

the Salmon STRIKES

John Salmon fine-tunes Brubeck's
classical piano manuscripts

PIANO PROFESSOR DR. JOHN SALMON STILL HAS the reply to the fan letter he sent as a teen to jazz great Dave Brubeck. The personal response is now pressed between two layers of protective plastic.

"Your interest in music of all kinds reminds me of my own sons...If you decide to become a professional musician, the road is rough and the rewards are slim, financially, as my boys are soon learning, but to be doing for a livelihood, what you most want to do with your time, means more than anything else," Brubeck wrote.

Little did Salmon know, the correspondence would be the first step in a friendship and professional collaboration with the famed composer and jazz pianist.

In 1991, the two pianists met when Salmon interviewed Brubeck for *American Music Teacher*. After that meeting, Salmon began mailing Brubeck recordings he had made of Brubeck's piano works. Impressed by Salmon's interpretations, Brubeck began sending him photocopies of manuscripts to edit.

Today, more than a decade later, Salmon has hundreds of

BY TIFFANY AUMANN

PHOTO BY BERT VANDERVEEN '93, '97 MA



loose sheets of music written by Brubeck. There are cantatas, oratorios, pieces for strings and other compositions. In fact, the volume of music is so massive that he took leave fall semester 2002 in order to catalogue the literature. So far, the professor has labored 120 hours and the job is about 70 percent complete.

Also during his absence, the professor was busy editing "Seriously Brubeck," a collection of six piano works, as well as writing its 3,000-word preface. The 204-page publication was co-edited by Salmon and Gail Lew, director of keyboard publications for Warner Brothers, and was published in March.

"I send pieces immediately to John and ask him if he likes them. I trust him (as an editor) to see it through," said Brubeck, lamenting that a dozen errors were found in a score Salmon didn't review. "John has a critical, sharp mind. He's a stickler. It's humorous to watch the way he reacts to music. If it isn't the way he thinks it should be, he can get really red in the face."

Salmon knows Brubeck's music nearly as well as the composer himself. He has written several articles about the jazz artist, including 1992's "What Brubeck Got From Milhaud" for *American Music Teacher*, 1997's "Dave Brubeck's Pioneering Explorations of Rhythm" for *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, and "The Classical Side of Dave Brubeck," printed in 2001 in *American Music Teacher*. In October 2002, he participated in a Brubeck Symposium at Emory University, where he led a master class and a public concert.

Salmon is one of those rare musicians who can slip comfortably between classical and jazz playing styles. As a high school student, he played in a jazz trio. Yet, when he graduated, he decided to follow the classical route, earning a doctorate at The University of Texas at Austin.

"The die is cast and I can't give up either one now," he said.

Last fall, the professor recorded a 55-minute compact disc of Brubeck's music, some of which he was simultaneously editing for "Seriously Brubeck." Through that process, his roles as performer and editor intertwined, resulting in helpful notations in the publication that will offer Salmon's suggestions for performance. Salmon is currently seeking a label for the CD's release.

That versatility has been beneficial in his work with Brubeck, a composer who is constantly blurring the lines between classical and jazz. Although Brubeck composes classi-

cal and choral works, his own playing style leans toward jazz. "I stumble through classical," he confessed.

Without Salmon's initiative, many of Brubeck's pieces would have faded into obscurity, said the famed composer. The professor has crafted piano solo arrangements for works originally written for string quartet and small chamber ensemble.

"There were things that had been hanging around for years," Brubeck said, citing the dark piano solo "Tritonis" as an example. "John really believed in that piece. Otherwise, it might never have seen the light of day."

Brubeck, 82, is still touring and writing prolifically.

While known to mainstream audiences as the creative genius behind "Time Out" and "Blue Rondo a la Turk," Brubeck is also a talented composer of classical work. With nearly 100 minutes of playing time written for solo piano, Brubeck has surpassed Samuel Barber's output by 40 minutes and approaches Aaron Copland's 115 minutes of literature.

"Seriously Brubeck" makes a statement about the composer's range. It includes six large-scale compositions for piano: "The Salmon Strikes," "Tritonis," "They All Sang Yankee Doodle," "Chromatic Fantasy Sonata," "Points on Jazz" and the Milhaud-inspired "Glances." Of the selections, "Chromatic Fantasy Sonata" has been the most difficult to edit, Salmon said. Littered with accidentals, the piece requires meticulous analysis.

Brubeck paid tribute to his editor's piano performance by dedicating a composition to him called "The Salmon Strikes." He has played a jazz version in concert with the Dave Brubeck Quartet, but the classical version has never been performed.

It was published for the first time in "Seriously Brubeck." Through music, Brubeck draws the analogy between Salmon's hard-hitting technique and a feisty salmon he wrangled during a 1960s fishing trip in Alaska.

"It starts out very brash," explained Salmon. "There's a place when the salmon is circling the boat, and then it progresses to when the salmon takes off in a rage."

Salmon has previously edited two other publications of Brubeck's work, "Nocturnes" and "Two Part Adventures." Going beyond catching typographical errors, he attempts to capture Brubeck's stylistic intentions during the editing process and to ensure the music is playable.

"I take this very seriously," Salmon said. "When you commit something to print, that's a sacred act. I am doing this for the precocious 12-year-old in Kansas who is going to play this. He would catch an error. I was like that." 