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Concert review | Columbus Jazz Orchestra: Guest artists summon magic for season-opener

By Peter Tonguette For The Columbus Dispatch

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Opening night with the Columbus Jazz Orchestra is always a high-spirited occasion, but this year's season opener had the feeling of an extravaganza.

To launch its 2019-20 season, the orchestra performed Thursday night in the Southern Theatre. In conceiving the program, Artistic Director Byron Stripling took his cue from a series of iconic jazz concerts in 1967, each given the moniker "The Greatest Jazz Concert in the World."

Those performances featured a roster of luminaries, including Duke Ellington, Ella Fitzgerald and Oscar Peterson. Instead of Duke, Ella and Oscar, the orchestra hosted John, Benny and Jeff — that is, bassist John Clayton, pianist Benny Green and drummer Jeff Hamilton.

The greatest ever? Who can say, but few could doubt that the concert was full of spirit and soul. Performances continue through Sunday in the Southern.

The performance functioned as a showcase for the singular talents of its guest artists — from the soft hum of Clayton's bass to the crisp sparkle of Green's piano to the emphatic resonance of Hamilton's drums.

The concert began with the orchestra performing a swinging set on its own, including a blazingly strong version of Ellington's "It Don't Mean a Thing (If It Ain't Got That Swing)" with standout solos by saxophonist Chad Eby and trombonist Ryan Hamilton. Best of all were the vocals by Stripling, who showed himself to be a splendid scat-singer.

Once the guest artists settled into their seats, the orchestra embarked on a set that included standards and surprises. High points included a performance of Harry "Sweets" Edison's "Centerpiece," which was rendered with sass and style without ever betraying its warm, mellow undertones.

Also memorable were Duke Ellington's faux anthem to happiness "I'm Just a Lucky So-and-So" and Ray Brown's arrangement of Ellington tunes, the latter of which produced some of the most pleasing playing of the evening.

Clearly delighting in the presence of Clayton, Green and Hamilton, the orchestra was sharp and secure throughout; often, their intensity was dialed to 11.

At the urging of Stripling, the trio of Clayton, Green and Hamilton performed on its own at various points, eventually offering the evening's piece de resistance: an achingly lovely version of Brown's arrangement of "Lil' Darlin'." In the hands of these artists, the tune had the quality of a whispered lullaby.

But let us say in a voice louder than a whisper: On Thursday night, the orchestra and its guests performed with inspiration and, yes, greatness.

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