

## Mideast music a delight

By: Chris Smith

So, who knew the Middle East could be so funky

Well, Danish pianist/composer/arranger/band leader Nikolaj Bentzon for one, who melds traditional Eastern sounds with funk in his 1001 Arabian Jazz Nights suite, performed in part by the Winnipeg Jazz Orchestra in two concerts Sunday.

Every jazz lover knows Dizzy Gillespie's A Night in Tunisia, and Bentzon gave a nod Sunday afternoon to the same locale in his Tunesian Specialist, a big band chart that featured Jonathan Stevens on clarinet conjuring the sound and feel of an Arab bazaar while a funky rhythm section of pianist Michael Cain, guitarist Keith Price, percussionist Scott Senior, bassist Gilles Fournier and drummer Rob Siwik laid down a funky backing more reminiscent of New Orleans, say.

Mashrig, which Bentzon explains means Where The Sun Rises in Arabic, a name for the Middle East, featured great solo work by Stevens on clarinet and trombonist Jeff Presslaff in another mashup of East meets West.

Academy of Gundishapur (Bentzon admits to a tendency for bizarre titles) is a tribute to an ancient Persian university that came up with the idea of hospitals. It was a further melding of Eastern sounds and funk with flute (Neil Watson), bass trombone (D'Arcy McLean) and trombone (Chris Butcher, former Winnipegger home from Toronto for a visit) joining pianist Cain in a great piece.

Middle Eastern music boasts a number of string instruments, left to the capable hands of electric guitarist Keith Price to capture their sound Sunday.

Bentzon mostly conducted the big band, but his turns at the piano illustrated what a great musician he is.

A highlight on the afternoon concert was an Eastern-themed piece not from Bentzon's suite -- Isfahan, the Duke Ellington/Billy Strayhorn composition was an absolutely delightful saxophone solo by Neil Watson.

Summer Somewhere, by Jeff Presslaff, was a very good composition that ranged from a sizzling Price guitar solo to a deep orchestral sound.

The Slide Hampton piece Go East Young Man was the crowd-pleaser of the show with Bentzon at the piano, great ensemble play and good solos by Darren Ritchie on trumpet and Butcher on trombone.

Western jazz musicians have long had an interest in and affection for Eastern music, and Bentzon's suite shows how easily the twain shall meet.

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