Musicians to create saxophone magic at Wharton

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FOR THE LANSING STATE JOURNAL

IF YOU GO

What: American Festival, Lansing Symphony Orchestra, Timothy Muffitt, Music Director and Conductor. Saxophone quartet, Chris Creviston, James Forger, Joe Lulloff, Griffin Campbell.
When: Saturday, Nov. 7, 8 p.m.;
Where: Wharton Center for Performing Arts
Tickets: $20 and up, lansingsymphony.org, (517) 487-5001

Most people know James Forger as the dapper and poised Dean of the College of Music at Michigan State University.

But every once in a while Forger picks up his alto saxophone and shows why he is known as a world class performer, and – even better – an able professor of the saxophone. And on Saturday night he will demonstrate his playing skills and his teaching prowess.

On Saturday's Lansing Symphony Orchestra's concert, Forger will be appearing with three of his former students in the Concerto for Four Saxophones and Orchestra by Ann Arbor-based Pulitzer Prize and Grammy Award winning composer, William Bolcom.

When he's not looking, you can call that sax quartet "Dad and his Three Boys".

Appearing with Forger will be professor of saxophone at MSU, Joe Lulloff; professor of saxophone at Arizona State University, Chris Creviston, and distinguished professor of saxophone at Louisiana State University, Griff Campbell.

They all enjoy international concert careers, are brilliant teachers and represent the great legacy of Forger's saxophone studio at MSU.

As they rehearse in preparation for the concert, the age difference is not that obvious. Forger is 63, Lulloff 55, Campbell 57 and Creviston 48. At one time those numbers between student and teacher appeared like a wide gap. Now, not so much. They all have touches of grey hair, and they talk to each other as fellow world-class players.

Forger smiles, "They start out students, then they become colleagues".

When LSO conductor Timothy Muffitt was asked why he programmed a piece for four saxophones with his orchestra, he responded, "We've got the best saxophonists in the whole world right here – why not use them?"

As the four friends rehearse, there is casual, respectful feeling between all of them. But besides their 30-plus year relationship, the other bond is simply their love for music and for the sax. Forger says, "We started playing together in this very room 30 years ago."

Then, it was Forger's sax studio. When he moved downstairs to the Dean's office, Joe Lulloff took over the office.

Lulloff came to MSU as a freshman sax student in 1978, and Forger arrived as the sax prof in 1979. Once Lulloff received his bachelor's and masters in sax performance, he went to the University of Illinois to become their sax prof.

When Forger was appointed the head of the music school in 1990, he was happy to bring back Lulloff, one of his star students, to take over his studio.

Lulloff says, "It's always so special to play with your teachers and friends. "

The Bolcom piece offers up a wide variety of styles: bebop, jazz, blues, Bach, etc. – displaying everything a saxophone can do.

The tones of the four saxophonists are mellow and vibrant, and they all somehow sound very much like their teacher – Forger. For those who have never heard a professional-level saxophone quartet, the beauty of the blend is similar to a string quartet.

And for this piece we get to hear the full panorama of saxophones – soprano, alto, tenor and baritone along with a full orchestra. It should be a glorious sound.

Campbell says, "Jim's amazing. He can lay off the sax for two months, and give him a few days of practicing, and he sounds like a million bucks."

"As I get older, I need a longer running start to get back to the way I want to sound. But it does come," says Forger.

Despite the fact that Forger heads up the College of Music – dealing with budgets, university politics, raising money and hiring faculty - he manages to keep the sax nearby. He will often be called upon to play in a recital or in a symphony orchestra.

And for the past 22 years, Forger has been spending a portion of his summer as a performer in the Grand Teton Music Festival in Wyoming,

You can take a great sax player out of the studio and place him into the boss's office, but you can't take his love of sax and performing from his psyche.

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