

Shelley Oliver Tap Dancers display fine chemistry with David Leonhardt Jazz Group

Monday, August 18, 2008

Newark Star Ledger

BY ROBERT JOHNSON

Pianist **David Leonhardt** began the final number of Saturday's program that his musical trio shared with the **Shelley Oliver Tap Dancers** at the Algonquin Arts Theater in Manasquan, Leonhardt's face turned serious. He slumped over his instrument, forehead resting heavily on the concert grand. What he was about to play seemed too terrible to contemplate.

By this point, however, the audience was used to his shenanigans. Leonhardt had been telling jokes all evening, buttering an already slick presentation of music and dancing with one-liners. Was anyone really surprised when the finale turned out NOT to be a dour, 12-tone composition, but instead a riff on the Flintstones theme song? The dancers played along, accompanying this silliness with an adaptation of the Copasetics' legendary "Chair Dance."

Dancing while seated in a chair isn't as easy as it sounds, by the way, and in Oliver's version this piece was less a rest for footsore hoofers than a daredevil way to burn off whatever fumes remained, at that point, in their tanks.

It had been a lively evening. It was a **magical evening**, too. Leonhardt, Oliver and their associates are **serious artists**. When they sink into a groove and let the music carry them away, **the audience is transported**, too. Inside the darkened theater, this music brightens the interior coastline of the heart like sunshine.

In "Starlight Interlude," Oliver danced solo. She has a **figure of elfin lightness**, and as she tapped she unspooled threads of sound, running on deliciously and picking up speed. Oliver seemed an **inexhaustible source of rhythm**, until suddenly she laid her heels down hard. Then, from effortless monologue she switched to an exchange with drummer Paul Wells, trading intense bursts of percussion.

Like her second-act solo, "Ode to Bo" (as in "Bojangles"), much of the tapping on this program paid homage to the suave style of an earlier generation of masters. The more experimental numbers included an ensemble dance set to classical music -- Bach's "Prelude in G" will run away from them, if they're not careful -- and a richly textured piece called "Funk Monk," set to music by Thelonious Monk. In "Funk," dance company member Rebekkah Brown was a flashy standout, while the choreography teased viewers with **bustling complexity** that suddenly resolved into images of solidarity.

The musical trio, which also featured mellow bass player Matthew Parrish, had its own opportunities to show off, whether riffing on Gershwin in the dreamy, ever optimistic "The Man I Love" or memorably taking a salsa break in "How Long Has This Been Going on?" In the latter, **Leonhardt supplied the dancers with a steady and propulsive Latin beat** -- feeding them pure energy and giving them a rhythm to play with.

Spectacularly, in the second half, the musicians improvised a new composition on the spot based on three notes supplied by the audience. **A consummate demonstration of skill**, a number like this might be considered a gimmick, but, unlike Leonhardt's comic blather, it certainly is not a joke.

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