

Pianist makes poignant return to the Queen's Hall

It will be a bitter-sweet return when pianist Gwilym Simcock appears at the Queen's Hall with the Scottish National Jazz Orchestra on Thursday 27 April.

Now an internationally acclaimed musician, whose recent activity has included touring the world with superstar guitarist Pat Metheny, Simcock was considered a new kid on the block when he shared the Queen's Hall stage with his mentor and fellow pianist John Taylor in 2008.

"Fifteen years ago almost to the day," says Bangor-born Simcock, who at the time of the concert with Taylor had recently become the first jazz musician to be given BBC New Generation Artist status.

"We didn't get to play piano duets too often, because there are not many venues that can provide two grand pianos. So that was memorable in itself. But of course, JT, as everyone knew him and who was a great guiding light for me as a student at the Royal Academy of Music and Drama, passed away in 2015. I'll be thinking of him this time, I know."

Simcock had already been earning praise for his musicianship for some time when he went to London to study at the Royal Academy. At the age of eleven, in 1992, he had achieved the highest marks in the country for his Associated Board Grade 8 exams on both piano and French horn. He went on to study these two instruments plus composition at the prestigious Chetham's

Music School in Manchester where two teachers – pianist Les Chisnall and Steve Berry, who had played bass in the anarchic London big band Loose Tubes – introduced him to jazz.

“JT was brilliant but other tutors at the Academy also helped me to develop as a jazz pianist,” says Simcock. “Nikki Iles, Nick Weldon and Geoff Keezer were great guides, too.”

Simcock graduated with a first-class honours degree and the Principal’s Prize for outstanding achievement and was soon showing his ability to shine in both classical music and jazz as a professional. He has undertaken commissions for the Aronowitz Ensemble and the Britten Sinfonia and his jazz experience includes work with vocalist Bobby McFerrin, trumpeter Kenny Wheeler, saxophonists Lee Konitz and Peter King, bassist Dave Holland and drummer Bill Bruford’s Earthworks. Along with British guitar legend Mike Walker he co-leads the Anglo-American supergroup The Impossible Gentlemen.

The late, great jazz pianist and keyboards player Chick Corea described Simcock as “an original, a creative genius” and the Scottish National Jazz Orchestra’s artistic director, saxophonist Tommy Smith is a long-time admirer. “When I heard Gwilym playing a solo piano concert, I was transfixed and loved every minute,” says Smith, who has commissioned Simcock to compose a new work, entitled Release, for the tour that brings Simcock and the SNJO to the Queen’s Hall.

Simcock, who was shortlisted for the Mercury Music Prize in 2011 and has worked with top European ensembles including the NDR Big Band, is delighted to be joining the SNJO on tour.

“It’s fantastic to have the opportunity to write for such a brilliant, world-famous ensemble,” he says. “As a composer, you want your music realized to the highest level, so I’m extremely excited to create this programme of music, especially for the SNJO.”

