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JAZZING UP THE BEATLES

Tributes to the Beatles, in this 50th anniversary of the band's arrival in America, will not be in short supply this year.

But none will sound like the music Chicago pianist Anthony Molinaro will play this weekend in two ambitious recitals, both featuring the entirety of his exceptional new solo album, "Here, There and Everywhere."

Not that Molinaro conceived the project as a golden anniversary tribute to the Fab Four.

"I'm not that clever," says Molinaro, with a laugh, confessing that when he embarked on the venture several years ago, the Beatles' 50th wasn't remotely on his radar.

"I hadn't even thought about it — I guess I'm lucky, or happy."



HOWARD REICH
My Kind of Jazz

The timing may be fortuitous from a promotional point of view, but it's utterly incidental to the value of this work. For Molinaro, who has built an unusual career combining jazz and classical methods at the piano, has reached a personal high point with the Beatles opus. In

revisiting such Beatles classics as "Blackbird," "Something," "Yesterday" and "When I'm 64," he does much more than simply bring a formidable technique to bear on tunes that just about everyone knows.

More important, he transforms these works, creating a distinctive world of sound for each one. "Norwegian Wood," for instance, becomes a prelude in the manner of Johann Sebastian Bach, while a theme from "In My Life"

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ZBIGNIEW BZDAK/TRIBUNE PHOTO

Chicago pianist Anthony Molinaro plays Monday at PianoForte Studios, where he will perform his interpretations of Beatles songs at two shows this weekend.

New takes on Beatles standards

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emerges as a full-blown, four-voice fugue. Played one after the other, the two vignettes are a pair recalling the preludes and fugues of Bach's "Well-Tempered Clavier," albeit built on melodic material that once ruled the world's pop charts.

Elsewhere on the album, Molinaro evokes the Harlem stride techniques of James P. Johnson and Fats Waller in "When I'm 64," the impressionistic tone painting of Claude Debussy in "Something" and the driving, perpetual motion rhythms of any number of musicians — from Sergei Prokofiev to Keith Jarrett — in "Dear Prudence."

In effect, Molinaro has brought to these famous songs a harmonic sophistication, rhythmic complexity and textural intricacy that far surpass the originals. It was the very simplicity of the tunes, in fact, that lured him to this music in the first place.

For when Molinaro began planning a solo album, several years ago, he wanted it to be a kind of vehicle for exploring and developing certain keyboard techniques — particularly related to left-hand accompaniments. His first thought was to work with the standard repertoire, meaning widely loved, ultrasophistic-

ated songs of George Gershwin, Cole Porter and others.

But then Molinaro changed his mind.

"Rock music, just in general, would tend to have fewer and simpler harmonies, which was conducive to the type of accompaniment techniques that I wanted to explore," says Molinaro, an assistant professor of music at Loyola University Chicago.

In addition, "Fewer and fewer people know the standard tunes. If you don't know the starting point, it's much more difficult to appreciate the journey."

I'd argue with the notion that audiences aren't quite familiar with the songbooks of Gershwin and Porter and the like, but there's certainly no denying the ubiquity of the Beatles oeuvre, as well. And to hear Molinaro expand, embellish and otherwise reinvent these rather straightforward tunes proves as dramatic a listening experience as Molinaro hoped. For what started out as immensely hummable music becomes something much more ornate, richly layered and narrative.

None of his treatments can be considered wholly jazz, classical, pop or rock — the hallmarks of all these genres intermingle in Molinaro's hands, to often startling effect.

Surely one of the most

"Fewer and fewer people know the standard tunes."

— Anthony Molinaro on why he decided on an album of Beatles songs rather than works by Gershwin or Porter

audacious pieces is the fugue inspired by "In My Life." Beatles fans will recall that the original recording includes George Martin's quasi-baroque keyboard solo. Molinaro had forgotten about that until he listened to the single again and had a kind of epiphany: He had to build an entire fugue on that motif.

Unfortunately, he already had recorded most of his album but couldn't bear the thought of releasing it without a fugue, which he hadn't yet composed. He spent about a month sweating over the piece, to write it and learn it in time to record it last summer.

"It was the first fugue I've written," says Molinaro, who was already familiar with the form, having performed and recorded a great deal of Bach's work. His first album, "The Bach Sessions," included Bach's immensely demanding "Goldberg" Variations.

Still, penning the fugue wasn't easy.

"The process was really

interesting, because at times it was painstaking, but it was really overall transformative," says Molinaro. "It was so rewarding to find the solution to the endless (compositional) problems that presented themselves. ... It was a lot of trial and error."

Doesn't sound like it in on the recording, one melodic line intertwining elegantly with the others, as if Molinaro had channeled the Beatles channeling Martin channeling Bach. Indeed, one wishes the piece had been longer, with Molinaro developing its themes more fully than in the two-minute duration of his fugue. But better too little than too much.

What's essential to note here, however, is that the eclecticism of this project clearly is not some gimmick by Molinaro, who never has been confined to a single musical genre. Though his career took off when he won the Naumburg International Piano Competition — a prestigious classical contest — in 1997, even there he dared to play an original improvisation during the finals.

Ever since, he has taken an unorthodox approach to both the jazz and classical repertoire, winning critical accolades for his recording "The Bach Sessions," idiomatically interpreting music of Gersh-

win on his album "New Blue" and duetting with jazz harmonica virtuoso Howard Levy on "The Molinaro-Levy Project, LIVE."

In concert, Molinaro has played one of the most gripping solo versions of Gershwin's "Rhapsody in Blue" that I've ever heard.

Why does he insist on working in jazz, classical and other musical languages, often simultaneously?

"It's never been enough for me to just play the notes on the page," says Molinaro. "It's enough in the moment — it's awesome to play Rachmaninoff's Third Piano Concerto."

"But then to not be creating something when I'm not playing that (written repertoire) would leave a void. It's always been very natural to me."

Which is exactly how it sounds.

Anthony Molinaro plays "Here, There and Everywhere" at 7:30 p.m. Saturday and 5 p.m. Sunday at PianoForte Studios, 1335 S. Michigan Ave.; \$10-\$20; 312-291-0291 or pianoforte.foundation.org.

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