

*Fall 2009*

**PROFILE OF AN HONORS PROJECT:**

***Getting into Focus with Alex Chilowicz***



**Alex Chilowicz and Professor/Conductor Richard DeRosa analyzing the Focus Suite**

The awesome power of a string orchestra coupled with the cool strains of jazz tenor saxophone- a fusion of sounds even the most avid music enthusiast rarely encounters. However, students of William Paterson University and audience members will get the chance to hear just that on December 9<sup>th</sup> at 8:00pm in the Shea Center for the Performing Arts when saxophonist Alex Chilowicz, a senior in the Music Honors Track, will perform the unique masterpiece, the *Focus Suite*, with a string orchestra conducted by Professor Richard DeRosa.

The concert will be the result of four years of hard work, research, and investigation on the part of Mr. Chilowicz, who has been interested in the *Focus Suite* long before college. “I fell in love with *Focus* when I first started playing the saxophone, almost nine years ago,” Alex recalled. “My first saxophone instructor, Sam Sadigursky (a William Paterson Music Honors Alum) introduced me to the piece, and I listened to it night after night for the next few months. There was something so unique about the musical color of the saxophone combined with the strings.”

In his first year of college, Mr. Chilowicz, a graduate of Wayne Hills High School and a Presidential Scholar at William Paterson, entered the Music Honors Track under the direction of Dr. Jeffrey Kresky. When Alex first learned of the thesis project required of all students in the Honors tracks, he realized that a performance of *Focus Suite* would be an appropriate endeavor.

The *Focus Suite* is a seven-movement piece that composer Eddie Sauter wrote for the legendary saxophonist, Stan Getz, in 1961. The suite has a fully-composed score for the strings and percussion, but the lyrical

saxophone playing heard on the original album is entirely improvised. At the end of his career, Mr. Getz claimed that *Focus* was his personal favorite of all his recordings. *Focus* is considered by many jazz historians to be one of the rare instances in record history (along with other classics such as George Gershwin's *Rhapsody in Blue* and Miles Davis' *Miles Ahead*) of classical and jazz elements being combined successfully to create an unusual style termed "Third-Stream" music, a phrase coined by composer and jazz historian Gunther Schuller.

Mr. Chilowicz began the process of preparing for his thesis project in his freshmen year. He sought out the original score and found that it was housed at the Eddie Sauter Archive at the Yale University Library. The original sheet music was very difficult to read, so the young saxophonist spent several dozen hours during the summer of 2009 listening to the original recording in order to accurately restore the handwritten music with the use of the Finale Music Notational Software. The Manhattan School of Music Jazz Philharmonic Orchestra then used the parts created by Mr. Chilowicz for a performance with world-renowned saxophonist and former William Paterson faculty member, Joe Lovano, at a concert in October. The concert was a smashing success and several members of the orchestra from that performance will be performing in Alex Chilowicz's December 9<sup>th</sup> recital, including the critically acclaimed concertmistress, Ms. Katie Thomas.

In an interview, Alex Chilowicz, explained the difficulties that he encountered trying to get this concert off the ground. "Since William Paterson no longer has a full orchestra, I realized that I would have to hire string players to assist me with this concert. Fortunately, a fellow Music Honors Track student, Theo Metz ('09), informed me of a program on campus that assisted him with funding for his Honors thesis presentation." That program, the Student Undergraduate Research Program (S.U.R.P.) "is designed to foster and reward outstanding intellectual inquiry and creative works by students who are enrolled in full-time study" (S.U.R.P. Mission Statement). Mr. Chilowicz applied for the grant in the Spring of '09 and received the maximum amount that can be awarded to an individual student (\$2000).

Having restored the sheet music and acquired the funding to hire an orchestra, the William Paterson senior's next challenge will be to determine how to approach the performance of *Focus*. "It is going to be such a unique experience to improvise in front of a string orchestra as a jazz saxophonist," Mr. Chilowicz remarked. "The trick is going to be to find the 'holes' in the composition where I will be able to contribute original melodic material. Having spent so much time staring at the score, I have a good idea of where those spots will be." Another element that Chilowicz will have to take into account is how to create his own interpretation of *Focus*, having spent time listening to Stan Getz's rendition of the work. "When I get on stage, I'm not only going to be hearing the strings, but I will also be hearing Stan's improvisations in my head. The musical ideas Getz created spontaneously on the recording of *Focus* are as magical as the fully-composed piece itself. It's going to

be difficult to try and do something completely different when Stan's solos are so ingrained in my ear; all I can do is try to be myself and allow Getz's tasteful musical decisions to influence my own."

In addition to his saxophone abilities, Alex Chilowicz will display his capacity for composition on the Shea Center's stage at the culminating date in December. As Chilowicz recounted, "after spending so much time studying Eddie Sauter's composition, I decided to take it upon myself to arrange some music for the performance. It was a complete rush when the orchestra used the parts that I restored for the Joe Lovano performance of *Focus*, and I think it will be even more exhilarating when I get to hear them play music that I have composed on my own."

Dr. David Demsey, Coordinator of Jazz Studies at William Paterson University and Mr. Chilowicz's Thesis Project Advisor, noted how many different aspects of the music industry that the project has allowed the 21 year-old to explore. "Not only is Alex getting to perform with an orchestra, but he also has gained valuable skills in key areas: research, copyist-work, hiring musicians, grant-writing, and composition."

The *Focus* project has opened the young musician up to new career possibilities following graduation. Alex says, "Writing parts for strings has been really rewarding, and as a result of my studies in composition and arranging with Professor Rich DeRosa, I have gained an interest in writing music for film and commercial purposes. I will be taking the new 'Composition for Media' course in the spring semester, and I intend to explore possible careers working with music and film after college."