

Mark Lewis aiming to convert Bremerton Symphony fans to jazz

Mark Lewis joins the Bremerton Symphony Orchestra Oct. 21 to salute jazz great Charlie Parker.

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BREMERTON — The formal, tuxes-and-heels world of classical music doesn't phase Mark Lewis at all. He shrugged off a question about playing to a Bremerton Symphony Orchestra crowd that might have a pooh-pooh attitude about his chosen milieu, jazz.

"They won't have when I'm done with them," he smiled playfully from behind a set of self-constructed double-lens glasses that help him read enlarged musical scores despite his almost-total blindness.

The saxophonist-flutist-composer is well known around the Puget Sound area, and recognized around the jazz world as a major talent, if not a singular one. But when Lewis steps on stage for the BSO's season-opening "Jazz and the Romantic" program Oct. 21, he'll be on somewhat foreign ground.

"They play very well," Lewis said of the orchestra after just the first of several rehearsals leading up to the 7:30 p.m. concert. "I like playing with them, and I think we're all going to have a great time."

The program is a musical salute to jazz icon Charlie Parker, featuring selections from a series of albums titled "Charlie Parker with Strings" — which Lewis several times referred to as "Bird with Strings," using Parker's nickname. Also on tap is Lewis's own composition "Bop," an homage to Parker that he performs every year in Kansas City at a party marking Parker's birthday.

Following the recovery time afforded by the intermission, the orchestra will return to play Howard Hanson's "Romantic" symphony.

Lewis said he used to refer to classical players as "long-hair musicians." But it was a coincidental meeting at a hair-shortening venue that put him together with BSO music director and conductor Alan Futterman, and sowed the seed of the Oct. 21 concert.

"I was getting my hair cut by Don Ward there at Timothy Stimac's," Lewis said, "and Alan was in there at the same time. Don introduced us, and Alan right way suggested that I do something with the symphony."

The two met later and Futterman gave Lewis a list of pieces for his consideration.

"'Bird with Strings' I like because the arrangements are interesting," Lewis said. "I liked a lot of the other pieces (on Futterman's list), too, but I didn't realize they'd be so heavily arranged."

For the "Charlie Parker with Strings" performance, Lewis said, the orchestra plays the basic score, and "I supply the jazz. I basically play around inside their framework."

Lewis was born in Tacoma and raised on a farm near Gig Harbor. After studies at Western Washington University and Cornish, he moved to the Netherlands, where he began his careers as a performer, recording artist and teacher. He later moved to San Francisco, and earned a recording contract from an audition for jazz great Stan Getz.

Since settling in Bremerton, he has continued to compose and record prolifically, his West Bremerton rooms doubling as a studio. He's played weekly at venues around the area, and tours annually. He said he has long considered Bremerton to be a "jazz town."

"Cap DiMiero started jazz with Ralph Mutchler at (Olympic College)," he said. "I saw Stan Kenton, Stan Getz, a lot of people at festivals at OC."