

# THE AUSTRALIAN

---

## Sound a source of pain for festival's welcome return



*Fabian Almazan at the Sydney Con Jazz Festival... PHOTO CREDIT ANTHONY BROWELL*

### **MUSIC**

Various Artists

Sydney Con Jazz Festival

May 30

---

### **ERIC MYERS**

This splendid one-day event, not held in 2020 because of covid, roared back triumphantly on Sunday. Despite international travel being virtually non-existent, artistic director David Theak was able to put together a first-class program, featuring accredited internationals, stars from around Australia, and highly talented students emerging from the local jazz studies program.

At day's end, the organisers could hold their heads high and bask in the light of substantial achievement.



*Artistic director David Theak: he was able to put together a first-class program...*

Having said that, it would be remiss not to mention the key factor which marred some performances: lack of attention to sound balance. This deeply complicated issue is horrendously difficult to grapple with, for a multitude of reasons.

Of all music genres, jazz depends most on the listener being able to hear and appreciate the individuality of the improvising musician. The music needs to be

constructed so that the improviser's train of thought can be clearly delineated. If the soloist is drowned out by other musicians, all is lost.



*A microphone was available for announcements by Mace Francis (above), but not for the alto saxophone played by Michael Griffin (below)...*



Perth luminary Mace Francis conducted a student orchestra playing the legendary Marty Paich arrangements on the 1960 album *Art Pepper + 11*. The brilliant Sydney altoist Michael Griffin was featured, playing without amplification. While his beautiful Charlie Parker-influenced sound was a joy to hear with the rhythm section, his lines were nullified when the big band behind him opened up. If a microphone was necessary and available for Francis to announce the tunes, why not one in the bell of Griffin's saxophone, to enable him to be clearly heard?

Andy Fiddes conducted the Sydney Conservatorium Jazz Orchestra, presenting his masterpiece *Fiddes vs Tinkler*, recorded by the Jazzgroove Mothership Orchestra in 2016. In effect a trumpet concerto, this featured Scott Tinkler himself, a trumpeter who is incredible in the literal sense of the word. This was an invaluable opportunity to savour the artistry of an Australian trumpeter who has not come through the normal lineage of Dizzy Gillespie, Clifford Brown and Freddie Hubbard, and has gone his own individual way, built on stamina and technical virtuosity.



*Scott Tinkler (above), a trumpeter who is incredible in the literal sense of the word, played “Fiddes vs Tinkler”, a masterpiece written by Andy Fiddes (below)...* TINKLER PHOTO CREDIT MARC BONGERS; FIDDES PHOTO CREDIT FEL HIBBLE



As sound can vary radically depending on where one is seated, I planted myself in the second row and experienced Tinkler's pristine sound and Fiddes's writing to advantage.

Australian jazz's most prestigious singer Vince Jones appeared with the star-studded Australian National Jazz Orchestra (ANJO), playing re-imagined versions by several leading arrangers of compositions from Jones's prolific recording output. A stunning backdrop to Jones's beautiful singing was provided – I trust that a future album will appear as a result of this important collaboration – but the gorgeous sound of these orchestrations often overrode Jones's vocals.



*Vince Jones at the Sydney Con Jazz Festival: his beautiful singing was backed by gorgeous orchestrations played by the ANJO... PHOTO CREDIT ANTHONY BROWELL*

At one stage the trombonist James Greening took a solo, and his huge sound carried to the back of the venue. Here was a musician projecting his individuality, and it provoked enthusiastic applause.

Linda May Han Oh, one of the world's great bassists, was twice saddled with the appalling acoustics of the Verbrugghen Hall, once in her husband Fabian Almazan's group Rhizome early in the day, and later in her own quartet which closed the festival's Gala Concert.



*Linda May Han Oh: twice saddled with the appalling acoustics of the Verbrugghen Hall... PHOTO CREDIT ANTHONY BROWELL*

The same rhythm section - Oh, Almazan and Perth drummer Ben Vanderwal – performed with both groups, while a student string quartet and singer Jo Lawry were part of Rhizome, and saxophonist Will Vinson performed with the Oh quartet. The sound was so poor that I considered both performances ineligible for review. Such difficult and nuanced music demands high sound quality, such

as that enjoyed by Oh in early 2020 when she performed in Sydney with Pat Metheny's band.

The curtain-raiser for the Gala Concert was provided by pianist Mike Nock, bassist Jonathan Zwartz and drummer Hamish Stuart, without their saxophonist Julien Wilson, who was stranded in Melbourne. Stuart played softly throughout the performance without using his sticks, in an exquisite half-hour set which was all too short.



*A short set from Mike Nock (above), Jonathan Zwartz & Hamish Stuart was part of the Gala Concert... PHOTO CREDIT ANTHONY BROWELL*

There are simple strategies available which might alleviate this event's sound balance problems. Carpet, as thick as possible, should cover the entire stage in the Verbrugghen Hall, absorbing the musicians' sound at source; this strategy worked extremely well when the great American saxophonist Sonny Rollins played at the Sydney Opera House in 2011. At the Don Burrows celebration concert in November, 2020, the drums were encased in a plastic cage, largely solving the Opera House's notorious "drums problem".

Will the organisers of the splendid Con festival adopt such common sense measures next year? Only time will tell.