

SAXOPHONIST-COMPOSER JOHN PETRUCELLI RELEASES LIVE CONCERT RECORDING *PRESENCE*

With hybrid ensemble — jazz quintet and string quartet — Petrucelli premieres a nine-movement suite large in scope and expressive intent

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Hailed by allaboutjazz.com as “a saxophone heavyweight,” **John Petrucelli** follows up his 2015 debut *The Way* with the ambitious live album ***Presence***, recorded live at Pittsburgh’s New Hazlett Theater. Broadening his canvas to include string quartet, Petrucelli builds on the quintet sound of *The Way* with a strong lineup: pianist **Brett Williams**, guitarist **Peter Park**, bassist **Paul Thompson** and drummer **Gusten Rudolph** are joined by violinists **Melissa Hernandez** and **Ashley Freeburn**, violist **Olga Taimonov** and cellist **Katya Janpoladyan**. The music, rich in harmonic color and rhythmic detail, is for Petrucelli “a meditation on our state of being, the idea that we are in process, and this music is as well.”

Currently a saxophone instructor at Carnegie Mellon University, Petrucelli began a teaching fellowship at the University of Pittsburgh in 2013 while pursuing his Ph.D. in music. Prior to this he completed his Master’s degree at Rutgers, studying with Ralph Bowen, Victor Lewis, Charles Tolliver, Stanley Cowell and Conrad Herwig. While at Rutgers he also studied with Lewis Porter and Henry Martin in the Master’s program in Jazz History and Research.

With ***Presence***, Petrucelli fully manifests the depth of his learning and experience while revealing a selfless spirit. “The musicians and technical directors really banded together in the days leading up to the concert,” he recalls. “Though I was the one who set the pieces in motion, it was a very holistic effort that really eclipsed any one person’s individual efforts.”

The history of jazz with strings runs deep: Petrucelli mentions major influences such as *Charlie Parker with Strings*, along with recent albums by his contemporaries, including Troy Roberts’ *XenDen Suite* and Chris Potter’s *Song for Anyone*. His growing body of work in contemporary classical and new music has also impelled him to find common links between musical languages.

“Classical music changed what I thought was possible technically and formally in my approach to composition,” he says. “While at Pittsburgh I studied composition not only with the great Geri Allen but also Amy Williams, a Guggenheim composition fellow. It provided a unique amalgam of approaches for the framework I was pursuing in my music.” For this project in particular, Petrucelli’s reference points ranged from Sibelius, Elliott Carter and Gérard Grisey to Ligeti, Bartók and Lutoslawski.

Rhythmically, Petrucelli has drawn substantially from his study of tabla and Indian classical music. “It began to take shape with ‘Prism’ and ‘I Hear a Rhapsody’ from *The Way*,” Petrucelli says, “and it’s continued to evolve over the past few years.”

Following an unaccompanied tenor saxophone “Prelude,” Petrucelli cues the ensemble into the insistent tempo and inspired melodic arc of “Intentions.” The piece is “a fanfare and a mission statement for what I’m trying to do with this group,” the leader says, “moving between and through influences, different orchestrations, written versus improvised music as well as different time signatures and metric modulations.” Between each movement, we hear a prerecorded “Electronic Meditation” featuring Petrucelli on tabla with evocative sound design by Angela Baughman.

Both “Field of Heaven” and “Mercury Crossing” touch on Petrucelli’s interest in astronomy: the former refers to the Campo del Cielo site in Argentina, a historical marvel, over 500 square miles of land littered with space debris from a colossal meteor impact 4,000 years ago. “Mercury Crossing” refers to a rare celestial event on May 9, 2016, when the planet Mercury was visible transiting across the sun.

Petrucelli dedicates “Bridge, Not an End” to his mentor, the late Geri Allen, whose untimely passing at age 60 sent a shock through the jazz world. “Garden of the Angels,” with its soaring melody, is an homage to Allen as well. “sly,” too, has something of an Allen backstory: when she played through the tune the first time, she remarked on the fact that it’s a disguised six-bar blues.

“Summon (the spirit)” is inspired by drummer Victor Lewis, a significant presence on *The Way*. “Victor and I were talking about living musically, and he explained his morning meditation ritual where he summons the spirits of great musicians. It was a powerful account that resonated with me. I came back to it after realizing how powerful Professor Allen’s spirit and character had to have been to play, teach and lead the way she did despite her illness.”

“For One to Know,” a beautiful ballad, “just sort of came to me,” Petrucelli recalls. “It’s an eight-bar phrase that cycles while tiny little modifications to the rhythmic phrasing keep occurring. It’s continuously reharmonized and refreshed.”

Fellow tenor saxophonist Melvin Butler, a highly regarded Miami-based educator and longtime member of Brian Blade’s Fellowship Band, makes a compelling guest appearance on the uptempo “Scallop Shell of Quiet.” Petrucelli titled it after a line from a poem by Sir Walter Raleigh, reflecting on his quest to bring the remarkable **Presence** to fruition: “Give me my scallop shell of quiet / My staff of faith to walk upon / my scrip of joy, immortal diet / My bottle of salvation / My gown of glory, hope’s true gage / And thus I’ll take my pilgrimage.” =END=