

Aaron Diehl - Biography

A 32-year-old classically trained pianist and composer, Aaron Diehl has made an indelible mark on the jazz world over the last 15 years. Showing an affinity for early jazz and mid-20th century “third-stream” music, his latest evolution comes as he begins to tackle modern classical works, performing works by George Gershwin with the New York Philharmonic, Cleveland Orchestra and LA Philharmonic in the last year alone.

Diehl has collaborated with living masters ranging from NEA Jazz Master Benny Golson to 20th century classical titan Philip Glass, while establishing himself as one of the preeminent interpreters of the Great American Songbook in his own trio and with the vocalist Cécile McLorin Salvant.

Critics from *The New York Times* jazz critics have extolled Mr. Diehl’s “melodic precision, harmonic erudition, and elegant restraint,” while the same paper’s classical critics have noted, “Mr. Diehl play[s] magnificently.” His meticulously conceived performances, collaborations, and compositions are refreshing as his highly personal aesthetic spearheads a union of tradition and original artistry, while bounding ahead on an uncharted course.

Born in 1985 in Columbus, Ohio to a funeral director and a former Olympian turned education administrator, Aaron Diehl grew up in a nurturing musical environment. His grandfather, Arthur Baskerville, a pianist and trombonist was an early influence. He began studying classical piano at age 7, while his passion for jazz was further fueled while attending the Interlochen Arts Camp as a pre-teen, where he met the pianist Eldar, who exposed him to Oscar Peterson and Art Tatum recordings.

At age 17, Diehl was a finalist in Jazz at Lincoln Center’s Essentially Ellington competition, where he was noticed by Wynton Marsalis. Soon after, Diehl was invited to tour Europe with the Wynton Marsalis Septet (Marsalis has famously referred to him as “The Real Diehl”). That Fall he would matriculate to the Juilliard School, studying with jazz pianists Kenny Barron and Eric Reed and classical pianist Oxana Yablonskaya. Diehl came to wider recognition in 2011 as winner of the American Pianists Association’s Cole Porter Fellowship, which included \$50,000 in career development and a recording contract with the esteemed Mack Avenue Records.

Aaron has been a staple of the New York jazz scene since 2007. His role as pianist and musical director for vocalist Cécile McLorin Salvant, the most arresting and authentic jazz vocalist to emerge in three decades, has enhanced his profile well beyond the jazz world. Diehl & Salvant’s musical partnership is one of the most fruitful in recent memory.

Shortly before Salvant released her highly acclaimed *WomanChild*, which featured Diehl and his trio, the pianist released his Mack Avenue debut, *The Bespoke Man’s Narrative*, a tribute of to the sophisticated classicism of the Modern Jazz Quartet; particularly the pianist John Lewis. At the time, the *New York Daily News* wrote, “Diehl, a rising star of jazz piano, has an individual talent so huge that one day he may extend the jazz tradition,” *The Financial Times* commented, “as sharp, opulent and stylish as the title might suggest. [Diehl]’s fluency is remarkable and his light-but-sensuous touch oozes class without breaking boundaries.”

Upon the release of his 2015 Mack Avenue album, *Space, Time, Continuum* —featuring special guests Golson and Joe Temperley — in some ways a reaction to the classicism of *Bespoke*, the *New York*

Times reframed its prior appraisal. “Mr. Diehl, who once might have suggested an emissary from another time himself, has brilliantly advanced his art under current conditions.” *The Irish Times* noted, “his second studio album...hints at new horizons.” Golson told the *Wall Street Journal*, “He’s going to go the distance. He’s going to be one of the important ones.”

Diehl’s first solo album, *Live at Caramoor* (2008), was a concert recorded at the Caramoor Festival. *Live at the Players* (2010) featured two of his trios: Quincy Davis and David Wong, and Paul Sikivie and Lawrence Leathers. He won the 2012 Prix du Jazz Classique from the Académie du Jazz for *Live at the Players*; the 2013 Jazz Journalists Award for Up-And-Coming Artist, and in 2014 was the Monterey Jazz Festival Commission Artist, becoming one of the youngest artists to receive that honor. For Monterey, he composed “Three Streams of Expression,” dedicated to Lewis.

Diehl served in 2014-2015 as Music Director for Jazz at Lincoln Center’s New Orleans Songbook series, performed in the 2014 New York premiere of Philip Glass’ complete Etudes at the Brooklyn Academy of Music, collaborated with the flamenco guitarist Dani De Morón in Flamenco Meets Jazz (produced by Savannah Music Festival and Flamenco Festival). He served as the inaugural Artistic Director of the Catskill Jazz Factory in Tannersville, NY.

In 2017, Diehl embarked on a new venture. He would play with the New York Philharmonic and the Cleveland Orchestra as featured soloist on George Gershwin’s Piano Concerto in F. Diehl played on the NY Phil’s opening gala performance of their 2016-2017 season in conductor Alan Gilbert’s final season. The chief classical critic of the *New York Times* wrote, “Mr. Diehl...had brilliance when called for, during jazz-tinged passages of Lisztian runs and octaves. The roomy freedom of [his] playing in bluesy episodes was especially affecting. He folded short improvised sections into the score, and it’s hard to imagine that Gershwin would not have been impressed.” Of the same piece, the *Cleveland Plain Dealer* wrote “In his Cleveland debut, [Diehl]...was right on the money, a responsive and virtuosic interpretation marked by keen vitality and intimate communication with his peers.”

In addition to Salvant and Marsalis, Diehl has toured or recorded with Wycliffe Gordon, Warren Wolf, Lew Tabackin, Matt Wilson, and the Jazz at Lincoln Center Orchestra. When Diehl performed the music of Philip Glass at Brooklyn Academy of Music, he was exposed to the work of pianist and composer Timo Andres, with whom he plans to collaborate in the future. He has performed Gershwin’s Rhapsodies with the Amarillo Symphony and will perform Glass’ Works for Piano and The Complete Piano Etudes in Aarhus, Denmark in Fall 2017.

When he isn’t on tour or recording, Diehl enjoys spending time in the sky. As a licensed pilot, one of his favorite planes to fly is the Beechcraft Bonanza. One can follow Diehl’s travels, as well as fascinating practice sessions at the piano and much diverse concert-going via his instagram account at www.instagram.com/aaronjdiehl.