

## **Oberlin Jazz Ensemble in Finney Chapel (Nov. 8)**

By Max Newman



In an institution like Oberlin Conservatory, with plentiful opportunities to watch smaller ensembles strut their stuff, it's always refreshing to witness a virtuosic group of musicians play in a big band style. That's exactly the experience a packed

Finney Chapel crowd had on November 8 when the Oberlin Jazz Ensemble, under the direction of Chris Anderson, produced a stirring concert during parents weekend.

A key tenet of a good big band is chemistry, and the OJE had it in abundance. A brilliant, balanced sound filled Finney Chapel's cavernous interior. The space can often swallow low-end frequencies, but this was a very fluid, smooth-edged sonic experience. This balance continued even during solos, where the backing molded itself into its own complementary amalgamation of melodies.

Each component was impressive. The rhythm section provided a solid bedrock for the band, at times grooving boisterously and at others achieving smoothness and subtlety.

The horns shimmered lavishly all night. There was something almost decadent about the richness of the sound they achieved. The wind section's sound was equally full, but added some bite to the ensemble's sound.

The setlist, announced from the stage by Chris Anderson, was a journey through arrangements by some of the greats — Dizzy Gillespie, Frank Foster, and Duke Ellington. Two of Ellington's were high points of the show.

*Sepia Panorama*, began with a bright, swirling horn and wind flourish and continued at a cheeky walking pace, its musical quietude broken intermittently with delightfully jarring stabs.

*Banquet Scene* possessed a softness — its soulfully loping central melody garnished by brilliant solo sax work from Coltrane Park, whose tone had all the emotional potency of the human voice. In a night with many outstanding solos, Park was a stand-out. Later in the evening, when the rest of the band dropped out, Park showered the audience with a whirlwind of cascading notes, each enunciated with absolute tonal clarity, and oscillating at a terrific pace — a viscerally gripping moment.

Other mesmerizing contributions included Chloe Pauyo's flute solo in the opening song Amalia Gould's drum solo in the penultimate song of the evening. Tadd Dameron's *Lady Bird* as arranged by Maria Schneider was a highlight in its own right. Its sunny, smiling melody welcomed the crowd with open arms, and was an excellent showcase of the brass and wind sections' musical sensitivity.

Perhaps the best song of the night, though, was Pharez Whitted's *Watusi Boogaloo*, arranged by George DeLancey. Built upon a body-moving backbeat from Sebastien Kline on drums, meditated upon by Julian Mendiola's rhythmically hyper-aware piano playing, and paired mesmerizingly with Isaac Lieb's guitar.

This gave way to a devilishly catchy melody and a string of superb solos that fostered moments of ear-catching syncopation. Oliver Smith's trumpet solo was both unexpected and endearingly laid-back, keeping listeners on their toes with sudden twists and turns.

But this was also a song that underlined the unerring connection between the members of this musical collective on a night that well and truly exhibited Oberlin College's big band prowess.

*Published on ClevelandClassical.com November 18, 2025*

*Click here for a printable copy of this article*

[Return to the Front Page.](#)

