



The Playing Never Stops

Kyle Shepherd, the 2014 Standard Bank Young Artist for Jazz, plays with a skill and passion that has led him to be compared to the likes of South African jazz legend, Abdullah Ibrahim. *Classicfeel's* Tamaryn Greer spoke to the pianist about the award, music and everything in between.



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Cape Town's Kyle Shepherd grew up around music. His mother was a violinist and often took him with to orchestra rehearsals and concerts where he became immersed in the music world. At five, he began learning to play the violin, and went on to learn from some 'great teachers', including the late Zim Ngqana, who left a profound and lasting impression on Shepherd.

At just 26, Shepherd has been nominated for a South African Music Award (SAMA) for each of his first three albums and has performed solo or with his trio or quartet in South Africa, Switzerland, Japan, Germany, France, Belgium, Denmark, the Netherlands and China. Shepherd formed the Kyle Shepherd Trio five years ago with fellow Standard Bank Young Artist Shane Cooper, whom he met while playing the

'gig scene' as a student, on double bass and Jonno Sweetman on drums.

'I compose all the music by myself beforehand, but ... when I present the music to them they take the music further than what I could have thought of,' says Shepherd. 'I fill in about 80 per cent of the canvas and Shane and Jonno really fill in the rest with their own musical personalities, and with their own ideas; and that all happens actually in a very spontaneous way, improvised way.'

Shepherd is launching two albums in 2014. The first, a double album recorded with the Kyle Shepherd Trio, is being launched on 26 July at the Wits Great Hall. Titled *Dream State*, Shepherd describes the album as 'quite different' to his previous offerings. While his previous CDs responded to his exploration of various South African and African musical genres



– ‘I was writing music within those sounds because that was important to me at that stage of my life – to discover myself as a South African and African person,’ *Dream State* incorporates a wider set of influences drawn from classical music to rock, jazz, and free jazz.

‘[Sweetman, Cooper and myself] went into the studio in late February. We had three days and we recorded 28 tracks... and that’s not a healthy thing to do, let me tell you that!’ says Shepherd. ‘We pushed it, and we put down all this new material, so in fact we have enough for three albums.’ Consequently, Shepherd is set to release a double album in July, featuring around 20 tracks of completely new material.

The second album – Shepherd’s first solo piano offering – will be launched later this year, having been recorded in Japan in late 2012/early 2013. (Shepherd has toured the country several times, and created the album with support from a Japanese promoter). ‘We recorded it in a studio that’s in this mountain region in a rural area of Japan; it’s very, very beautiful. It was autumn in Japan. And, because of jet lag we ended up recording in the middle of the night – I, of course, was on South African time. We recorded right through the night and because it was in the mountains, on the recording you hear the sound of the nightlife... so I decided to call the album *Into Darkness*.’

Shepherd has, of course, played extensively in both Cape Town and Johannesburg – he comments on the different ‘energy’ the audience brings to concerts in the two cities, one that ultimately impacts on his own performance: ‘people don’t really realise how much power and influence on the music that they have as an audience,’ he says. ‘For me, there are three parts to music making: one is the composer, one is the player (the musician), and the third part is the audience. And all three of these participants all play a part in making the music.’

For Shepherd, 2014 is packed full of concerts – ranging from the National Arts Festival in July, to the Joy of Jazz in September and including his recent performance at the Harare International Festival of the Arts in April. Shepherd would like to see a concert circuit established throughout Africa, extending beyond HIFA and the like: ‘people are



hungry for music. The music needs to be brought to them, so I think a concert circuit would be a wonderful thing,’ he says.

He is also ‘excited about taking the music into new spaces,’ such as the Hermanus Festival, where he and his trio will play in June. All of which requires not only practice, but a great deal of administration, which takes time away from the many aspects of preparation required: practicing one’s art, writing music, and ‘listening to music, listening to the great players. That, for me, all forms part of the practice of music, or being a musician’ says Shepherd. Moreover, one has to overcome ‘all the demons that one has to deal with psychologically, because it’s not a normal thing to sit in front of 600 people alone... to try and be as honest

and sincere, it’s a vulnerable position to be in, so you have to strengthen yourself and your psychological aspect, much like a sportsman would do... All of that for me is part of the practice of music. Practicing is more than just sitting down and playing your instrument, which is – don’t get me wrong – the most important part. All of this I try and do every day.’

Thus Shepherd’s Standard Bank Young Artist Award seems a well-earned prize, marking a key achievement in the musician’s developing career. ‘When I think of the long line of previous young artist award winners for music and for jazz, then I feel very honoured to be part of that line,’ he says. ‘It is a very valuable accolade to get, so it’s one which I am very honoured to have received.’ CF