

# EXPLODING THE BOUNDARIES

What happens when a classical violinist, Zoë Black, and a jazz pianist, Joe Chindamo, decide to make beautiful music together? **Jill Fraser** finds out



Joe Chindamo is not happy. The celebrated pianist and composer, one of Australia's finest and most versatile, has been compelled to launch a new label purely to avoid the tag, classical crossover.

A number of tracks on Chindamo's latest CD, *Dido's Lament*, a collaboration with life partner, violin virtuoso, Zoë Black and recorded on their new label, Mo'OzArt, are re-workings of classical pieces: new compositions that utilize pre-existing thematic material, such as Purcell's *Dido's Lament*, Handel's *Ombra Mai Fu* and Puccini's *Nessun Dorma*. The practice of appropriating

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another artist's work in order to create something of one's own is a tradition that dates back to Bach.

“Our recording reignites this tradition,” says Chindamo.

But after two decades of a stellar career and an outstanding reputation worldwide, the multi-award winning jazz artist, composer, arranger and improviser is struggling to shake the jazz association.

Established record labels insist on dubbing these re-workings, fusion or crossover while Chindamo argues that they are standalone compositions that represent “a new conversation in classical music”.

His exasperation is clear as he discusses the “one-size-fits-all” attitude he has encountered in the recording industry. “For many, classical music has become a showcase for museum pieces and in the quest to find new paths crossover projects have become increasingly popular. Most have succeeded in creating a meeting of comfort zones with each protagonist staying well within the confines of their genre and making little or no attempt to modify,” he groans.

“One dances the Tango, the other the Pride of Erin and as long as they don't trip each other up it passes as a cultural meeting.”

*Dido's Lament* is neither fusion nor crossover, he says, declaring that rather it “offers a new vision”.

The “new conversation” and vision to which Chindamo refers comes about, he explains, by extending the vocabulary of possibilities within the (classical) genre by stretching the harmonic language through use of complex dissonances and other elements. The end result retains a sound that retains the integrity of the original and remains within the classical category.

Brisbane-born Dale Barltrop, Concertmaster of the Melbourne Symphony Orchestra and jointly the Vancouver Symphony Orchestra agrees. After listening to *Dido's Lament* Barltrop made the pronouncement that Chindamo takes Baroque “where it hasn't been before while remaining true to its style and aesthetic”.

“By using Baroque as a compositional device and extending its language creatively (not via mimicry or parody) Zoë and I are doing something different; possibly even leading the way for a renaissance of the



style as a compositional tool, not just a genre that serves performers,” muses Chindamo, admitting he is starting to identify with André Previn and Leonard Bernstein, both of whom confronted prejudice when they changed genres. “I'm fighting now what they faced in the '40s and '50s.”

Chindamo's success as a jazz musician and status as a jazz icon are clearly contributing factors – the assumption being that everything he touches turns to jazz. His career spans 38 years. He cut his first record at age 14. With 20 CDs to his name (many topping charts in Japan – his ARIA-nominated CD *Joy of Standards* reached number 1 on the HMV modern jazz charts in Japan, the first Australian artist to have achieved this distinction). He has shared the stage with greats such as Ray Brown, Billy Cobham, Lee Konitz, Mike and Randy Brecker, Frank Morgan, Mark Turner, Ernie Watts, Ravi Coltrane, Larry Coryell and James Morrison... So it's perhaps no surprise that the jazz moniker is hard to shift.

Chindamo likens his approach of compositional re-workings to Rachmaninov's utilization of Paganini's theme to create his famous Rhapsody.

“No one in his or her right mind could dare call that crossover,” he says. “And that's even though Rachmaninov's harmonic palette would sound more like Keith Jarrett's to the ears of the demonic violinist, were

Chindamo and Black have created three albums already in their four-year relationship

the latter to be transported to the 20th century.

"Similarly, Mozart used a Clementi Sonata as a kick-off point for the overture to his *Magic Flute*, Bach incorporated a couple of pop songs in one of his *Goldberg Variations*, Liszt utilised Mozart's *Don Giovanni* in his virtuosic paraphrases and so on."

He points out that there is no stylistic dissonance in any of the above.

"That's what I strive for in my composing," he says. It's what gives it an authenticity. Even when I make use of jazz I modify and mould it to seamlessly fit with Zoë's

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classical aesthetic. Similarly, when Zoë plays anything resembling jazz, she makes sure she doesn't try to swing like a saxophone, which is the mistake nearly all classical musicians make when attempting jazz."

Asked why he chooses to embark on excursions into other composers' works when he is perfectly capable of creating his own original compositions he quips: "Maybe there's a larrikin spirit in me. If someone says I'm not allowed to do something it's the first thing I want to do."

Often it's about having fun exploring different methods and styles. "Sometimes I want to write in someone else's style just to see if I can do it. I recently composed a 'violinistic' twin to accompany all Bach's *Goldberg Variations*. It's much more than just a line on top, it's a conversation and in contrast to much of my other work I made no attempt to depart from Bach's style. It was a challenge (a dangerous one) to attempt to channel such a genius and if all that transpires is that I succeeded in not ruining the music, I've performed a small miracle."

His choice of pieces to re-work is determined by a range of factors. He seems amused at the question: "I suppose I would have to choose something that speaks to me, something that contains an element that aligns with my personal aesthetic. It could be as simple as a lovely chord change or something I think I could make my own. Or sometimes I try to find the *Id* in a piece and learn what it's saying."

He is very clear that his motivation has nothing to do with a desire to improve the original or a view that he is better than the composer.

Black, Chindamo's partner of over four years, is his harshest critic. He admits to being "filled with terror" every time he places a piece of

music in front of her and refers to their common 'take no prisoners attitude' towards music.

"If something doesn't work she smells it before I do," he chuckles. Black agrees that they are tough on each other and push each other hard. "I know how good Joe can be and I want him to be that good for himself and for us. And I want to impress him so that pushes me further," she says.

"I've been a classical musician all my life and playing with Joe has opened my eyes to a whole new world.

"Playing with him gives me a sense of freedom, an ability to be myself, much more than I've ever experienced playing in a strictly classical ensemble.

"He encourages me bring out all the nuances I have picked up along the way. I've become more confident and expansive, which I think comes from being more aware of harmony and structure. As classical players we tend to focus solely on our own line rather than being aware of the piece as a whole."

One of the leading violinists of her generation and a regular with the Australian Chamber Orchestra, Black brings all the elements of her classical background to the couple's musical dialogue, along with a few surprising ingredients. Together, Black and Chindamo make a formidable musical duo.

Chindamo values Black's input during the composing process. He talks of tweaking compositions based on her feedback and how being with her has taught him through osmosis to write for the violin.

Their mutual respect for each other as consummate musicians is powerful and underpins the chemistry apparent in their music.

"I fell in love with her playing before I fell in love with her," Chindamo declares. "I



guess I'm a romantic. Actually we both are," he laughs. He refers to a "rare juggernaut-thing happening" when their musical styles collide.

"Zoë possesses an incredible groove, which is exceptional among classical musicians. Classical music can and should be groovy. It's innate in Zoë. She has a 'rock chic' type of persona locked into a highly sophisticated classical image," he says proudly.

Black's admiration for Chindamo is also unmistakable. "He is a multi-talented genius," she pronounces. "I don't know anyone else who can merge from the jazz world so seamlessly into classical."

Chindamo talks about the joy of listening to Black practicing a Bach violin partita. Black says she rarely hears Chindamo playing jazz. "He's usually practicing Bach. If I didn't know he came from a jazz background I wouldn't guess it," she says.

Listening to Chindamo "endlessly" practicing the Bach Goldberg Variations and her inability to join in prompted Black to ask him to write her a part. This led to their take on Bach's Goldberg Variations, which will be recorded later this year.

"It sounds as if Bach could have written it," Black exclaims. "We've played it to a select few people and they've all said, it sounds like Him, with a capital 'H'!"

Like Chindamo, Black is exasperated at the fusion/crossover tag. "The minute you venture away from traditional repertoire you enter a grey area that no one knows how to define," Chindamo says. "Contemporary composers are adding to that repertoire, but even then there is an expectation that in order to be regarded as new music it should eschew the tonal world. This means that a new conservatism arises because this music then falls prey to the same predictability that plagues tonal music. In any artform what was once radical has a knack of becoming the new dogma."

"The added danger is that anything that doesn't subscribe to this aesthetic is regarded as old fashioned or worse, it is relegated to no man's land – cross-genre."

He gives an example of French pianist, composer and famous crossover artist, Jacques Loussier, who added a rhythm section to Bach.

"Even though he did this with great charm his method is akin to putting Bach in fancy dress," Chindamo says. "When he does depart from Bach's score his improvisations have little to do with the actual work he is playing. For me, this creates a stylistic dissonance, which is probably another way of describing crossover."

For Chindamo it's all about tension and release, the continual dance between the consonant and dissonant and the expansion of an idea from an apparent reference point.

Mozart, he maintains, demonstrated this elasticity masterfully by "referencing his miraculous lines against the most boring and commonplace musical device of his time, the Alberti bass" (the music box accompaniment in the left hand).

"It works because Mozart toys with our expectations and ideas about context. He also reveals that a great composer's gift lies beyond the strictures of genre and style: great composers are not slaves to style; rather they utilize it as a home base from which



to emancipate themselves. The importance of context is underestimated in music."

There is no such thing as a beautiful chord or ugly sound, Chindamo says. "A rowdy city is a kaleidoscopic cacophony of dissonance to a new visitor but to the accustomed resident the dissonance takes on the homely refuge of a boring major triad. In music I try to toy with the context in order to keep the adrenalin running for mind body and spirit."

While Nicole Forsyth, a teacher at the Sydney Conservatorium of Music and violist of chamber music ensemble Ironwood, believes that the terms 'crossover' and 'fusion' are simply shorthand marketing tools, and agrees with Chindamo that they have a tendency to diminish the value of a work. "The new buzz word is collaboration," Forsyth says.

The notion of a genre-less music world also appeals to Chindamo. "It's all just music," he proclaims.

"Authors experience the same prejudice. UK author, Sebastian Faulks recently wrote a book in the style of P.G. Wodehouse and was pilloried by the critics for not being original. I don't understand this, because it is not as if he doesn't write anything else."

"We place too much importance on labels and it has dangerous repercussions because it invites value judgements. Too often an artist is defined by a genre rather than what he or she brings to it."

**Joe Chindamo and Zoë Black's *Dido's Lament* is out on their own Mo'OzArt label. Read our review of the disc on page 79.**

Chindamo and Black hope their music can transcend traditional genre boundaries