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Donal Fox's jazz plays upon many traditions

By Kevin Lowenthal | June 13, 2006

CAMBRIDGE -- Composer/pianist Donal Fox has forged a unique amalgam of jazz, Latin American, and classical music. Past projects have focused on Johann Sebastian Bach, but the centerpiece of Saturday night's Regattabar performance was a jazz suite incorporating the music of Domenico Scarlatti .

Fox was accompanied by vibraphonist Stefon Harris , bassist John Lockwood , and drummer Terri Lyne Carrington. This instrumentation inevitably brings the Modern Jazz Quartet to mind, but Fox's band married that group's cool poise with the power and momentum of the John Coltrane Quartet.

The opening number was based on an Astor Piazzolla tango. Rather than presenting the usual string of solos, piano and vibraphone engaged in a fluid, improvisatory dialogue. Lockwood and Carrington's bass and drums provided active but essentially supportive background for the friendly jousting of Fox and Harris.

The second number was Fox's "Inventions in Blue," which drew from Bach's Two-Part Invention No. 4 in D Minor. It began as a rapid, African-sounding vamp, spelled by lyrical piano chords that floated over the pulsating rhythm. Harris's swinging, bluesy solo was buoyed by Lockwood's walking bass and Carrington's urgent ride cymbal.

Then Bach's invention was introduced, played faithfully at first by piano and vibes. But Fox and Harris began stretching out, as the African rhythm returned, revealing that the initial vamp had indeed been based upon a cadence of Bach's. With the full band's headlong velocity re-established, Fox and Harris played intense percussive patterns that interlocked in an exciting rhythmic counterpoint.

Next came Bach's Fugue No. 23 in B Major, set to a Latin beat and building to a two-fisted Fox solo. A sensitive rendition of Horace Silver's ballad "Peace" was dedicated to Eric Jackson's 25 years as a DJ on WGBH.

"The Scarlatti Suite" was structured similarly to "Inventions in Blue" but built to even greater heights. Its rhythms shifted from African to tango to a suggestion of ska. Carrington soloed with spell binding counter rhythms over an almost frighteningly intense full-band vamp.

After a standing ovation from the sell-out crowd, the band encored with an affecting rendition of Schumann's gentle "Davidsbundler" No. 2, Op. 6. ■

