

Renewing the Myth
Saturday, June 23, 7:30pm
Vancouver Community
College Auditorium
by Colin MacDonald

In a weekend dedicated to the Vancouver International Jazz Festival we might forget that the saxophone didn't always have its place at the head of a combo or big band, but actually started out as an orchestral instrument. French Romantic composer and symphonic reformer Hector Berlioz even recognized the nascent invention's potential: "...a delicious instrument which lends itself to the finest nuances, to the most subtle shadings, as well as to majestic accents...." Despite its worldwide popularity, this relatively young instrument is still seeking proper acceptance in the field of classical music. However, with a wealth of talented local performers, that goal is well in sight.

Classical saxophonists have had to become good thieves in order to expand the repertoire of the instrument, and half of the evening's program was borrowed from other instruments. Although intended for an unaccompanied oboe, Benjamin Britten approved his *Six Metamorphoses after Ovid* to be played on the soprano saxophone. These short movements took inspiration from Greek myths of supernatural transformations, and Britten developed simple folk-like melodies into complex textures. The intensity of David Branter's performance filled the hall, proving that no supporting musicians were required.

Predating the saxophone's invention, Ludwig van Beethoven's *Trio Op. 87* was written for two oboes and english horn, but was arranged here for soprano, alto, and tenor saxes. Guest artist Dr.

Eugene Rousseau, an international soloist and one of the living masters of the instrument, joined local musicians David Branter and Julia Nolan in a performance that highlighted the elegance of Beethoven. The combination of brass and woodwind elements made it possible to achieve both extremes of strength and delicacy that characterize Beethoven, and the arrangement was perfectly natural.

Some very strong original repertoire revealed the possibilities for virtuosity. *Mirage*, by Vancouver-born composer Nicholas Scherzinger, was a mysterious and surreal dialogue for alto sax and piano, a dreamlike texture where melodies appeared and disappeared through shimmering chordal structures. The richness of Julia Nolan's tone was balanced by the sensitive and ethereal piano playing of Terence Dawson. Ranging from meditative to dramatic, Scherzinger's atonal harmonies seemed quaintly archaic, a reverie of a previous era.

"Doing battle with the Devil" was how alto saxophonist Lynne Greenwood described *Renewing the Myth*, by American composer Marilyn Shrude. The myth in question was the assumption that technical virtuosity must come from selling your soul, and the piece made musical references to the famous 24th *Caprice* of violinist Niccolò Paganini. Greenwood, joined by her husband Julian Greenwood on piano, gave a dramatic performance of this expressionistic work, demonstrating extremes of both power and lyricism.

Dazzling speed was the order of the day in Stephen Chatman's *Music for Two Alto Saxophones*, a perpetual motion machine played by Branter and Nolan. The two instruments became one as they

traded off seamless melodies,
played mirror images, and
combined in parallel harmonies.
As one of the more experimental
pieces by local composer Chatman,
the work challenges the technical
precision of its performers, but the
duo proved they could have a good
time while showing off some
burning fingerwork.