

## Oberlin Small Jazz Ensembles at The Cat (Nov. 19)

by Max Newman



Oberlin Conservatory's jazz department has a storied and star-studded history, with alumni such as pianist Sullivan Fortner, trumpeter Theo Croker, and violinist Jenny Scheinman, as well as a faculty that includes saxophonist Gary Bartz, an NEA Jazz Master and two-time Grammy winner. There is clearly a pipeline of talent here that has not ended, as heard at the Oberlin Small Jazz Ensembles concert on November 19.

This was clearly a display of possible future stars. However, what was really striking was how each ensemble worked as a group to create distinct atmospheres and feelings.

There was the emotionally intimate Gabi Allemana Ensemble, whose gorgeous arrangements filled the room with bliss, sadness, longing, contemplativeness, and everything in between. There was the playful, organ-centric Ori Josell Ensemble, who, even in the absence of their saxophone player, managed to get the audience on the edge of their seats with a series of arrangements impossible not to bob your head to. There was also the ragtime- and New Orleans jazz-inspired Colin Leonard Ensemble, whose energetic performances closing out the night felt celebratory.

The logistical setup of the concert, held at the Cat in the Cream Coffeehouse, certainly gave power to these underlying moods. The relatively small space allowed for meaningful connection between the performers and the audience, and brought the listener as close as possible to the musical themes on display. The double-pronged nature of the concert, with one portion at 4:30 and another at 7:30 (with a break for dinner in between), also allowed the audience to keep minds and ears refreshed.

But if group dynamics were the bedrock of these performances, the individual moments of brilliance in every ensemble took them over the edge.

In the Ellie Weinberg Ensemble, the namesake of the group was absolutely fantastic on drums, pushing the group forward with precision and energy, and starting off the concert with a bang. She showed herself to be an adept arranger as well, with her own rhythmically varied and intricately textured piece closing out the set. There were a lot of gorgeous back-and-forths between guitarists Otto Allard and Ian Campen as well.

Her voice dancing beautifully over the elegant instrumental backing, Gabi Allemana spearheaded her own ensemble through a series of Brazilian compositions primarily by João Bosco. The instrumentals may have laid the basis for this dense package of emotions, but it was Allemana who laid it all out there, drawing the audience in with an impassioned performance. Bassist Nathaniel Coben's performance was also of note, with a clear tone and a series of mind-bending solos.

The Ori Josell Ensemble, slightly downsized due to the absence of saxophonist Coleman Rose, saw each member step up on various occasions. Mitchell Galligan was the most ear-catching, with several complicated yet joyous solos on the organ. Josell himself was terrific on the drums, with one of his excellent solos played almost entirely on the rims. Guitarist Tim Picard was also impressive, showcasing remarkable spatial awareness on his instrument within the arrangements.

David Serpan's ensemble began the evening portion of the concert with a bang. Serpan himself spoke through his saxophone, maintaining a gorgeous tone through a series of musically brilliant solos, playing with dissonance in a way that held your eyes fixed on the stage. Drummer Yunshen Tao played his socks off, his heavy usage of cymbals creating an ethereal atmosphere.

Jonathan Clark of the Griffin Edwards Ensemble was impressive with his versatility, switching back and forth between guitar and voice, and showing great panache with each. Nash McBride's superb runs on piano and use of dissonance stood out — complex, winding, and beautiful.

To close out the night, the Colin Leonard Ensemble introduced the banjo (Ryan Michaud) and the trombone (Henry Newquist). Both musicians showed flashes of brilliance within the ragtime-y arrangements. And Leonard was talismanic, switching between saxophone and clarinet to great effect.

The group projected infectious and joyous energy. It was a delightful end to a lovely day

of jazz — an exciting snapshot of a group of young musicians with even more exciting futures.

*Published on ClevelandClassical.com December 7, 2023.*

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