

Erica Von Kleist, HSO Strings, Salute Cannonball Adderley



Erica von Kleist played the music of Cannonball Adderley Friday in a tribute to the sax player. (Michael Regan / March 3, 2012)

By CHUCK OBUCHOWSKI, Special to The Courant
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...Friday's Jazz and Strings performance at The Learning Corridor Theater in Hartford celebrated the music of Julian "Cannonball" Adderley. It provided an appealing confluence of old and new sounds, and highlighted the talents of two outstanding soloists: alto saxophonist/flutist Erica von Kleist and trumpeter Nadjie Noordhuis.

Series Artistic Director Gene Bozzi assembled an excellent mix of material, much of it culled from Adderley's two sessions with strings, recorded during the 1950s. Several favorites from the alto saxophonist's popular 1960s quintet added blues power to the concert. And a couple strong compositions by West Hartford native von Kleist served as a link to the present day.

Beginning with a soulful version of Adderley's greatest hit, "Mercy, Mercy, Mercy," written by his longtime keyboardist Joe Zawinul, drummer Bozzi led a quintet including fellow HSO performer Rick Rozie on bass, along with pianist Gwardyak and the two guest soloists.

It was a stroke of genius to precede the tune with Adderley's preacher-like spoken introduction from the original Capitol recording. Only von Kleist soloed on this first piece, but she instantly locked into a festive Cannonball groove.

Members of the HSO string session joined the quintet for a lovely arrangement of "Polka Dots and Moonbeams." Here von Kleist exhibited a silky smooth sound that Adderley rarely attained. Her alto playing had a rounder tone than Adderley's, but her familiarity with his work was apparent all evening. She told the audience that she'd been listening to his music since she was 12.

While von Kleist didn't try to match the grittiness of Adderley's horn, her fluidity and carefree swing recalled the master's spirit. Her solo work during "Wabash," following intermission, was especially soul-stirring. She is the same age that Adderley was when he recorded his most notable string session, "Jump for Joy," in 1958; von Kleist will celebrate her 30th birthday on March 9.

Connecticut native and Hall High and Juilliard grad von Kleist, now based in Brooklyn, brought Noordhuis, a New York colleague, with her Friday. The Dutch/Australian trumpeter performed with von Kleist in Hartford once before, as a member of the DIVA Jazz Orchestra at the 2005 Greater Hartford Festival of Jazz. The two currently work together in Darcy James Argue's Secret Society.

Although Noordhuis didn't join the ensemble on every tune, she made worthy contributions whenever she was included. Her flugelhorn playing was exceptional during one of von Kleist's originals, the sunny samba "Monday Drivers."

Gwardyak's string arrangements were uniformly impressive. His most striking piano work came during a poignant (and stringless) duet with von Kleist on the ballad "Answer Me, My Love." The saxophonist referred to it as "my favorite song ever," and fondly recalled studying with Gwardyak at the Hartford Conservatory when she was 13.

Von Kleist displayed exceptional piccolo chops on Adderley's "Sack o' Woe." She said she'd honed those skills while working in the pit orchestra for "The Addams Family" during its Broadway run.

The next performance in the Jazz and Strings Series spotlights another Hartford homecoming: Bloomfield native Jimmy Greene will travel from Canada to join the ensemble at the Learning Corridor Theater, 359 Washington St., Hartford on Saturday, May 19, 8 p.m. The ensemble will perform compositions and arrangements by Greene, one of the most distinctive tenor saxophonists in jazz today. Tickets available at 860-244-2999 and <http://www.hartfordsymphony.org>.