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SPARKS OF LIFE: FESTIVAL HIGHLIGHTS (JUNE 2016-JANUARY 2017)

THE MARCIN WASILEWSKI TRIO, an exciting Polish group, performed one of their first Canadian shows at the National Arts Centre on June 25th (they were also presented this year by the Vancouver Jazz Festival). This early evening concert in a temporarily outfitted section of the renovating NAC was a sheer delight for the roughly 200 listeners assembled on a perfect summer festival night. The strong downtown presence of the Ottawa Jazz Festival hummed around us as we arrived (with some difficulty) at the obscure rear loading bay entrance, the close concentration of key festival venues in Confederation Park, NAC, the Lord Elgin, etc., making for a palpable and infectious energy. (After Wasilewski's trio, I heard some of the raunchy and unrestrained strains of Trombone Shorty in the park, but opted in a rare moment of festival restraint not to pile one radically different musical experience on top of another—this time!)

OJF programming manager Petr Cancura waxed briefly and eloquently about his enthusiasm for finally being able to schedule Wasilewski before the three lean, austere musicians (Michał Miśkiewicz on drums and Sławomir Kurkiewicz on bass), dressed in t-shirts and jeans, looking both cerebral and very guitar-rock (*vive les clichés*) in a European kind of way, hit the foreshortened, angular stage. I'm sure they must hate the inevitable comparisons with the Esbjörn Svensson Trio—another Baltic-facing combo whose trajectory was cut lamentably short with the leader's 2008 death in a Stockholm archipelago scuba-diving accident—but there is an undoubted resemblance in style and attitude, *mutatis mutandis*, between the two groups with, it must be said, Wasilewski's trio generally in a more meditative register.

The programme focused on their 2014 ECM release *Spark of Life* (with Swedish tenor saxophonist Joakim Milder, sadly not guesting here) but

also included pieces from some earlier recordings and at least one choice from outside their recorded repertoire. Highlights included the absolutely beautiful “Austin” (definitely in that meditative, elegiac mode), which was a tribute to Austin Peralta, another departed young jazz pianist. Herbie Hancock’s “Actual Proof” turned into a spare exercise in funk—a stripped-down reading with a simple, bluesy figure setting off a no-holds-barred exploration of downbeat and diatonic pleasure. “Night Train to You,” a piece from their 2010 album *Faithful*, had challenging and enjoyable shifts in time and overall, again, a sense that we were going to be taken some way beyond the recorded versions of this repertoire.

Separated from friends in the crowded temporary space, I sat with a family of three francophones from Gatineau who were clearly jazz-curious and enthusiastic without being total jazzheads (read: players themselves). We spoke animatedly afterwards about the performance, and they had not caught the title of the enchanting encore piece either. (It was, I learned later, Krzysztof Komeda’s “Lullaby” from the soundtrack to Roman Polanski’s 1968 film *Rosemary’s Baby*—an achingly beautiful repertoire choice, as the waltzing swing of the closer smoothed some of the edges of a performance that had tended to drive the material considerably harder than the recordings do.)

The review in the *Ottawa Citizen* the next day usefully emphasized that contrast between the group’s recorded, quintessentially pristine ECM sound and the high intensity of a real go-for-it, hold-nothing-back jam. One of my Ottawa hosts, an erstwhile reed player and veteran of Real Book jam sessions, simply said, “Wow, the chops.” It was a memorable performance of sensitivity, brio, brains, and joyful risk, which confirmed that this is one of the strongest piano trios in the world right now.

Another interesting if ambivalent experience at the OJF was extraordinary American saxophonist and occasional Arcade Fire member Colin Stetson’s rereading of Henryk Górecki’s 1976 composition Symphony No. 3 (subtitled the “Symphony of Sorrowful Songs”) in the NAC Studio space. I hadn’t heard anything about “Sorrow,” the recording that preceded the live performances, and I found the idea exciting, if somewhat puzzling. Reorchestrating the composition for a kind of alt-rock chamber orchestra might well be a legitimate interpretive statement, but in the end, despite the beautiful vocal performance by Megan Stetson (the saxophonist’s sister) and a Claire Denis soundtrack kind of vibe in the electric instruments that I ap-

preciated, the outing did not leave me with a clear enough sense of purpose. Perhaps this kind of exercise can bring wider audiences to canonical, orchestral works of contemporary music or perhaps this particular piece gives off an aura of untouchability that precisely needs to be questioned through such a gesture, but it did not feel as though the work had been elevated, critiqued or even shifted into a significantly different light by this ambitious and respectful project. It was lovely to hear this music again in a different way, but in my view it was not an essentially revealing recasting.

A chronicle of concert and festival highlights from an Atlantic Canadian perspective must include the Halifax Jazz Festival (July 12-16), which celebrated its 30th anniversary in 2016. Like similar events across the country and around the world, although more slowly and less radically than some, the HJF has developed into a core jazz festival wrapped in a more general celebration of popular and world music. Such is the price of survival, and only the most narrow-minded purist would deny that it does create some terrific juxtapositions in its intelligent and pragmatic programming. The speed with which the Lauryn Hill show at the Waterfront site sold out and the way in which such music has become what most of the concert-going public identifies with “Jazz Fest” (I’ve never liked that diminutive) illustrate this shift.

Those in search of generically recognizable or more experimental jazz often find it in the side series at St. Matthew’s United Church or the 1313 Hollis Art Gallery, which this year featured a programme curated by world-renowned drummer Jerry Granelli (of *Tales of a Charlie Brown Christmas* soundtrack fame). Highlights from the St. Matthew’s series included a touching very-late-career show by Montreal hard-swinging piano stylist Oliver Jones and his lovely trio (perhaps a farewell concert, although he has teased his fans before) and a passionate looping, blowing, and bowing session with the hipster virtuosos Colin Stetson and Sarah Neufeld on saxophone and violin respectively. I needed to acquire and listen to their CD a few times in the days following the festival in an attempt to process what I had experienced. It was not a format or mode that I usually enjoy, but it was a beautiful moment of aural challenge with grinding and booming, hard-edged beauty in excess.

Jazz was not absent from the waterfront main stage either, with the usual rich and locally-focused daytime programming giving festival goers

a good sense of what the Halifax scene is producing these days. In the shift to a shorter festival, this dimension could perhaps be re-emphasized. Two American stars from very different points on the broad music spectrum anchored two very different nights: the arch-traditionalist Preservation Hall Jazz Orchestra turned a cool, rainy closing night into a warm and welcome New Orleans street party, while Stephen Bruner (better known by his stage name “Thundercat”) left confirmed fans and those discovering his music nearly paralyzed in amazement at his apparently superhuman ability to combine the most complex bass playing with an uncanny high-pitched (in every sense) vocal performance that was utterly unique. Quirky and off-centre in his fascinations, Bruner hearkens back to other mad, bad, dangerous geniuses of the electric bass while snapping, popping, walking, and smacking in a way that is eminently his own: gentle, almost child-like, but obsessively determined. His band featured some of the hottest players from a scene that doesn’t much care for labels, who push the music very, very far to their own apparent delight.

In terms of festival festiveness and sheer party value—such a vital part of the unpredictable Nova Scotia summer—nothing this year and very few shows over my decades of experience of the HJF could equal the Chic show featuring Nile Rodgers. By the time the stage was packed at the end with gyrating (the word is weak) fans, welcomed up by Rodgers, the audience had been danced through an amazing pop music history lesson, as the hits to which this legendary producer, writer, and musician has contributed were unfolded to a delirious and grateful crowd. From Madonna and Duran Duran to Diana Ross, David Bowie, and Daft Punk, this hyper-funky band laid down exciting versions of the highlights of an extraordinary catalogue and life-trajectory. Rodgers’ humble openness about his health struggles and his determination to make music the centre of a second chance deeply moved everyone in attendance at this unforgettable event.

The Open Waters festival, founded by Paul Cram and Jeff Reilly in the late 1990s and renewed by Cram in the 2010s, is an uncompromising post-New Year rendezvous focused on streams of improvised and composed new music. Presented by the UpStream Music Association, it draws performers, presenters, critics, and academics from across Canada and the Atlantic Rim. This year’s festival (January 6-10), which was the first under the direction of Lukas Pearse, carried forward much that was strong in the festival’s past

and opened up to some new currents. Three representative moments will have to suffice to give a sense of what an audience member might have had the possibility of hearing over that stormy, somewhat dreamy long weekend at the Dalhousie Arts Centre and The Company House on Gottingen Street in Halifax.

The late night performance on opening night at The Company House featured *See Through 4*—the newest iteration of my old friend Peter Johnston’s *See Through* project. I always thought that these groups were “see-through” because there was no drummer, but lo and behold here was the fabulous Jake Oelrichs on drums along with Johnston on bass, brilliant Mike Smith on keys and electronics, and subtle, imperturbable Rebecca Hennessy on trumpet. This music self-identified as chamber-prog, and that’s a good place to start. It was archly minimalist, compressed math-rock with a sardonic, postmodern smile and a stageload of micro-public nostalgias and references. The compositions, modestly referred to by Johnston as works-in-progress, were challenging, and the audience followed them untiringly the way they might a complicated plot on a Nordic Noir Netflix series. But they were also light, charming, and fun. Smith’s agile soloing on moody-Moogy synth patches brought many smiles to our faces in the course of the evening, while he remained utterly in the zone.

On Saturday afternoon Ellen Waterman of Memorial University also led an *Improvisation Talk Back*—a meeting-for-the-first-time quartet consisting of herself on flute, pianist Sebastian Lexer, vocalist Ann Denny, and bassist Lukas Pearse. Their commitment to making music in and of the moment with no preconceptions or agreed-upon structure worked well, and several audience members, including students from Dalhousie University and the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, actively participated in the discussion following the performance. The music that the once-and-once-only group generated ranged widely in mood, tempo, and dynamics with Pearse’s arco intensity and Denny’s discreet, register-challenging interventions providing openings and forcing adjustments in an animated conversation that the flute and piano were constantly rebalancing from very different places. Overall it was satisfying, instructive, and engaging for the audience, which mainly consisted of students.

“Behind the Sound of Music,” the final night’s performance featuring Symphony Nova Scotia and guest conductor Brian Current, was presented in partnership with the Toronto Symphony Orchestra and Canada 150. It

must have been the first major orchestral programme of exclusively Canadian compositions presented in this anniversary year, and it left the audience stimulated, entertained, and amazed at the range and quality of the generations of compositions presented. Current, who chose the programme, spoke animatedly and with conviction about the diversity and strength of Canadian contemporary music. Some audience members found his commentary to be a little too “New Music 101,” but even though his explanations of “line,” “colour,” and “texture” were slightly reductive they did not harm the audience’s enjoyment of the works and no doubt helped some less experienced listeners. The classic “Lonely Child” by Claude Vivier, the late bad boy of Canadian New Music, was masterfully pitched. A musician told me that Quebec composition students always study this piece, and it is so revered that they can all sing an A concert—not because they have perfect pitch, but because the composition begins with that note. Rising talent Samy Moussa’s “Intermezzo” and Pierre Mercure’s early piece “Kaléïdoscope” were sonic universes apart, yet they were both highlights of a diverse evening. The piece that gave its name to the programme, Nicole Lizée’s “Beyond the Sound of Music,” was a technically and musically remarkable mash-up of sequences from the eponymous motion picture. The looping chopped-up scenes of the von Trapp family and their governess caused a lot of laughter, some of it uncomfortable, as the musical materials were put through a rough process of reassembling and reassessment. It was a bit hard to take in and perhaps a little gimmicky at times, but the central conceit worked amazingly well. An assured run through visually and musically familiar territory had become strange and troubling.