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OFAM REVIEW

Festival sampler serves up several tasty dishes

BY DOUG ANDERS
 For The Register-Guard

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If the 11 artists who took the Jaqua Concert Hall stage at the Shedd on Tuesday night to open the 2012 Oregon Festival of American Music applied culinary skills comparable to their musicianship to start up a restaurant, the establishment would generate the kind of buzz that leads to a crowded room full of joyfully expectant diners.

Music director Ken Peplowski and his comrades accomplished just that kind of grand opening.

The rough edges often found when musicians come together on scant rehearsal time were noticeably absent for the majority of the evening. Billed as a "sampler" for the week's concerts to follow, singers and instrumentalists alike performed with poise and unity across a range of styles found in the Paris jazz of the 1920s and '30s.

From the subtle rubato expressions in the intro to the opening number, "You Don't Know Paree" to the frenetic closer, "Paris Biguine," these artists cooked up a creative and tasteful program.

Known for great warmth and charm in previous festival performances, Shirley Andress sang the opener with engaging expressiveness and pitch accuracy that suggests she has taken her singing to a level several times higher than I have heard previously. She executed "Stompin' at the Savoy" confidently and with a creative verve that captured the celebratory nature of the song.

The arrangement of the tune was lush and graceful, too.

Jazz guitar icon Bucky Pizzarelli's strong presence in that number and "Baby!" illustrated the mastery he has of this music. The 86-year-old Pizzarelli provided soulful, swinging accompaniments. When it was his turn to solo, he proved he has both ample chops and impeccable melodic taste.

Pizzarelli and fellow guitarist Howard Alden provided an innovative treatment of Hoagy Carmichael's "Stardust." Pizzarelli's grace and punch seemed to provide a springboard inspiring both to play at their highest level.

Peplowski joined Alden for a clarinet-guitar duet version of "China Boy" that featured extraordinarily responsive counterpoint by both musicians.

Alden joined the band and played with precision and creative genius all night. He and trumpeter Terell Stafford offered up some blazing solos, especially in a vigorous version of "Avalon." That number and "Tipico Brasileiro" showcased the superb facility and sense of on-the-spot composition that is pianist Ted Rosenthal's hallmark.

From his first note on, violinist Aaron Weinstein, a newcomer to the festival stage, offered solos and counterpoint played with the composure of professionals with decades of playing under their belts. His contribution was a major presence as he played with the gravity of Duke Ellington and Billy Strayhorn's swing and the virtuosity of trumpet legend Clifford Brown.

Siri Vik's interpretation of the diverse international styles of the music was also strong. Her original delivery of "How High the Moon" — starting slow and quiet and building to a vehement double-time close — captured the emotional expression of the words of the song.

The multiple counterpoint lines during solos in "Paris Biguine," the closing piece, exemplified the kind of controlled chaos found in the finest restaurants run by strong-willed, expert chefs.

If the bold risks and originality these "culinary artists" expressed in this appetizer is any indicator, OFAM audiences can be ready for some tasty "meals" to follow.

Doug Anders is the host of KLCC-FM's "Jazz Inside Out," which airs at 7:30 p.m. Thursday.

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