

Clarinetist Wolak calls his own tune

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Kornel Wolak - photo by Robert M. DiVito



The mix of old and hip in the Junction fills Kornel Wolak with pride.

As he walks along the west-end neighbourhood's main artery, Dundas St. W., he points out how the new arrivals to this gentrifying district strive for handmade-style authenticity.

Fair-trade coffee? There are several tasty options. Artisanal cheeses? No problem. Each new business is boldly going somewhere the big-chain brands can't take us.

It's a metaphor for the clarinetist himself. Since arriving in Toronto about six years ago, he has resolutely charted his own course.

Now in his early 30s, the Polish-born woodwind player has worked as a classical soloist. He is on the Toronto Symphony Orchestra's list of regular clarinet fill-ins during the music season. He spent two seasons working with Toronto-based crossover group Quartetto Gelato.

But, despite the security it may offer, Wolak is not interested in a full-time job with any organization right now. "I'm totally devoted to my own projects," he insists.

Here is a mixture of classical training and a curious spirit that has guided him into a number of fascinating collaborations.

"My landlord and the phone company are my biggest inspirations," says the smiling freelancer, who has a number of projects in the works.

One of these is coming up this weekend.

In what they are calling a “Reed Blowout in the Music Garden,” Wolak and Toronto accordion master Joseph Macerollo pair up for an afternoon concert at the western fringe of Harbourfront on Sunday afternoon. Wolak says there will be classical pieces by Mozart and Rossini on the program — alongside arrangements by big-band legend Benny Goodman “to lighten the atmosphere.”

Also in keeping with Wolak's desire to nurture a living music tradition, the Music Garden centrepiece is the world premiere of *Quai Quodlibet*, a new piece for accordion and clarinet by Toronto composer Norbert Palej.

The 4 p.m. free Music Garden concert is a prelude to a hectic close to 2011. On Wolak's calendar are concerts and master classes in Poland, Ecuador and Brazil.

This fall, Wolak teams up with Toronto jazz-piano hotshot Chris Donnelly. They'll be touring Atlantic Canada, southern Ontario and the Prairies, including making a stop for a Canadian opera Company free lunchtime concert on Nov. 1 at the Four Seasons Centre.

“We're playing the whole program from memory,” boasts Wolak of his collaboration with Donnelly. Wolak relates how they were one of four groups performing simultaneously at a programmers' showcase earlier this year: “The power went out, and we were the only ones left playing.”

Both the accordion and the piano can stand in for a full orchestra. In the case of the collaboration with Donnelly, this means the duo can program Mozart's gorgeous *Clarinet Concerto* and George Gershwin's *Rhapsody in Blue* — a piece that begins with a long, sensuous clarinet solo.

Donnelly and Wolak also came up with their own, highly unusual take on the music of Bach: Wolak transcribed some of the *Partitas for Solo Violin* into something playable on clarinet. Meanwhile, Donnelly devised a percussion accompaniment on — wait for it — spoons.

Wolak laughs. “Chris is crazy. We were at this showcase, and he saw some folk musicians playing the spoons. He resolved then and there to learn how to do it.”

That can-do spirit is sprucing up the classical concert world . . . just like young entrepreneurs freshening up an old neighbourhood.

Just the Facts

WHO: Kornel Wolak, with Joe Macerollo

WHERE: Toronto Music Garden, 475 Queens Quay W.

WHEN: Sunday @ 4 p.m.

ADMISSION: Free