

Big Band Music

An all-star night for jazz

By Richard Houdek
Special to the Eagle

PITTSFIELD — The commotion you heard near the center of town Thursday evening: Was it the vibrant sounds of the heroes of America's big band era? Or could it have been the appreciative roars from some 300 persons who savored the American Jazz Repertory Orchestra's performance at the First United Methodist Church?

Some of the best of Stan Kenton, Count Basie, Woody Herman, Duke Ellington and Benny Goodman were on display in the "Salute to Jazz' Big Bands" portion during the second half of the concert, and what a display it was.

Clem De Rosa, a member of the Jazz Hall of Fame, a former bandsman, leader and educator, has impeccable instincts when it comes to America's great contribution to world music, in his selection of repertory and how it is played, and — exhibited by his fine ensemble — who plays it.

The 16 members of the group, all soloists and sagely used by De Rosa in just the right spots, surprisingly, are not veterans of the venerable Preservation-Hall vintage. Yet, these men, generally young, or at least, youngish — most apparently not even around to remember when those big bands were in vogue — seize their assignments with mature style and consummate enthusiasm, clearly a tribute to De Rosa's inspiration and guidance. His gestures are minimal; the quality obviously has been honed in hours of preparation and rehearsal.

The achievement here was to capture the sounds and manner of each band, and this was managed with supreme deftness — Kenton's rich harmonies of the classicist that he was, illustrated by Victor Young's "Street of Dreams"; the discrete swing characteristics of Basie and Goodman, "Jumping at the Woodside" or "Sing, Sing, Sing"; the distinctive saxophone voicing brought to Herman by Jimmy Giuffre in "Four Brothers" and the incomparably rich coloration contrasts that emerged from the brilliant Ellington/Billy Strayhorn team in "Take the 'A' Train" and "Mood Indigo." De Rosa's bandsmen captured these textures, faithfully and passionately, in short sequences and quick shifts in nuance.



Clem De Rosa, far right, leads the American Jazz Repertory Orchestra. The 16-member ensemble headlined Berkshire Jazz' inaugural concert at First United Methodist Church in Pittsfield. Courtesy photo

Music Review

The pre-intermission portion of the program, devoted to the Great American Songbook, also enlisted the considerable talents of a quartet of artists that have become known as the Berkshire All-Stars, an appellation coined by Edward Bride, the director of Berkshires Jazz, Inc., sponsor of Thursday's concert. Bride, who served as narrator, skillfully guided the assembled listeners through the American treasures offered on the program.

The All-Stars — Charlie Tokarz on clarinet, Gary Miller, vibraphone, and Andy Kelly guitar — were joined by the orchestra's bassist, Josh Paris, and drummer, Scott Neumann, in a gorgeously transparent version of "Moonglow," the big hit first recorded by the Dorseys, and later, "When You're Smilin," the Armstrong hit, with Tokarz' mellow flute, first in a trio arrangement, then returning to the quintet. Tokarz brought his sax into play in a moving articulation of Kurt Weill's "Speak Low," again with accents from Paris and Neumann, all in surprising synergy,

given the brief rehearsal time. Vikki True, who has made a profound impression as a Broadway heroine, as well as a singer of gospel and country, proved to be a big band songstress of some competitive power, especially after De Rosa urged her take the microphone in hand. She carefully updated her torchy "I Can't Give You Anything But Love" with "Diamond Bracelets 'Walmart' doesn't sell, Baby," and although her "Blue Moon" and "All of Me" were stylized in that jazzy manner, she made clear that she knows a thing, or two, about pitch.

Thursday's concert was the first

event under the Berkshires Jazz banner. This newly organized non-profit organization has future plans, including the fourth annual Pittsfield City-Jazz Festival, set for Oct. 7-18, with Dave Brubeck a promised headliner.

The big band portion of this week's performance offered a fine tasting menu, nothing to incite any major complaints. On the other hand, wouldn't it be interesting to welcome back Clem De Rosa and his American Jazz Repertory Orchestra to concentrate on one, perhaps two, of the big bands honored on Thursday's show for deeper explorations?

Tanglewood

Variations with some distractions

By Andrew L. Pincus
Special to the Eagle

LENOX — Music by candlelight at Tanglewood Thursday night didn't mean that romance was in the air or the power failed. Pianist Stephen Kovacevich needed a citronella candle at his side to keep the mosquitoes at bay.

But the humid weather wasn't going to let him or the Steinway off with that little deterrent. Midway through the first work, Bach's Partita No. 4, he had to stop the performance and summon a technician to fix a sticking key.

The troubles continued. Before beginning the second half of the program, Beethoven's "Diabelli" Variations, Kovacevich told the audience, "The piano still isn't responding as it should, but here we are," so let's keep going.

He was also victimized by outbreaks of thunder outside and cell phinitis inside.

Under the circumstances, indulgence was in order. But in fact, Beethoven's monumental joke — 33 variations on a silly waltz tune given to him and other composers by one Anton Diabelli, a music publisher — came off rather well. Despite some waywardness, especially in the slow variations near the end, when sweat got into his eyes, Kovacevich had the stamina and range to probe the serious intent behind the joke.

The programming concept was a promising one: three works made up of short connecting movements, with Schumann's "Scenes of Childhood" in the middle. There was a further link. Beethoven's set of variations is a clear response to Bach in his monumental "Goldberg" Variations. Making the connection clear, Beethoven invokes Bach with a little fugue in Variation 24, which comes two variations after a laughing recollection of Mozart's Leporello. Serenity thus follows comedy.

Music Review

The thread among works, however, was pretty much lost in the troubled performances of Bach and Schumann.

It was evident from the start that the American-born, London-based pianist was having trouble in the partita, which went from the abrupt to the shapeless and back again. Even after the delay for repair to the instrument, things did not get much better.

In the Schumann, Kovacevich tried for a smoothly flowing gentleness in these 13 miniatures for children both young and old. What mostly emerged was a sameness of sound and character, though the familiar "Traumerei" ("Dreaming") was nicely shaped.

Beethoven's "Diabelli" set — the subject of a recent Broadway play, "33 Variations" — looks at the world of his last three piano sonatas from the other side of the mirror. He composed the variations soon after the sonatas, which go about as far as anyone can go in simultaneously exploring inner and outer consciousness on a single instrument. While ostensibly poking fun at the simple-minded theme, the 33 variations not only make up a compendium of a composer's tricks but also share in the sonatas' cosmic explorations.

It takes a sense of gruff humor to play this music, and Kovacevich had that as well as stamina. Humming audibly to himself, he played up the explosive, sometimes violent contrasts between loud and soft, fast and slow, outward- and inward-looking. Some of the brusque playing was probably not that way by intention, but his struggles somehow connected with the struggles inherent in the music.

The rather small audience's ovation seemed a show of sympathy as well as appreciation. That candle burned for everyone.

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