

Frost Spotlight: The Henry Mancini Institute

Students, faculty and community members gathered at UM's Frost School of Music on Jan. 25 as a red carpet studded with paparazzi rolled out to the entrance of the jam-packed Gusman Hall at the University.

Concertgoers buzzed amongst themselves with great anticipation of the night's musical premiere by one of the Frost School of Music's forefront ensembles: The Henry Mancini Institute Orchestra. Its massive yet unique instrumentation — a full symphony, jazz band and rhythm/percussion section all in one — filled the stage as instrumentalists tuned up, ready to enthrall the audience with a program fusing classical, jazz, Latin, rock and contemporary styles.

The [Henry Mancini Institute](#) (HMI) is a renowned artistry program housed at the Frost School. Its flagship, multi-genre orchestra (made up of 65 graduate student-musicians at Frost) is breaking boundaries in the music world. Through cutting-edge performances, HMI promotes diversity and modernism in the realm of music-making.

“HMI began with the mission to broaden the horizons of young classical musicians and train them to become more than just one thing, as the landscape for careers in music is constantly changing today,” said Steve Guerra, Managing Director of HMI. “As

Mancini Fellows, they're expanding not only their repertoire, but also their professional attitude — they're learning to prepare for concert performances under extreme pressure [with only two rehearsals before each] while gaining a wholesome comprehension of musical cultures and improvisation techniques.”

Under the initiative of a Frost School Dean, Shelly Berg, HMI came to Miami in 2008 after its founding by musical extraordinaire Jack Elliott. However, the movement's eponym is the iconic American film and media composer Henry Mancini, who wrote memorable scores for “Breakfast at Tiffany's,” “The Pink Panther” and other movies and TV shows. He has had 72 Grammy nominations and won 20.

Preserving Mancini's spirited legacy, the HMI Orchestra has since garnered its own resume of accolades as a professional company. Besides serving as principal orchestra for the Arsht Center's “JazzRoots” concert series, the group has collaborated with singer-songwriters like Ben Folds and Bruce Hornsby and has orchestrated “Raiders of the Lost Ark” and “House of Cards.” On the Latin music spectrum, Gloria Estefan, Arturo Sandoval, José Feliciano, Chick Corea and Jon Secada are just a few artists HMI musicians have graced the stage with.

Back in September, HMI kicked off its 2019-20 season in UM's Gusman Hall with the celestial Florida premiere of Mary Lou Williams's Zodiac Suite, a 12-movement composition inspired by the astrological personalities. The ensemble most recently

introduced [Maria Schneider](#) as its new [Artistic Director](#).

To open the concert, Dean Berg sang Schneider's praises: "With 12 Grammy nominations and five Grammy wins, Maria is a remarkable classical/jazz crossover artist, composer, arranger and bandleader. She's also an important advocate for musician's rights. We couldn't be more excited that she's accepted this role."



Artistic Director Maria Schneider greets a full-house audience by introducing her compositions: the breezy "El Viento," the sunshiny "Hang Gliding" and the mystical "Walking By Flashlight."

During HMI's search for a new Artistic Director, Schneider was "the one" from the start, according to Dr. Guerra. She has connections with the school — she studied at UM for one semester during her formative years and built close relationships with the faculty. Now leading one of the world's most distinguished jazz bands, the Maria Schneider Orchestra, her artistic brilliance aligns perfectly with HMI's innovative nature.

“Everything she writes is meaningful and paints a colorful picture. A lot of her songs are inspired by her childhood and upbringing, and I can just see a story every time I hear her music,” said Dr. Guerra. “Now she’s passing on to students this idea that musical emotion ought to come from within and stem from personal experiences.”

As the concert began, The HMI Orchestra interpreted a trio of Schneider’s imaginative compositions — “El Viento,” “Hang Gliding” and “Walking By Flashlight” — with frontman Donny McCaslin on saxophone. They were followed by a collection of McCaslin’s wildly original songs off his 2018 album “Blow” under the direction of resident conductor Scott Flavin. Three of these symphonic arrangements were created by HMI Composition Fellows in collaboration with the artists themselves.



Under the direction of Resident Conductor Scott Flavin, HMI musicians perform original works by Donny McCaslin alongside the saxophonist and songwriter himself.

During a tribute to David Bowie, HMI Concertmaster Misty Drake shared a compelling onstage moment alongside McCaslin, improvising an evocative duo with the saxophonist. Jazz improv isn't a native language for Drake, an M.M. candidate in violin performance.

“As a classical violinist, any opportunity I have to play solos involves a meticulously thought-out plan to produce the same result every time. Improvising is anything but,” Drake said.

She reflected on her spontaneous experimentation with McCaslin.

“The idea of improvising with Donny evolved pretty organically in rehearsal. He and I began improvising a duet off the cuff and we hit it off,” said Drake. “The night of the concert, we just went with the flow, found freedom in the moment and had a good time. The energy was through the roof!”



Violinist Misty Drake smiles after an improvisatory duo with Donny McCaslin — a defining moment of the night.

What’s next on the radar for HMI?

In April, the orchestra is collaborating with Dr. Melvin Butler, an ethnomusicologist and Associate Professor of Musicology at Frost, to present a historical celebration of Haitian music.

But why stop there?

Dr. Guerra aspires “to fabric HMI’s impact throughout the greater university, particularly the world language and culture departments. We wish to explore the intersections between music and art, architecture and sociology.”

He envisions HMI stepping into the film score scene through a hybrid performance with UM’s School of Communication in the near future.

As for long-term goals, HMI strives to not only record its full-length debut album, but also to share its music abroad.

“In 2017, we had the honor of performing under the baton of John Williams at a concert commemorating Henry Mancini in L.A. I’d love for us to travel again, now to Europe where there’s a respectable market for studio orchestras,” Dr. Guerra said.

Over their past 12 years, Mancini Institute Fellows have challenged Miami audiences’ perception of sound.

“A fine ensemble like this doesn’t exist in any university in the U.S. or anywhere in the world,” Schneider said during her debut.

Now under her masterful influence, the symphony-meets-jazz-band only further excels to new heights.

Don’t miss “Creole Connections: Frost School’s Henry Mancini Institute Orchestra” on Saturday, April 18 at 7:30 p.m. in UM’s Gusman Hall. [Buy tickets here.](#)

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