

Isabelle and Raphaël Olivier evoke French sensibility at Reithoffer's (Aug. 23)

by Kevin McLaughlin



Harpist Isabelle Olivier and her son, guitarist Raphaël Olivier, combined for an eclectic program of smart, original compositions and unexpected covers on Friday evening, August 23. The charming nightclub setting of Reithoffer's (called Hoff's by regulars), 10 miles east of Chagrin Falls, is an especially agreeable place to hear music.

Raphaël, age 27, who did most of the talking, charmed us right off with the duo's origin story: "We're from a small town outside Paris, but have now lived in Chicago twelve years. I've been a US citizen for a month and have less of a French accent, but Isabelle has more."

This also applied to their musical accents. Isabelle's elegant and technically secure harp playing confirmed a classical technique, but she also showed herself well-assimilated in the improvisational world of jazz. Operating pedals (needed for chromatic notes) can be cumbersome, but she seemed free, with ideas pouring out of her as on any saxophone.

Her instrument, an electric-acoustic hybrid, helped her project and balance with the electric guitar of her partner. Electronic mixing and amplified harmonics — her solo in "Over the Rainbow," for example — also distinguished her tonal palette in unexpected ways.

Raphaël Olivier demonstrated a native's comfort level not only with American English but also with the language of jazz. Before playing the Radiohead tune "No Surprises," he declared, "Jazz musicians love Radiohead," and then played — and sang — with Chet Baker-like feeling and restraint.

In a gesture both romantic and French, Raphaël recited (in English) a favorite Arthur Rimbaud poem, “Dawn,” to his mother's improvised accompaniment. Her evocative strokes brought imagined whiffs of clove cigarettes and Michel Legrand movie scores into the room, in support of these lines:

*I have kissed the summer dawn
Before the palaces, nothing moved
The water lay dead
Battalions of shadows still kept the forest road.*

After that, *everything* sounded French.

Familiar American tunes like Charlie Chaplin's “Smile” and George Gershwin's “Summertime,” both performed without words, had you hearing the voice of Maurice Chevalier — and Léo Ferré’s “Avec le temps,” crooned in Raphaël’s light tenor, took on a wistful French cinematic quality. Even Tim McGraw’s “My Old Friend,” a paean to friendship, felt more like a folk song than a country ballad. That last one was a surprise on this program, but the song had an empathic ally in this young singer.

Isabelle’s original compositions from recent recordings — “Cherry Blossoms,” “Cuban Smile,” and “Lunch” — all hit joyous, summer notes. You could dance to them, if you wanted to, like French teenagers at the beach.

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