

You can never be too amazing (sort of a show review)

By phum Sun, Nov 15 2009 [COMMENTS\(0\)](#) [Jazzblog.ca](#)

At Cafe Paradiso on Saturday night, I was thoroughly enjoying pianist Chris Donnelly's music when another listener said to me: "He's too amazing."

How to take what was said? The ultimate in kudos? It certainly wasn't faint praise, but could it have been a qualified compliment? That listener also mentioned that Donnelly's playing put him in mind of classical music. The comparison's plausible, I suppose, but it could also have been a value judgement -- good or bad, for that matter.

That was second distinctive appraisal of the young Toronto pianist's playing that I'd heard in nearly as many days. As I wrote, an Ottawa jazz fan a few days ago asked me whether Donnelly, who was back at Paradiso to perform solo as he had done a year previous, would "play anything different." The fan continued: "As good as his solo work is, I've heard it enough."

After listening to Donnelly yesterday night, it now strikes me that these comments say as much about the listener's esthetic perspectives as they do about Donnelly's music. Let me tell you about what I heard at Paradiso, so that we have a base line established. I caught the latter two of Donnelly's three sets, which included:

- A piece by the jazz-influenced Russian composer Nikolai Kapustin, which segued to one of Donnelly's originals
- Isotope* (saxophonist Joe Henderson's blues with some non-standard chord changes)
- some pieces from Donnelly's *Metamorphosis* suite
- Henry's Song and Dance*, another Donnelly original
- Baiao Malandro* (an Egberto Gismonti demanding show-stopper)
- So This is Love/ A Dream Is A Wish Your Heart Makes* (a medley of songs from *Cinderella*)
- Very Early* (Bill Evans)
- Hymn to Freedom* (Oscar Peterson)

Much of what Donnelly played had been painstakingly practiced. The Kapustin piece, for one. While Gismonti takes improvisational liberties when he plays his piano fantasias (that's what I gather from watching a few versions of *Baiao Malandro* on YouTube), Donnelly has committed himself to performing the version that appears on Gismonti's album *Alma*. Donnelly's substantial originals were richly detailed and intensely pianistic, more likely the result of considerable compositional travails -- not art that sprang into being like Athena from the head of Zeus. While Donnelly's originals are studded with improvised passages, they're far from the blowing vehicles that pianists stopping by Paradiso usually present.

You might argue that the amount of evident preparation and recitation involved in Donnelly's music makes it kindred to a classical music. (More superficially, you might also make the point that Donnelly's serious, dark suit-and-tie performance attire aligns him with classical pianists -- no untucked shirt-tails for him, unlike most other 20-something jazz musicians.)

But to those who might have a consequent misgiving or two ("not different enough," "not enough improvising") about Donnelly's music, here's my response. I found there was sufficient differences between Donnelly's sets on Saturday and what I heard from him previously. Yes, he presented arrangements and transcriptions of material that I was familiar with, thanks to having heard his November 2008 Paradiso performance and his CD, *Solo*. But I had not heard him play *Isotope* before, or *Hymn to Freedom*, or his original that closed his second set. Meanwhile, his version of *Very Early* departed from the arrangement that opened his CD, and became -- if anything -- more of a showcase for improvisation.

I suspect that those who protest a "sameness" or "over-preparation" in Donnelly's playing are, to some degree, a bit deaf to what he is presenting, perhaps because they've made a judgment based on an enthusiasm for process over product. But as a result, they either miss -- or perhaps are overwhelmed by -- the sheer amount of meaningful content to Donnelly's playing, which is consistently compelling, ranges from minimalist to incredibly dense, and generally has a romantic, harmonically sophisticated cast.

I wonder too if Donnelly's sheer distinctiveness and eclecticism (the tapping of Doug Riley, Kapustin, Egberto Gismonti and Oscar Peterson for material, his dogged quest for solo piano mastery, his overt virtuosity) make him somehow -- and here's a loaded phrase -- less accessible than a more ordinary pianist, or a pianist playing in a trio setting. Commenting on his repertoire, Donnelly simply stated that he adopts material (with its attendant challenges) if it moves him. Well, the breadth of what floats his boat is striking, and if anything, one common thread might be nothing more and nothing less than excellence, both musical and instrumental, if such a separation can be made. Grant Donnelly that, and I think you'll overcome any reservations about "sameness" and make the effort to hear him perform when you can.

After Donnelly finished his third set on Saturday night, a woman came to his table to say a few words. She told him -- what else? -- "That was amazing." Now that's more like it.