Bringing a jazz pulse to e.e. cummings and friends
By Howard Reich
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Can the poetry of Emily Dickenson be set to jazz?

And what about e.e. cummings and Robert Creeley – can their distinctive poetic voices sway to a jazz beat?

Three noted Chicago artists think so, and they've spent the past year toiling to prove it, conceiving a 45-minute suite that will receive its world premiere performances this weekend.

At the very least, "Sea Songs" should make a bit of musical history, in that it's penned for soprano saxophone, jazz string quintet and 24-voice choir – not exactly conventional forces.

"All the poems have posed challenges," concedes saxophonist Jim Gailloreto, one of Chicago's more accomplished jazz musicians and composer of "Sea Songs."

"But as I always tell my students: Just sit down in front of your paper or computer, try not to judge what happens – just let the ideas come out of your head."

They started bubbling up in Gailloreto's mind about a year ago, when he attended a performance of Chicago's venerable William Ferris Chorale and "was floored," he says, by the group's gorgeous sound and technical acuity. So Gailloreto immediately contacted artistic director John Vorrasi and music director Paul French, suggesting they collaborate on a jazz opus.

French quickly realized that "nobody is writing music for the kind of ensemble Jim had in mind," he says. Plus, "we had a hole in the schedule."

Vorrasi began rooting around for poetry that Gailloreto might use as text and found several works that dealt with water, though Vorrasi says doesn't know exactly why he picked that theme.

Then the struggles began.

"When I got the poems, I thought: 'These are not what I would have picked,' "says Gailloretro. "But then I thought, 'Let's see what happens.' So I started reading about them, and I got into it."

Certainly the works Vorrasi selected seem to lend themselves to jazz expression. Dickenson's "Wild Nights," for instance, portrays torrid sensuality, complete with the metaphoric rocking motion of a boat. Cummings' "maggie, milly, molly and may" explores the wonders of the seashore and the vast emotional reactions it evokes. Creeley's "Water Music" ponders the beauty of the sea – and the language we use to describe it.

Not surprisingly, Gailloretto felt comfortable composing for saxophone and strings but found himself, well, somewhat at sea writing for two dozen voices.
"I wrote the music, but Paul (French) spent hours with me manicuring the scores, making them appropriate for vocals," says Gailloreto.

Adds French, "We would get together during the compositional process, and he was writing elegant, virtuosic music for strings. ... My job was to say: 'Come on, Jim, you need to make it more challenging for the singers.'"

Whether the suite ultimately sounds like jazz, classical or some odd mixture of the two won't be known until Saturday and Sunday's performances, in Chicago-area churches. But Gailloreto believes he has figured out how to bridge the two worlds.

"I didn't want the singers in there scatting ... I don't want them to swing," says Gailloreto. "I'm not asking them to do anything they're not trained to do.

"But the content has jazz harmony. Plus, when you hear a jazz saxophone improvising over that, the listeners can hear that this comes from the world of jazz. ..."

"Anyway, I don't think this has been done before."

That's putting it mildly.

"Sea Songs" will be performed at 7:30 p.m. Saturday at Madonna della Strada Chapel at Loyola University, 1032 W. Sheridan Rd.; and 3 p.m. March 20 at Emmanuel Episcopal Church, 203 S. Kensington Ave., La Grange; $20-$25; 773-508-2940 or williamferrischorale.org.

Rebirth of the 'Cool'

The music from Miles Davis' "Birth of the Cool" has been revived by various musicians since Capitol released the landmark album in 1957 (though the cuts were originally recorded in the late 1940s). But rarely has this music sounded as sleekly elegant in performance as it did over the weekend at the Jazz Showcase.

The Mulligan Mosaics Nonet devised a clever strategy for rejuvenating the suite: perform newly minted transcriptions of tunes from "Birth of the Cool" in alteration with freshly composed pieces written for the same, unusual instrumental forces (which include French horn and tuba).

Playing to a capacity house on Saturday night, the Mulligan nonet sounded thoroughly persuasive in the "Birth of the Cool" material, thanks to well-chosen tempos and a robust, beautifully weighted tone. "Moon Dreams" inspired one of the evening's most alluring performances, particularly in its glowing, other worldly coda.

Among the evening's soloists, trumpeter Art Davis acquitted himself handsomely (if not quite flawlessly) in the daunting task of taking the role of Miles Davis (no relation).

Several of the newly composed works deserve to be heard again, particularly Joe Clark's haunting, harmonically astringent "Wraith"; Joe Policastro's exquisitely voiced "Durcheinander"; and Policastro's shimmering arrangement of John Lewis' "Milano."
Though the engagement ended Sunday, it ought to mark the start – not the finish – of this "Birth of the Cool" revival. The Mulligan Mosaics organization now has at its fingertips an appealing way of illuminating a pivotal moment in jazz history.