

Jay Harvey Upstage

Tuesday, January 24, 2017

Joel Smirnoff freshens up his Cleveland and jazz connections with a cabaret performance at Indiana Landmarks Center



Joel Smirnoff, jazz violinist



Trumpeter Conrad Jones, new ISO principal

The violin has been featured in jazz going back to the 1920s. Besides pioneering soloists like Joe Venuti, whole string sections have also played a role, particularly in jazz-inflected dance orchestras such as Paul Whiteman's. But the instrument so basic to classical music has not had steady, conventional representation in jazz, making the concert appearance here of a violinist adept in both fields worth special attention.

Joel Smirnoff attained eminence as a member of the Juilliard Quartet for many years, and from 2008 until last year, he was president of the Cleveland Institute of Music. Musicians associated with that school joined him Tuesday night for a concert with cabaret-style seating at Indiana Landmarks Center, co-presented with the International Violin Competition of Indianapolis.

One of the violinist's young colleagues onstage with him in Cook Theater is becoming familiar to Indianapolis audiences: Conrad Jones, named last year as the long-awaited principal trumpet of the Indianapolis Symphony Orchestra. Jones was crucial to the front-line sound of the band, often stating the tunes first in close coordination with Smirnoff. The rhythm section, also with CIM associations, consisted of Theron Brown, piano; Joel Negus, bass, and Anthony Taddeo, drums.

Smirnoff not only produced a smooth sound with his amplified violin, but also used its soft burred tone as a complement to Jones' darting, sometimes flowing trumpet. Both players indicated familiarity with a range of major jazz styles on their instrument; Smirnoff now and then went highly decorative, a la Stephane Grappelli, especially in "Nuages," by the French violinist's longtime collaborator, guitarist Django Reinhardt. He displayed his casual vocal chops, sort of on the order of a Yankee Jack Teagarden, during Horace Silver's "Love Vibrations" and George Gershwin's "They Can't Take That Away From Me."

Jones showed his familiarity with Clark Terry in his leaping, growling and low-register displays of puckish wit, with Art Farmer in mellow, well-connected phrases (especially on flugelhorn in "Love Vibrations" and in his major ballad showcase, "My Funny Valentine") and even with Louis Armstrong in the majestic push in the first part of his "They Can't Take That Away From Me" solo. He found apt ways to vary the band's sound with judicious use of cup, plunger, and Harmon mutes.

Arrangements were straightforward, sometimes with exciting complications, such as the sudden boost to the tempo of "It Don't Mean a Thing If It Ain't Got that Swing," with trumpet and drums duetting for a while at first.

Out-of-tempo solo introductions (what jazzmen call "rubato") added some nice tension before ensemble entrances in "Take the 'A' Train" (piano) and "Caravan" (trumpet, in something close to a free-jazz mode).

Joel Negus was solid in accompaniment; his walking bass during Brown's solo in "Take the 'A' Train" was inspired and harmonically precise. Taddeo's drum solos in Joe Henderson's "Recorda Me" and "Caravan" lit up the room. He uses the whole kit, favoring brief, complementary patterns, not just single-stroke accents, to vary the palette beyond the sound of drums.

The cabaret-concert tradition provides a welcome variety in the IVCI's concert series, and the full house in a crowded room of tables confirmed the usefulness and delight of this annual affair in the organization's programming..