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WOMEN'S JAZZ FESTIVAL OPENING CONCERT

Reviewed by Eric Myers, October 29, 2022

Billed as “the fiery Chilean saxophonist”, Melissa Aldana and her New York quartet provided a relatively constrained performance to open the Sydney International Women’s Jazz Festival on Thursday night, while the curtain-raiser, provided by vocalist Jo Lawry and French/American pianist Dan Tepfer was full of brilliance.

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Tenor saxophonist Melissa Aldana: now a popular celebrity and darling of social media... PHOTO CREDIT SHANE ROZARIO

The Sydney International Women's Jazz Festival was opened in splendid fashion on Thursday night, October 27, at the York Theatre, Seymour Centre. An exceedingly generous audience, estimated at 500, was treated to music rarely heard in Sydney.

For various reasons the world is now full of brilliant tenor saxophonists – there are many in Australia, as we know - and Aldana, courtesy of clever marketing over the 12 years she's been in New York, has pushed her way to the top and become a phenomenon. She has never looked back since winning the Thelonious Monk International Saxophone Competition in 2013 at the tender age of 24, and she's been inestimably assisted by fortuitous career moves such as her commission in 2018 to compose the suite *Visions: For Frida Kahlo*. She's now a popular celebrity and darling of social media, and her website has been described as a masterpiece.

The publicity surrounding her Australian tour certainly arrested a long drought in coverage of jazz in important sections of the local media. Aldana appeared in the "Spotlight" section of *The Weekend Australian's Review* – the first time a jazz artist has appeared there in over three years. Also the day before the Sydney concert she was interviewed by Patricia Karvelas on the "Breakfast" program on Radio National, and played an unaccompanied tenor solo.



The quartet, L-R, Pablo Menares (double bass), Lage Lund (guitar), Aldana (tenor saxophone) and Kush Abadey (drums)... PHOTO CREDIT SHANE ROZARIO

As for the music in the York Theatre, I sat to the side of the stage near the front for the Aldana set, as I needed light to take notes, and heard the group in a more or less

acoustic, unamplified form. In itself this was not without its advantages. At that location whatever Aldana said into her front microphone from time to time was indecipherable, but I only missed hearing clearly the names of the compositions.

Aldana's quartet included her long-time colleagues Lage Lund (guitar), Pablo Menares (double bass) and Kush Abadey (drums). This was a truncated version of the quintet which recorded her celebrated Blue Note album *12 Stars*, and I was deeply disappointed that the African American keyboardist Sullivan Fortner, who in my view is very much the star of the album, was not on this Australian tour. Without his lush electronic backgrounds and impressive piano solos, Aldana's music sounded, to my ears, very lean indeed.



American pianist Sullivan Fortner: perhaps the star of Aldana's celebrated album "12 Stars", he was missing from the group's tour of Australia...

Still, Aldana was able to provide an exciting set of over an hour. I can confirm that no-one of which I'm aware has played the tenor saxophone quite like Aldana – she has developed her own unique instrumental style – and a sizeable audience continued the long Sydney tradition of receiving visiting international jazz artists with overwhelming enthusiasm.

In performance Aldana has an odd habit of bobbing up and down, and rocking backwards and forwards while improvising, and frequently she would bend soft, long notes that she was holding, while tapping the side of the tenor with one hand. I was puzzled at why this was necessary but can only conclude that this was her way of coasting, and bringing down the energy level in order to prepare the way for the next section of the music – usually a guitar solo from Lund, who impressed again and again with his beautifully constructed improvisations. Lund had won the Thelonious Monk competition in 2005, so there was a delightful symmetry in this respect between him and Aldana as Monk competition winners, as they were the two primary soloists on display.



Guitarist Lage Lund with Aldana: a delightful symmetry in that both were winners of the prestigious Thelonious Monk competition... PHOTO CREDIT SHANE ROZARIO

I was impressed with drummer Abadey who was alive to the difficulties inherent in playing in such a live setting with a very high ceiling. At the beginning of solos he was willing to bring his volume down to a whisper, and as they progressed, strongly articulated the inner rhythmic structures of Aldana's compositions. At the end of each solo, there was often a fade-out, diluting the energy in the music, which I found refreshing. At these moments the music sounded pleasantly contemplative. There was little sense of the cultural superiority which, over the years, a number of visiting New York groups have displayed.

Those expecting to hear a new saxophone colossus in Aldana, would have been disappointed. Instead we heard a very fine working group, which has been on the road for some time, refining their music in live performance, and in the process of creating something quite distinct from the music on *12 Stars*.

The curtain-raiser provided by Jo Lawry and Dan Tepfer was a delight. Lawry gave a virtuosic demonstration of what a jazz singer can do with the human voice, suggesting she has taken the wordless vocal to a new level, while Tepfer's effortless facility at the keyboard suggested he is some kind of pianistic genius. One could hear in his piano work an amalgam of influences, including a strong vein of gospel music and of course his well-known interest in the music of Bach. Tepfer's having one foot in the avant-garde did not prevent his music from being highly melodic and accessible to the average ear.



Pianist Dan Tepfer (left) and vocalist Jo Lawry (right): the theme of their set was re-invention... PHOTO CREDIT SHANE ROZARIO

In many ways the theme of this set was re-invention, including a radical redefinition of the standard *Honeysuckle Rose*, which was a tour de force. Less successful was Lawry's version of Joni Mitchell's sacred anthem *Both Sides Now*, a composition so perfect that in my view it resists re-invention. Still, Lawry's version received a very warm reception from a generous audience.

Their interesting repertoire included Tepfer's composition *It Isn't Every Day* and a composition *Olive Tree* by Lawry's husband, saxophonist Will Vinson, to which Lawry has added lyrics. There was also a free jazz piece which was consummated beautifully by the two players. The set closed with Gian Slater's composition *Acrobats*.

"It's so good to walk this tightrope with you", Lawry said to Tepfer. The tightrope analogy was perfectly apt, as this was improvisation right at the edge, flirting with disaster. The wheels did not fall off, but it was a close call. In many ways the tension inherent in this sort of improvisation is what jazz is all about, and it was energising to experience it once again at such a high level.

The Sydney International Women's Jazz Festival runs until November 4 . More information at <https://sima.org.au/siwjf/>