

CHRISTOPHER ELSON

THE HOURS AND THE COLOURS: CONCERT AND FESTIVAL HIGHLIGHTS

MIDNIGHT BLUE: LONDON

The Scottish National Jazz Orchestra (SNJO) has been riding a wave of acclaim for some years and is considered by many to be the finest large jazz ensemble in Europe. Its model—a not-for-profit society including a youth development orchestra—and its leadership by the understatedly charismatic Tommy Smith—a noteworthy tenor saxophonist with an exciting international career who returned to Scotland in the 1990s in part to launch the SNJO—are exemplary and admired. It was with some excitement then that, finding myself in London in January, I discovered the big band installed for a three-night stint at the legendary Ronnie Scott’s Jazz Club. Each of the three nights was distinctively themed and based around the SNJO’s ambitious reimaginings of classic American jazz artists. The first night was titled “American Jazz Masters: Gershwin, Ellington, and Bernstein,” the second was devoted to “Mancini and Mandel,” and the third promised to delve into “The Jazz Legacy of Charles Mingus.”

With some difficulty I managed to procure a ticket for the “American Jazz Masters” show on January 25th, and I entered the maze of SoHo to find Ronnie Scott’s—a steep and compact inner sanctum that reveals at first glance the lively proximity of fusty *mélomanes*, besuited bankers splashing out on champagne-driven dates, eagerly transfixed students, and Russian families out on the town trailing indifference and display, along with much other fascinating nocturnal fauna. I found myself perched at a corner of the bar next to two retired business journalists deeply involved with the UK Duke Ellington Society. Their devotion to any and all performances featuring Ellington’s music and their enthusiasm for the SNJO provided me with a very efficient introduction to what the Scottish band has done over the years

and continues to do to keep the music and its classic composers alive and moving full-steam ahead.

The SNJO employed a classic “big band” format for these gigs, including four trumpets, four trombones, four reeds, and a rhythm section. It was a well-honed and confident unit, whose players ranged in age from the 20s to the 70s. Smith and veteran pianist Brian Kellock—a regular collaborator of the SNJO—were also featured for this outing, and the program was packed and powerful. The reading given to Ira Gershwin’s *Rhapsody in Blue* (1924), in a vivid arrangement, soared or came to grief upon Kellock’s contribution, which somehow managed to feel strikingly new but not unfaithful to familiar recordings and orchestrations. There was a real sense of risk and reward in the tempos and in the sometimes surprising but always deft articulation of the sections. Smith and his players were able to find and reveal what might be described as syncopation within the spaces opened up by the original’s syncopation, which was partly a function of tempo and partly a function of emphasis and accent in the part writing. And in spite of the evident unity and confidence of the ensemble, nothing seemed to be or could be taken for granted in this demanding chart.

The second set featured a range of compositions and arrangements made famous by Ellington’s orchestra along with a few pieces from Leonard Bernstein’s *West Side Story* (1957). Among the most exciting moments were the multifaceted “Black and Tan Fantasy” (1927), the gorgeous “The Single Petal of a Rose” from “The Queen’s Suite” (1959), and a fun and driving rendition of Ellington and Billy Strayhorn’s arrangement of Edvard Grieg’s “In the Hall of the Mountain King” from “Peer Gynt Suite No. 1” (1960).

The set ended with Robert Burns’ words on the traditional folk tune “Charlie He’s My Darling” (1794), featuring a whole lot of singing, boisterous unison playing, and a little sipping of whisky, with the promise of much more to come. I later listened to the SNJO’s delightful Ellington album *In the Spirit of Duke* (2012), and have done so several times since, but more often than not it is that old Jacobite song that I hear when I remember this warm and exciting performance: “*An’ Charlie he’s my darling, / My darling, my darling, / Charlie he’s my darling, / The young Chevalier.*”

SNOWY DAWN: PARIS

Just before the crack of dawn on March 18th I taxied across Paris from the

Avenue du Maine to Jean Nouvel's stunning Philharmonie de Paris in the 19th arrondissement (brooding and challenging at first sight in the early hints of dawn), giving unsure advice to the driver about preferred routes and gawking at the gaggles of clubbers still lingering, groping, and kissing on the snow-covered sidewalks after the discos shut them out.

The reason for this early morning dash was a 6am performance of the first tranche of Olivier Messiaen's *Catalogue d'Oiseaux* (1959) by Pierre-Laurent Aimard, a leading contemporary pianist and former student of Yvonne Loriod (Messiaen's great interpreter, muse, and second wife). The concert was part of "Week-end Les Oiseaux," an event that took over all of the Philharmonie's remarkable halls and also featured music by Luciano Berio, Igor Stravinsky, Johannes Brahms, Ralph Vaughan Williams, and Einojuhani Rautavaara, with works performed by the Ensemble intercontemporain, the Orchestre de chambre de Paris, and eminent soloists, along with supplementary programming from filmmakers, composers, and musicologists. The dawn chorus was the start of a full day.

The concert, which was performed in the superb Studio of the Philharmonie with its delicately filigreed wooden panels, was organized around the "bird-colours" of first light. Selected from different parts of the *Catalogue*, "Le traquet stapazin" (The Black-eared Wheatear), "La bouscarle" (Cetti's warbler), and "Le traquet rieur" (The Black Wheatear) together formed a unit of sound and sense for our early contemplation. In this sequence, one sensed the spiritual synesthesia and the fusion of biophilia and faith in the eternal that belong so deeply and brilliantly to Messiaen. As he said in a 1958 lecture, "I only wish that composers would not forget . . . that nature—an inexhaustible treasure house of sounds, colours, forms, and rhythms and the unequalled model for total development and perpetual variations—that nature is the supreme resource."

Aimard played the three pieces with workmanlike authority, which was obviously earned from years of familiarity, practice, and performance. There was little of the star and more of the monk in his modest entrance, and his pellucid playing flowed marvelously through the piano and throughout the gently-spaced hall. It seemed to me that the deep attention he paid to Messiaen was gratefully repaid by the serious early risers in the small hall. Musicians in the crowd with a far deeper knowledge of Messiaen than I possess were thrilled by the clarity of the interpretation—a clarity that brought together the hour, the place, and the birdsongs (in their literal transcription

and in their mystical weaving-through with everything else in the created order—from mineral to amphibian) into a kind of great cosmic or ecological prayer. Even with Aimard’s choice to reorder Messiaen’s material according to natural processes—that is, according to the birdsongs that one would hear at different hours of the day—this prayer, communion, or testimony to miraculously diverse presence maintained a kind of metaphysical distance and a questioning with respect to the being and mystery of what was sung.

EVENING ROSE: OTTAWA

The humidex reached a stifling 47 degrees on Canada Day, and the evening of June 30th was already anything but cool. The Ottawa Jazz Festival was reorganized for this year’s edition, with the main stage moving from Confederation Park to the Marion Dewar Plaza in front of Ottawa City Hall—a more intimate but still sufficiently large area that I think favours the needs of the jazz artists over the pop and world music artists who inevitably make up a significant part of Canada’s “jazz” festivals. On this summer night we heard the remarkable and beloved musician Herbie Hancock, who has straddled those worlds uncompromisingly, contributing to the evolution of electronic keyboards across the musical spectrum, respectfully approaching black musical genres from funk to hip hop and influencing them in return, and renewing the singular beauty of jazz-folk icon Joni Mitchell, among many other accomplishments.

At the age of 78, Hancock still brings imagination, colour, refinement, and astonishing drive. Free association and rigorous structure feed one another in his lengthy and shifting excursions through his well-known catalogue. He began with an overture that included hints of *Head Hunters* (1973), *Future Shock* (1983), *Gershwin’s World* (1998), *River: The Joni Letters* (2007), and no doubt much more that I missed. A lot of the concert felt like this—a proud but irreverent revisiting of classics—but there were also performances of whole tunes, including some of the biggies, like “Cantaloupe Island” (1964), “Actual Proof” (1974), and the funk classic “Chameleon” (1974), which got an extended treatment at the end of the show (anyone who has played in a high school jazz band in the last thirty years is familiar with the big band arrangement). And Hancock promises still more inventions and associations, performing a piece, “Secret Sauce,” that may be part of the new album he is currently preparing with young artists engaged

in hybridizing jazz with other forms today, including people like Kendrick Lamar, Thundercat, and Kamasi Washington.

Hancock radiates simple personal elegance and serene, selfless surrender to the music's highest demands. Without supposing or imposing any specific contemplative or meditative practice or discipline, it seemed clear that the deep and long inhabiting of musical improvisation has given him an even-handed, even detached, confidence that no matter what musical corner he finds himself in he can always find a route forward, inventing a passage in any impasse, finding an exit from any dead end, finding a pithy solution to any awkward problem, and articulating a perfect reply to any dull or difficult proposition. And he does all of this with palpable joy.

Hancock's quartet featured three other remarkable musicians: the phenomenal guitar star Lionel Loueke, whose pedal effects, haunting vocals, and ridiculously inventive rhythms and lines had Hancock smiling all night; veteran bassist James Genus, who has performed and recorded with bands from Out of the Blue to Dave Douglas to Daft Punk; and the adventurously inventive drummer Trevor Lawrence Jr., who is known for his work as a producer and performer with artists like Alicia Keys, Snoop Dogg, Chaka Khan, and Stevie Wonder and who has toured intermittently with Hancock since 2010. These long-time collaborators were each virtuosos in confident possession of their own voices, yet they were also plainly delighted to be associating with the master and contributing to the extended conversation of a long, hot night.

The encore of the one hour and forty-five minute concert (the extended version of "Chameleon" mentioned earlier) saw Hancock up on his feet, dressed in rosy pink linen and wielding his Keytar like a teenage wannabe guitar god—or at least a teenage wannabe guitar god who has already made it to the pantheon and who is looking down at the world from that cloudy perch. Watching him improvise was like getting a cutaway view of a fine, stripped-down musical engine—its circuits and connections, its architecture and physical necessities, and maybe even its fuel ("Rockit" fuel?) all becoming a little bit clearer than when seen through the denser support of the piano or synthesizers.

As the night sky went rose, the audience finally accepted that the evening was over, politely packed up its chairs, moved together through the festival gates, and made their way home, still in thrall to the groove and the infinite possibilities suggested by the music.