

It's a Mads world; Violinist Mads Tolling plays the Sanchez

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Only 205 miles south of the equator on the northern boundary of Tanzania, Mt. Kilimanjaro has been called the roof of Africa. It spirals above the Great Rift Valley, above tropical forests and herds of eland to a summit of permanent ice and below freezing temperatures. Violinist Mads Tolling climbed the great mountain not long ago with his father; an accomplishment which offered great physical challenge and endless rewards.

It was typical of Tolling in that he is known for stepping away from what is known into that which is less tested.



This two-time Grammy award winning Turtle Island Quartet violinist is bringing his own quartet to Saturday night's Pacifica Performances concert. Members of the Mads Tolling Quartet are: Tolling on violin, Mike Abraham on guitar, George Ban-Weiss on upright and electric bass and Eric Garland on drums.

Among the tunes the Quartet will offer are: "Danish Dessert" (Mads Tolling), "Song to John" (Stanley Clarke), "Black Dog" (Led Zeppelin), "Blue in Green" (Miles Davis), "The Chicken" (Jaco Pastorius) and "I skovens Dybe stille ro" (a Danish folk song).

Mads describes the Quartet's music as the Mahavishnu Orchestra meets Bela Fleck and the Flecktones.

"The core of our music is jazz, but not so much bebop," said Tolling.

"We are more influenced by Americana, world music and fusion, hence the rock n roll connection with Led Zeppelin."

As far as Tolling on violin, he said the comparison would be less Stephen Grappelli and more Jean-Luc Ponty. However Mads does offer some of the aesthetics of Grappelli in feel of time and swing. His compositions are also noted for being both melodic and lyrical with a lot of funk and groove.

Born and raised in Copenhagen, Denmark, Tolling picked up violin because his parents started him on it when he was 6. But by the time he was 9, he would get up on his own, an hour before school, so he could practice violin with his mother and younger sister.

"To me, the violin is one of the most expressive instruments around," said Tolling. "It sounds very close to the human voice."

Tolling started with the Suzuki method which emphasizes music by ear over musical notation. This was followed by the more traditional teaching of playing sonatas and violin concertos. Along the way his father, a jazz lover, introduced Mads to Miles Davis.

"I listened to Miles Davis play "Autumn Leaves" every day after that," said Tolling.

"Some sense of freedom and space grabbed me. The next step was for me to figure out how to do these things on the violin." Soon Tolling discovered that Denmark had a thriving jazz violin scene.

"I really developed my own voice with my instrument and I feel there is a lot I can contribute because my instrument is somewhat undiscovered in styles besides classical music."

At age 20, Tolling moved to the United States to pursue his jazz education and he studied under Matt Glaser.

He graduated summa cum laude from Berklee College of Music in Boston in 2003 and the legendary Jean-Luc Ponty recommended Mads play with acclaimed bassist Stanley Clarke and his touring band. He got the gig and hundreds of concerts with Clarke, including the Newport Jazz Festival and the Hollywood Bowl, followed.

Tolling is also a member of the Turtle Island Quartet. That offer came in at the same time Mads was invited to audition for the Monk Institute in front of Herbie Hancock, Ron Carter and Terrence Blanchard. It was a hard choice. Tolling auditioned for the Institute but then decided he would rather be out there playing as opposed to going to more school.

Turtle Island needed a viola player, something which violinist Tolling had never played.

But he stretched the truth and learned the viola before the audition that would lead to gigs in Pueblo, Mexico and Bremen, Germany. Tolling was the violist for Turtle Island from 2003-2007, since then he is their first violinist.

Tolling, who said he has been honored to play with such greats as Stanley Clarke and Kenny Baron, also listed Keith Jarrett and Pat Metheny as his long-time heroes.

"Jarrett is a genius!" said Tolling. "He, like Beethoven or Bach, reaches for something almost beyond human imagination, much like what Wayne Shorter. He has the greatest sound on the piano and can even compete with the classical guys."

As to Metheny, Tolling was effusive with his praise noting Metheny's melodic improvisations and uncompromising compositions that are nevertheless commercial. Plus Tolling admired the way Metheny, like Miles Davis, put the right people in the band.

Tolling said his quartet, which has been together since early 2007, really fits together well stylistically and on a personal level.

"All three musicians are virtuosos and great improvisers on their instruments," said Tolling.

"At the same time, they understand what it means to play as a unit."

He also noted a bit of their credentials. Mike Abraham and George Ban-Weiss are both long time members of Mitch Marcus Quartet. Eric Garland and Mike Abraham also toured with Irish pop icon Donovan.

Why does Mads think his audience will have a great time at his concert?

"The comment I get the most about when we play is, "I generally don't really like jazz, but I like your band so much, how do you it?" laughed Mads.

"For me it's a way of doing a show for the audience that will reach everybody. I don't want the music to be for a select few, or just have a certain sound to it - to me that is boring. I think like a producer or a scientist when I put a show together. I want to make it as fun for the listener as it is for us performers on stage.

"I still like the idea of educating people about what went before, and what it means to play these instruments. In that way people learn while having fun doing it. I think ultimately seeing four young guys that have a good time playing music and doing a very good job at it can be very exciting."