

Five Days of Jazz in Brno

Harmonie – Czech monthly magazine about jazz and classical music.

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JazzFest Brno aspires to be one of the most intriguing jazz events in the Czech Republic. Let us take a closer look at all five days of this year's festival (21 - 25 April), which we have enjoyed in the capital city of Moravia.

April 21, Semilasso

A Slavonic dialogue in the post-bop esperanto was a major feature in the first half of the evening. It was the repertoire from the latest recording, Serendipity, from the Slovenian saxophone phenomenon **Jure Pukl** in the stellar Czechoslovak company of the **Ondrej Krajňák Trio**. The musicians created a remarkable continuum, shining brightly despite the quite poor work of the sound engineer in the field of the timbres and dynamics. In connection with the previously mentioned sound and dynamics, the rhythm section comprised of **Marian Ševčík** (drums), **Tomáš Baroš** (bass) and **Ondrej Krajňák** (piano) deserves a great deal of recognition. The pianist also served as a great counterpart to Pukl's solo flights. Especially the slow tempos which turned out very well, where Pukl revealed quite a bit of his Redmanesque influences and the piano sounded almost impresionistic. The final danceable kind-of-funky encore with an apparent bluesy harmonic base was an apt and energetic period before the intermission in an otherwise stylistically quite strictly limited performance.

American guitarist **Kurt Rosenwinkel** experienced his Brno and Czech premiere. A year has already passed since the release of his last record Deep Song and even though his quintet has kept identical instrumentation since the recording session, the new and renewed group personnel promised another "next step" in the band's sound. With the exception of the frontman, only the energetic drummer **Jeff Ballard** remained from the Deep Song personnel. As usual, Ballard presented a wide array of rhythmic ideas and inspirations and he and the rest of the group (**Aaron Goldberg** - piano, **Mark Turner** - saxophone, **Joe Martin** - bass) stroked the audience with the first tones of their set, not leaving any space for doubt that this is new music with an extraordinary quality. The main characteristics of the Rosenwinkel Group sound (unison and polyphonic connection of the guitar and saxophone, refined harmonic and melodic thinking of the leader, synthesizing an ample amount of different impulses) were as almost, a bit rougher this time around, with a rock-like sound, which also touched the once clean sound of the band leader. Rosenwinkel performed his brand new compositions as well as some older ones (Use of Light) in Brno. Mark Turner also contributed his pieces Jacky's Place and Casa Oscura to the Brno repertoire.

The impressive solidity and a new acoustic concept of the Kurt Rosenwinkel Group proves that its 36-year old leader is with no doubt a well earned world jazz star. If only he joined the rest of his group to jam with the Ondřej Pivec Quartet. The remainder of the group excelled again during the jam session!

April 22, Semilasso

The second evening was an evening of no surprise, a certainty game, which is by all means not to say that the quality of the performance suffered. For those, who had not experienced **Miriam Bayle's** vocals before, it must have been a complete revelation. There is no doubt that this Slovak singer with a base in Prague jazz clubs has strengthened her position as the most compelling vocalist in this little country. Her third performance in the relatively short JazzFest history is only a confirmation of that fact. Every time she presents herself with a little different packaging, but always with a solid repertoire. Similarly, three years ago, **Radek Zapadlo** with his soaring tenor saxophone was a great counterpart of the leader and everything was propelled by the drummer **Bady Zbořil**. Sensible and clever bass lines were provided by Mr. P.D. (Petr Dvorský) and solid frames of the arrangements were guarded by Jakub Zomer, the pianist. The flawless Donna Lee was a crest of the first set for the most of the spectators.

Scott Hamilton took over the stage after the intermission. The American saxophonist arrived without his regular band to form a front line together with Polish saxophone colleague, **Piotr Cieslikowski**. As much as the opening west-coast standard Bernie's Tune captivated with an interesting second voice leading, different from the original more than a half century old Mulligan version, the remaining numbers could be regarded with a bit more criticism as they revealed slight problems in the interplay (Scott Changes, Groovin' High). On the other hand, in the solo ballads (Piotr - Moonlight in Vermont, Scott - Skylark, according to the wish of one of the spectators!) everything fell into the right place including the exquisite support from the Slovak accompany trio **Nothing But Swing** (Klaudius Kováč - piano, Róbert Ragan - bass, Peter Solárik - drums). A bit dull course of the solos - first tenor, second tenor, piano and bass - could have been a bit more varied. Such a noted player (he records at least one album a year on the Concord label) could have shown a little bit more imagination. Nevertheless, his performance was not a disappointment for those, who are aware of the important fact that Hamilton preserves the style of the older saxophone generation fresh and inspired.

April 23, the Brno City Theater

The main evening certainly was the most important from the social standpoint. The organizers purposely chose a noble and attractive environment to make the plentiful V.I.P. audience feel they are a part of a magnificent show. The Musical scene of the Brno City Theater served excellent for this purpose up until the point when the temperature rose almost above a bearable limit. The audience was even less happy when they found out that there were no refreshments available during the pause, especially because the evening was composed of three parts this time.

Those who foretold evil in the case of the 4TET being just a plain libation for the sponsors were not true. The group members might fall to a slightly different music category visually, however those who really listen to the music could enjoy the show quite as much. Only a primitive musical ignoramus would not have heard and praised their fresh arrangements, the difficult voice leading in the vocal quartet, the interpretation extended all the way down to the smallest details as well as the show's moderation which never exceeded the limits of taste.

The immediately following concert of Anne Ducros continued with the so far, uninterrupted series of vocal performances starting with Dianne Schuur in 2002, resuming with Nneenna Freelon, Polish ballad master Anna Maria Jopek and finishing with Janis Siegel last year. An original approach to standards was one of the aspects to admire in Ducros' performance (*Naima, Come Rain or Come Shine, Who Can I Turn To, Just in Time, Four*) as well as an optimistic encore (*On a Clear Day You Can See Forever*) and exemplary communication with her Trio.

After a departure of the most exhausted, there was a bit more oxygen left in the previously packed house for those brave, who were ready to enjoy the only this year's festival big band performance. Milans Svoboda treated this discipline with a restless doggedness and it was very inspiring to watch, how he can pass his enthusiasm onto every single member of the orchestra just by his energetic conducting. The opening classic penned by Thad Jones, *Central Park North*, played a bit differently despite its quite exact and obligatory score, promised an outstanding experience. The bandleader's music could naturally not be omitted during the course of the second half of the evening and when the large sound of the band was interrupted by solo piano interludes played by Karel Růžička, the dramaturgy of the evening received an additional star.

April 24, the Brno City Theater

The evening was kicked off by the intriguing nationals called the Vertigo Quintet. To write that it was some kind of echo of the Nuselský Umělecký Orchester, which performed at the JazzFestBrno two years ago, could sound as a degradation. No, it was the other way around! In the more chamber sound of the group one can hear the original composer's and arranger's ideas, the final shape of the music is fine tuned by all members of the group, who also contribute with their own compositions. The crucial difference, though, is a totally different approach than most of the domestic groups present nowadays. The new generation of the musicians, who have thoroughly paid their dues, does not hesitate to exceed the 32bar form and is not afraid of repeating and exploiting the motifs, which would normally sink into this profound sea of ideas. They create similar moods as the best representatives of the ECM label, however, with the label "Home Made". The opening performance was by no means a match of the juniors before the one of the masters. It was a well selected

appetizer before the fantasies served up by the chef. The chef, even though once seen and heard in Brno, did not disappoint at all.

Avishai Cohen enchanted the audience with both his new music from the fresh outing called Continuo and an untamable and contagious joy of playing music, far from being tied down by affectation. It turned out to be difficult for the members of the trio to hide their perfect control over the music material as well as their instruments by the translucent blanket of a spontaneous movement over the whole stage. While Cohen only held his double bass, he performed only small step variations and rhythmical sway. The moment he oicked up the bass guitar, he easily caught up with everything he neglected before. His action radius finished at the edge of the stage and from time to time, he outshined even the acrobatic elements of the incredibly energetic pianist Sam Barsh. His two-meter recoils from the piano bench to the backstage at the solo climaxes made famous by Keith Jarrett's dance figures seem like a feeble competition. Only the young drummer Mark Guiliana had to stay at his throne and keep eye contact with the remaining two. The music went on with the minimalistically endless exploitation of tiny musical fragments. The climaxing peculiar rendition of Ellington's Caravan after a very long set topped up the great night. The peak of this year's JazzFest? Perhaps.

April 22, Fléda

The last night of the festival was enhanced by the atmospheric club vibe at Fléda. It was definitely a pleasant change in comparison to the bit snobbish environment at the Brno City Theater. The program matched the venue well, featuring Michael Marcus, who is considered to be one of the most distinguished avant-garde improvisers as well as session players in New York City (album *Speaking Out*, 2002). The skillful instrumentalist did not let himself get uncomfortable with the absence of the ill trumpeter Ted Daniel and centered the complete attention of the audience towards his easy-going personage. The trio they formed with Georg Wolf and Newman Baker recalled slightly the Austrian *Tres Hombres*, at lest to a certain part of the audience. This comparison, though, does not seem correct. The group does not pander to the listeners with simple and approachable funk figures, yet stays firmly in the swing context, even though often they often dismantled the groove down to the atoms. That aspect may have influenced some listeners in their perception of the first half of the evening as being a bit too complex. It is not smart to turn off any instrument of the pianoless trio in your head, and Marcus proved that with his concept, enabling the band mates to communicate and still stay locked in with the necessary rhythm flexibility and looseness. The frontman is primarily a compelling melodicist, who does not trouble audience with his inner chaos.

Almost two years have passed since the publishing of the last recording *Electrology* of the French electro group Wise, their music still has enough power to attract with its blend of swing, soul, jazz and hip-hop. The program bulletin labeled the music as "typical French truffazesque electro jazz", the music is a bit further from the Truffaz icon than the one of his various other imitators. The frontman, Guillaume Poncellet played flugelhorn (from time to time slightly blurred with an electronic effect device) instead of the trumpet. Wise provided a pleasant dance party with the fragile, almost Chet Baker-like melodic of the horn player. Even though the programming and other experimental elements assume an important position in the final shape of the music, the formation can present itself both as a pure and brutal acoustic trio (Robin Notte provoked the harsh rhythm section primarily with the acoustic piano) and good old jazzrock fusion. To put it bluntly: the electronics are more or less an extension of the improvisational qualities for this energetic quintet, which they proved during the late night jamsession.

This year's JazzFest was a great example of the compromise between a one-day event with major jazz superstars and fractionalism of the long term program series. The dramaturgy highlighted mostly mainstream, but free jazz or progressive electronics as a crucial focus of other festivals. Brno was a great opportunity to meet. The remaining question stays, though: is there still a potential for another week long or longer summer jazz event?