in transit from his home in Graz, Austria, where he is department chairman of the Jazz Institute at the University of Music and Performing Arts, to Lucerne, Switzerland, where he teaches composition at the University of Applied Sciences and Arts. In addition to his busy academic schedule, Partyka also leads Frankfurt’s HR Big Band, has his own jazz orchestra, is in demand as a guest conductor throughout western Europe, and still finds time to play trombone and tuba with Carla Bley and Steve Swallow. He has also been a member of the WDR Big Band (1992–2002) and the Vienna Art Orchestra (2000–’08), and has released eight recordings under his own name and been featured on many others.

A graduate of Northern Illinois University, Partyka originally moved to Germany in 1990, the year the country was reunified, following the fall of the Berlin Wall. He said his relocation was as much a reaction to the music scene in California as anything else.

“I wanted to go somewhere other than Chicago after I finished my bachelor’s degree, and I was all set to go to California State University Northridge,” he said. “I went out to L.A. and I hated it. I was into Lester Bowie and the AACM, and the L.A. I found was all about the business of music, and I wasn’t interested in that at all.”

Around the same time, he attended a master

class held by Jiggs Whigham, the American trombonist who had emigrated to West Germany in the ’60s.

“He told me about the German scene, so I auditioned for the Conservatory of Music in Cologne and got into the master’s program,” Partyka said. “It was a difficult time; I didn’t speak German at all.”

Coincidentally, the move soon put Partyka in close proximity to the musician who has been his biggest influence: Bob Brookmeyer.

In Chicago, Partyka had been entranced by the renowned trombonist and composer since hearing his music in high school.

“He was one of the main reasons I became a musician. I transcribed a lot of his solos, and he was just a major, major influence on me.”

When Brookmeyer relocated to the Netherlands in 1991, Partyka got the feeling that destiny was dealing him a good hand. He signed up for a master class and wound up winning a spot in Brookmeyer’s GEMA Jazz Composers Workshop in 1994, beginning an association that would last until the elder musician’s death in 2011.

“It was an incredible learning experience for me,” Partyka said. “Bob had an amazing work ethic, and he wasn’t afraid to teach you right from wrong and how to find the important parts of a composition. Bob really passed on the importance of melody. He taught me that melody is the main meal, the rest is just spice, and he taught me the role of the soloist in serving the melody.”

These were lessons Partyka began to pass along to younger musicians in 2003, when he

landed his first teaching position at the Johannes Gutenberg University in Mainz, Germany. He moved to the Jazz Institute in Graz in 2006.

“Jazz education in Europe is so different than in North America,” he said. “For one thing, because it is state-subsidized and tuition is free, the playing field is really level. Students get into university jazz programs because they have interest and potential, not because they’re more able to afford tuition. Because money is no object, we get to choose the best 25 applicants.” Another differentiating factor, he noted, is that students in Europe do not get as much advanced music instruction before university. They arrive without the kind of highly developed chops and reading skills, or the playing experience, that U.S. high school graduates generally possess.

He said that despite those differences, the system in Austria follows the model established by Boston’s Berklee College of Music, with an emphasis on ear-training, arranging, harmony and music technology, and students come from more than 20 countries.

“Elsewhere in Europe, things are somewhat different. In German schools, they’re asking a lot of hard questions about the past, focusing on their own local traditions and moving away from the blues and other American jazz roots. There’s a big movement away from standards, and more interest in creating a more complete artist.”

For big bands, he said, that means blurring the lines between contemporary popular music and traditional big bands, with their focus on brass and woodwind instruments, and introducing a

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Ed Partyka: "It's important to let students know what's really going on in music right now."

lot of electronic elements to augment the standard instrumentation.

In Austria, for whatever reason, the shift away from the traditional big band approach has not been as radical, which fits with Partyka's teaching philosophy.

"In Graz, I focus on two areas," he said. "I teach beginning arranging, where my goal is to give students the tools and methods they need. And I teach arranging and composing at the master's level, covering the entire spectrum of big band music, right up to people like John Hollenbeck. For those in the master's program, I also look at career development and try to share my knowledge."

"Ed has a way of teaching that brings focus to the importance of a solid foundation, yet he encourages authenticity and creativity to flourish," said vocalist Dena DeRose, who is also on the Graz faculty.

"I think it's important to let students know what's really going on in music right now," said Partyka. "That's why I believe it's vital to remain active myself. I like to take students to Frankfurt when I'm working on a project there so they

can see the entire development."

He also uses his classes as an ongoing series of auditions, and currently has four former students in his big band. The amount and quality of work he provides musicians is miles ahead of what recent graduates could find in the United States, he said, pointing to the fact that relatively tiny Switzerland supports three contemporary big bands, all of which actively commission new music.

With that much opportunity, Partyka is finding no shortage of new work. In the past two years, he has written almost 50 arrangements and compositions for the HR Big Band, and conducted projects with guest artists ranging from singer Theo Bleckmann to long-time Rolling Stones pianist Chuck Leavell. His own big band, which has been based in Berlin since 2007, performs an average of 15 times a year and released a new CD, *Hits, Volume One* (Mons Records), in 2014.

Over the life of his band, Partyka has seen his music change significantly. "I used to write angry, sad music," he said. "Everything was in a minor key until I was 40. As I've been getting happier in my life,



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I find myself just trying to tell a story and touch listeners."

"Ed's tunes include a lot of the European influences from his many years there," said DeRose, "yet he can still swing hard like Count Basie or Mingus. Working with him on a project with the HR Big Band in 2013 gave me great insight into his arranging pen. He keeps in mind the lyrics, creates a very hip vibe and makes space for the vocals to sparkle."

Partyka said that these days he finds himself filling the role of arranger more than composer. That is reflected on *Hits, Volume One*, where he features just two of his compositions.

"I feel so grateful to be here right now," he continued, "because there's a wealth of work for creative musicians. It's really artistically pleasing and financially rewarding. I was back in Chicago last year and all I heard from big bands was swing music. A lot of good musicians there are still playing weddings and bar mitzvahs. Where is the paid, creative music outside of New York City?"

Partyka is confident that he has found the answer to that question. **DB**

A Wide Dynamic Scope

Ed Partyka is nothing if not self-aware, and his liner notes to his 19-piece big band's latest recording, *Hits, Volume One* (Mons Records), reflect on his shift away from "dark, depressing music filled with dissonance" to music that is "lighter and slightly more hopeful."

There is reflection in the album's overall concept, too, with Partyka looking back over his band's seven-year history and picking the pieces that have garnered the biggest response from listeners. As he notes, this results in a diverse group of compositions, ranging from "Blue Skies," composed by Irving Berlin in 1926, to "Undiscovered First" by Canadian indie-rocker Leslie Feist. It also serves as a showcase for Partyka's expanding repertoire of vocal arrangements, delivered by 33-year-old German singer Julia Oschewsky.

Oschewsky receives support from Partyka's love of clarinets and bass trombones. The foggy softness of those dark horns provides subtle contrast to her expressive voice, while the occasional lift of lighter brass and crisp drum work by Reinhold Schmolzer add upward propulsion. For the Feist song, Partyka wisely lets Oschewsky's unadorned voice carry the verses, using only a handful of horns for a restrained ostinato. When the full band joins in for the chorus, the effect is powerful.

Nothing ever appears rushed in Partyka's arrangements, creating a feeling of space, as well as accentuating the wide dynamic scope of his band.

That scope is especially evident on his interpretation of a Portuguese fado, "Na Palma Da Mao," where the woodwinds blend sensuously behind Oschewsky's vocals, and on a brawny, noir-ish version of "Chelsea Bridge."

Partyka gives his musicians more space to stretch out on "Hair Of The Dog," which he calls "the 'serious' jazz piece on this recording." Inspired by the third act of Verdi's *Rigoletto*, it features expansive solos by reed player Mark Wyland and pianist Hendrik Soll, and leaves no question of Partyka's place in the lineage of Bob Brookmeyer alongside better-known acolytes like Darcy James Argue and John Hollenbeck. —James Hale

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