

**Feature: Versatile musician: a conversation with trumpeter Josh Rzepka**

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by Mike Telin



Akron native Josh Rzepka is a young trumpet player who is busy carving his own niche in the music world. Armed with a double performance degree in classical and jazz trumpet from Oberlin, and a master's in classical trumpet from Boston University, he quickly found his way into the recording studio and has released two compact discs in as many years. On his critically acclaimed 2009 release *Midwest Coast*, Rzepka proves that when it comes to jazz, he is a musician with a very bright future. The album contains ten original compositions, and Rzepka is backed up by three of the finest musicians around, pianist extraordinaire Jackie Warren, the remarkable bassist Peter Dominguez and the always-sensitive drummer Ron Godale.

Earlier this summer Rzepka released *Josh Rzepka: Baroque Music For Trumpet*, an equally musically wonderful CD that shows off his talents as a classical musician. The album was recorded by Robert Friedrich and Michael Bishop and was produced and edited by Thomas Moore of Five/Four Productions. You can find a review of the CD in our CD reviews section.

The day before our conversation Josh sent me some mp3 files of his jazz album so I was curious about his thoughts on mp3 files vs. CDs vs. vinyl and which recording method he preferred and why. (I did receive a copy of the CD the following day).

**Josh Rzepka:** A lot of people don't realize what they are missing by listening to mp3's because of the compression. You also miss out on the packaging. I have had many discussions with people about all of the real estate you used to be able to get with an LP. For example putting great artwork on the front and really doing some cool things with it. I still have about 400 LP's. When I was a student at Oberlin and at Boston University, if I was going to go buy CD's of the entire classical repertoire, it would have cost me a fortune. Now I have LP 's of all of the Mahler, Bruckner, Beethoven, Sibelius, and Shostakovich symphonies, and I picked them up for twenty-five or fifty cents apiece.

Also, there are a lot of very famous recordings both in classical and jazz that were never re-released on CD. I understand that it is not financially viable for a record company to re-master and re-package something that is only going to sell four hundred copies, so there are a lot of treasures out there if you can find them.

*MT: So aside from listening being part of your education and part of every musician's job, are you an audiophile?*

**JR:** Well sort of. I remember back when I was in 9th or 10th grade, I was busing tables and saving my money to put my stereo system together. I bought some acoustic towers, and the nicest preamp that I could find. There was an audio store down the street from my house, and I would hang out there. I remember bringing in my CD's, so I could listen to how everything sounded on really good equipment. I always appreciated how much better things sound on good equipment. Also, I am a curious person. I loved to discover things, whether it's the equipment or different recording techniques, all of those things intrigued me.

*MT: Given that you have educated yourself about different recording techniques and sounds, did you go into your latest recording project with a specific*

*sound in mind?*

JR: When I was looking for a recording company, I did speak to a couple different people, and they all gave me CD's of some of their previous projects. I also had a handful of Telarc recordings of trumpeters, people like Rolf Smedwig, and a lot of Jazz trumpeters, so I was familiar with the Telarc sound, and being a local and an audiophile, I had learned a bit about Telarc. A lot of what I learned [about recordings] came from my cousin Vikki Rzepka, who worked at Telarc for twenty-one years. So, I knew what type of sound recording I would be getting from Five-Four. But I never went to Thom [Moore] and gave him a CD and said that I want it to sound like this, although I did research and found some recordings that had been made in those venues I would be using. But to have people like Thom as the producer, and Michael Bishop and Robert Friedrich on sound, they really know what they are doing. When we did the sound checks at the beginning of the sessions, we would go back into the control room, and they would ask me how I liked the sound, and as far as I was concerned, they nailed it every time.

There is a tendency, especially with trumpet recordings to overdo the trumpet. You can put on any number of recordings and the players can really play, however once you start to listen, the soloist is overpowering the orchestra. I feel that any musical experience is not just about one person, even if you are the soloist in a concerto. You still need to fit into the ensemble. There needs to be a balance. Playing with such great musicians, as I was able to have on the recording, I did not want it to be the Josh Rzepka show. Frankly that's not going to give you the best listening experience and I want the listener to enjoy listening to my albums.

*MT: How did you choose the repertoire?*

JR: Mainly it is just music that I love, and have been introduced to by the world's greatest trumpet players. It is not by accident that they all recorded these pieces, because it is great music. There were other considerations, most of which were economic. For example all of the music with strings uses the same size ensemble, or less. None of the pieces have any woodwinds, brass or percussion. None of

it is overly complicated to put together. For example, had I recorded the Neruda with strings, it would have taken hours of rehearsal time just for that one piece, so economics did play a role in the decisions that were made.

*MT: I was reading that you partially funded this recording yourself, but you were also able to find some donors.*

JR: Yes, I was able to find some people who really get what I am trying to do, and who have strong beliefs in my music. They saw this as an opportunity to be able to help me. I am now aware of some additional options, such as Kickstarter and Pledge Music that I did not use for this album. However, I did make a proposal for people to donate through Fractured Atlas so they could get a tax deduction, but no one chose to go that route.

*MT: I would like to talk a little bit about your Jazz CD. I truly admire all of the members of the trio. I think Jackie Warren is not only a great person, but also one of the best pianists anywhere.*

JR: I totally agree with you, she is a great player, but also just a great person. It would be hard to find a more fun person to be around whether you are playing gigs or just hanging out.

*MT: You composed all of the tunes on your Jazz album. But have you ever composed any classical music?*

JR: Not really except for some cadenzas and exercises [and assignments] for classes. I am fairly sure that one day I will, and besides, there is a lot of good music out there.

*MT: Yes, but there is also a lot of great Jazz music out there. I don't want to put words into your mouth, but perhaps it has something to do with the difference between the way that Jazz and Classical music is taught?*

JR: Yes, I think so. For me, as far as composing is concerned, composing classical music still seems a little intimidating since I don't have a real compositional background. I just wouldn't feel comfortable.

*MT: Did you enter Oberlin intending to be a double performance major?*

JR: One of the biggest reasons I applied to Oberlin was that they had both classical and jazz programs. And I got accepted into both. However, I would be hesitant to recommend, without explanation, for anyone to pursue both programs. It really was very challenging. There were two or three other people when I was there who started as a double performance major, and as far as I know I was the only one who finished them both. You had two sets of juries, two sets of recitals, and two sets of lessons each week. You also have two sets of music theory and music history tracks. Then of course you had two sets of ensembles. However it can be done. Just because you are not in one or the other program doesn't mean that you can't and or won't benefit from it. Just being around everyone, and having access to them is very valuable and something that I think is a tremendous credit to Oberlin.

(Photo by Robert J. Saferstein)