

LIMELIGHT

Music, Arts & Culture

SYDNEY CON JAZZ FESTIVAL: A SPLENDID EVENT ONCE AGAIN

Reviewed by Eric Myers on June 7, 2022

On Sunday, June 5, an all-day jazz festival presented twenty-two concerts in six venues within the confines of the Sydney Conservatorium building. This review can be read on Limelight's website at this link

<https://limelightmagazine.com.au/reviews/sydney-con-jazz-festival-2022/>

This splendid one-day extravaganza, the second since the 2020 event was cancelled owing to covid, once again featured a commendable array of distinguished Australian jazz performers, further testimony to the overwhelming talent that now exists in Australian jazz, especially amongst what one might call, for want of a better term, younger musicians. As in the case of the 2021 event, when the event roared back with a vengeance, 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 confines of the Conservatorium building, so patrons were presented with agonising choices as to which gigs to attend. In the spirit of a glutton who wishes to eat everything at a smorgasbord, I attended nine concerts. While this usually meant rushing from one venue to another in the few minutes between once concert ending and another commencing, I managed to survive the ordeal.

Can I please suggest however, an initiative which might have made this event vastly more palatable? A mobile coffee barista should be available outside the front doors of the Con, serving a good cappuccino. Would that be too much to ask? The absence of coffee at such an all-day event is a crime.

While the nine concerts I attended were only a small sample of what was on offer, I heard enough to confirm the unprecedented flowering of new talent in today's contemporary jazz musicians. The extraordinary bassist/vocalist Helen Svoboda for example, who won the 2020 Freedman Jazz Fellowship, was a dominant presence at this event. She opened proceedings 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.



Helen Svoboda: a beautiful and lyrical vocal sound in live performance... PHOTO CREDIT FRANK HIRSCHHAUSEN

Meatshell included the splendid tenor saxophonist Andrew Saragossi. While the past works of this duo - on their celebrated album *Since Subito* and in various videos – have been somewhat confrontational, if not excessive, exhibiting a punk-like spirit,

this performance at the Con was unexpectedly genteel, and I was struck by how beautiful and lyrical Svoboda's somewhat revolutionary vocal sound was, when heard live.

Also, her innovative style on 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, including clever harmonising between saxophone and voice. It is a truism that jazz musicians always sound better in live performance than on record but, in the case of Meatshell, I felt this was especially so.

The quartet GRG67, including Kiwis Roger Manins (tenor saxophone), Michael Howell (guitar), Mostyn Cole (electric bass), and Tristan Deck (drums) performed strongly in the Music Café, the one venue I favoured where, for various reasons, the potential for good sound balance was most possible. The major point of interest here was the playing of Manins, a saxophone colossus in Australian jazz before he returned to New Zealand some 20 years ago. Certainly he has lost none of his great ability, and I was impressed by the ingenious way in which these excellent musicians put together the music in their 50-minute set with such skill and empathy. I was not surprised to hear they've been together for eight years. It showed in the way they swapped solo space between each other, and moved intuitively towards the high-energy peaks that are now characteristic in music that a perceptive local jazz broadcaster recently called "advanced post-bop".



New Zealand saxophonist Roger Manins: leading a quartet of excellent Kiwi musicians... PHOTO COURTESY FACEBOOK

Julien Wilson's Stock performed in the same venue an hour later. This Melbourne quartet, together for 11 years, playing mainly Wilson compositions, was personnel-wise a mirror-image of GRG67, including Wilson (tenor saxophone), Craig Fermanis (guitar), Christopher Hale (6 string electric bass) and Hugh Harvey (drums). While it's unfashionable these days to refer to the competitive nature of jazz I do not think it harmful to compare jazz groups at this elite level; it's my idea of fun. GRG67 was an extremely accomplished quartet, but on virtually every criterion one could think of, the brilliant Stock members revealed themselves to be marginally superior. Wilson's huge sound and mellifluous improvisations overshadowed those of Manins; the subtleties and moderate volume level of Hale's electric bass, and his great sound, were a revelation; Fermanis was at least as impressive as Cole, although both were guitar virtuosos, with a splendid singing sound; and the nuances in Harvey's playing, notably his expertise with brushes were, in my view, in the class of the comparable Sydney drummer Hamish Stuart.



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

Playing compositions with very hip titles (*Fortuity Speaks*, *Cautiously Optimistic*), Stock was firing after half-an-hour, in a way that GRG67 had been unable to do in their performance. The latter, now in retrospect, appeared an intellectual rather than a gut-wrenching experience. 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 had palpably set the room alight. They concluded a memorable

performance with a crowd-pleasing Latin number *Pen Pals*, somewhat reminiscent of the popular Sonny Rollins composition *St Thomas*.

Interestingly, the quartet *Aura* was formed when four Australian female musicians met by accident 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).

This performance, which took place in Recital Hall West, was an extremely accomplished one, built on the strongly orchestral sound of Svoboda's bass, which largely compensated for the absence of a chordal instrument in the rhythm section. What was most impressive about their approach were the techniques they employed to provide variety in the music: the judicious use of brushes by Anderson; their willingness to bring the volume down, and arrest the sometimes predictable trajectory towards high volume; the tendency to allow each soloist to perform unaccompanied; Svoboda's picking up the bow on occasions; the swapping between soloists of two or four-bar breaks; the willingness to suddenly play out of tempo; and the judicious use of free improvisation without allowing it to become excessive.



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

While these strategies may have been conditioned by the need to play a short set, they enabled the music to keep moving and create interest in the listener. Playing without amplification, except for the inevitable pickup on the bass, the quartet

achieved an excellent sound balance, chiefly because Anderson chose to play at a sensible volume level in a venue with poor acoustics for jazz, and raising it only when it was absolutely necessary. It was her drum solo which engendered most applause from a capacity audience.

The other thing to note was how happy this band was, obviously enjoying each other's company on stage, smiling, laughing and joking amongst themselves. Powne compered with considerable humour (she should have been given a microphone, because most of what she said, given her soft voice, was indecipherable, even near the stage, where I was located) and clearly this was a jazz group adept at having fun – in contrast to the deadly seriousness of most all-male groups who performed in other concerts I heard.

While Aura could consider their performance a big success, some other musicians were not so lucky. Two brilliant Sydney pianists, Steve Barry and Chris Cody, I'm sorry to say, respectively died a death in Recital Hall West owing to structural deficiencies not of their own making. Barry's Blueprints Trio included himself on piano, accompanied by two brilliant musicians, Jacques Emery (double bass) and Alex Inman-Hislop (drums). His repertoire was ambitious: original compositions which were decidedly complicated and Monk-influenced, played beautifully by this accomplished trio. The absence of sensible amplification marred what should have been a triumphant performance. Whatever Barry said to the audience by way of verbal introductions were unamplified and therefore incomprehensible; I simply could not hear clearly the names of the tunes. And more's the pity, his piano had a muffled sound without the presence and definition essential to jazz piano. Barry has a habit, in his solos, of doubling the time, or embarking on complicated, highly technical runs. Those passages sounded flowery and muffled by the time they reached the audience. Seated relatively close to the stage I could not hear clearly Barry's train of thought on the piano keyboard.



Pianist Steve Barry: his trio dying a death in Recital Hall West...
PHOTOGRAPHER UNKNOWN

When will it occur to organisers of this event that utilising venues with enormously high ceilings, built for classical music, and then expecting jazz musicians to play without suitable amplification is a recipe for disaster? Such problems are in fact easily soluble with the application of a little common sense. Everyone knows how the jazz piano sounds. Why can't this sound be approximated in a venue like Recital Hall West at a prestigious festival such as this?

I left at the end of the Barry concert and emerged into the main corridor where the Pocket Trio was in full flight. There – for all to hear – was the genuine sound of jazz piano, with the fine pianist Andrew Scott on an upright. How glorious it was to hear, after the travesty that had been experienced a few moments earlier in Recital Hall West.

The outstanding composer/pianist Chris Cody fared little better in the same venue. Arriving late, owing to the Delay 45 concert going overtime, I noticed first that an excellent solo from Cody drew no applause. Zilch. This was a telltale sign that the piano sound was having little impact in the audience.



*Pianist/composer Chris Cody: his piano sound having little impact in the audience...
PHOTO COURTESY SYDNEY IMPROVISED MUSIC ASSOCIATION*

In his accompanying musicians Cody had much going for him: perhaps Australia's most distinguished double bassist in Lloyd Swanton, who has an unerring capacity to get his sound just right no matter what acoustic problems might be present; a sensitive drummer James Waples playing at a whisper in a very live venue; and an extremely

capable saxophonist in Michael Avgenicos. Still, as with Steve Barry previously, Cody sounded as if he was playing in the next room.

Both Cody and Swanton are highly adept in playing fills in the spaces which come their way in the improvisations of others. While Swanton's were as clear as a bell, and provided much of the interest in the music throughout, Cody's were muffled and distant. The overall result was a performance peculiarly lacking in spirit and audience engagement, and I put this down to the guts of the compositions, normally emanating from the piano, being too distant. There was a microphone on hand that Cody used to speak to the audience. Why did no-one have the brilliant idea to place it under the lid of the piano? Cody is a relatively soft pianist, and he would have needed a much more muscular technique to be heard clearly under these circumstances – a la Joe Zawinul, who learnt his attack on the keyboard playing piano with Cannonball Adderley's quintet in an era when no-one was amplified.



Lloyd Swanton: his playing provided much of the interest in the music throughout...
PHOTO CREDIT MARKUS LACKINGER

Delay 45, the quartet featuring Tom Avgenicos (trumpet), Roshan Kumarage (piano), Dave Quinn (bass) and Ashley Stoneham (drums) is further testimony to the kind of beautifully integrated jazz that can be produced by musicians staying together and playing together for many years; in the case of this quartet, they apparently go back to their days in high school. At this performance they played a new suite written by Avgenicos, entitled *Where The River Goes*, virtually a trumpet concerto, in the sense that this work highlighted the burgeoning virtuosity of Avgenicos. While his ability to coax a bewildering variety of sounds out of the

trumpet was on display, there was also no disguising his strength and stamina as a jazz trumpeter; he is perhaps the best young trumpeter to come along in Australian jazz since Mat Jodrell. How interesting it would be to hear both Jodrell and Avgenicos on the same stage.



Delay 45, L-R, Ashley Stoneham, Tom Avgenicos, Dave Quinn, Roshan Kumarage...
PHOTOGRAPHER UNKNOWN

While Avgenicos naturally took the limelight here, his extraordinary rhythm section should not be underestimated. Like Stock and GRG67, Delay 45 also builds their music in masterly fashion, sometimes with Avgenicos being accompanied by Kumarage's piano only, sometimes with bass solos accompanied by soft drums and piano. In a review of Delay 45's album *Flux* published in *The Australian* I referred to Kumarage's piano style as "rhapsodic" which caused some mirth on Facebook. Perhaps that term was ill-advised, and "impressionistic" might have been more apt. Whatever the terminology, Kumarage is exceedingly adept at providing a warm musical mat on which Avgenicos's trumpet lines are able to rest, particularly in the lyrical sections. Also, Kumarage's soft and ruminative piano style when playing unaccompanied, is a highly appealing aspect of Delay 45's artistry.

In what was palpably one of the highlights of the festival, pianist Barney McAll presented a 20-minute cameo performance as a curtain raiser for the Trio Grande 2.0 gig which closed the festival in the Verbrugghen Hall. Presenting a highly thoughtful short program, covering many bases, McAll advanced his well-deserved reputation as one of the current giants of Australian jazz.

McAll played Mike Nock's legendary composition *Ondas*, the Michel Legrand standard *You Must Believe in Spring*, a piece called *Strays*, written by Larry Goldings, and James P Johnson's rarely heard ragtime classic *Carolina Shout*, an immensely influential piece in jazz history – both Duke Ellington and Fats Waller, it is said, learnt it note for note. McAll's spirited adaptation of this seminal work ended his set on a note of triumph.



Pianist Barney McAll in the Verbrugghen Hall at the Sydney Con Jazz Festival: a highly thoughtful short program, covering many bases... PHOTO CREDIT ANTHONY BROWELL

A man of intellect, as well as an artist, McAll touched many hearts in the audience by referring briefly to the new Federal arts minister - without naming him - who now carries the hopes of arts communities around Australia. McAll also presented a thought-provoking quote from the great Canadian writer and composer Leonard Cohen: "Poetry is just the evidence of life. If your life is burning well, poetry is just the ash".

The festival was closed in powerful fashion by the multi-national Trio Grande 2.0, including the UK saxophonist & keyboardist Will Vinson, Israeli guitarist Gilad Hekselman and the extraordinary US drummer Eric Harland. It was notable for Harland's unique, burning style on the drums, where he was on fire from the first note. It was exceedingly instructive to listen closely to one of the great African American drummers in full flight; born only in 1976, he is still a young man in his 40s, with a CV of glorious achievements to his credit.



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

Efforts have been made to improve the diabolical acoustics for jazz in the Verbrugghen Hall – absorbent barriers now surround the musicians, enabling the sound to be deadened at source – and the sound at this concluding concert was acceptable, given the problems which occurred in 2021. For Barney McAll’s solo set, the piano sound was superb, clear as a bell.

In the case of Trio Grande, the sound was very loud, more or less at the volume level of a rock concert, rather than a jazz performance. At some points the sound of Vinson’s electrified saxophone was inevitably lost in the mix but, for power and excitement, this splendid trio brought a superb festival to an end on an explosive note.
