



BALTIMORE JAZZ ALLIANCE

NOVEMBER 2013

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VOLUME X

ISSUE XI

THE BJA NEWSLETTER

WWW.BALTIMOREJAZZ.COM

BJA's Second Jazz Composers' Showcase

On Sunday September 29th, ten compositions by ten Baltimore-area composers were played at Loyola University's McManus Theatre. The event was sponsored by the Baltimore Jazz Alliance. With funding from the William G. Baker, Jr. Memorial Fund, BJA awarded four of the composers a commission to create brand-new jazz compositions. All but one composer came to the stage to introduce his tune before it was played.

Brian Smith's "Different Spaces, Different Places" was inspired by hearing pianist Reuben Brown playing in a small club in Fells Point. His music was not available on recordings so, while listening to him, Smith realized that the music was happening only once, in "real time"—a rare experience these days. Although Smith said that "the only thing that is constant with this piece is change," in fact, it remained fairly constant in its relaxed, slinky Latin feel. It began with a *montuno* rhythm marked by claves and plenty of cowbell. The sax and trumpet played in duet back and forth on the melody, which was syncopated almost like ragtime. Tenor saxophonist Craig Alston soloed with a shower of warm golden notes, followed by the trumpeter David Smith's crisp and spicy solo.

George Spicka, who has a background in zoology, said that his tune "Step a Little Closer" is not about a love-sick swain's proposition to the object of his affections, but about a spi-



TODD BUTLER



ETHAN HELM



NICO SARBANES



IAN SIMS

der's invitation to its hoped-for prey—and its success in capturing the hapless victim. The tune began with an eerie meandering bass solo embellished with ethereal little piano trills. As the rhythm moved into a driving $\frac{3}{4}$ time, horns brought an urgent feel suggesting pursuit, while the drums and bass dug in with rising intensity. Solos of whirling notes were backed by angular fourth voicings on piano until the climax of capture and dinner!

Phil Ravita's tune, "Sepia," came to him while stuck in traffic downtown, and the tune reflects the many layers of events happening on a street during a traffic jam—the road rage, the ennui, the frustration of the traffic cop—and the calm acceptance of some commuters who think creative thoughts. The bass set up an easy funk pulse like traffic slowly pulsing through the streets, while the trumpet hinted at the sound of car horns and street calls.

Commission-winner Ethan Helm's

tune, "The Color Wheel," was inspired by how the colors of a pinwheel blend as it spins—like jazz, which takes grooves and harmonic colors from blues, European classical music, Latin-American music, and pop and blends them into something unique and beautiful. The primary "color" in this tune was decidedly Latin. The tune began with a bowed bass ostinato and a long, slow horn duet playing an angular, meandering melody. After a brief piano cadenza, the band launched into a lively samba with a touch of swing. The temperature rose as Alston's sax solo blazed with a flurry of notes, Smith's trumpet tooted and squawked with a touch of New Orleans Mardi Gras, and drummer Mark St. Pierre summoned up a voodoo spell as he furiously plied tom toms, snares, rims, cymbals, cowbell, and a whole range of percussion sounds.

Mark Osteen said his tune "Ver la Luz" was designed as a conversation between the horns, continuing until

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BALTIMORE JAZZ ALLIANCE

We are a 501(c)(3)
tax exempt organization

The Baltimore Jazz Alliance (BJA) is a grass-roots organization of jazz aficionados, musicians and venues dedicated to enhancing and promoting jazz in Baltimore and the surrounding areas. New members sharing this passion are always welcome as the BJA continues its efforts to build a stronger and better networked jazz scene. Together we can help this music thrive in the region and reward listeners and musicians alike.

BJA Priorities

- To develop new audiences for jazz
- To strengthen communication within the jazz community
- To improve media relations on behalf of the jazz community
- To bring greater visibility to the entire array of jazz offerings in the Baltimore region
- To provide greater access to performance opportunities for Baltimore-area jazz musicians

Visit www.baltimorejazz.com
for information about our
accomplishments and future goals.

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BJA's Second Jazz Composers' Showcase

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they "see the light." His composition, he explained, was a contrafact: a new melody overlaid on a chord progression borrowed from another tune. Bebop musicians of the 1940s used this device to create new pieces to perform and record without having to pay royalties to the original composer (melodies can be copyrighted, but not harmonic progressions). Osteen's tune, based on Cole Porter's classic "Night and Day," takes advantage of its interesting use of half-diminished chords. The tune began with a horn duet over an Afro-Cuban groove. The horns then engaged in a musical conversation, trading every two measures, and then overlapping and playing in duet. After Dr. Anthony Villa's engaging piano solo, the conversation between the horns resumed until they, and everyone listening, saw the light.

Ian Sims, a commission winner, said he usually starts a composition simply with a melody. Hearing the word "conundrum" on a television program, he decided he liked the sound of it as a title for his tune, an up-tempo swing piece with some jagged melodic intervals that hinted at a kind of non-verbal conundrum. Alston's sax solo on this tune was one of his most arresting, a dizzying whirlwind of notes reaching the heights and depths of the scale. Smith's solo evoked the bebop era of Dizzy Gillespie and Nat Adderley. After the solos, the sax brought back the melody, with a counterpoint by trumpet. A forceful unison outro took the tune to an abrupt climactic end.

Nico Sarbanes, who won the student commission, noted that his "Clifford the Big Brown Dog" is an homage to Clifford Brown, famed trumpeter of the 1950s, and uses a hard-bop vibe in the mode of Lee Morgan and the era of Blue Note Records. This energetic tune was a real toe-tapper, with tricky repeated motifs in the melody. Although in a minor key, it conveyed some of the joie de vivre of Brown's "Joy Spring." Alex Weber's walking bass helped drive the lively tune to a happy conclusion.

Bill Murray's composition "P & C" began with a question: what would happen if you played two melodies against

one another? What if two jazz musicians with distinct styles, such as Charlie Parker ("P") and John Coltrane ("C"), played together? Murray's concept is somewhat akin to Osteen's in featuring a musical conversation. But Murray's short tune opened with two instruments that were not so much conversing as butting up against each other, not even trying to find common ground—yet there was, in fact, a quirky consonance in the conflict. After each horn stated its case, they came together again in call-and-response, still colliding against each other's sharp edges until they reached a concord and ended in friendly harmony.

Tim Andulonis's "Let's See" was another composition with a Latin feel, evoking bright colors in a lush tropical garden through its silky horn duo played over the contained but forceful percussion groove. The solos preserved that bright and relaxed mood, but at the end of the piece, the intensity rose with St. Pierre's impassioned drum solo, driven by the horns playing a riff increasing in pitch and volume, until dying down to a peaceful close.

Todd Butler, another commission winner, pointed out that his tune, "Mojo," was inspired by legendary jazz trumpeter Freddie Hubbard. *The Urban Slang Dictionary* defines "mojo" as self-assuredness, charm, sex appeal, or talent and, fittingly enough, a funky, self-assured riff on bass and drums kicked it off, then the horns in unison played an introduction with an interesting downward chromatic movement. The tune then shifted into a jaunty swing feel with a minor-blues-based melody, evoking plenty of sassy sex appeal. A high point was a killin' drum solo by St. Pierre.

The band members, led by pianist Villa, a professor of music at Loyola, showed a deep understanding of jazz and impressive command of their instruments. McManus Theatre was a perfect setting: the room was commodious and yet intimate, and the acoustics were perfect—warm, without too much reverberation, and at the exactly right level of audibility.

—LIZ FIXSEN