

## **3 piano giants reach out toward music's frontiers**

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For piano devotees, it was heaven: Three mighty keyboard virtuosos converging in one of the most intimate concert halls in the Chicago area.

Like a solar eclipse in which the planets briefly align, Saturday night's annual "Rite of Spring" concert brought the brilliant pianists Jean-Michel Pilc, Anthony Molinaro and Michael Kocour to a single stage -- Northwestern University's Pick-Staiger Concert Hall in Evanston.

Any one of these artists would be worth traveling far to hear. Together, they represented a rare gathering of keyboard talent, each pianist taking the art of jazz improvisation in fascinating directions.

For Chicago listeners, French pianist Pilc was the main attraction, if only because he was least familiar. Though widely admired for his stunning recording of last year, "Welcome Home" (on Dreyfus Jazz), Pilc rarely has been sighted in this area since his appearance as a sideman at the Ravinia Festival, in Highland Park, in 1997. With his headlining performances Friday night at the Green Mill Jazz Club and Saturday night at Pick-Staiger, the man was reintroducing himself to a large and clearly enthusiastic Chicago audience.

Lest anyone believe that the phenomenal technical feats heard on Pilc's "Welcome Home" CD were the product of recording-studio wizardry, the Pick-Staiger concert established beyond doubt the stature of the man's technique. More important, Pilc showed that he thinks as fast as he plays, nimbly changing musical directions and inventing unexpected turns of phrase at the drop of a sixteenth note (or less).

In many ways, Pilc can be considered a Gallic counterpart to the Cuban pianist Gonzalo Rubalcaba, who similarly merges a colossal technique, thorough knowledge of classical repertoire and a penchant for indigenous, nationalistic music. But where Rubalcaba brings to his jazz improvisations elements of Afro-Cuban dance rhythms and traditional song forms, Pilc embraces the distinctly French sensibility of Maurice Ravel, Claude Debussy, Erik Satie and Francis Poulenc, among others.

Thus while Pilc's trio was transforming music of Thelonious Monk, the pianist punctuated the proceedings with snippets from Ravel's Piano Concerto in G, a piece that is at the center of every French pianist's repertoire. Elsewhere, Pilc evoked shades of

Debussy's "The Sunken Cathedral" in an unabashedly Impressionistic version of "Softly, As in a Morning Sunrise" and whimsically merged Lalo Schifrin's theme from "Mission Impossible" with John Coltrane's "Giant Steps."

Whether playing Coltrane's "Cousin Mary" at a phenomenal clip or bringing dense, extended chords to the first movement of an original piano sonata, Pilc took his place among the most accomplished and stylistically daring jazz pianists working today.

Chicago pianist Molinaro opened the evening with an exceptionally persuasive solo performance, in effect digging even more deeply into classical influences than Pilc. It was not difficult to discern the perpetual-motion ostinatos of Prokofiev's Seventh Piano Sonata in Molinaro's dynamic, radical transformation of "Back Home in Indiana," nor the driving energy of Prokofiev's Toccata in Molinaro's similarly propulsive "19/8."

But in every solo piece Molinaro played, from his Keith Jarrett-influenced rewriting of "Summertime" to his ferociously syncopated stride-piano sendup "Sketchy" (composed with Howard Levy), Molinaro acquitted himself as an original, often iconoclastic thinker equipped with a leonine technique.

Though some the audience might have found the abstract improvisations of pianist Kocour and drummer Paul Wertico a bit amorphous, at least one listener was captivated by their utterly unscripted give-and-take. Wertico brought out the most adventurous side of Kocour's art, the two daring to play off of each other with strange sonorities, exotic colors, unmeasured rhythm and unflinching bursts of dissonance.

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