

“Avital Meets Avital” at the Cleveland Museum of Art (Apr. 10)

by Nicholas Stevens



Building on shared qualities, musicians from divergent traditions and genres can achieve synthesis in sound. This is the premise behind *Avital Meets Avital*, an album and touring program devised by two unrelated

holders of the same Moroccan-Jewish surname.

The premise of such cross-genre collaborations implies that musical matter fired from opposing directions will fuse, but still generate the hot glow of differences reconciled. In a recent performance in Cleveland, however, no such glimmer of inter-genre friction remained. In this project, the Avitals and their bandmates achieve stylistic cold fusion, freeing up listeners' attention to focus on the group's irresistible grooves, solos, and formal arcs.

Jazz double bassist Omer Avital and classical mandolinist Avi Avital joined album colleagues Yonathan Avishai and Itamar Doari at the Cleveland Museum of Art's Gartner Auditorium on April 10. The concert consisted primarily of album material, with some unannounced additions. The thrill of being there arose as much from seeing the quartet realize their virtuosic compositions, complete with glances and half-smiles of satisfaction, as from hearing them improvise.

Minor-mode phrases on the larger of Avi Avital's mandolins pealed forth first, but the opener, *Zamzama*, began in earnest with a percussive strike from Avishai's piano, Doari's drum kit, and Omer Avital's bass. Here as throughout the evening, the group balanced and blended its sound with chamber-ensemble precision. Avishai, generally afforded little time in the spotlight, fleshed out the group's harmonies with modern-jazz

lushness. *Lonely Girl* bobbed along in a slow-tango rhythm reminiscent of Piazzolla, reaching a peak of ardent expression before fading away.

Omer Avital took up an oud for a freely paced solo, pulling out a high overtone that lingered over his unfolding counterpoint. Avi Avital joined to trade solo moments, and it became clear that this unannounced piece would serve as an essay in slow-burn intensification. In the piece that followed, Doari played simultaneous hi-hat and lap drum solos while also maintaining a groove on cajón and snare drum, often passing up sticks in favor of bare hands.

The solemn rhythms of *Ballad for Eli*, named for Omer Avital's late father, evolved into a joyful, danceable groove over several minutes. *Avi's Song* found the mandolinist demonstrating his ability to play with both fierce strokes and fleet fingers. Both Avitals and Avishai left the stage as Doari launched into a frame drum solo that incorporated tapping, thumping, slapping, and rubbing the surface, producing a clear, ringing tone. Even pure resonance became thrilling: by wavering the drum in his lap, Doari produced vibrato. The rest of the band rejoined one by one, building to a rousing finale.

The Source and the Sea gave Omer Avital, purveyor of many a perfect high-register bass figuration, a chance to shine in a restless solo introduction. The concert ended with one of his compositions, a rollicking vehicle for the entire group in which his oud sounded more like a steel guitar. Playing with rock energy and jazz sophistication, and guided by a commitment to overwhelming virtuosity, these four musicians earned the rapturous ovation that greeted them.

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