

# WIGMORE HALL

Monday 2 May 2022 1.00pm

Celebrating Gershwin

## Julian Bliss Septet

Julian Bliss clarinet

Colin Oxley guitar

Lewis Wright vibraphone

Tom Farmer bass

Jason Rebello piano

Ed Richardson drums

Martin Shaw trumpet



This concert is being broadcast on BBC Radio 3



This concert is part of the CAVATINA Chamber Music Trust ticket scheme, offering free tickets to those aged 8-25

Improvisatory programme to include arrangements of:

**George Gershwin** (1898-1937)

From *Girl Crazy* (1930)

I Got Rhythm • Embraceable You

Strike Up the Band from *Strike Up the Band* (1927)

From *Porgy and Bess* (1935)

Summertime • I Loves You, Porgy

They Can't Take That Away from Me from *Shall We Dance* (1937)

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## Julian Bliss talks about his Septet and *Celebrating Gershwin* to Sebastian Scotney

*I have the impression that the Julian Bliss Septet is taking on a new lease of life...*

That's right. Lewis Wright – he's the vibraphonist from the group Empirical – has been with the band for more than eight years now, but since last year has taken on a new role as joint Musical Director with me. Not only is he one of the world's top vibraphone players, he is also an incredibly skilful arranger.

I'm really enjoying working with him, because I've always wanted this group to be a joint effort between everyone. I am very lucky to have a group of world-class musicians, and so I always want everyone to feel free to express themselves rather than just one person telling everybody what to do (!) It is also important to me that the people get on with each other socially as well, and that works really well within this group. I am truly indebted to my friends and fantastic colleagues, there just wouldn't be a band without them – Lewis Wright, and also Martin Shaw, Jason Rebello, Colin Oxley, Tom Farmer and Ed Richardson. They all bring their own flair and talent to each tune we play and make every performance totally enjoyable.

Lewis is also helping to formulate the programmes, and we're putting some new ones together. There's one about jazz that has been used in films. There are a huge amount of fantastic tunes that have been featured in film, and it's been fun to explore that world. We also have a new programme about the jazz innovators like Duke Ellington, Wayne Shorter, Chick Corea... All that modern harmony, those colourful voicings... the 'expensive' chords (laughs) – I just love that!

*And Jason Rebello is the newest member in the band?*

We have some incredible jazz players in this country, and Jason is certainly one of them! The first gig we did together last year is something I'll not forget, ever. I suggested he might do a piano introduction to a ballad and I didn't want to play and interrupt him! That incredible touch; it was one of the most beautiful things I've ever heard!

*You are mainly a classical player – where did the interest in jazz come from?*

I've always listened to jazz, and to be honest the barriers between genres frustrate me. I think everyone who is learning classical music theory should also be given at least a grounding in jazz harmony. I've a soft spot for early jazz... I've listened to a lot of the great vocalists too. That whole business of how individually and personally a phrase can be inflected, my ears are completely alive to that kind of thing. I've been fascinated try to find out WHY they play what they play...

*And jazz clarinetists?*

We did our first septet programme based on Benny Goodman. I've listened really intently to Goodman for many years, I've transcribed solos, assimilated them, learned them, played them, and I still do. We're adding new tunes and evolving that programme all the time. I like the earlier players too. And I've been listening to the likes of Buddy DeFranco and Eddie Daniels for many years as well, I love both of those players, I want to hear the evolution of the jazz clarinet, to try to understand and incorporate that vocabulary. And I am also a huge admirer of some UK-based jazz clarinetists who have also become good friends: Giacomo Smith and Adrian Cox – the way they play is incredible! The septet also plays with the great pianist Joe Webb who works a lot with Giacomo and Adrian. He is also an incredible talent and a lovely guy... We are very lucky to have some truly exceptional musicians in this country.

*Will your Wigmore Hall programme have a fixed set?*

We don't ever have a completely fixed set, I try to bring variety, build energy, then step out into a ballad, it's about capturing the moment...

Having said that, whereas we normally do concerts of two sets, with this one we are going to have to land it at fifty minutes on the button, to make way for the news on the radio!

*And the programme is called Celebrating Gershwin...*

Gershwin is certainly worth celebrating: that astonishing outpouring, that vast quantity of great tunes during his 38-year life is one of the great miracles of 20th-century music. I love the way that he blurred the lines between the classical and jazz genres.

### Four tunes from the *Celebrating Gershwin* programme

'Summertime' is a window into not just one but two masterpieces. The 'great art' and 'human truth' (Maya Angelou) of Gershwin's opera *Porgy and Bess*, and also the 1959 Miles Davis/Gil Evans album of the same name. It is heard tonight in a new arrangement from **Lewis Wright**.

'Embraceable You', performed here as a slow ballad, is from the 1930 musical *Girl Crazy*. It helped to make Ginger Rogers an overnight star.

'They Can't Take That Away from Me' was introduced by Fred Astaire in the 1937 film *Shall We Dance*.

No song of Gershwin's went through as many versions and revisions as 'Strike Up the Band'. These days, London jazz musicians are irresistibly drawn to give it a local tweak...and refer to it as 'Bike Up the Strand'.

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