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BY TED PANKEN

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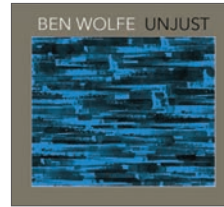


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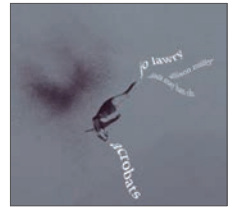
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# *The Orchestral Jazz Musings of*

# VINCE

By Gary Fukushima

Photos by Reinout Bos

# MENDOZA

Sunset Boulevard begins its 21-mile journey at Figueroa Street in downtown Los Angeles, curving northward as it skirts the edge of Dodger Stadium and Silverlake, extending west through Hollywood and Beverly Hills. Moving past UCLA in Westwood into Brentwood, the bustling city scenes spin away from a shady, looping road dotted with homes growing exponentially in size and value.

**F**inally, the vast ocean reveals itself, where the golden sun gleams off the water onto the town of Pacific Palisades, an idyllic place that might have been quaint before it became sumptuous.

Vince Mendoza told me he moved his family into this neighborhood more than 20 years ago, joking that waiting another 10 minutes might have put the price of the home we were sitting in out

of reach for good. It was built in 1947, elegant but increasingly dwarfed over time by the mini-mansions that have replaced many of the other structures in his neighborhood. "I'm just kind of getting to appreciate the history of the house and what it represented, and what this neighborhood used to be like," he said. "You know, the Palisades were called 'the Weimar of the West.' There were a lot of European expatriates who came here to live."



Vince Mendoza has collaborated with Metropole Orkest for the past 28 years and served as its principal conductor from 2005 to 2013.



Mendoza's path in music has traced a similar route as the boulevard that leads to his home — journeying west on a winding road to a destination bathed in warmth and success, created in part by those from old Europe. Though the seven-time Grammy winner lives a literal stone's throw from the Pacific, much of Mendoza's accomplishments have happened across the Atlantic, most notably in the Netherlands, home to the highly regarded Metropole Orkest, with which Mendoza has collaborated for the past 28 years and served as its principal conductor from 2005 to 2013. Under his watch, Metropole became what it is now: the premiere jazz orchestra in the world, a European luxury vehicle taken for a spin by some of jazz's brightest stars, including Herbie Hancock, Pat Metheny, Robert Glasper and Snarky Puppy. Mendoza and the orchestra have reunited in a grand retrospective of their relationship together with *Olympians* (Modern), featuring selected works Mendoza wrote and performed with the group over the years.

Mendoza, 61, first arrived in Los Angeles in 1983 — journeying westward from his birthplace of Norwalk, Connecticut, via Columbus, Ohio, where he went to college at The Ohio State University — for graduate school at the University of Southern California. He had, at the time, dual aspirations of becoming a film composer and a studio trumpet player. “Those aspirations were dashed almost immediately upon arrival,” he said ruefully. He initially did some work for television, but found himself drawn to writing music for jazz musicians. “It’s

all kind of one big pot of [television and film] composers that are vying for the same projects, but they don’t mix, generally, with the concert composers and the jazz musicians,” Mendoza explained. “It was fortunate that I found the opportunity to develop my voice as a jazz composer . . . I think [that] would have definitely been compromised had I pursued the media music any further than I did.”

An exception would be the arranging and conducting Mendoza did for the singer and composer Björk, who turned to him for the 2001 film *Dancer in the Dark* and her album *Vespertine* (Elektra) from the same year. At the time, Mendoza was also working with another iconic pop singer, Joni Mitchell, on her landmark orchestral albums *Both Sides Now* (Reprise, 2000) and *Travelogue* (Nonesuch, 2002). Though these two artists traverse entirely different universes of sound and style, Mendoza was able to flesh out similar themes of mystique and wonder they both share.

Mitchell and Björk are two examples of Mendoza's uncanny ability to enhance a well-known voice, also doing so with the likes of Elvis Costello, Melody Gardot, Al Jarreau, Gregory Porter, Luciana Souza and even Sting. On *Olympians*, a new treatment of one of Mendoza's most beloved compositions, “Esperanto,” features another acclaimed vocalist, Dianne Reeves, who has collaborated with Mendoza since the early 2000s, most recently at a concert in her hometown of Denver, Colorado.

“Anytime I work with him, I enjoy it

because you know he really, really listens,” Reeves said by phone from Denver, where she still lives. “The way that he conducts . . . I feel that [I] and the orchestra are one. . . He’ll be right there to support whatever the read of the song is for that day, and it’s exciting when you have somebody who conducts in that way.” Reeves sings lyrics to “Esperanto,” words written by Kurt Elling, who drew loosely from Pablo Neruda's *The Book of Questions* for his own litany of queries set to the tune's syncopated, odd-metered chorus.

“The lyrics really gave a new birth to that melody by framing it in a beautiful story,” Mendoza said. “Dianne’s rendition is really about a very wise person giving us comfort and a life lesson, and when Dianne delivers a lyric, you really sit up and listen.”

Reeves was mutually inspired by the song. “It mirrors a lot of Vince’s music to me,” she said. “There’s so much mystery in his own writing.”

Befitting Neruda's native tongue, “Esperanto” is the Spanish translation of “Esperança,” the Brazilian-Portuguese word for “hope” and the original title of Mendoza's tune, which he wrote in the 1990s. “During those years, I spent a fair amount of time as a tunesmith, coming up with compositions that would interest instrumentalists who were making recordings,” he said. Mendoza had originally intended “Esperança” for the Yellowjackets, but it was drummer Peter Erskine who took a liking to it for his trio with pianist John Taylor and bassist Palle Danielson on the 1996 ECM album *As It Is*. Erskine, in an aside during an

interview for DownBeat, alluded to his time in guitarist John Abercrombie's trio with bassist Marc Johnson as instructive for how to play with greater attention to the sonic choices one could make, something Erskine brought into his own ethereal piano trio. Mendoza played synths in a trio with the late Abercrombie and drummer Jon Christensen on 1990's *Animato* (ECM), and there is a through-line from all these aforementioned trios to Mendoza's aesthetic of mysterious beauty. "John's sense of lyricism and space for me was very influential as a composer and still is," he said of Abercrombie. "In orchestrations and how I feel about lyricism and leaving space for improvisers, and a lot of that comes from John's sensibility."

Other hallmarks of Mendoza's sound: sudden modulations, asymmetrical phrases, unusual and unpredictable syncopations — he attributes directly to the music and mentorship of Wayne Shorter and Joe Zawinul. "With regard to Joe," he said, "his way of assembling a structure based on an improvisation and then scrambling it to tell a different type of a story, and the mystery and the sense of expectation that comes from that, has always been interesting to me." Mendoza was once quoted as saying Zawinul and Igor Stravinsky "have more in common than you think." When asked about that he said, "I think that they both had a very

modular sense of structure . . . . A lot of the times the first idea will inspire the second one, [and that] will inspire the third one, and Joe definitely worked that way. He was much more modular in his sense of structure than, you know, Brahms." (Also, Stravinsky and Zawinul were both Europeans who resettled in Los Angeles, the latter residing in Pacific Palisades near Mendoza's home.)

Mendoza first worked with Zawinul soon after his graduate work at USC, beginning a relationship that culminated in 2005, when Mendoza arranged and conducted another European jazz ensemble, the WDR Big Band of Cologne, Germany, behind Zawinul for a live concert album, *Brown Street* (Heads Up International). They had plans to bring Zawinul to Metropole Orkest, but he passed away before they got the chance. Metropole Orkest ended up recording Mendoza's arrangements for Zawinul in a live tribute concert album, 2010's *Fast City* (BHM).

Despite all his progressive innovation on keyboards, Zawinul's voicings on synthesizer hearkened back to an earlier time. Mendoza said a friend told him, "Joe was a big band, and I think that was true . . . . He wanted the sound of that, so in a way it was easily transformed for a big band, but then you have a dilemma to contend with because when you hear those struc-

tures replicated for a big band you're already transformed to 1938." He continued, "The challenge was to take those voicings and write it for a big band without automatically generating this historical reference to so many years ago that I think would have been abhorrent to Joe, with his sense of looking forward."

Looking forward is as critically important to Mendoza as it would be for any other jazz musician. He seeks to innovate as a composer, arranger and orchestrator. "It may be a little bit more of what Wayne [Shorter] was talking about with regard to his mission that there would be an improvisational approach to composition, that each idea would inspire the next idea," he said. The incorporation of a jazz-centric viewpoint into a classical orchestral arena is also what makes Metropole Orkest unique. "I think that's one of the reasons that Metropole, in particular, and I had a relationship . . . . They knew that I had experience and a point of view of classical music as well as the jazz nomenclature, so it was important for me to be able to translate all of that into practice," he said. "How do we really play these rhythms with a string instrument, and how is the string orchestra relating to a rhythm section in a meaningful way?"

Mendoza was discovering answers to these questions with the release of his seventh solo



**“There’s so much mystery in his own writing.”** -Dianne Reeves on Vince Mendoza

album, 1997’s *Epiphany* (Zebra Acoustic), the first of his own to fully utilize a string ensemble — in this case, the London Symphony Orchestra. Mendoza imported many of his musical friends and heroes to the U.K. for the session: Erskine, guitarists Abercrombie and

John Scofield, saxophonists Michael Brecker and Joe Lovano, bassist Johnson, along with pianist (and native Briton) John Taylor and trumpeter Kenny Wheeler. The groundbreaking album created the gold standard for what a symphonic jazz orchestra could sound like.

And yet by then, Mendoza had already begun collaborating with Metropole Orkest, honing his writing and conducting for such a vehicle. “The orchestra of was born out of the ashes of World War II in 1945,” said Mendoza, recounting the history of Metropole. “They were working for different radio stations doing different types of projects, and they were looked at really as a light music orchestra for radio broadcasts.” With each successive conductor, the orchestra adapted to the identity of its leader, becoming more of a studio film orchestra in the ’80s under Rogier van Otterloo, and a pops orchestra in the ’90s with Dick Bakker. By the time Mendoza had agreed in 2005 to become only the fourth principal conductor in its history, he had already established a decade-long rapport with the group as a guest conductor and arranger, ultimately and fully imbibing the orchestra with his jazz sensibilities.

And that attracted jazz musicians to the orchestra. Guitarist Peter Tiehuis had been in Metropole Orkest prior to Mendoza’s first appearances. He had moved on, but as a fan of Mendoza’s music, he decided to rejoin in 1995 on a trial basis for a year. “The first time, [Mendoza] came with Bob Mintzer, and I think the second project was with Mike Stern,” Tiehuis recalled, speaking by phone from Amsterdam. “Those were my heroes, and I

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realized I could play with those people.” He has remained ever since. “One of the finest guitarists in the world — he’s incredible,” Mendoza gushed. Tiehuis’ guitar work is featured on the rock-driven anthem “Big Night.”

Tiehuis, pianist Hans Vroomans, alto saxophonists Marc Scholten and Paul van der Feen, tenor saxophonist Leo Janssen, trumpeter Rik Mol and drummer (as well as co-producer) Martijn Vink form the core of jazz artists in Metropole who are showcased alongside numerous all-stars brought in for *Olympians*. In addition to Reeves, vocalist Cécile McLoren-Salvant makes a memorable appearance on “House Of Reflections,” a haunting ballad written years ago by Mendoza, with lyrics added in 2014 by Norma Winstone, who co-led the group Azimuth with Kenny Wheeler and pianist (and then-husband) John Taylor. Winstone wrote those words to sing at Wheeler’s memorial. As both Winstone and Taylor have also since passed on, this orchestral debut could be a requiem to all three artists and friends of Mendoza.

Saxophonist Chris Potter unleashes a blistering solo on “Barcelona,” which, like “Esperanto,” was both performed by Metropole Orkest and can be heard on *Epiphany*, where the solo was played by Brecker. “It was a bit of, you know, large shoes to step into for that solo,” Mendoza conceded, “but the environment around that solo is totally different, and [Potter] really approached it from a very powerful place.”

Alto saxophonist David Binney has his own incandescent moment on the whirlwind piece “Lake Fire.” Mendoza had utilized Binney’s sound and talent years ago with Metropole, and they reacquainted after Binney relocated to Southern California in 2016 and started playing around town with a quartet of young musicians that included Mendoza’s son, Luca. (The junior Mendoza shared the stage with his father for the first time last fall, a concert at the Ford featuring Luciana Souza.)

Percussionist Alex Acuña and the late charrango player Ramon Stagnaro are featured on the album’s opening track, “Quixote,” adding folkloric authenticity to the Spanish and South American rhythms Mendoza arranged for symphonic orchestra. It was originally commissioned by the Henry Mancini Institute, the former Los Angeles educational organization that sponsored workshops to help young orchestral and jazz musicians understand and appreciate each other’s music through direct collaboration. Mendoza, who now teaches jazz composition and arranging at his alma mater USC, had an outsized role to play there as well. “You know, I hear quite often from the musicians out there that they started and got interested in playing jazz and working with rhythm sections from that Mancini Institute,” he remarked. “And so now, I’d like to think that

that being in [a hybrid jazz-classical] ensemble like that would be a goal of a younger musician the way it is for younger musicians to step into the Metropole.” (In fact, a former attendee of the Mancini Institute, Jules Buckley, went on to succeed Mendoza in 2013 as the current principal director of Metropole Orkest.)

Knowing that younger musicians are now looking to organizations like Metropole as a career goal is just one of many positive outcomes Mendoza has realized during his tenure. “From the first moment I was on the podium with them,” he said, “I felt that we had a connection, and I really appreciated their enthusiasm

and friendly way of working together. We were developing unusual language, and when we had projects that were challenging in terms of stylistic variations — music in different countries or different eras of jazz or whatever — they were always very open to my suggestions of how we could get there. As a result, over the years we’ve been together, they’ve developed a wide palette of possibilities of styles and colors that are very comfortable to them, which makes them really the perfect orchestra to play my music.”

And they continue to do so with power and grace, like Olympic athletes running along a boulevard off into an ocean-framed sunset. **DB**

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