



Sunnyside

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Clovis Nicolas
The Contrapuntist

There have been many instances where a musician specializing in a particular genre has taken a detour to investigate another. Bassist/composer **Clovis Nicolas** has focused on jazz music since he picked up his instrument, but it was his chance meeting of a classical music mentor at Juilliard that piqued his curiosity in classical composition. Nicolas's new recording, ***The Contrapuntist***, presents his first recorded foray into classical music, which features his new string quartet, along with a fascinating reflection of the piece for jazz quartet.

The Ivory Coast-born and France raised Nicolas has focused on jazz bass playing and composing since his introduction to the music. He moved to New York City in 2002, investing himself fully in the vibrant jazz scene. In 2009, Clovis attended the Juilliard School to study with master bassist Ron Carter. At Juilliard, Clovis met composer Kendall Briggs, whose method of teaching and speaking about music had a dramatic effect on him.

Though it was a completely foreign concept, Nicolas became more and more taken with the classical pieces he was discovering. He began to take his study seriously, diving into orchestration, counterpoint, and voice leading. Nicolas studied scores from legends like Beethoven and Bartók. He then began his nascent attempts at writing classical scores, from choral works to symphonic pieces to string quartets.

The string quartet piece presented on *The Contrapuntist* is entitled "Le Miroir." The writing process began with a plan, initially naming the tonal centers where the movements would begin and end, then establishing all that would happen in between. Nicolas enjoyed the parallels of the plan to that of a jazz tune, with a head on both ends and solos comprising the journey in the middle. The only difference was that Nicolas would have to provide everything written for the musicians.

Nicolas chose to utilize a symmetric structure, a recurring schematic theme that he found in his favorite string quartets by Beethoven. The piece begins and ends with an *andante*. There are then two *scherzos* bounding a slow *adagio* in the middle. Nicolas made a conscious effort not to lean on his jazz background too heavily. The first movement does borrow a chord progression from Dizzy Gillespie and Nicolas found that he tended to write his strongest melodies in eighth notes, much like a bebop tune.

Once he had finished the score, Nicolas knew that he needed to record it. He reached out to his friend, violist **Colin Brookes**, whom he studied with at Juilliard. Brookes helped to propose edits and then suggested that the group he performs with play the piece. Thus, the **Ulysses String Quartet**, featuring violinists **Christina Bouey** and **Rhiannon Banerdt, Brookes**, and cellist **Grace Ho**, were recruited to perform "Le Miroir."



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The piece was recorded at Oktaven Studio on April 24, 2022. By sheer chance, the string players were in the last month of their loans of some historic instruments created by 17th and 18th century master luthiers and the string players were happy to record “Le Miroir” using these treasured instruments.

Nicolas realized that it would be difficult to release his quartet piece on its own and it was recommended to him by producer Daniel Yvinec that he incorporate elements of his native tongue, jazz music, into the release to balance his two musical sides. Nicolas decided that he would create new variations on the movements of “Le Miroir” for a jazz quartet.

For the jazz variations, Nicolas went back to the original compositions and found elements that he could build the new pieces on. One of these elements was taking pieces of the cello parts to help him build new bass lines that would drive the rhythm section and the rest of the band.

For the ensemble, Nicolas picked some of the greatest musicians that he had had the privilege of working with. Trumpeter **Jeremy Pelt** is a fantastic interpreter and proved perfect for the readings with his funky, swinging demeanor. After hosting a session with **Sullivan Fortner**, Nicolas knew that he needed him for the record because of the magic and spontaneity that the pianist possesses. Drummer **Bill Stewart** was chosen for his near perfect playing and decision making in service to the music.

The jazz interpretation follows the symmetric construction of the string quartet. Two medium and fast tempo pieces surround the slower ballad. The moods of the pieces are also taken into account in the performances. The jazz pieces utilize many of the melodic and harmonic elements established by the string quartet but in an environment suited for improvisation and swinging groove that is so essential to the jazz genre.

Clovis Nicolas shows the two sides of his music personality on his new recording, ***The Contrapuntist***. There is the jazz honed contrabassist that regularly drives the rhythm sections for some of New York’s best bands. But there is also the classically trained composer who focuses on making beautiful written music through voice-leading and counterpoint. These two sides mirror one another fantastically.

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