

# THE AUSTRALIAN

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## Sydney Con Jazz Festival: A smorgasbord of talent



*Trio Grande 2.0 at the Sydney Con Jazz Festival, L-R, Will Vinson, Gilad Hekselman and Eric Harland ... PHOTO CREDIT ANTHONY BROWELL*

### MUSIC

Various Artists

Sydney Con Jazz Festival

Sydney Conservatorium of Music, June 5

The Australian, June 9, 2022

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### ERIC MYERS

This splendid one-day event featured a commendable array of distinguished Australian jazz performers, further testimony to the overwhelming talent that now exists in Australian jazz, especially amongst younger musicians. As in 2021, when the event roared back with a

vengeance after covid, artistic director David Theak could once again hold his head high and bask in the light of substantial achievement.



*Artistic director David Theak: entitled to hold his head high and bask in the light of substantial achievement... PHOTOGRAPHER UNKNOWN*

The event encompassed twenty-two 50-minute concerts in six venues within the Conservatorium building. I attended nine concerts in all, and refer here to four only, which I consider to be the event's highlights.

The extraordinary bassist/vocalist Helen Svoboda, who won the 2020 Freedman Jazz Fellowship, was rather dominant at this event. She began in Recital Hall West with the duo Meatshell, anchored the all-female quartet Aura, and performed with Andrea Keller and Niran Dasika later in the day.

Meatshell included the splendid tenor saxophonist Andrew Saragossi. While the past works of this duo might be considered somewhat confrontational, this performance was unexpectedly genteel, and I was struck by how beautiful and lyrical Svoboda's somewhat revolutionary vocal style was, when heard live.

Also, her innovative approach to the double bass, which is busy, rhythmically strong, and much more orchestral than is customary, was vastly impressive in a duo that was well-integrated soundwise.



*Helen Svoboda: a beautiful and lyrical vocal sound in live performance...*

*PHOTO CREDIT FRANK HIRSCHHAUSEN*

The Melbourne quartet Julien Wilson's Stock, together for 11 years playing mostly Wilson compositions, was palpably a hit of the festival. They included Wilson on tenor saxophone, with his huge sound and mellifluous improvisations as convincing as ever; guitarist Craig Fermanis, who produced one of the festival's most impactful solos; electric bassist Christopher Hale whose subtleties on his instrument, and his great sound, were a revelation; and drummer Hugh Harvey, whose nuances in his playing were inestimable.



*L-R, Craig Fermanis, Julien Wilson & Christopher Hale of Wilson's group Stock, performing at the Sydney Con Jazz Festival... PHOTO CREDIT ANTHONY BROWELL*



Stock's penultimate tune, Gil Askey's *Weeping Willows*, a bluesy tune featuring Hale on bass, morphed into a spirited R & B feel, whereupon Fermanis unleashed a powerful heavy metal guitar solo which generated huge applause. Stock palpably set the Music Café venue alight, and concluded with a crowd-pleasing Latin number *Pen Pals*, reminiscent of Sonny Rollins's popular composition *St Thomas*.

The quartet *Aura* included four Australian female musicians who met in 2019 at the Banff Centre for Arts and Creativity in regional Canada, and recorded there their album *Aura*. They include Audrey Powne (trumpet), Flora Carbo (alto saxophone), Helen Svoboda (double bass), and Kyrie Anderson (drums).



*Aura, L-R, Audrey Powne, Flora Carbo, Helen Svoboda and Kyrie Anderson...*  
PHOTO COURTESY SYDNEY CON JAZZ FESTIVAL

Their performance in Recital Hall West was extremely accomplished, built on the strongly orchestral sound of Svoboda's double bass. The techniques they employed to provide variety in the music included the judicious use of brushes by Anderson; their willingness to bring the volume down, and arrest the often predictable trajectory towards high volume; allowing soloists to perform unaccompanied from time to time; Svoboda's use of the bow on occasions; their willingness to suddenly play out of tempo; and the judicious use of free improvisation without allowing it to become excessive.

This was a happy band, with its members enjoying each other's company on stage. Clearly a jazz ensemble adept at having fun, it was in contrast to the deadly seriousness of some of the all-male ensembles which dominated other concerts I heard.



*Pianist Barney McAll, pictured during his performance at the Sydney Con Jazz Festival: a highly thoughtful short program, covering many bases... PHOTO CREDIT ANTHONY BROWELL*

In a memorable highlight, pianist Barney McAll presented a 20-minute performance to open the Trio Grande 2.0 gig which closed the festival in the Verbrugghen Hall. With a highly thoughtful program, McAll advanced his well-deserved reputation as one of the current giants of Australian jazz.

He played Mike Nock's composition *Ondas*, the standard *You Must Believe in Spring*, Larry Goldings' piece *Strays*, and James P Johnson's ragtime classic *Carolina Shout*. McAll's spirited adaptation of this seminal work ended his set on a note of considerable triumph.

The festival closed with the multi-national Trio Grande 2.0, with UK saxophonist & keyboardist Will Vinson, Israeli guitarist Gilad Hekselman and the extraordinary African American drummer Eric Harland, whose unique

artistry dominated the set from the first note. It was exceedingly instructive to hear his burning style on the drums. The sound was very loud, at the volume level of a rock concert but, for power and excitement, this splendid trio brought a superb festival to an end on a highly explosive note.



*The extraordinary African American drummer Eric Harland, performing at the Sydney Con Jazz Festival; closing a superb festival on an explosive note...*

*PHOTO CREDIT ANTHONY BROWELL*

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