

THE AUSTRALIAN

Sydney trumpeter wins the prestigious Freedman Fellowship



Freedman Fellowship winner Tom Avgenicos in action in The Studio ... PHOTO CREDIT KARL SCHWERDTFEGER

JAZZ

Freedman Jazz Fellowship Concert
The Studio, Sydney Opera House
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After a two-year hiatus owing to COVID, the Freedman Jazz Fellowship has roared back to the Sydney Opera House, confirming its place as one of the premier jazz events of the year.

Three finalists, culled from a list of 16 original candidates, competed for the prestigious \$21,000 award. They were two Sydney-based musicians, trumpeter Tom Avgenicos and drummer Holly Conner, and Melbourne-based saxophonist Flora Carbo. After scintillating performances by all three candidates, Avgenicos was declared the winner.



The three candidates for the Freedman Fellowship, L-R, Holly Conner, Tom Avgenicos, Flora Carbo... PHOTO CREDIT KARL SCHWERDTFEGER

Based on the music presented, in my view there was no clear winner. All three performances were vastly impressive, exhibiting differing strengths. The three judges – saxophonist Dr Andrew Robson, vocalist Virna Sanzone, and pianist Dr Steve Barry – might have had a devilishly difficult task to determine a winner.

The Fellowship however is determined also by how the candidates will spend the prize money. In his welcoming speech Dr Richard Letts, Director of the

Music Trust and the Freedman Music Fellowships, clarified the unique nature of the award: “Usually awards for performing musicians depend on a competition in performance virtuosity. There is a second aspect to the Freedman. Competitors have to devise a project that stretches their imagination and maybe their career, and contributes to development of jazz and/or the Australian scene. Something they really want to do. And then they have the money to bring it off!”



L-R, Richard Letts, Virna Sanzone, Tom Avgenicos, Andrew Robson, Steve Barry... PHOTO CREDIT KARL SCHWERDTFEGER

It may be that Avgenicos’s success derives from the project he submitted, which he calls *Ghosts Within Streams*: a multi-disciplinary work for his longtime quartet Delay 45, collaborating with the Ensemble Apex String Quartet, contemporary dancer/choreographer Reina Takeuchi, and motion graphic artist Jordan East.

Avgenicos is the sort of outstanding jazz trumpeter who comes along once in a generation. He foreshadowed in part his award-winning project in opening the concert with colleagues Roshan Kumarage (piano), Dave Quinn (bass) and Ashley Stoneham (drums) plus the aforementioned string quartet, with Seamus Macnamara & Beatrice Colombis (violins), Phoebe Gilbert (viola) and Reena Oh (cello).

While the alto saxophone in Australian jazz has for a long time been dominated by pop-oriented virtuosos - Michael Griffin and Blaine Whittaker are two who currently come to mind - Flora Carbo appears to be of another ilk, with a uniquely different improvisatory language. Her artistry is built, not on technical virtuosity but on qualities such as expressiveness and understatement, and her ability to exploit the vocal quality of the alto.

In the second set Carbo performed with Isaac Gunnoo (bass), Maddison Carter (drums), and Eitan Ritz (modular synthesiser). One was immediately struck by the gorgeous sound of her alto saxophone in the pristine acoustics of The Studio, and the beauty of her improvisations.



The Flora Carbo group, L-R, Eitan Ritz (modular synthesiser), Isaac Gunnoo (double bass), Carbo (alto saxophone), Maddison Carter (drums)...
PHOTO CREDIT KARL SCHWERDTFEGER

If she had won the Freedman, Carbo planned a project called Residence in Motion which, over four months, would have taken her through Europe and the UK, travelling by bicycle, developing her solo creative practice through mentorships, network building and collaboration.

The third set, featuring drummer, percussionist and electronic music producer Holly Conner, was the most dynamic part of the concert. As so often in jazz

performance, it was the drums which engendered the most enthusiastic applause. Connor was seated on a podium, with her drum set cleverly lit – the performance included a “visual projectionist” – and gave a highly theatrical display of virtuosic drumming.

Had Conner won, she would have produced an album of new percussive works, collaborating with electronic music producers, art-pop songwriters, sound artists, multi-instrumentalists, contemporary classical musicians, graphic designers, 3D animators and filmmakers.



*Drummer,
percussionist and
electronic music
producer Holly
Conner in
performance in The
Studio... PHOTO
CREDIT KARL
SCHWERDTFEGER*

While the judges were determining the fellowship winner, pianist Mike Nock and saxophonist Julien Wilson, the 2006 Freedman Fellow, played two Nock compositions, *Deception* and *The Dream*, and two Wilson compositions *Rebellious Bird* and *LDT*.



*Pianist Mike
Nock and tenor
saxophonist
Julien Wilson
performing in
The Studio...
PHOTO CREDIT
KARL
SCHWERDTFEGER*

The event was compered by the engaging live wire, ABC broadcaster and jazz saxophonist, James Valentine. Breaking the ice with irreverent humour, he encouraged a relaxed aura in The Studio, a venue built for high culture events rather than freewheeling jazz performance.



Compere, ABC broadcaster James Valentine interviews Tom Avgenicos...
PHOTO CREDIT KARL SCHWERDTFEGER
