

**Mike Fletcher Jazz Orchestra** presents **Picasso(s):Interactions** – a new suite of music for jazz improvisers inspired by Picasso's *Las Meninas* and Coleman Hawkins' *Picasso*.

### Five questions from an imagined audience-member

#### **What is the connection to Picasso?**

At the beginning of my PhD in early 2015 I found myself in Barcelona with some free time so I went to the Museo Picasso, where I discovered his *Las Meninas* exhibition, which is a collection of 58 paintings that he made based on the much earlier Velazquez painting of the same name. The paintings themselves are, of course, wonderful pieces of art in their own right, but what caught my attention was a short extract from a letter Picasso wrote to his friend Sabartes where the artist explained his process, which I'll paraphrase here. He said something along the lines of "if I were to undertake a faithful copy of Velazquez's *Las Meninas*, there would come a time when I would perhaps be impelled to make a small change, and as a result of this first change more would follow. Gradually it would cease to be a copy and become my (Picasso's) *Las Meninas*."

As a jazz musician I found this description to be resonant of the way we improvise on standard compositions. So I decided to see if I could apply Picasso's process to my own music making.

#### **What about Coleman Hawkins?**

Picasso's project involved copying a seminal masterpiece of Spanish painting. In order to 'copy' Picasso's process I would have to find a similar masterpiece from within my own discipline. I had already decided that it should be a solo saxophone project, so it was an easy decision to make. I would copy the first great solo saxophone piece. A beautiful coincidence is that the first major recording made by a solo saxophonist was Coleman Hawkins' 1948 recording *Picasso* – hence the title *Picasso(s)*.

#### **Why is this music any different to what you've done before?**

The most apparent difference is that it represents the first time I've done a project completely on my own. That said, perhaps the most important difference in terms of the music is that it is all based on a technique I call 'pitch limitation'.

Picasso based his *Las Meninas* entirely on the structure and content of the Velazquez. This is to say that, although he made many changes to the way he depicted Velazquez' tableau, he didn't add in any extra figures or objects. I felt like this was an important part of the procedure, so I decided to do the same with the Hawkins piece. In other words, I transcribed Hawkins' notes, and throughout the piece, these are the only notes I permit myself to use.

In this sense I would argue that this is quite a novel approach to jazz performance because in almost every other type of jazz, the musician is free to choose the notes he or she likes!

### **But isn't *Picasso(s):Interactions* a large ensemble project?**

Yes. The original *Picasso(s)* was a solo piece (which was the basis of my PhD, and is also available as an album). What I have done with the *Interactions* stage is to apply the same pitch limitation process to my work with MFJO. The suite is in three parts, each of which based on a different way of using Hawkins' notes, but the common thread is that you won't hear any other notes throughout the suite!

### **Does improvising in this way make a difference to the musicians' experience?**

This was one of the questions I asked myself when I began the project. I can report that it very much does – perhaps more than I had anticipated.

Improvisers frequently talk about the way that they form habits that, over time, lead them to develop certain formulae. As a result many of us try and find ways to stimulate new ideas. The pitch limitation concept was my way of doing this. I have found that, when performing the piece, an idea occurs to me that I can't complete because the notes I need to complete the phrase are not available. Consequently I have to find a way of resolving the phrase that would not have occurred to me had I followed the first idea. I find this a challenging but very rewarding way of improvising.

Now I have employed the same technique for the large ensemble, the rest of the guys in the band are faced with the same challenge!

### **Five questions for my audience.**

**1 - Do you think it is necessary/valuable for an audience member to understand the processes that musicians use in performance?**

**2 - If so, do you consider it the responsibility of the musician to inform the listener, or the listener to inform his or herself? If not, why not?**

**3 - Do you think you would have noticed any difference in musical approach without having had it explained?**

**4 - Do you think this type of verbal interaction could be relevant to other types of jazz performance?**

**5 - Is it jazz?**

If you would like to respond to these questions you can do so on the back of this sheet, which will be collected at the end of the gig. If you'd prefer to do so online, please send replies (or any other comments) to: [mikefletcherjazz@gmail.com](mailto:mikefletcherjazz@gmail.com) or [@mikefletchermusic](https://www.instagram.com/mikefletchermusic) on social media.

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