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Robert Glasper Trio

Monday 10 August, 10.30pm

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Anna Calvi and Heritage Orchestra

Tuesday 18 – Thursday 20 August, 10.30pm

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HUB SESSIONS



CHILLY GONZALES FEATURING KAISER QUARTETT | CHAMBERS

Saturday 8 and Sunday 9 August,
9.30pm | The Hub

The performance lasts approximately
1 hour and 50 minutes with no interval

CHILLY GONZALES FEATURING KAISER QUARTETT | CHAMBERS

Pianist, composer, producer, songwriter and world record-breaker, Chilly Gonzales is a self-proclaimed musical genius – in the words of his alter ego creator, Canadian-born Jason Beck.

Gonzo (as he prefers to be known – don't call him Chilly) has collaborated with a startling array of artists spanning eclectic musical genres, from Jamie Lidell to Jane Birkin, Charles Aznavour to Jarvis Cocker. He was also first person to introduce the world to orchestral rap, with his 2011 album *The Unspeakable Chilly Gonzales*. And he even shared in the 2013 Grammy-winning glory of Daft Punk's *Random Access Memories* – for what he jokes was 44 seconds of solo piano negotiating a tricky harmonic transition from B flat minor to A minor.

He calls that his 'harmonic superpower'. And in fact, despite his punning titles, playfulness and unpredictability, Gonzo's music has always been supremely intelligent. He intertwines pop, hip hop, classical, chill-out, soft rock, electronica, lounge and more, highlighting one strand or another across his vast stylistic armoury.

It's got a lot to do with his background. Jason Beck grew up in Toronto and began teaching himself piano at the age of three, later remembering learning Chopin in piano lessons only to rush home to catch 1980s pop on TV. He graduated from Montreal's McGill University with a joint degree in jazz piano and composition. The pseudonym Chilly Gonzales came as a spur-of-the-moment thing in 1999: he'd long been nicknamed Gonzo (after the Muppet) because of his rather prominent nose, and it wasn't much of a stretch from that to the cartoonish moniker Chilly Gonzales. But despite the obviously fake name and preposterous persona, he put his truth and sincerity into the music he creates. And Gonzo has long been a musical innovator, rightly proud of his multiple musical personalities. He's never been afraid of exposing music's inner workings, either, highlighting connections between the different sides of our musical cultures – from Western art music to throwaway pop. And, most importantly, emphasising that there are far more similarities than there are differences. In a YouTube series of Pop Music Masterclasses (originally produced for German radio station 1Live) Gonzo sits at a piano in a darkened concert hall, blithely analysing pop songs – Daft Punk's 'Get Lucky', Drake's 'Hold On' or Taylor Swift's 'Shake It Off' – with the insights of a classical master, as if to tell us it's okay to take this music seriously. He's compared the advent of amplified guitars, synthesizers and drum machines with Debussy's innovations in piano sound.

Once upon a time, it might have been embarrassing to be a conservatory-trained musician in the instinctive, play-what-you-feel world of pop. But Gonzo is proud of his musical nerdiness. In 2004 he released his first purely instrumental album, *Solo Piano*, which drew comparisons with Erik Satie and remains his best-selling release. He took a detour in 2009 to break the world record for the longest solo musical performance (in Paris, playing for 27 hours, 3 minutes and 44 seconds), and then followed his first solo disc up with *Solo Piano II* in 2013. In 2012, though, he'd followed in the footsteps of the great composers by publishing an album of sheet music. *Re-Introduction Etudes* is a collection of 24 piano pieces designed to encourage lapsed keyboardists back into playing. It's been so successful that Toronto's Royal Conservatory of Music has three of the pieces on its 2015 piano exam syllabus.

Earlier this year, Gonzo unleashed upon the world the next phase in his updating of classical music for the 21st century. *Chambers* is an album of plush miniature gems for piano quintet (piano plus string quartet), the classical ensemble prized by Schumann, Dvořák and Shostakovich, among many others. On the disc Gonzo is joined by the four string players of Hamburg's Kaiser Quartett, whom he first met when they were performing as part of his *The Unspeakable Chilly Gonzales* tour in 2011. Seizing the opportunity of like musical minds, he worked closely with the Kaiser foursome in developing his writing for strings.

Gonzo points out that chamber music was arguably the pop music of its day, the first kind of music to invite itself into people's homes and become part of their everyday lives. Without families and friends playing together in one another's homes centuries ago, we'd have no CD systems or iPods today.

On *Chambers*, however, he reimagines classical chamber music taking in influences from today's pop: chord progressions from rapper Juicy J cast for string quartet on 'Switchcraft'; a familiar hip-hop rhythm as an acoustic riff on the Rick Ross-dedicated 'Sample This'. Each of the album's tracks gets a different dedication: to Bach and Daft Punk on the acoustic arpeggiator imitator 'Prelude to a Feud'; to French composer Gabriel Fauré on the lyrical 'Sweet Burden'; and even to himself (well, to Jason Beck, if that really is himself) on the enigmatic lisp song 'Myth Me'. (Yes, Gonzo's puns are alive and well.)

Gonzo live, though, is an unpredictable creature. For tonight's intimate offering, the man himself on piano and vocals is joined by the four string players of the Kaiser Quartett. They'll mix tracks from *Chambers*, earlier material reimagined afresh for his sophisticated classical-style ensemble – and even, quite possibly, the odd spot of commentary on Gonzo's unique musical universe.

© **David Kettle** is a freelance writer and editor