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Jazz on and under the radar in Boston - Reviews by Roanna Forman

Donal Fox Quartet at Scullers

By Roanna Forman | May 16, 2011

Scarlatti, what was a nice Italian composer like you doing in a room like Scullers on April 29 going into a hard-driving funk groove with Afro-Cuban overlay? Don't worry, you, were in good hands.

Donal Fox's eclecticism and widely-recognized piano mastery were in full force that night. Compositions combining genres have been a career-long joy for Fox. He has constantly answered the question, "What is jazz?" with another question. "What is music, if not jazz and other elements?" Fox has consistently combined influences, training, and styles, with interesting end results. As early as 1991, his improvisations with Eric Thomas on "Duetto for Clarinet" blurred the line between scored music and spontaneous creation. Fox's score for Boston Ballet's "Gone City" similarly combined improvised contemporary accompaniments with scored effects.

The evening's tunes at Scullers were tightly arranged, and the quartet – including John Lockwood (bass), Warren Wolf (vibraphone) and Dafnis Prieto (drums) moved between sections with grace and power. The complex charts had quick switches from scored to improvised music, kicks, and full-band stops that musicians of lesser caliber wouldn't have been able to handle. Besides the personnel, this group works well because its tunes, despite their complexity, have accessible forms. The tangos, funk, blues, and classical elements are appealing. Finally, there's the instrumentation, a formula used so successfully by the Modern Jazz Quartet. (Fox dedicated a Tanglewood concert of his to the MJQ.)

Like Fox, John Lewis wrote arrangements incorporating classical pieces, or based on them. Beyond that, however, the differences between these two quartets outweigh the similarities. MJQ was understated, and drew on bebop – remember, they were Diz's original rhythm section. They went for a lighter sound and a soft swing.

Although Fox's quartet had delicate moments when I heard them, like English Renaissance composer John Dowland's "Flow My Tears," every statement, even if restrained, was strong. There was deep, sensual beauty, too, in an arrangement of Piazzolla's "Ausencias," with its, spare, mournful vibraphone lines. But from the elegant arrangement of a Spanish baroque theme morphing into the grooves of the galloping original "Firefly," or the solemnity of Scarlatti's Aria K.32 leading to "Inventions in Blue" with a fine solo by Warren Wolf, the intensity never wavered. Speaking of intensity, Wolf symbolically fanned Prieto during an explosive drum solo that the audience loved.

I loved it, too. Cuban-trained Prieto's spontaneity and creativity enhance this music. Moreover I find him a better fit for the material than Terri Lyne Carrington, a great instrumentalist herself who added so much to Fox's "The Scarlatti Suite Project" but has a more laid-back feel. What didn't enhance the evening at Scullers, and was not needed, were two microphones over the drum set. In Carnegie Hall (where, by the way, Fox's "Hear De Lambs A-Cryin" had its New York Premiere on May 10), you need to mike drums. Not at Scullers. I hope both the club and musicians will keep that in mind.

"People often say to me," Fox noted as he opened his set, "you have all this music on your piano, but you never look at it." He confided to the audience, "It's all for show."

Nice show.