

Pilar and the Sicilian Jazz Project replaced jazz cool with passion (review)

Wednesday, 19 August 2015



Pilar and the Sicilian Jazz Project
Ottawa Chamberfest, Chamberfringe series
Saint Brigid's Centre for the Arts, Kildare Room
Saturday, August 1, 2015 – 10 p.m.

In many jazz shows there's a subtle distance between the performers and the material. It's part of the jazz cool: a way of looking at the music both from the inside and the outside, of standing apart.

Pilar and The Sicilian Jazz Project were having none of that, in their late-night Chamberfringe show August 1.

Rarely have I seen performers – and particularly singers – who immersed themselves in the music as much as Franco-Italian vocalist Pilar and Canadian-Sicilian vocalist Dominic Mancuso did in this show. In almost every song, their voices, their faces, their hands, and their entire bodies were communicating the intense emotion in the lyrics and music.

It was an emphatically “hot” concert – both the vocals and the concentrated, jazz-fusion-flavoured instrumentals.

The project is the brainchild of Toronto jazz guitarist/composer Michael Occhipinti, and is based on his own Sicilian family heritage, as well as field recordings made by musicologist Alan Lomax in Sicily in 1954. It's a rethinking of original folksongs through the lens of Occhipinti's jazz sensibility, rhythms, arrangements, and improvisation.

In 2008, Occhipinti released *The Sicilian Jazz Project* album, which received considerable critical acclaim, including a Juno nomination. Over the next few years, he continued to tour the project and write further material for it. In 2010, he received a Chalmers Fellowship to live in Sicily to explore its folk culture further.

Last year, Occhipinti said, he had the chance to hear an album by Pilar and was so impressed by her singing that he invited her to perform with the project – for the very first time, without ever playing together – at the 2014 Ottawa Chamberfest. The combination was such a huge hit that Chamberfest invited them back again this year.

In May, the group – Occhipinti on guitar, his brother Roberto on double and electric bass, Mark Kelso on drums, Louis Simão on accordion, Kevin Turcotte on trumpet, Ernie Tollar on flute, and Mancuso on vocals – released their second album, *Muorica*. Pilar guested on the CD; so did clarinetist Don Byron, who also appeared in last year's Ottawa concert. A string quartet added a more classical feel to several pieces. About half of the tracks were specifically written with Pilar in mind, Occhipinti said.

Occhipinti and the group (minus Byron, Turcotte, and Tollar) have been touring the album since its release, mostly with Pilar. By the time they hit the stage before a packed house at Chamberfringe, it was a tight and well-rehearsed show.

As in previous shows, Occhipinti took pains to introduce and explain the music, almost all of which was sung in the dialect of Muòrica (aka Modina), the small city in Sicily from which his parents emigrated. All but three of the songs

they played were from the new album. The songs were generally more upbeat (pirates and love, rather than disaster and famine) than the first album.

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They opened with “Sacciu Chi Parla A La Luna”, a mixture of swirling accordion lines from Simão and alternately delicate and dramatic vocals from Mancuso, all telling the story of a woman who, in her sad state, can only sing to the moon.

Then Pilar appeared, looking as though she had stepped out of a Pre-Raphaelite painting by Edward Burne-Jones or Dante Gabriel Rossetti. Her voice was equally angelic, soaring over the accordion accompaniment, as the band paid tribute to the steep streets of Muòrica through Occhipinti's setting of a local poem.

In a dense concert which lasted more than 90 minutes, I was particularly impressed with two pieces: “Lingua e dialettu” and “The Soldier and The Siren”.

“Lingua e dialettu” was a piece Occhipinti wrote especially for last year's Chamberfest concert. It's based on a poem by a Sicilian writer, whose message was that one can only enslave a people by taking away their language – like a guitar which loses a chord every day. Over a muted guitar riff and light cymbals, Pilar first read the poem, simply and eloquently, and then started singing the words, her voice becoming richer and more intense. She then stopped singing and started clapping out the rhythm, as the band played a fluid jazz fusion-like melody. The instruments quietened and she returned, almost pleading as she sang, and then the music built up again before ending abruptly.

Occhipinti gave “The Soldier and The Siren” new lyrics, based on the experience of the Canadian soldiers who accepted the bloodless surrender of Muòrica during World War II. He noted that many of those soldiers never returned home again after several later battles in Italy. The piece began softly with light guitar and the deep moans of Roberto Occhipinti's bowed bass, and Pilar softly singing the haunting melody above. Slowly it became clearer, Pilar eventually singing a wordless, high lament which sounded like Cassandra bewailing fate.

Throughout the concert, Pilar and Mancuso alternated songs and also sang together on several pieces, such as the lyrical love song “Nun Ti Lassu”. They closed with “Amuninni Razzietta”, a friendly musical argument between husband bone-weary after a hard week of work and a wife who needs to get out of the house and wants to go dancing, based on conversations Occhipinti heard as he was growing up. It was a bright, rhythmic piece which ended with Pilar singing exultantly and dancing in place. The audience clapped along as she and Mancuso sang their final duet.

The audience then jumped to its feet to give the group a standing ovation.

This was definitely crossover music. It combined art song, folk music, and jazz in an entrancing and well-produced mixture – which of course made it particularly appropriate for Chamberfest's late-night Chamberfringe series.

The one problem with the concert was some of the audience members, specifically those who left partway through. This regularly happens with the late-night Chamberfringe concerts, as some audience members reach their bedtimes or need to catch a bus before the show ends.

But this show was particularly crowded – it appeared to be sold out – and when audience members left at song breaks they were more noticeable and disruptive than usual. It's the same problem that used to drive Jacques Émond crazy when Ottawa Jazz Festival late-night *Jazz with an Edge* concerts would start emptying out well before the musicians were finished. It would have been nice if those listeners who planned to leave early could have sat nearer the back or the sides of the room.

The large majority who stayed looked immersed in the music and thoroughly enjoying themselves. That's no surprise given the emotional and musical richness of this latest Sicilian Jazz Project collaboration, and the talent displayed by vocalists Pilar and Dominic Mancuso and the group's instrumentalists.

– Alayne McGregor

Set List:

- Sacciu Chi Parla A La Luna
- Muorica
- Lingua e dialettu
- Pirati A Palermo
- Nun Ti Lassu
- Favi Amari
- The Soldier and The Siren
- Con Toda Palabra / Lhasa
- Amuninni Razzietta (lu Weekend)
- Vitti 'na crozza

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