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New England
Conservatory

Concert Program

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The Music of George Russell

NEC Jazz Orchestra
Ken Schaphorst, director

Thursday, October 19, 2023
7:30 p.m.
NEC's Jordan Hall

PROGRAM

George Russell
(1923–2009)
arr. Jerry Coker

Ezz-thetic

arr. Gil Evans

Stratusphunk

Vernon Duke/Burton Lane
arr. George Russell

Autumn in New York/How About You?

George Russell

All About Rosie

from *The African Game*

Event II: The Paleolithic Game

Event III: Consciousness

Event IV: The Survival Game

Event V: The Human Sensing of Unity
with Great Nature

Event IX: The Future

NEC Jazz Orchestra
Ken Schaphorst, conductor

Winds

Zack Bacak, alto saxophone, soprano saxophone, clarinet
Lenka Molcanyiova, alto saxophone, soprano saxophone
Logan From, tenor saxophone, soprano saxophone, flute
Lorenzo Cortese, tenor saxophone, clarinet
Matt Wessner, baritone saxophone, bass clarinet

Trumpets

Richard Stanmeyer	Koki Renwick
Woody Pierre	Sammy Davies

Trombones

Aiden Coleman	Yimin Ji
Cooper Malanowski	Weza Jamison-Neto

Rhythm

Longfei Li, piano	Nick Isherwood, bass
Peikun Liu, guitar	Caleb Montague, drums

George Russell was a hugely influential, innovative figure in the evolution of modern jazz, the music's only major theorist, one of its most profound composers, a trail blazer whose ideas have transformed and inspired some of the greatest musicians of our time. One of a rare breed of musician-thinkers, his ideas had a remarkable influence on the development of post-World War II music.

Russell was born in Cincinnati in 1923, the adopted son of a registered nurse and a chef on the B&O Railroad. He began playing drums with the Boy Scout Drum and Bugle Corps, and eventually received a scholarship to Wilberforce University where he joined the Collegians, whose list of alumni include Coleman Hawkins, Benny Carter, Fletcher Henderson, Ben Webster, and Frank Foster. But his most valuable musical education came in 1941; attempting to enlist in the Marines, he was diagnosed with tuberculosis and spent 6 months in the hospital where he was taught the fundamentals of music theory by a fellow patient. He joined Benny Carter's Orchestra as a drummer, but was soon replaced by Max Roach. Carter had played one of Russell's compositions and, as Russell recalled, "Benny had paid me for it. I was launched on a writing career, and that was fortuitous, because after hearing Max, I decided to give up drumming." After hearing Thelonious Monk, Russell decided he had to be at the center of things, and moved to New York where he became part of the jazz Bloomsbury who gathered in the basement apartment of arranger-composer,

Gil Evans. Miles Davis, Gerry Mulligan, Max Roach, Charlie Parker and others would drop in to be a part of the energy emanating from Evans' one room in the basement. Dizzy Gillespie commissioned Russell to write a piece for his orchestra; the result was the seminal "Cubano Be/Cubano Bop," one of the first fusions of Afro-Cuban rhythms with jazz, premiered at Carnegie Hall in 1947 while Russell was working behind a New York lunch counter. Two years later, his "Bird in Igor's Yard" was recorded by Buddy DeFranco. Combining elements of Stravinsky and Charlie "Bird" Parker, the piece was considered too radical, and wasn't released by the record company until the 1960s.

A remark made by Miles Davis when Russell asked him his musical aim set Russell on the course which became his life's work. Miles said he wanted to "learn all the changes." Russell was puzzled because he knew Miles already knew all the chord progressions. What he eventually determined was that Miles was seeking a different way to relate to chords, rather than the arpeggiation approach to melody that was prevalent for soloists. This began a quest for Russell, and again hospitalized for 16 months, he hit upon his now widely known intuition that every scale had a chord of unity, or a Parent Scale. The theory became the basis for his book, *The Lydian Chromatic Concept of Tonal Organization*. First published in 1953, "the Concept" proposed a new set of relationships between chords and scales, opening the way for modal music, and influencing Davis, John Coltrane, Bill Evans and generations of musicians since. Miles applied the Concept to the making of his *Kind of Blue*, the first modal jazz record, and the best-selling record in jazz history. Using the Lydian Scale as the primary scale of Western music, the Lydian Chromatic Concept introduced the idea of chord/scale unity; it was the first theory to explore the vertical relationship between chords and scales, and was the only original theory to come from jazz.

Throughout the 1950s and '60s, Russell continued developing the Concept, leading bands under his direction. In the mid-fifties, a superb sextet, including Bill Evans and Art Farmer, recorded under his direction, producing *Jazz Workshop*, an album of astonishing originality; the often dense textures and rhythms anticipated the jazz-rock movement of the 1970s. During this time, Russell was also working odd jobs as a counterman in a lunch spot and selling toys at Macy's at Christmas. The release of *Jazz Workshop* put an end to Russell's jobs outside of music.

At the same time, the Third Stream movement was gaining favor with composers such as Gunther Schuller, who recommended Russell for the Brandeis University Festival of the Creative Arts—the first time an American university had commissioned works by jazz composers. Russell's classic, *All About Rosie*, was based on a motif from a southern African-American children's game song, "Rosie, Little Rosie." Written in three movements, the first alternates between 2/2 and 3/2 in repeated and sequenced phrases through various sections of the orchestra. The brisk third movement is at the same time languorous and bluesy, with Russell bringing several seemingly disparate lines into crisp tonal focus. The piece featured Bill Evans on piano, and was nominated for a Grammy.

In 1959 Russell gathered a Who's Who in jazz to record *New York, New York*. With poetry by Jon Hendricks and featuring Bill Evans, Max Roach, John Coltrane,

Milt Hinton, Bob Brookmeyer, Art Farmer, Doc Severinsen, Ernie Royal, and many others, the recording is striking in its evocation of the New York of the late fifties. From 1960, Russell began leading his own sextets around the New York area and at festivals; he also toured throughout the Midwest and Europe with his sextet. His sextet made four notable albums on the Riverside label. One of the most important was *Ezz-thetic*, which featured Eric Dolphy, Don Ellis and Steve Swallow. Russell wrote it in honor of his neighbor from his boyhood home in Cincinnati, Ezzard Charles, the heavyweight champion of the world. *Ezz-thetic* was first recorded by Lee Konitz, with Miles Davis, Lennie Tristano and Max Roach.

In 1964, Russell and his group joined the George Wein All Stars on a European tour. Arriving in Scandinavia in a wheel chair after another bout of bad health, he found immediate acceptance within the new music community. He began to write and record for Norwegian and Swedish Broadcasting. This afforded the opportunity to experiment with his concept of vertical form, which he likened to an African drum choir—layers or strata of divergent modes of rhythmic behavior built upon a tonal center, going nowhere but up or down the scale of vertical density, stopping, in effect, horizontal time. One of his most adventurous vertical form pieces is *Listen to the Silence: A Mass for Our Time*, which was recorded in Norway during the Vietnam war. Written for jazz orchestra, featuring Russell protégés Jan Garbarek and Terje Rypdal, soloists and chorus, the work juxtaposes chanted and sung text from sources as varied as Rainer Maria Rilke and Newsweek.

In 1969, Russell returned to the States to assume a position in the NEC's newly created jazz department at the invitation of then president Gunther Schuller, where he remained until his retirement in 2004. During his tenure, he continued to revise his theory, publishing a final greatly expanded volume in 2001. He also wrote and led big bands in tours of America and Europe. In 1983 he was commissioned to write what is widely considered his magnum opus, *The African Game*, which *The New York Times* called "one of the most significant releases of the last several years." The recording received two Grammy nominations in 1985.

Russell taught throughout the world. Invited to tour the UK through the Contemporary Music Network in 1986, he brought with him a core of American musicians to join the best of Britain's jazz players. The Living Time Orchestra toured and recorded throughout Europe and Japan until 2003, doing special projects and residencies which include the Festival D'automne and the Cité de la Musique in Paris, the Umbria Jazz Festival, the Barbican Centre, Tokyo Music Joy, and many more. Russell's last extended work, *It's About Time*, is a further refinement of his vertical form concept and the vast palette of tonal resources his Concept provides; his ability to construct masses of sound with exuberant, prolonged finales is a hallmark of his writing and his belief that music is a total commitment to the physical, emotional and intellectual.

Russell received the MacArthur Foundation Fellowship, the National Endowment for the Arts American Jazz Master, two Guggenheim Fellowships, the Oscar du Disque de Jazz, the Guardian Award, six NEA Music Fellowships, the

American Music Award, and was elected a Foreign Member of the Royal Swedish Academy.

Upcoming Concerts at NEC

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JOHN HEISS MEMORIAL CONCERT

Faculty, alumni and current students celebrate the life of John Heiss on what would have been his 85th birthday. Reception in Brown Hall follows the concert.

Monday, October 23, 2023 at 4:00 p.m., Jordan Hall

TUESDAY NIGHT NEW MUSIC

New music by NEC student composers, performed by their peers

Tuesday, October 24, 2023 at 8:00 p.m., Brown Hall

NEC PHILHARMONIA, Earl Lee, guest conductor

Schumann *Manfred Overture*; Shin *Upon His Ghostly Solitude* (2023);

Brahms *Symphony No. 2 in D Major, op. 73*

Wednesday, October 25, 2023 at 7:30 p.m., Jordan Hall

SONATA NIGHT 47, Pei-Shan Lee, director

All Brahms program in collaboration with Mai Motobuchi's viola studio

Thursday, October 26, 2023 at 6:30 p.m., Burnes Hall

NEC COMPOSERS' SERIES

Works by NEC faculty and alumni composers

Thursday, October 26, 2023 at 7:30 p.m., Jordan Hall

RESIDENCY CONCERT: THE MUSIC OF DAVE HOLLAND

Thursday, October 26, 2023 at 8:00 p.m., Eben Jordan

"EMBRACING CORETTA: A CELEBRATION OF CORETTA SCOTT KING":

A sabbatical project by pianist Timothy Steele; program includes Rush *Dear Coretta*

(premiere); works by Black composers and poets; performers include Sarah Joyce

Cooper soprano; Neil Nelson, bass-baritone; Melissa Joseph, soprano; Daon Drisdorn,

tenor; Timothy Steele, piano, and others

Monday, October 30, 2023 at 7:30 p.m., Jordan Hall

NEC CHAMBER ORCHESTRA, Donald Palma, artistic director

Haydn *Symphony No. 6 "Le Matin"*; Stravinsky *Concerto in D*;

Rózsa *Concerto for Strings, op. 17*

Wednesday, November 1, 2023 at 7:30 p.m., Jordan Hall

Upcoming Concerts at NEC

—continued

FIRST MONDAY IN JORDAN HALL, Laurence Lesser, artistic director - 39th season
Rachmaninoff *Songs*; Rachmaninoff *Trio élégiaque No. 2 in D Minor, op. 9*
Monday, November 6, 2023 at 7:30 p.m., Jordan Hall

TUESDAY NIGHT NEW MUSIC

New music by NEC student composers, performed by their peers
Tuesday, November 7, 2023 at 8:00 p.m., Brown Hall

NEC PHILHARMONIA & SYMPHONIC CHOIR, David Loebel, conductor
Pärt *Fratres*; Mozart “*Great*” *Mass in C Minor, K. 427* - soloists: Yeonjae Cho,
Josie Larsen, Ruoxi Peng, Shiyu Zhou, soprano; Suowei Wu, tenor; Hyungjin Son,
baritone
Wednesday, November 8, 2023 at 7:30 p.m., Jordan Hall

SONATA NIGHT 48, Pei-Shan Lee, director
All Schumann program in collaboration with Ayano Ninomiya’s violin studio
Thursday, November 9, 2023 at 6:00 p.m., Burnes Hall

FACULTY RECITAL: VIVIAN HORNIK WEILERSTEIN, piano, **CAMERON STOWE**, piano, **SARI GRUBER**, soprano, **DONALD WEILERSTEIN**, violin
Works by Ives, Kurtág, Schubert, and Weinberg
Thursday, November 9, 2023 at 7:30 p.m., Jordan Hall

FACULTY RECITAL: LAURENCE LESSER, cello, and **MINSOO SOHN**, piano
Bartók *Rhapsody No. 1 for Cello and Piano*; Bach *Cello Suite No. 6*; Rachmaninoff, *Sonata in G Minor for Cello and Piano*
Monday, November 13, 2023 at 7:30 p.m., Jordan Hall

CMA DEPARTMENT: “1923”

A retrospective concert directed by Anthony Coleman
Tuesday, November 14, 2023 at 7:30 p.m., Jordan Hall

NEC NEW MUSIC ENSEMBLE, Hugh Wolff, conductor
Ligeti *Six Bagatelles*; Stravinsky *Octet*; Villa-Lobos *Bachianas brasileiras No. 5*;
Boulez *Messagesquise*; Yuan-Chen Li *Butterfly*; Piazzolla excerpts from *The Four Seasons of Buenos Aires*
Tuesday, November 14, 2023 at 8:00 p.m., Brown Hall

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