

Classical Music

It takes at least seven to tango

Ensemble Vivant bring home popular hybrid of classical and jazz

JOHN TERAUDS
CLASSICAL MUSIC CRITIC

Jazz and classical only share a program if there are free musical spirits at work. Pianist Catherine Wilson, the artistic director of Ensemble Vivant, is one such free thinker.

Soft-spoken in her infectious enthusiasm, Wilson sits in her Riverdale home surrounded by two pianos, music books, discs and the flotsam of daily household life talking of Astor Piazzolla and Charles-Marie Widor.

Those two names have little in common: The Argentine composer and master of the bandoneon (sort of a supersized accordion) died in 1992. Widor, a French composer whose life spanned nearly a century (1844-1937), was organist at the cathedral of St. Sulpice in Paris for six decades.

Piazzolla's tango-inflected energy hits the listener on a visceral level. Widor's aesthetic is more sensual. Yet Wilson is not afraid to include works by both men in tomorrow night's concert at the St. Lawrence Centre's Jane Mallett Theatre.

Ensemble Vivant likes to cross boundaries. Their repertoire stretches from Franz Schubert to Leroy Anderson to new creations. Since its founding in 1988, the group has earned the respect of audiences across North America and Europe. Paradoxically, the well-travelled ensemble doesn't play in Toronto very much anymore.

Regulars — pianist Wilson, violinist Erica Beston and cellist Sharon Prater — are being joined by Norman Hathaway on violin, violist Jonathan Craig, double-bass player Dave Young and Philip Séguin on trumpet. The program also includes a *Septet* by Camille Saint-Saëns, and pieces by George Gershwin, Leroy Anderson and Vancouver composer John Burke (who is doing out-on-the-edge sonic experiments at the Music Gallery tonight).

Wilson has just finished four hours of rehearsals in her living room. Clearly riding her daily musical high, the pianist talks for two hours about her di-



The well-travelled Ensemble Vivant ensemble don't play much in their hometown Toronto anymore. But the eclectic troupe is back for a show with several local guests tomorrow.

verse motivations and inspirations.

"I've always played music from the jazz world," she says, realising it's an unusual move for a classical pianist. "You need to have the right feeling for the idiom. It's not about the notes."

"The right feeling" is a recurring theme in Wilson's musical life. She has developed as an artist through chains of connected events rather than from set plans.

A love of Piazzolla connected her with bandoneon player and Piazzolla devotee Julien Labro during Wilson's 5½-year teaching stint at Michigan's Wayne State University. Labro has since arranged several Piazzolla compositions for Ensemble Vivant. They will be included in a planned two-disc CD issue tentatively titled *Piazzolla and his Contemporaries*.

While touring in France a couple of years ago, Wilson unearthed long-neglected scores by Widor at the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris. "This may be the first time they will be performed in Canada," says Wilson.

One of Leroy Anderson's sons heard Ensemble Vivant's recording of *Blue Tango* and played it to his mother. She was thrilled. One thing led to another, eventually landing Wilson on the Carnegie Hall stage with the New York

Pops Orchestra to play Anderson's *Piano Concerto*.

Even her first record came from a chance encounter.

"I was playing the piano at the Courtyard Café when the producer of ProArte records heard me," recalls Wilson. "It led to our first album, *Palm Court Pleasures*."

As it is today, Wilson's approach 20 years ago at the Courtyard Café was personal. "I played only what I loved," she says.

Like so many other classical labels from the 1980s and '90s, ProArte is long gone. Now, Ensemble Vivant arranges

its own recording sessions.

"Last summer we recorded six pieces by Piazzolla and the Debussy Piano Trio," says Wilson. "This summer, we're recording the Widor. Next summer it will be the rest of the Piazzolla."

Rather than an artistic imperative, this is a labour of love.

Just the facts

WHAT: Ensemble Vivant
WHERE: Jane Mallett Theatre, 27 Front St. E.
WHEN: Tomorrow @ 8 p.m.
TICKETS: \$42-\$48 @ 416-366-7723 or stlc.com