

SÜDTIROL

BY THOMAS CONRAD



Marco Mezquida

Südtirol Jazzfestival (Jun. 28th-Jul. 7th), based in Bolzano, Italy, is known for two things: unusual, often spectacular settings for music and fearless, independent programming. Bands often play high up in the Dolomites, in meadows or on ledges in stone quarries. The beauty of the South Tyrol region is changeless. The festival program is an annual improvisation. Every year the festival focuses (though not exclusively) on one country or region. In 2019 it was Spain and Portugal.

There were 58 concerts in 10 days. The highly selective comments below are divided into four categories: great stuff you never knew about; great stuff you only thought you knew about; awful stuff; last memories.

Category 1: Marco Mezquida is a 32-year-old Spanish pianist who played five times. His last performance in the sunny courtyard of a small winery. It was mostly one long improvised invention, accompanied by singing birds. There were chordal washes in waves and streams of single-note melodies that appeared, evolved, then melted into new motifs. He reminded one of Keith Jarrett in the way he trusted his impulses. But Mezquida's spontaneous designs were ornate, even delicate and bright with Flamenco colors. Watch for his name.

Travelers + 1, a French/Italian quintet led by bassist Matteo Bortone, played in a leafy park attached to Palais Toggenburg in Bolzano. Many of the best young European bands are more interested in discovering fresh concepts of ensemble form than showing off solo firepower. Francesco Diodati is one of the most gifted guitarists of the new European generation, but in Travelers + 1 he picks his spots. His haunting sonorities contribute to elusive atmospheres and sublimated grooves. Bortone writes mysterious songs sometimes consumed by synthesized orchestras. (A large percentage of musicians at Südtirol supplemented their instruments with electronics.) "In Aliore Loco", by the band's tenor saxophonist Julien Pontvianne, was a rapt melody portrayed on tenor and arco bass with dark chords underneath from Yannick Lestra's Rhodes. Bortone's subtle ensemble has a voice of its own.

A quintessential piece of programming at every Südtirol festival is a series called Jazz Labs. Artistic director Klaus Widmann throws together highly volatile players from different ensembles and hopes they explode, or at least catch fire. This year's Labs took place in the antithesis of a mountain meadow: Batzen Sudwerk, a dark, cramped basement in Bolzano. Trombonist Filippo Vignato, keyboardist Anne Quillier, drummer Paal Nilssen-Love and vocalist Beatriz Nunes, strangers from four countries, became a band in two minutes.

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MONTRÉAL

BY KURT GOTTSCHALK



Bobo Stenson

The Montréal Jazz Festival is no doubt one of the biggest in the Americas, at least if judged by attendance and number of performances. The final weekend of the 40th edition this year—which ran from Jun. 27-Jul. 6th—often felt like two festivals dropped onto the same downtown. There's the massive, free, street party with blues and salsa bands and beer, poutine and ice cream stands that one must pass through to get to the other, indoor, festival, with air conditioning and acts that largely live up to whatever promise they might have made. Deep within a festival largely geared toward appealing to the majority, there also lies the "Jazz Dans La Nuit" series at Le Gesù—much of it marking the ECM Records 50th Anniversary—providing programming both innovative and satisfying.

Gesù, a former Roman Catholic Church that hasn't been renovated so much as having a whole new theater built below, provides good sight lines, comfortable seating, dramatic lighting and, most importantly, warm acoustics. The room can embody acoustic stillness as easily as the trademarked reverberations of ECM founder Manfred Eicher's productions.

Bassist Larry Grenadier made the best of the room's natural sound (with some tasteful if unnecessary added reverb) with his own rich tone on the double bass. Playing arco, pizzicato and strumming the thick strings, he paid homage to John Coltrane, Paul Motian and Oscar Pettiford in a smart and worldly solo set. Swedish pianist Bobo Stenson began his recital with variations on a simple and poignant melody, stretching for harmonies and doubling back to fill the expanse, ornamenting with a ragtime-informed syncopation. He built a structure, humming along as he toiled, then methodically dismantled it to build a new one on the same spot.

More viscerally thrilling and certainly louder was a set by the Swiss quartet Ronin, led by pianist Nik Bärtsch. They're practitioners of a sort of chock-full minimalism that has been in vogue for some time now (The Necks, Dawn of Midi, Natural Information Society), although they've been at it for 18 years. Their music is far from sparse, but still often slow and barely changing (although there are actual bridges every now and again). They built to a rocking groove but were still able to stop on a dime. And then, like flipping a record, they did it again, to a more than enthusiastic response.

Montréal saxophonist Christine Jensen appeared with her New York Quartet, featuring the remarkable drummer Allison Miller, whose "Slow Jam" forced some welcome asymmetry on the ensemble, which otherwise played pieces about sailing off the west coast and bicycling in Sweden. While the overall

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COPENHAGEN

BY JOHN SHARPE



Lotte Anker

With over 1,200 performances across some 120 venues covering an astonishing stylistic breadth, the Copenhagen Jazz Festival (Jul. 5th-14th) forms one of the premier entries in the jazz calendar. Walking or cycling between concerts, jazz seemed to waft temptingly from every nook and cranny. But with so much music available at overlapping times, you couldn't see everything. You had to choose. The Festival banner serves both as an umbrella under which individual mini-festivals operate and as a promoter of special projects and series. During a three-night visit (Jul. 7th-9th), this writer was able to sample the diverse fare, which included a wealth of homegrown talent alongside other European and international acts.

Two consecutive concerts featuring prominent Danish musicians renowned for different styles provided a graphic illustration of the breadth of the schedule. At 5e, Lotte Anker's adventurous saxophone improvising provoked and reacted to Lebanese trumpeter Mazen Kerbaj, German drummer Burkhard Beins and Japanese electronicist Ikue Mori. While the latter often contributes the most unusual voicings to any given event, in this company she was among equals as the air fizzed with splutters, beeps, rattles and squeaks involving no electricity whatsoever, as extended techniques held sway almost exclusively. By adding a balloon to his mouthpiece, Kerbaj in particular was a fertile source of unpredictable sonorities. Everyone listened intently to gauge what and when to play in a display as notable for its selflessness as its virtuosity.

Later that evening at Brorson's Church guitarist Jakob Bro brought a special edition trio with bassist Larry Grenadier and drummer Jorge Rossy for an intimate sold-out performance in the round. Although Bro's shimmering lines sang out, cushioned by the expected sensitive support, the guitarist's exploration of effects, textures and swirling loops resulted in a more experimental feel than may have been anticipated. Nonetheless, his subtle melodies, sometimes folk or Arabic-tinged, acted as the homebase around which the delicate interplay circled. It wasn't until the encore that he eschewed the pedals for a more straightforwardly lyrical recital.

In a way, cellist Josefine Opsahl merged the two approaches in her morning concert, part of the SpaceHouse Series at the airy Design Museum. By supplementing New Music-imbued free improvisation with electronic manipulation, she effectively composed in real time as she layered yearning cries and folksy dances over spellbinding chorales. Other concerts in the series encompassed a variety of genres, ranging from a classical repertoire incorporating Vivaldi, Tchaikovsky and Rimsky-Korsakov with unfettered

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Little Rosie's Kindergarten is a mindblowing orchestra from Vienna. Widmann is prone to tinker even with already experimental projects. He added six players to the Kindergarten from a local Tyrolean band, Euregio Jazzwerkstatt, and created a 19-piece Frankenstein's monster: two singers, six horns, two violins, a cello, a vibraphone, two guitars, three basses, a keyboard player and a drummer. The segues between overwhelming monoliths of sound and improvised lyric interludes were jarring and exhilarating. The music seethed and loomed. Sometimes the seething was so slow it sounded like trance music, if trancemusic can be deafening. Sometimes it sounded like John Coltrane's *Ascension*, except that massive upheavals never quite became chaos.

Category 2: Pipe Dream released an odd, deft eponymous record in 2018 on CAMJazz. They played tunes from it in Bolzano. They are Filippo Vignato (trombone), Hank Roberts (cello), Pasquale Mirra (vibraphone), Giorgio Pacorig (keyboards) and Zeno De Rossi (drums). The atypical instrumentation leads to interesting ensemble colors and textures. Even more interesting is how this band functions together. They play songs that start simply but quickly develop depths of inner detail in shifting, intricate counterpoint. Not many groups can sound like a dignified chamber ensemble one moment and a Trinidad steel band the next. Pipe Dream is another example of a European project prioritizing collaboration over individual ego, although Vignato takes some of the most imposing trombone solos in current jazz and Roberts makes quietly cryptic cello statements. (Roberts also gave a solo cello concert that had a quality rare for avant garde jazz: charm.)

Susana Santos Silva of Portugal is a rising star on the European free jazz scene. Her acoustic band, with the long but fitting name Life and Other Transient Storms, electrified the air of Bolzano's Museion (a museum of contemporary art). Her front line partner-in-crime was saxophonist Lotte Anker of Denmark. Together, they created hair-raising disharmonies and startling fractured melodies. The rhythm section was Torbjörn Zetterberg (a maniacal bassist) and Nilssen-Love (a drummer who is over being maniacal and understands musical space). For all the fierce creativity on the loose in this band, not many notes were wasted. When alto saxophone collided with trumpet, it was like the sublime cacophony of Ornette Coleman with Don Cherry, refracted through the prism of our present uncertain moment. They played one piece for an hour. The audience was rewarded for its attention with continuous outbreaks of arcane lyricism.

Category 3: Yes, there was some awful stuff at Südtirol. Widmann takes programming risks because he seeks the leading edges of the jazz art form. Drummer Pedro Melo Alves, a tasteless, showboating basher, appeared in several Portuguese ensembles. Catacombe was boring. The Rite of Trio was lurching and nasty. Wretched excess plus inanity makes for a long evening. The duo of Alves and guitarist Pedro Branco generated hideous noise, like musical waterboarding.

Category 4: On the last day, a stage was set up in a field near a "Rifugio" (a mountain refuge) at 7,000 feet. A 10-piece German female orchestra, SiEA, played for a crowd that had arrived by cable car. SiEA is a tight, quick party band. Everyone got up and danced. Some threw July snowballs. In the near distance, all around, sheer gray rock faces towered. Further away, the jagged peaks of the Dolomites pierced the sky. ❖

For more information, visit suedtiroljazzfestival.com

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package was a bit overly pleasant, Miller-like ICP Orchestra drummer Han Bennink—is ever inventive

and a joy to watch, whatever the context.

Guitarist Stephane Wrembel—at one-time a fixture at Barbès in Brooklyn who now plays regular brunch gigs at Manhattan's Blue Note—gave an updating to Django Reinhardt's likeable and eminently recognizable Gypsy jazz, playing both solo and with a quartet including a second guitarist. The music was often fast and sometimes faster, every so often breaking out of the mold without breaking it, at times taking some surprising detours into Spanish and baroque guitar music, bluegrass and heavy blues rock. Subtle echo distortion and muted strings didn't undermine but somehow underscored the reverence for their patron saint. (Homage was also paid by France's Django Festival All-Stars and the Quebecois band Eclectic Django.).

In other words, it wasn't retro shtick. It was innovative, thoughtful arrangements that remained faithful to the spirit of the source, much like the Dr. Dre big band tribute that followed at Salle Ludger-Duvernay Monument National. With keyboards, synths, electric bass and a full (and well-mic'd) drum set among the two dozen instruments on the bandstand, the Orchestre National de Jazz de Montréal played looped melodies as if to bring samples back to the analog source while staying true to the work of the hip-hop pioneer. The orchestra—led by Sylvester Uzoma Onyejiaka II, aka Sly5thAve—rolled through the exciting arrangements with barely a pause.

For reasons beyond the comprehension of this cultural tourist, the innovative and long-standing Montréal collective Ambiances Magnetiques gets little representation in the festival, the closest thing this year being a set of Bill Evans music at L'Astral played by the quartet of pianist François Bourassa, saxophonist Frank Lozano, bassist Michel Donato and drummer Pierre Tanguay, informed both by a love for the late pianist's music and Donato's brief employment with the jazz great. They brought their own moodiness and abstractions into Evans' sublimely understated tunes. Tanguay is one of the most reliable and rewarding timekeepers in town and here was endlessly skirting the edges, never intruding on the proceedings.

The final set at Gesù on Sunday night was a marvelous solo set by Vancouver-born, New York-based pianist Kris Davis. She began standing at the instrument, awakening the strings with carefully placed Ebows, then moved to the upper end of the keyboard, revealing the string preparations with a banjo-like sonority. As she moved toward the lower end, she uncovered sentient wind chimes and distant geologies. After several minutes, she at last positioned herself on the bench and initiated a series of improvisations on a Ligeti theme. She followed that with "Grass and Trees on the Other Side of the Tracks", her contribution to the 2018 Tzadik release *Winged Serpents: Six Encomiums for Cecil Taylor*, in which she managed to depict the music of the great master without trying to mimic him. An improvisation followed, showing her gift for maintaining polyrhythms, before she closed with Thelonious Monk's "Ask Me Now".

Davis' set marked a theme that ran through many of the concerts, with dedications to such past masters as Evans, Monk, Reinhardt and Taylor permeating the setlists. It makes one wonder if jazz—or festival jazz—has become a bit too backward-looking. But when the dedications are as impassioned as these, the concern seems largely academic. ❖

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flourishes by cellist Toke Møldrup and accordion player Bjarke Mogensen, through to modern mainstream from the Birthday Trio, with saxophonist

Ned Ferm, imparting contemporary twists to Thelonious Monk and others.

Other series gathered under the Festival banner included those organized by two forward-looking record labels. ILK Records curated concerts in 5e among repurposed industrial units in the Meatpacking District. At the invitation of guitarist Mark Solborg, the great German drummer Paul Lovens contributed his idiosyncratic take on tone color and rhythm to two different collectives. In one memorable episode, the bat-register screaming of Portuguese trumpeter Susana Santos Silva and Lars Greve, simultaneously wielding two clarinets, fractured an otherwise pointillist interchange.

Barefoot Records took over the Galeri Krebsen in the heart of downtown Copenhagen. The opening concert comprised a composition of half-hour duration by guitarist Henrik Olsson. Seven stalwarts of the label spread around the two floors of the building interpreted Italian musical instructions, such as *ostinato*, *con amore* and *misterioso*, in whatever way they liked. At times the outcome conjured totally separate entities, but at other times a pleasing blend of near and far developed. Later shows the same afternoon presented lively sets by alto saxophonist Nona Pi's Nezelhorns and drummer Kasper Toms' FUSK, featuring German bass clarinetist Rudi Mahall.

One mark of a top-notch festival is the effort put in to promote jazz more widely. A string of free concerts in the foyer of The Royal Playhouse under the heading European Jazz Highlights constituted a tremendous showcase. There, Anna Högberg's dynamic six-piece Attack! staged one of the standout shows, fusing free jazz wailing, imaginative charts and two exceptional contributors in the leader's alto saxophone and Lisa Ullén's piano. Not that the rest were slouches, as Elsa Bergman's simple bass figures furnished the fuel for interweaving concurrent solos by the leader, tenor saxophonist Elin Larsson or trumpeter Niklas Barnö.

Anker appeared on a regular basis through the festival and was responsible for another of the peaks as part of the Mokuto Trio, which ignited the Beboerhus in Christianshavn with two sets of rampant free jazz. One of the finest electric bassists on the scene, Peter Friis Nielsen began by alternating short staccato taps with more melodic phrases, until the music blossomed, Anker injecting lots of space into her narrative momentum while drummer Peter Ole Jørgensen gradually brought the trio to a boil. The level of invention and expression never dipped, whether they touched on open timbral exchanges or daredevil flights.

Among the touring artists, saxophonist Joshua Redman's Still Dreaming, inspired by his father Dewey's stint with Old And New Dreams, graced the comfortable surroundings of Betty Nansen Teatret. Their alluring set included more of their own material than might be expected, with bassist Scott Colley's corkscrewing tunes evoking Ornette Coleman. Drummer Dave King, in his first concert with the band, proved an irrepressible presence, channeling his inner Ed Blackwell through playful interludes and tight switchbacks. Don Cherry's "Mopti" formed a highlight, with trumpeter Ron Miles' sustained half-note murmurs a noteworthy outing. Also on tour, bassist Joshua Abrams' Natural Information Society landed at world music hub Alice, where they were introduced as hypnotic Gnawa free jazz. That pretty much summed up their mesmerizing grooves with sporadic minor-gear changes continuing unbroken for well over an hour, with Jason Stein's occasional bass clarinet excursions the only wayward element.

While it's a cliché to say there's something for everyone, Copenhagen Jazz Festival catered for all tastes with substantive programs rather than token concerts, in a schedule that justifies budgeting for the duration. ❖

For more information, visit jazz.dk