

The Berkshire Eagle

A Blue Afternoon at Tanglewood Jazz

By Seth Rogovoy | September 1, 2003

(LENOX, Mass.) – It was a blue afternoon at Tanglewood Jazz Festival on Sunday, with Donal Fox's "Inventions in Blue" tribute to the Modern Jazz Quartet followed by a full-fledged festival of the blues featuring four different acts.

Like the Modern Jazz Quartet before him, Fox, a pianist and composer like MJQ leader John Lewis, sought ways to connect classical music and jazz. With his able quartet mirroring the instrumentation of the MJQ – with vibraphonist Stefon Harris, bassist John Lockwood and drummer Yoron Israel – Fox succeeded to various effects. "Blues on Handel" was lively, with Fox and Harris seeming to work out equations with mathematical precision, as if to say, this plus this equals this. Israel added delicate but energetic drumming propelled by Lockwood's running bass, and the piece built to a speedy crescendo just this side of electronic dance beats before the tempo was divided in half to become a bluesy, walking strut.

Other highlights of Fox's set in the Tanglewood Theatre included "Variations on Bach's Fugue in B-flat, No. 21." Bach's theme was played straight through once before Fox turned the fugue into a bass riff for left hand. Israel added a fast pulse underneath, and Harris played a blues variation of Fox's bass pattern, which Fox then echoed in his right hand. The piece wound up exploding into a full-fledged blues jam, truly fulfilling the MJQ's credo, "from Bach to blues."

Fox called Bach "the original bluesman" by way of introducing his version of "Air on a G String," to which Lockwood applied popping, syncopated beats atop which Fox swung the melody. Their set also included a version of John Lewis's "Django," and another Bach variation called "Italian Concerto Blues."

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