



all-about-jazz

George Wein's

Jazz Festival 55SM

ETTA JAMES | MOS DEF | BRANFORD MARSALIS
JOSHUA REDMAN | ESPERANZA SPALDING | HIROMI

AUGUST 7 - 9, 2009 FORT ADAMS STATE PARK, NEWPORT, RI

Ottawa Jazz Festival 2009: Days 4-6, June 28-30, 2009

By [John Kelman](#)

June 30: Andy Milne/Benoît Delbecq Crystal Magnets

Since its introduction in 2006, the *Improv Series*, taking place at the National Arts Centre's intimate Fourth Stage, has expanded from a mere six concerts to, for 2009, double that number, with as many as three performances in a single evening. It's a good idea, as its more experimental nature often appeals to a different contingent than those who attend the more crowd-friendly main stage shows at Confederation Park. But while improvisation is a component of the acts that perform at the *Improv Series*, it by no means implies that it's all about free improv. Pianists Andy Milne (known for his groundbreaking work with [Steve Coleman](#) and his own Dapp Theory) and pianist Benoît Delbecq (whose *Phonetics* (Songlines, 2005) also mined new turf) performed all but one track from their collaborative release, *Where is Pannonica?* (Songlines, 2009), at their 7:00PM show; certainly a rare approach.

But after listening to the two talk--banter, more like it--with a rapport not quite as overtly comedic as that of Enrico Rava and Stefano Bollani the night before but certainly funny and with a relaxed demeanor that made the music, somehow, less serious than it appears on record--the approach made perfect sense. With the amount of care and attention that not only went into the making of these prepared piano duets and the sequencing of the 11 compositions--written by Milne and Delbecq either alone or together--the album possesses an overriding arc that demands replication in performance.



l:r: Benoît Delbecq, Andy Milne

Although the pianists performed these sometimes oblique, often minimalist-informed pieces in the same running order as the CD, they also took greater improvisational liberties, often stretching things considerably from the miniature settings on disc. With all kinds of implements attached to strings inside the piano to create buzzing, percussive sounds rarely heard from the instrument, Milne and Delbecq passed repetitive rhythmic motifs between each other like a tag team, allowing the other to take some space to evolve solo passages of recondite beauty.

There was no shortage of structure being used as the foundation for more expansive improvisation, though the pieces strayed significantly from any kind of conventional song form. Almost mathematical in its precision and intent, the nearly 90-minute set felt, at times, more like a contemporary classical recital, were it not for the ample exploration going on within that context. And while many of the pieces featured repetitive patterns, they maintained a strong sense of movement as Milne and Delbecq layered strong voicings and occasionally jagged melodic lines over, around and under them. The two pianists possess their own styles--Milne's harmonic control over chordal development particularly notable, while Delbecq is a master at evolving sinuous lines.

A performance that crept up and captivated in an almost hypnotic fashion rather than in a more immediate and direct way, it was certainly an inspiration to check out the recording, which also features a 5.1 surround mix created, in an unusual move, as part of the recording process, not later in post-production. But whether it's heard in 5.1 or conventional stereo, Milne and Delbecq's recorded document of music performed at their Fourth Stage performance is but a taste--albeit a very good one--of what their music becomes when it hits the stage in front of an appreciative audience.

Photo Credits

All Photos: [John Fowler](#)