

JAZZ REVIEW

Bill Cunliffe adds colors to his palette An oboe and bassoon join the pianist's trio at the Jazz Bakery.

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Oboe and bassoon are not instruments that ordinarily turn up in jazz. But fans of Bill Cunliffe have learned to anticipate the unexpected from the eclectic pianist-composer. The performance by his Trimotif ensemble Friday at the Jazz Bakery, blending his jazz trio with the oboe of Chris Bleth and the bassoon of Phoebe Ray, was a fascinating glimpse of an unusual -- but highly effective -- musical combination.

The set opened in traditional jazz fashion with a beautifully articulated group of tunes performed with bassist Dave Carpenter and drummer Joe La Barbera. A gently swinging, harmonically rich take on "I'm Afraid the Masquerade Is Over" was followed by a pair of Cunliffe originals: "Melancholia" (inspired by and dedicated to Bud Powell) and a sweetly melodic Celtic-style ballad, "Ireland." The trio portion of the set concluded with another Cunliffe original, based on the chord changes of "My Funny Valentine," appropriately, and whimsically, titled "Amusing Paramours."

Like many pianists of his generation, Cunliffe has drawn inspiration from the work of Bill Evans. But the compositional vision he brings to his playing allows Cunliffe to transform the clustered harmonies and loping swing of Evans' style into a compelling, improvisationally atmospheric vision of his own. With Carpenter's imaginative bass lines adding creative counterpoint and La Barbera's always subtle drumming propelling the rhythm, the result was classic piano trio music at its best.

When Bleth and Ray joined for a performance of Cunliffe's three-movement work, "Nostalgia in Corcovado," the palette of colors opened into an impressionistic portrait of Brazilian-inspired jazz.

Cunliffe offered beautifully crafted melodic textures, enhanced by his playful takes on samba and *choro* rhythms. Bleth and Ray provided a few improvisational passages, but it was Cunliffe's remarkable combination of timbres -- surprisingly lush for such a small ensemble -- that made the work such a delight.

His announcement that a recording of the piece is in the works is welcome news for fans of engaging, offbeat, melodically appealing contemporary jazz.