

MUSIC

And all this jazz!

The founder of the Saturday Night Jazz Orchestra, **Taka Hirohama**, is collaborating with songstress Yoko Wende for three nights of big band jazz. Josiah Ng speaks with these cool cats about the history of big band music and finds out which artists are joining them at the concerts

The Saturday Night Jazz Orchestra puts on some of Hong Kong's most authentic big band experiences. Fact. And, this fortnight, SNJO's founder, Taka Hirohama, along with singer Yoko Wende, are bringing us Jazz Summer 2016. Prepare for three nights designed to immerse audiences in the art of big band swing, with each show headlined by an international performer in order to give Hongkongers a taste of what local and global big band jazz is all about.

Hirohama, a sax player who founded the SNJO in 1990, is largely solely responsible for swing jazz's current presence in Hong Kong. He remembers fondly the first few gigs by the orchestra in our city, which were performed shortly after he moved here in 1989. "No-one I performed with at that time had actually played jazz before," he recalls. "I remember being signed up for a Christmas party. I was told I had to help out with the music but I was the only one who could play jazz. They asked me to lead a band but the other musicians just couldn't play the music, even if they had come from a marching band background."

Thus, it took a few years for the orchestra to find its ground, says Hirohama. He explains that the first group of musicians he worked with in 1990 consisted of four piano players, four flautists and a quartet of guitar players. "How can you make a band from that?" he asks. "We were called



the Shikuhaku Band at that time, which is a Japanese Buddhist term that describes a kind of endless suffering. It was a joke at first but I soon got very tired of hearing it, so I changed it."

Jazz was the first stage of pop music. To share jazz is to share history

Fast forward 26 years and, after endless practices, performances and hard work, now the SNJO is the most renowned big band in Hong Kong. They're known for their Saturday night engagements at the Fringe Club, as well as regular appearances in the city's annual jazz festivals. Basically, they're a mainstay on the circuit. At the end of the day, however, Hirohama wants to show and teach music lovers in the fragrant harbour a thing or two about jazz. He notes that it was on the bandstands in the USA that blacks and whites were first given equal status at a time when laws prevented African-Americans from even drinking from the same fountains and using the same toilets as white people. "Most people think jazz is difficult and different," says Hirohama, "but it was really the first stage of pop music. It's when people started to share the same music,

so it became popular. To share jazz is to share history."

Co-organiser and first-rate jazz singer Yoko Wende partners with Hirohama in organising Jazz Summer so they too can share history. Born and raised in Tokyo, Wende earned a degree in international business in Japan before moving to New York. Originally intending to study business, she switched to acting after her involvement in a student musical. Eventually, she found her way to Hong Kong, where, inspired by bar and lounge singers, she realised a need to express herself and began singing in shows. She actually played her first show last November before meeting Hirohama, who introduced her to jazz, just a few months back. "I needed to express my intimate feelings," she says, of her desire to sing live. "I wanted to do acoustic evenings in small environments." Wende says that, in particular, she finds the expressive side of jazz the most appealing. "Some singers sing like they're singing and some sing like they're talking. I prefer to sing as if I'm talking because it's about the message we want to send." With three nights of hot big band jazz on the way for Hongkongers, the message is loud and clear.

Summer Jazz Jun 21-23, 8pm, Hong Kong City Hall Theatre, Central. Tickets: \$150-\$300; urbtix.hk.

Three for the money

The best way to experience big band jazz is to see it live, so be sure to catch the Saturday Night Jazz Orchestra on one or all of their mega Jazz Summer 2016 evenings. The orchestra, as well as moderator-emcee-singer Yoko Wende, should cook up a storm on all three nights. Here's the lowdown on the international musical maestros who are joining in the fun...

Aya Takazawa, Jun 21

Japanese trumpet virtuosa Aya Takazawa comes to town to perform a set of groovy jazz tunes with the big band to kick off the three-day affair. Known for an established, hip sound, she's joined on this first evening by Hirohama's own project, 40 Sax Swingin, an ensemble of 40 saxophones all improvising in perfect unity.

Richard Sussman, Jun 22

Richard Sussman, hailing from the Manhattan School of Music, headlines this night as pianist-arranger. He brings a star-studded résumé, which includes gigs with Lionel Hampton and Randy Brecker. Sussman is joined by Japanese pop singing duo KK Sis, who sing classic big band tunes from their native land.

Alan Chan, Jun 23

Alan Chan has won numerous awards for his arrangements and compositions, including an award for a composition for a 67-piece orchestra. We get to hear some of his originals with the SNJO. Joining him is Kazuo Oguro, a longtime friend of the SNJO and a multi-saxophone talent.