

Review: Callum Au Big Band: West Side Story Suite (LondonJazz, 15/06/2012)



(Spice of Life, 13th June 2012. Review by Sarah Ellen Hughes)

On Wednesday night at the Spice of Life, the Callum Au Big Band showcased a suite of music from West Side Story, arranged and re-interpreted by Callum. Suave, fierce and full of surprises, this is a suite that should be being heard on the major stages in this country. And it's played by a band that can rival many more seasoned professional big bands in terms of artistic credibility and execution.

The suite is made up of six selections from the West Side Story score: Something's Coming, Maria, Cool, Somewhere, America and Tonight, which segued beautifully by putting pianist Chris Eldred's fine cadenza skills to full use. As a complete suite, it is intelligent writing, exploiting an unusual combination of textures and timbres: at one point employing four flugelhorns in the trumpet section as well as euphonium and tuba within the trombones.

Some highlights: Maria brought a tear to the eye, with Kwabena Adjepong's vocals balancing perfectly atop a core of delicious woodwind; A Pat Metheny-esque Afro Cuban treatment of America; and a culmination of the two singers, Kwabena and Emma Smith, on Tonight.



Solos were specially commended – Lucas Dodd on soaring soprano saxophone and Robbie Harvey producing a flourish of notes on tenor trombone –with Au pertinently announcing, “It’s not how many notes, but which.” The suite coaxed an entirely convincing “super” range (notes found within and above the top octave on the piano) from its fledgling trumpet section – headed by an 18-year-old Louis Dowdeswell who played the entire gig standing with a broken leg in plaster.

I am looking forward to seeing where this project goes next, and hope that it gets the credit it deserves.

Press Cuttings: The Callum Au Big Band

Callum's big band was bursting with energy, creative writing and outstanding young players – most enjoyable! (Mark Nightingale, Freelance UK Jazz Trombonist)

A big band brimming with the UK's best young players able to deliver the gospel truth and large ensemble dynamics that are rarely matched by other similar musical aggregations attempting the classic oeuvre of Basie, Ferguson, Rich to Sinatra and Ella. Bandleader and first-call trombonist Au has brought heart-felt passion, intelligence, humour and musicality to a much loved genre. (Paul Pace, Promoter, Ronnie Scott's, Spicejazz at the Spice of Life)

Conclusive proof that good big band writing didn't die out sometime in the 50's. (Steve Harris, Promoter, Ruislip Manor Sports and Social Club)

There's no better word – badass (Edward Randell, jazz journalist, JazzWise)

Press Cuttings: Callum Au

Callum's skill as a composer/arranger is truly inspiring, and equally matched with his abilities on the trombone. I look forward to hearing much more from this fine young talent. (Nigel Hitchcock, Session Alto Saxophonist)

Callum Au ... definitely one of the new writers to keep a keen eye on. I am fortunate enough to be able to present some of his music with my band and I am sure we are going to be hearing a lot more of this guy in the future. (Jay Craig, BBC Big Band Musical Director)

Obviously thrilling excitement came from the outstandingly powerful and inventive trombone player Callum Au's arrangement of September In The Rain. (Brian Blain, Jazz UK)

Callum Au caught the eye with his exuberant soloing, not to mention his exceptionally mature piece, Gentleman Jack... Au's arrangement of September in the Rain glistened too. (Clive Davis, The Times)

A bright rising star of the British scene, whose invention and virtuosity are an easy match for any musical challenge! (Pete Long, Ronnie Scott's Jazz Orchestra Musical Director)

'Obvious star quality' (Jack Massarik, JazzWise)