

Orchestra of circus musicians breaks away from the big top

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Author: Josh Berk Special to The Morning Call -- Freelance | Page: D5 | Section: SATURDAY MAGAZINE

As he talks on his cell phone during an intermission, Peter Bufano briefly pauses to note, "Oh, two zedonks just walked by." A zedonk is a half zebra/half donkey. Bufano does not think their presence is strange, nor does he think it's odd that his best friend for a year was a giraffe. He's hardly fazed by bearded ladies, sword-swallowers, or any of the strange and quirky characters of life. It's all in a day's work for Bufano, a former clown, current keyboardist for the Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus and accordionist/band-leader of the band Cirkestra, or circus orchestra.

Cirkestra, in its continuing quest to "run away from the circus to join the world," performs tonight at Wired Gallery in Bethlehem. Although it might seem odd to play circus music in a contemporary art gallery, Bufano is thrilled at the opportunity.

"I'm accustomed to playing for 10,000-20,000 people," he says. "That's what I do day to day about 10 times a week. But I love playing for small audiences. You're very directly feeling your audience and it's very intense."

The music Bufano plays with his five-piece band is in certain ways similar to the tunes you hear under any big top. The group plays classic circus waltzes as well as the uptempo "oom-pah" songs that have been a circus staple for years. However, other influences enter the group's original music, mostly written by Bufano.

"Our dark circus waltzes have been compared to the sound of Tom Waits," Bufano says. "I'm flattered by the comparison." In addition, Cirkestra's melodies sometimes have a klezmer feel, and also show the influence of jazz and traditional gypsy music.

"Circuses go way back," Bufano says. "And they always traveled like gypsies, so there's a big crossover there."

Bufano isn't interested in the experimental futurist music that accompanies

some modern circus performances.

"Our music sounds in some ways like folk music from other parts of the world. It's about melody and we don't really rely on electronics. It sounds, in its own way, kind of ancient," he says. "If you go to hear Cirque du Soleil, you'll hear music that is pop and electronic. It's my mission to keep classic circus music alive."

Bufano plays keyboards in the circus, but usually sticks to accordion in Cirkestra. The instrument might not have the greatest reputation (composer Edward Greig once famously stated "It sounds like a pig with a sore throat"), but Bufano defends it heartily. "I love to play the accordion," he enthuses, adding that his grandfather played the instrument and passed the tradition down.

Joining Bufano's accordion (which sounds nothing like a sick pig) in Cirkestra is a crew of musicians, all with circus backgrounds. Kthe Louise Hostetter, whose resume includes both the Bindlestiff Cirkus and the Boston Philharmonic, plays the five-string fiddle, an unusual home-made variation on the traditional violin. Sam Lett of Circus Smirkus plays winds: clarinet, saxophone, flute, harmonica, and occasionally the didgeridoo -- a droning wind instrument of the Australian Aborigines. Cirkestra's drummer is Mike Dobson of the Big Apple Circus.

"He plays a regular drum kit, but with added gizmos," Bufano says. By smacking toys and tweaking other gadgets, Dobson creates "the pops and whistles, the boink and the bink that you hear when clowns are tumbling around." He is described as a "band within the band."

"When people hear it, it immediately conjures up images of ringmasters, dogs dancing, people flying up through the air," Bufano says. "It's like watching a movie without the words."

Bufano's route to the unlikely career of professional circus musician was a circuitous one.

"A lot of circus people come up in circus families," he says. "But I did not." His first career goal was to be a magician, a passion that led him to apply for the now defunct Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Clown College after he graduated from high school. Out of the thousands who applied, he was one of 50 chosen to enter the demanding course of study required of a professional clown. "It's kind of random," he admits. "I kind of wonder what my parents

think."

After clown college, Bufano found work first as a clown with Ringling Bros. in the late 1980s. Later, he studied film scoring at Berklee College before finding a way to unite both fields. He returned to the circus, not as a performer, but as a musician. He began writing original scores and providing music for circuses big and small all over the world. It was during a tour of Japan that he befriended a giraffe, and it was at the Palace of Variety, the last variety theater in New York, where he performed with old-time sideshow performers such as bearded ladies and sword-swallowers. "Just a couple of dozen circus freaks," he says.

Now 38, Bufano lives the wandering life. "I call Boston home," he says with a laugh, "even though I haven't been there for a year."

For the past four years, whenever there's a break in the Ringling Bros. schedule, he rushes to meet up with Cirkestra. The group has recorded three CDs and loves to take its music to the world at every opportunity.

"I really live for these little venues," he says.