



June 3, 2004

Concert brings together love of jazz, God

Webster native Deanna Witkowski will perform in the area this weekend.
By Amy Kotlarz

Deanna Witkowski couldn't have known when she cut out an article about Cary Ratcliff, Strassenberg Planetarium's composer-in-residence that years later he would host her sacred jazz in a church in her native Rochester.

But it was that article that jogged her memory years later. Witkowski, who at the time was the music director for All Angels' Episcopal Church in New York City, thought the Rochester resident might be the same Cary Ratcliff who had composed a hymn in an Episcopal hymnal. Witkowski sent him a letter about how she had spun an arrangement of his hymn into a jazz piece.

"I picked up the phone right then," said Ratcliff, now the music director of Bethany Presbyterian Church in Greece. "She was very surprised to hear from me, but I wanted to know more. Ever since then, we've kept in touch." It was their shared love for jazz, God, and Rochester that brought them together. Sunday's free concert at Bethany Presbyterian Church, 3000 Dewey Ave., Greece, is the latest product of that collaboration. Witkowski, 32, will bring her smoky-sounding singing to town for the Rochester Jazz Festival and will perform with her trio and with the Bethany Presbyterian Choir during the jazz vespers service.

Vespers, Ratcliff explained, are a gentle, sunset service designed to bring the day to a close. The ancient text that goes with the service also includes prayers of the people for the needs of the world, he said. "Most of the service is just listening to the human heart being expressed through music," said Ratcliff, who has a doctorate in music composition from the Eastman School of Music.

Witkowski, a Webster native, has distinguished herself on the New York and Chicago music scenes with both her straight-ahead jazz piano and her lyrical, sacred jazz pieces. Witkowski won the prestigious 2002 Great American Jazz Piano Competition and recently appeared on Marian McPartland's Piano Jazz on National Public Radio. She recently released a critically acclaimed sophomore album, "Wide Open Window" to add to her debut, "Having to Ask."

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"She's the best there is," Ratcliff said. "She's right up there in terms of sacred jazz."

Witkowski, who started out as a classical pianist and flutist, discovered jazz while attending Wheaton College in Illinois. She then attended DePaul University in Chicago, but left to perform full time. Witkowski first started writing sacred jazz at a church in Chicago where she was a member. Then, when she accepted the full-time music director job at All Angels' Episcopal Church and moved to New York, the job included a composing component.

When Witkowski set a mass, her jazz background filtered in to the music. As she writes, she tries to remember whether her audience will be participating or simply listening. "I want it to be something that everyone can relate to in some way," Witkowski said. Jazz, although not typically performed in church, often has things in common with sacred music, including unbridled energy, spontaneity, and introspection, Ratcliff said. "Jazz can be very introspective and so can a prayerful life," Ratcliff said.

Ratcliff said he believes Witkowski does not always separate her music into sacred or secular. "I know she feels very unified as a person," Ratcliff said.

Witkowski has researched and been inspired by the late jazz musician Mary Lou Williams, who converted to Catholicism late in her life and wrote and performed liturgical music, in addition to her other jazz performances. Witkowski will be speak about Williams during a performance at Calvary Street Andrews Presbyterian Church this weekend.

Witkowski's next project is a piece she wrote for the Rochester women's choir Concentus based on a poem called "I learned that her name was Proverb" by Denise Levertov. This commission came from Gwen Gassler, the choir's director, who heard Witkowski perform several times during concerts which Ratcliff hosted. The choir will present Witkowski's piece in November.

Although some of her music is overtly sacred while some is not, Witkowski said her inspiration is the same: "I try to approach everything from the same place. I'm a Christian trying to play music as best I can. I see everything as an offering to make to God."
