



Concert Review

By M.J. Territo | February 2006

Donal Fox: Monk and Bach Project Live at Dizzy's Club Coca Cola Jazz at Lincoln Center

From a chapel in Germany, 1722 to a New York City nightclub, 2005: an unbridgeable distance? Not with Donal Fox at the piano. An accomplished classical pianist and composer, Fox is determined to remind us that once-upon-a time classical music was extemporaneous. Scores were written with open spaces that invited players to improvise; musicians were known for their ability to play more than what was written on the page.

Fox started the program with an unrestrained reading of Bach's Prelude in C Minor (BWV 847) from The Well-Tempered Clavier, moving smoothly from a solo interpretation of the score to improvisation backed by George Mraz on bass and Lewis Nash on drums. At the beginning of the improvisation, Fox stayed with the tight, focused flavor that Bach creates in this prelude, barely moving from the confines of the narrow range of the piece. Gradually, though, he opened the music up to include the whole keyboard, still keeping the dark, restless mood, and moving seamlessly from pure Bachian statements to free-flowing invention.

The prelude morphed into a tango, based on an Astor Piazzola piece, and Lewis Nash had the opportunity to strut his considerable stuff, from martial riffs to extended rolls. George Mraz remained steady as a rock on the bass, responding to Nash's dynamic changes with dramatic slides. And then we were back to Bach again, with Fox's inventive "Inventions in Blue."

The Monk part of the project this evening was "Misterioso," given a happy, Caribbean flavor and featuring a sly Nash solo. The trio took a restrained final chorus on this tune, and set the stage beautifully for a simple and moving rendition of Bach's Air on a G String. Nash brought out his brushes and Mraz provided a clear underscoring to Fox's unadorned, heartrending playing.

Moving on to the 19th century, we were treated to Robert Schumann's "About Strange Lands and People," the first of the Kinderscenen (Scenes from Childhood). Featured on bass, Mraz managed to make his single instrument sound like an entire string section here, rich and flowing, bringing out the wide-eyed wonder of this familiar tune. Nash brought complementary rhythms into the open spaces of the piece, using mallets and brushes to precisely place the smallest, softest, most perfect snippets of sound.

For his "Italian Concerto Blues", based on Bach's Italian Concerto in F Major (BWV 971), Fox starts out with the same major scale runs as Bach, and keeps this motif throughout the piece, playing not only with strength and precision, but with great agility and flexibility, in both notes and improvisational ideas. The trio had a grand time with this one, raising a chorus of laughter from the audience for some stop-time segments. Mraz pulled off a dazzling running bass solo and Nash abandoned all his implements for a hand percussion romp.

In Donal Fox's hands, classical music returns to its improvisational roots. Let's hope that not only jazz fans are on hand to hear this revival, but that word of Fox's adventures in sound make their way back to the classical music community.