



THE PLAIN DEALER

Openers boost thrill for diverse audience

Monday, January 31, 2005

Carlo Wolff

Special to The Plain Dealer

The eclectic Canadian jazz composer-trumpeter Kenny Wheeler is a hard act to precede, but the work of local lights Dan Wall and Dave Morgan was so striking that it made the Cleveland Jazz Orchestra show Saturday night a terrific double-whammy.

The CJO is the most exciting jazz engine in Greater Cleveland these days.

The closing of the Bop Stop has ended regular dates for the Jazz Unit, the little big band led by CJO music director and master trumpeter-flugelhornist Jack Schantz. Fortunately, several Unit members, including Schantz, pianist Wall and bassist Morgan, work in the CJO, too.

The late Bop Stop's co-owner, Ron Busch, was also on hand Saturday night. He contributed sparkling vibraharp to Wall's creamy "Clouds" and Morgan's jolting "Looking Glass." Busch's Bop Stop partner, Anita Nonneman, got warm thanks from CJO board President Joel Brotman for her recent \$25,000 contribution to the orchestra.

This long, satisfying concert drew about 425 fans to the 700-seat Fairmount Temple Auditorium in Beachwood. The audience, diverse in age and race, was united in its appreciation.

The Wall-Morgan section was more experimental, more appropriate for solos. The Wheeler segment, which came together Wednesday when sometime CJO singer Barbara Knight began rehearsing the vocal parts, was more formal - if no less thrilling.

Wall's part of the first half, a three-part suite of great range, went on too long in the solos. But how those could swing: Wall, Morgan and guest drummer Nate Douds (an astonishing Youngstown State University student destined for the big time) played so hard and fast during "Depressions," Wall's final piece, one's heart raced to keep up.

Wall's daring compositions have yet to reconcile internally, but ambition and creativity? No problem.

Douds was one of several guests to spark this demanding, satisfying show. The liquid guitar of Dan Bruce smoothed parts of Wheeler's "Sweet Time Suite." This unusual, soaring nine-part piece comes from the fabulous 1990 recording, "Music for Large & Small Ensembles."

Oberlin graduate Andy Hunter worked slide trombone magic. And Wheeler protégé Paul Tynan blew hard, beautiful flugelhorn during "Looking Glass," Morgan's startling, techno-flecked melange of romanticism and lyricism.

A little more than a year ago, the CJO began to modernize with concerts split between local work and the avant-garde big-band repertoire. The strategy is beginning to pay off: Young outnumbered old Saturday night. That suggests a new market for this chronically marginal genre.

With musicians as flexible and virtuosic (did I mention saxophonists Kent Engelhardt and Lance Bryant?) as those in the CJO, that market can only grow.

Wolff is a free-lance writer in South Euclid.

To reach Carlo Wolff:

entertainment@plaind.com

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