

Brussels Jazz Orchestra Gets Animated in Premiere of 'Graphicology'

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In more ways than one, it was a sight to behold. With the sun setting outside the panoramic glass enclosure overlooking the Manhattan skyline, the audience at Dizzy's Club Coca-Cola inside Jazz at Lincoln Center were treated to cinematic sounds of the Brussels Jazz Orchestra on March 20.

Perhaps best known to American audiences for its soundtrack to the Oscar-winning movie *The Artist*, the BJO's show (one of six sold-out performances) was the U.S. premiere of "Graphicology," a multimedia project combining big band jazz and visual art. Throughout the performance, images were projected onto a screen positioned above the 16-piece band.

The BJO's gallant, 22-year history includes many unconventional and intriguing presentations, as well as collaborations with Joe Lovano, Maria Schneider, Richard Galliano, Kenny Werner, Enrico Pieranunzi and Dave Liebman, among others.

At Dizzy's, spot-on musical direction from reed player Frank Vaganée guided an orchestra that was a model of group cohesion and pent-up reserve. Kicking things off were the instrumentals "Sundown" and "Bells & Brass," strikingly arranged pieces that offered a bit of sleight-of-hand. The BJO handled them expertly, turning complex charts into music not only palatable but downright digestible.

Bert Joris' "Sundown" opened with an uptempo section in 5/4 time and transformed into a samba of sorts with a "Spain"-like segue. Solos from trumpeter Pierre Drevet and pianist Vincent Bruyninckx (subbing for Nathalie Loriers) provided the requisite spice and color.

The slightly insistent three-note pulse of "Bells & Brass" gave patrons a healthy dose of aural resonance. Played softly with a rolling 6/4 meter, the music cradled trombonist Lode Mertens' composition with solos from tenorist Kurt Van Herck and trombonist Frederik Heirman. It was lyrical to the end, the arrangement proceeding like a gathering melodic storm, the music already suggesting a cinematic feel, the pulse evoking images of a racehorse approaching full stride.

Beginning with "Bird," however, the imagined became literal. The comic-strip-style work of illustrator Philip Paquet commingled with music from four composers in a flourish of black-and-white sights and thoughtfully orchestrated sound and solos. Considered a "graphic novel" overall, the only narrative thread seemed to be historic American jazz, each piece (averaging between six and 16 minutes) capable of telling its own story.

"Bird" was a combination of Paquet's portrayals of famous jazz musicians Charlie Parker, Miles Davis, Max Roach and others as anthropomorphic animals, with text by Davis recalling episodes with the famed alto saxophonist. The graphics and music were deftly synchronized through cues from offstage as well as from Vaganée (featured on blazing alto).

Reedist Dieter Limbourg's oddly bright score to the ultimately sad tale of "Bird" was then mirrored by Drevet's similarly peppy music with a recounting of Louis Armstrong's formative years through and including his early bands. With references to "Hello



The Brussels Jazz Orchestra in a performance of "Graphicology" at Dizzy's Club Coca-Cola in New York City on March 20 (Photo: René Clement)

Dolly," "Mack The Knife" and beyond, the New Orleans-inspired music was bluesy, rhapsodic, slow yet lively. And, because the accompanying images had less text, there was ample time to indulge in Paquet's more realistic, less caricatured illustrations.

From the well-known to the anonymous, "Smilin'" (with music by Michael Herr) was the familiar tale of a saxophonist's complicated relationship with his family, including not only his wife and daughter but also his personal habits and unfaithfulness.

The music was once again a seamless match with images, the story producing a happy ending with more bright colors from yet another truly varied score. Ending with "The Portrait" and more music from Joris, the house at Dizzy's was treated to a multi-character fictional yarn of urban intrigue, this time involving a love story centered around 1920s Harlem and characters named Johnny Ciccone, William the Painter and Ida and Cornelius. Drugs, money and sex combined for a combustible outpouring of images, complete with rapid-fire music, as well as dramatic punches between characters not unlike the "Blam!" and "Pow!" of a Batman comic book.

Perhaps even more than with "Bird," viewers were kept on the edge of their seats as they followed the text's brisk pace, augmented by words from writer Langston Hughes. As elsewhere, the rollout of sights and story included occasional animation and a right-to-left display. In the end, Paquet's visual creations were a match for the Brussels Jazz Orchestra's own engaging, programmatic storytelling.

—John Ephland

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