

LIMELIGHT

Music, Arts & Culture

ZELA MARGOSSIAN QUINTET ALBUM LAUNCH + STU HUNTER

Mary's Underground, 29 Reiby Pl, Sydney, February 25, 2022

Reviewed by Eric Myers on February 27, 2022

This review appeared in "Limelight" magazine on February 27, 2022, and can be read there at this link <https://limelightmagazine.com.au/reviews/zela-margossian-quintet-stu-hunter-sima-jazz-now-summer-festival/>

In a scintillating performance at Mary's Underground, the Zela Margossian Quintet played, in chronological order, the eight compositions on their new album *The Road*, plus a couple of encores. A tight, well-rehearsed, and very professional quintet, it featured, other than Margossian on piano, her long-term colleagues Stuart Vandegraaff (saxophones & clarinet), Jacques Emery (double bass), Adem Yilmaz (percussion), and Alexander Inman-Hislop (drums).



The Zela Margossian Quintet, L-R, Alexander Inman-Hislop, Stuart Vandegraaff, Margossian, Adem Yilmaz Jacques Emery.... PHOTO COURTESY LACHLAN R DALE

I have a working familiarity with the group's two albums – including their first, *Transition*, – but their studio work, although highly impressive, did not adequately prepare me for the group's overwhelming brilliance in live performance.



Consider how well Yilmaz and Inman-Hislop have integrated their playing together. These two extraordinary musicians might be respectively a percussionist and a drummer, but it would be more apt to think of them as two highly skilled percussionists, such were the subtleties and nuances in their playing. Unusual in what may appear to be a fusion band, they showed an excellent feel for dynamics, bringing the volume up or down whenever necessary, creating the tension and release essential to jazz.

In the composition *Forecast*, taken at speed early in the set, their exchange of solos drew rapturous applause. With Emery on double bass, they are a formidable rhythm section, not only underpinning Margossian's works with a splendid groove, but also doubling as entertainers when their solo turns came around.

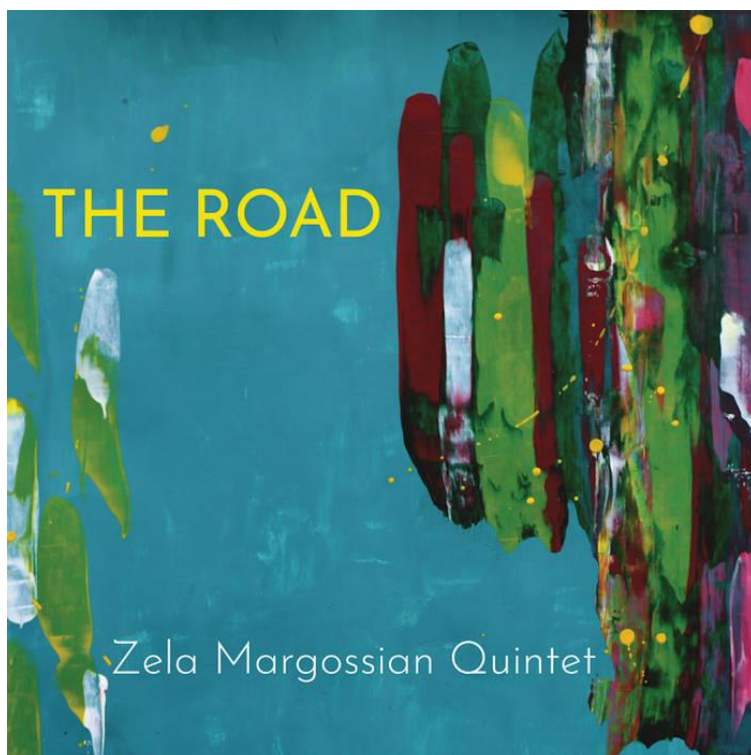
Not that the two other members of the group, Margossian and Vandegraaff, lacked appreciation. An enviable following of maybe 70 dedicated fans flooded the quintet with warm feelings from the first note. Spread throughout the venue, Mary's Underground felt like a relatively full house.

Margossian, born in Beirut, Lebanon, of Armenian heritage, arrived in Australia in 2008. Milestones in her career have included a stint as pianist with Sydney's Sirens Big Band, where she made a mark, and her quintet's 2018 album *Transition* which was justly celebrated, and nominated for an ARIA. *The Road* is further evidence of her rare talent as a pianist/composer.

The character of Margossian's unusual music is noteworthy. The pianist/composer Chris Cody, a perceptive analyst, has put his finger on its basic elements: "She fuses the rhythms and harmonies of jazz, and the discipline of classical with the beautiful melodies of Armenian and Middle Eastern folk music".

Margossian has confirmed this herself, conceding that some of her compositions utilise folk melodies borrowed from Middle Eastern musics. This is perhaps the main reason why her compositions sound so melodic, and easy on the ear. Her music is in no way abstract but, at the same time, this does not mean it lacks gravitas. In fact, the rhythmic structures of most of her compositions are quite distinctive, if not abnormally difficult, mixing up odd numbers of beats in the bar, and creating a complexity that keeps discerning listeners on their toes.

The album's title track *The Road*, for example, is constructed on a recurring pattern of one bar of 4/4, two bars of 3/4 and one bar of 5/8. Having to improvise over such a structure might create rhythmic minefields for some older musicians, but the mostly young musicians in Margossian's quintet, typical of their generation, steamed through without missing a beat, and seemingly without a care in the world.



The title track "The Road" is constructed on a recurring pattern of one bar of 4/4, two bars of 3/4 and one bar of 5/8...

This sort of complexity in the music serves a higher purpose for Margossian. In my view it creates a mystique which increases her ability to go over the heads of those hard-core jazz buffs who can easily relate to this sort of music, and appeal to the wider audience of fans who might be equivocal about jazz, but warm to her music.

Vandegraaff, a vastly talented saxophonist, is difficult to categorise in jazz terms. After two albums, I suspect that the character of Margossian's music largely depends on his fluency on soprano, alto or clarinet. Interestingly he has a Master's degree in Arabic *maqam*, the system of melodic modes used in traditional Arabic music. With

this pedigree, and a distinctive Middle Eastern flavour in his style, he is a big asset as an interpreter of Margossian's music.



Saxophonist Stuart Vandegraaff: he has a Master's degree in Arabic maqam, the system of melodic modes used in traditional Arabic music....

Margossian herself is similarly hard to categorise. She doesn't sound like a normal modern jazz pianist in the African American tradition. Her brilliant technique reflects her training as a classical pianist, and that brilliance explains much of her appeal, particularly when it is encased in a beautiful composition which captures a particular emotion. Following *Forecast*, which brought the house down, and effectively broke the ice, courtesy of the Yilmaz and Inman-Hislop tour de force, Margossian played one of her most lyrical compositions *Gratitude*. By this time she was flying, and her solo seemed to gather up the warm feelings in the venue. From that point on, the music seemed to play itself; the rest of the performance was, as Billy Strayhorn might say, ever up and onward.

Those marketing Margossian, perhaps influenced by the notion that jazz is unpopular, have bent over backwards to categorise her music as something other than jazz – terms such as “ethno-jazz” and “world music” have been applied. These are highly misleading. In fact it is the illustrious broad church of jazz - and jazz only - where Margossian's music most authentically finds its home.

In a robust opening set, Stu Hunter, best-known as a composer of large-scale orchestral works, played solo piano for 45 minutes. Like many other composer/pianists - Gil Evans and Duke Ellington come to mind – he sounds as if he

rarely performs as a solo pianist. He has a signature style of repetitive one-note figures or riffs in the left hand while his right hand explores fascinating melodic improvisations. His selections from past albums such as *The Muse*, and *The Migration*, as well as from his celebrated solo album *The Beautiful Things*, were well-received, particularly the lovely piece he's dedicated to his partner, entitled *Ash*.



Pianist Stu Hunter: a lovely piece he's dedicated to his partner, entitled "Ash"...

In a jazz scene where it's not unusual for musicians in Sydney to be poorly amplified, I can report that where I was sitting in Mary's Underground, the sound was absolutely superb throughout, courtesy of the technician Adam Hignett. It's a delight to be able to hear clearly the playing of such fine musicians, and to be able to follow their trains of thought, without the distraction of poor sound.

Other articles on this site which may be of interest:

Chris Cody, "10 x 10 Interview with Zela Margossian", at this link <https://ericmyersjazz.com/essays-page-102>

Eric Myers, Review of Zela Margossian Quintet album "Transition", published in *The Australian*, March 2, 2019 at this link <https://ericmyersjazz.com/cd-reviews-page-19>

Eric Myers, Review of Zela Margossian Quintet album "The Road", published in *The Australian*, May 14, 2022 at this link <https://ericmyersjazz.com/cd-reviews-page-56>