

Not your parent's piano duo

BY DOUG FISCHER, THE OTTAWA CITIZEN JULY 1, 2009

OTTAWA — In the liner notes to their unique two-piano album, *Where is Pannonica?*, old friends Andy Milne and Benoit Delbecq report that after three weeks of working together on the project, they began to finish each other's jokes and conceptual ideas.

They also completed each other's musical phrases, a connection very much on display Tuesday night in their Ottawa jazz festival concert at the NAC's Fourth Stage.

Milne, a Canadian now living in Pennsylvania, and Delbecq, a Frenchman who has moved to Montreal, met in 1990 while studying with the influential saxophonist-composer Steve Coleman at the Banff Centre Jazz Workshop.

The experience changed both pianists dramatically.

Delbecq began to explore electronics and computer-based instruments, and became an expert in "prepared piano" – altering the instrument's sound by placing objects between or on the strings or on the hammers or dampers. Milne concentrated on integrating the rhythmic concepts of music from Cuba, Ghana, jazz, funk and hip-hop.

When they returned to Banff 18 years later to develop and record their first album together, they discovered "an almost magical affinity," to quote Milne, for complex rhythmic, melodic and harmonic relationships that allowed them to expand the sonic possibilities of the piano.

Performing as part of the jazz festival's Improv Series, Milne and Delbecq (*Crystal Magnets* they call their collaboration) set out to re-create and push those ideas even farther.

Over top of — or mixed with — an electronic multi-track looper called a Dlooper and numerous piano preparations (whittled sticks, straw brushes and metal rivets), the musicians ruminated on their facing Steinways, by turns offering dreamy, melancholy, meditative, dissonant, percussive and even manic piano.

The results were sometimes startling – assorted clicks and knocks, soft swishes, rhythmic strumming moving in and out and around the piano playing – and always intriguing to try to figure out which pianist was playing what, or adding which sounds.

But perhaps most fascinating was how seamlessly they picked up and completed each other's music phrases, often passing them back and forth a dozen times in a few short minutes.