



**Pianist and Brookview School music teacher Larry Schanker wrote "Concerto for Jazz Piano," which will receive its world premiere Saturday night as part of the Southwest Michigan Symphony Orchestra's "Whirlpool 100th Celebration." Don Campbell / H-P staff**

*Whirlpool concert features premiere of Schanker's 'Concerto for Jazz Piano'*

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BENTON HARBOR - Two years ago Larry Schanker approached music director and conductor Robin Fountain about writing something for the Southwest Michigan Symphony Orchestra.

"I had been watching these musicians for a long time," the 52-year-old pianist says between classes at the Brookview School in Benton Harbor, where he's taught music the past 15 years. "I told Robin that I was interested in writing a concerto for jazz piano and we talked about it for a while."

What Schanker didn't know at the time was that Fountain was just as eager to work with him.

"I worked with Larry on some other projects and it was blindly clear to me that he is one of the most all-around accomplished musicians that I know," Fountain says by telephone from his office at Vanderbilt University in Nashville, Tenn. "He is the master of so many aspects of music making - improvisation, jazz, piano playing and composition - he's a truly remarkable person."

So when Fountain and the SMSO decided to dedicate a concert honoring the 100th anniversary of Whirlpool Corp. during its Mendel Mainstage Season, he immediately thought of Schanker's proposal.

"When I started to think of how to program a concert that celebrates the founding of Whirlpool one of the things I thought about was its innovation," Fountain says. "My next thought was that we have to have a premiere so we can make explicit the creativity that's in St. Joe and Benton Harbor and that we should commission someone from this region. Then I remembered Larry and it was this light bulb moment."

On Saturday when the SMSO presents its "Whirlpool 100th Celebration," at Lake Michigan College's Mendel Center, Schanker will join Fountain and the orchestra on stage as guest soloist for the world premiere of his "Concerto for Jazz Piano."

"I had always wanted to write a piece like this that incorporates all the different styles I've worked with for many years into a traditionally structured work," Schanker says. "But it grounded the work even more knowing I was writing it for this concert and specifically for this symphony."

Structurally, Schanker's concerto follows a form that has been around for centuries. It's a four-movement work, with the first and fourth movements book ending the piece in a fast tempo, the second movement much slower, and the third in waltz time, like the scherzo of countless symphonies and concertos. What's different is how Schanker has approached those movements.

The piece includes styles that are a result of a lifetime of musical influences, ranging from Oscar Peterson, to Rachmaninoff, to TV music of the 1970s, to European film music, to ragtime and gospel.

"The first movement has almost a cartoon feel with these bluesy patterns on piano and a lot of syncopation," Schanker says. "The second is very bossa nova-like and percussion plays a large role in that. The third movement is a waltz, but it's a jazz waltz, and the fourth is in this celebratory gospel where several instruments are improvising simultaneously in a New Orleans style."

"When I received the first three movements I was jubilant because it was exactly the kind of piece I thought Larry would write," Fountain says. "There aren't very many people who have the range of skills to write a true jazz concerto, and Larry is one of them."

Schanker, who grew up in Long Island, N.Y., started playing piano at age 4 when his sisters Janet and Karen taught him to read music.

"Then they got mad at me because they heard me playing their pieces while they were laying in bed on Saturday mornings," Schanker says, laughing.

He first moved to the Midwest to study piano at Northwestern University and began to study under Chicago jazz pianist Alan Swain.

"He really gave me a love for jazz," Schanker says. "He just had a way of helping you accent the other eighth note and help the music swing. I still teach what he taught me."

It was also in Chicago that Schanker discovered his penchant for composing musical underscoring for theater and film. He played live for the Second City Comedy troupe, and composed music for the Goodman Theater, the National Jewish Theater and the Court Theatre, among others, and earned his doctorate at the University of Chicago.

Since moving to St. Joseph with his wife, Jenny, whom he met at the Goodman, Schanker has been a local music staple, composing numerous pieces for programs at The Citadel Dance & Music Center, including "Around the World in the Season of Light," a 60-minute multi-cultural celebration of the holiday season, and backing local and guest artists.

But even with that vast amount of experience, Schanker admits he's having a hard time trying to play off just how much Saturday's concert means to him, which was evident at a recent rehearsal with the SMSO.

"I tried to be cool," he says, "but hearing this piece with the orchestra for the first time is something I'll never forget. The work feels wonderfully grounded under Robin's baton, and at the same time, it's very malleable - he leaves room for the give and take that is the essence of jazz."

"Judging by his Cheshire cat grin at the end of our rehearsal," Fountain adds, laughing, "I'm sure he slept very well that night."

There will be other pieces in Saturday's concert. Fountain has tapped Aaron Copland's "Fanfare for the Common Man," "Corral Nocturne" and "Hoe-Down," as well as Czech composer Antonin Dvorak's "New World Symphony" for the event. There also will be a slideshow presentation from the Whirlpool archives, in a program Fountain has designed to recognize what he describes as Whirlpool's "quintessential American success story." But, in the end, even he knows, that all eyes will really be on Schanker.

"Those who know Larry are all rooting that this piece will be as good as I said it is," Fountain says. "Any time you make a commission you take a risk. Frankly, I just thought this was a great bet. And it turned out to be one of my better ones."

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