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## Joel Frahm Ends Hartford Jazz Festival On

### Fair Note

July 20, 2010

By CHUCK OBUCHOWSKI, Special to The Courant

The final day of the 19th annual Greater Hartford Festival of Jazz proceeded without the cloudbursts that sent some concertgoers home on Friday and Saturday nights. Instead, torrents of gleeful notes poured forth from the instruments of the many musicians gracing the Bushnell Park stage in downtown Hartford.

Sunday's festivities included pleasant sets from groups led by two little known foreign-born players: Japanese guitarist Nobuki Takamen and German bassist Iris Ornig. The day's highlight came last, however: collaboration between tenor saxophonist Joel Frahm and members of the Hartford Symphony Orchestra.

"Focus," written and arranged by Eddie Sauter in 1961 for Stan Getz and string accompaniment, was one of the sax master's most ambitious projects. Sauter's compositions combined jazz sensibilities with contemporary classical influences, to which Getz added his richly varied palette of improvisations. As splendid as the original recording was, this is hardly the type of material one usually encounters at a free, outdoor jazz festival, especially one which has come to be dominated by smooth, pop and R&B elements over the years.

Festival organizers and HSO percussionist Gene Bozzi deserve credit for having the courage to present this program in such a setting. Frahm and the HSO ensemble first performed "Focus" last autumn at the Asylum Hill Congregational Church. On Sunday, the saxophonist seemed even more assured of his role in this context, and his playing was inventive and impassioned throughout. The sound crew did a remarkable job balancing all the instruments as well.

Harpist Joan Ceo's sweet tones — missing at last year's performance — were a welcome addition, also benefiting from the fine sound mix. Unfortunately, many of the subtleties of this music were lost on the

festival crowd, whose constant chatter proved a serious detriment to those trying to appreciate the soft, lyrical segments of the suite.

Further complicating matters for those who may have been new to "Focus," no one announced what it was the audience was hearing: although Frahm included Stan Getz in his list of thank-you's afterwards, he never alluded to this work. He later made a reference to "Focus," but did not explain it. Some audience members had probably read about the presentation in the Courant, or picked up one of the festival flyers which mentioned these details, but for many, the HSO material was a mystery, albeit a fascinating one.

Following "Focus," Frahm fronted a quartet with pianist Spike Wilner, HSO bassist Rick Rozie and drummer Bozzi. The crowd was more receptive to this swinging set, which included a blazing romp through Kenny Barron's "Voyage" and a sterling rendition of Duke Ellington's "Prelude to a Kiss." When the HSO string section rejoined the quartet, they played two pieces much more in the jazz tradition than "Focus": Frahm's lovely "We Used to Dance" and "First Song," written by bassist Charlie Haden. Walt Gwardyak, longtime leader of the New England Jazz Ensemble, contributed these memorable arrangements.

A brief, bustling reprise of Sauter's "I'm Late, I'm Late" followed, and the quartet closed out the evening — and the festival — with a triumphant "Blue Monk." Bozzi promised the audience that the HSO Strings and Jazz series will resume this fall.

Future collaborators include trumpeter Claudio Roditi and saxophonist "Sweet" Sue Terry.

The Nabuki Takamen Group opened Sunday's main stage events with an hour-long set of originals by the 33-year-old guitarist. Blending a variety of straight-ahead and more pop-oriented jazz styles, Takamen's quartet spotlighted the leader's fluid six-string work. The Hiroshima native acknowledged influences ranging from bluesman Freddie King to swing stylist George Van Eps, but much of his work fell into a relaxed modern groove. He and his colleagues finally let loose on the closing "CMG," a tune dedicated to "three of my favorite tenor saxophonists: John Coltrane, Hank Mobley and Benny Golson."

During her captivating set, young bassist Ornig also focused on original compositions, with the exception of a bluesy take on Michael Jackson's "The Way You Make Me Feel," plus the jazz classic "Caravan." Jim Rotundi provided Ornig's quartet with exceptional solo power, on trumpet and flugelhorn.

Although Ornig has only one recording to her name — last year's "New Ground" — she performed several newer pieces in Bushnell Park that bode well for her future, both as a writer and as a performer.

GHFJ President Charles Christie appealed to the crowd to consider donating to the non-profit, free-admission festival, in order to assure its future. This year's financial campaign fell short of expectations. Donations may be made at <http://www.hartfordjazz.org>.