

Pianist Aaron Diehl returns to Blossom for the genre-crossing *Zodiac Suite*

by Stephanie Manning



Take a look at pianist Aaron Diehl's upcoming concerts and you'll see a little bit of everything. There's "Jazz in July" at New York's 92nd Street Y, "Bach to Bebop" with his Trio in Irvine, CA, and Gershwin's *Concerto in F* with the Milwaukee Symphony Orchestra — all in the span of a few months. Much of Diehl's work lies at the intersection of jazz and classical, and so does Mary Lou Williams' *Zodiac Suite*, which he'll be

performing this weekend with The Cleveland Orchestra.

It was on the Blossom Music Center stage where the Columbus, Ohio native made his debut with the Orchestra back in 2017. "I remember how sensitive they were to the music and how the sections within the orchestra were so together, and so expressive and nuanced," he reflected in a 2019 [interview](#) with *ClevelandClassical.com*. "It was like playing with a chamber music group."

For his third appearance at Blossom, Diehl will be joined by bassist David Wong, drummer Aaron Kimmel, and soprano Mikaela Bennett on Saturday, July 16 at 7:00 pm. Led by conductor Jader Bignamini, the Orchestra will also perform two works by Ottorino Respighi: *Fountains of Rome* and *Pines of Rome*. Tickets are available [here](#).

The influence of *Zodiac Suite* is far-reaching, with versions ranging from the original jazz trio to symphony orchestra, and Diehl has become one of its fiercest champions. After unsuccessfully proposing the chamber score to several orchestras, last year he convinced the New York Philharmonic to take on several selections for one of their online concerts, "An All-American Program."

Composer Mary Lou Williams, also a jazz pianist and bandleader, had a huge influence on swing and bebop music in mid-20th century America. In the '30s and '40s, she arranged music for jazz greats like Duke Ellington and Louis Armstrong, and as a pedagogue, she gave lessons to up-and-coming stars like Thelonious Monk. Williams “continuously challenged audience expectations of who she was — her identity as a Black American woman,” Diehl [told](#) *The New York Times*. “She was just as critical a figure as her male colleagues...But she didn’t get the credit she deserved.”



One of the composer’s cornerstone works is the 1945 *Zodiac Suite*, a combination of twelve pieces — one per constellation — each corresponding to specific musical figures in her life. “Aries,” dedicated to Billie Holiday and Ben Webster, swings between fiery energy and charming lyricism. And in the spirited “Virgo,” which draws on Kansas City jazz traditions, Diehl’s piano takes over the part originally for jazz trumpet. Hear him perform that selection with the New York Philharmonic [here](#).

Despite initial reticence from some classical musicians, who cited unfamiliarity with jazz idioms, Diehl told the *Times* that support for the piece is growing. “I think it could be a sign that musicians are willing to step outside of their comfort zone and really collaborate in ways that previously hadn’t been explored before.” And since that 2021 interview, time has only proved him right — the pianist brought the full orchestral version to the Milwaukee Symphony Orchestra in May and is set to perform it with the Philadelphia Orchestra next April.

In its day, the chamber orchestra version of *Zodiac Suite* was deemed “rather ambitious” by *The New York Times*. More jazz adaptations of the suite have appeared over the years — notably from pianist Geri Allen in the early 2000s — though the orchestral versions largely faded from the public eye. But its newfound popularity makes a compelling argument to include a little more jazz in the orchestra hall.

“Americans don’t realize how important jazz is,” Williams told the *New York Post* in 1975. “It’s healing for the soul. It should be played everywhere — in churches, nightclubs, everywhere. We have to use every place we can.”

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