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Jean-Michel Pilc thunders at the piano

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An explosion went off at the Green Mill Jazz Club over the weekend, which is exactly what pianist Jean-Michel Pilc intended.

The sheer mass of sound he produced, as well as the galvanic rhythms he ignited, practically overwhelmed the ear during the first set Friday night. Even when Pilc was playing ballads, it didn't take long before the pianist and his trio were pushing decibel levels and tempos once again. With drummer Billy Hart hitting accents for all he was worth and bassist Boris Kozlov churning up maximum energy, the band seemed determined to make an impression. It did.

In lesser hands, this kind of music-making easily could have devolved into noise or bombast. But Pilc, playing mostly original compositions from his newest CD – "True Story" (on Dreyfus Jazz) – paired high volume with provocative content. Amid the storm of sound, he produced passages of remarkable complexity, invention and intellectual acuity. Whirring single-note lines, monumental double octaves, enormous block chords – nary a keyboard technique went untapped.

To Pilc, any performance represents an opportunity to stretch past jazz conventions. He refused to play any tune at a consistent tempo or meter. He declined to cling to a single idea or motif for more than a few bars or so. He adamantly avoided familiar chord progressions (or even a hint of them).

In practically every regard, Pilc stretched past the outer limits of mainstream vocabulary, reveling in crashing dissonances and strangely structured chords. Everything about this music sounded fresh, challenging, unorthodox.

Which means there was no easy listening from the Pilc Trio, no moments of casual riffing or easy vamping. And this may explain why a wider public has yet to discover his music: It demands a great deal of the listener.

Occasionally, Pilc chose to play a softly lyrical piece, his tone uncommonly soft and rounded, his touch so nuanced that it would have been appropriate for a nocturne by Chopin. Consider "A Brief History of Time," a Pilc ballad that yielded some of the most tender music of the evening. With poetically bowed phrases from bassist Kozlov and gentle brush work from drummer Hart, the trio proved that it could whisper as well as shout.

Though not for long. The trio quickly elided into Pilc's "High Sky – The Elegant Universe," an up-tempo piece notable for its bounding dance rhythms, unusually gnarly textures and strangely angular melodic figures.

Whether Pilc, 49, ever achieves the acclaim his work deserves is hard to predict. The man's refusal to bow to audience expectations or commercial demands places him in rarefied artistic territory.

Still, there's no denying the visceral force of this music. And the inarguable fact that a drummer of Hart's stature has lent his name to Pilc's cause only heightens one's hopes that the world will discover the singularity of the pianist's art.

