

Concert Review: Jazz And Strings Tribute To John Coltrane And Johnny Hartman

By Michael Hamad

Saturday, March 12, 2011 7:00am

Last night's show at the Learning Corridor in Hartford marked a new high point for the Jazz and Strings tribute series, even though the program strayed immediately from the song order on the original Coltrane and Hartman album. (The first two recorded songs, Irving Berlin's "They Say It's Wonderful" and Sammy Cahn, Saul Chaplin and Hy Zaret's "Dedicated to You," were left off the program entirely, presumably because of copyright issues.)

The omissions and re-ordering didn't matter a whole lot, as it seemed nobody was there for a history lesson or a museum-quality album reconstruction. (The players certainly weren't interested in that kind of thing.) The superb ensemble was directed by drummer Gene Bozzi, and they put on a living, breathing show that took the most attractive, suggestive outcomes of the Coltrane/Hartman collaboration - strong vocals, intimate small-group interaction, lush textures and tempos worthy of string arrangements, exquisite song selection - and ran with each one, often ending up in territory into which Coltrane and Hartman never ventured on that 1963 recording date for Impulse.

A narrative (quickly abandoned) was at least suggested by the first two selections, Billy Strayhorn's "Lush Life," composed when he was nineteen ("He was *deep* for nineteen," singer Giacomo Gates told the crowd), and Rodgers and Hart's "You Are Too Beautiful," with Gates, wonderfully charismatic if understated, transforming the hall into a smoky dive. Gates' respectful, vibrato-less readings never sounded lifeless, the HSO strings - arranged by pianist Walter Gwardyak - adding a luminous, session-like atmosphere to the proceedings, as though you could sense vacuum tubes were humming quietly below a console on the other side of a glass booth. Wayne Escoffery, on tenor here as for most of the show, his tone bright and confident, made his first entrance of the night about two minutes into "Lush Life," and he laid way back with the rhythm section of Bozzi, Gwardyak and bassist Rick Rozie (who punctuated several tunes with elegant, bowed bass solos) on "Beautiful."

The quiet chemistry between Coltrane and Hartman was captured successfully in the pairing of the laid-back, extroverted Gates and Escoffery, a reserved figure onstage who's capable of explosive outbursts. But their interaction, mitigated by the presence of the strings, was more programmatic than it was

direct. Gates left the stage for Coltrane's quartet arrangement of Gershwin's "Summertime" from his 1961 *My Favorite Things* album, and Escoffery practically tore up the floorboards, cutting loose churning, repetitive figures at breakneck speed over the elastic, responsive rhythm players. Gates returned for more Gershwin on "Lady Be Good" (another album departure), **inserting Eddie Jefferson's virtuosic vocalise "Disappointed" (based on Charlie Parker's "Lady Be Good" solo)**. And on the Eddie Vinson/Miles Davis composition "Four," Gates improvised a scat solo and traded bass and drum fours with Rozie with Bozzi, before the set-ending "Giant Steps," arranged by Gwardyak into a slow chamber movement that heads into a Bozzi-driven combo stomp. Necessarily taken at a slower pace than Coltrane's recording, the strings played the first pair of Coltrane's solo choruses in unison and octaves before Escoffery navigated the tortuous chord changes with rapid-fire bursts.

Escoffery delivered his best solos of the night during the second set: ecstatic pyrotechnics on Mongo Santamaria's "Afro-Blue" and liquid 32nd-notes and long, sustained tones on the Coltrane original blues "Equinox." Gates returned the focus to Hartman with Peter DeRose and Sammy Gallop's "Autumn Serenade" and Guy Wood and Robert Mellin's "My One and Only Love," and the night ended with an elaborate arrangement of "My Favorite Things," with Escoffery switching to soprano. Gates sat down, then stood suddenly to trade terse bits of scat singing with Escoffery, who kept his head down as he played, occasionally directing the strings with finger counts and nods. Escoffery could have been allowed more room to take off, but the interaction between the whole ensemble was still enjoyable.

Gwardyak composed several solos for the string section, a technique that could have sounded gimmicky if it wasn't done so well, as in the double-time section of "You Are Too Beautiful." Bozzi and Rozie wore wide smiles for most of the night, and so did the string players, who dug in when it was their turn and looked on admiringly at the jazzers when it wasn't. After this one, it shouldn't be hard to convince anyone to come back for another season.