



The Examiner

Donal Fox and Maya Beiser Make Wonderful Music Together

By Julie Hatfield | April 13, 2013

What would the music of Johann Sebastian Bach sound like if the composer came back today? What would the music of Domenico Scarlatti sound like?

Probably a lot like the music of composer-pianist-improviser Donal Fox, who brought his inventive musicianship to Boston's Institute of Contemporary Art on Thursday. Fox, who in 2008 was the first performer ever in the stunning Barbara Lee Family Foundation Theater of the ICA, began alone by playing his own interpretation of a 16th Century John Dowland song as he sat surrounded by the floor-to-ceiling windows of the theater, which affords listeners an extra sensory experience, with all the boats tooling across the waters of Boston Harbor just outside.



His playing on the classics is superb, and on the pianissimo of the Dowland his fingers touch the keys with the delicacy of a butterfly alighting on a flower, so we forgive him some heavy-handed left hand chords on his sforzando riffs on the classics, which is his characteristic method of musicality. A Bach invention seems to come out of a jazzy riff on Dowland -- wonderfully bastardized Bach, actually, emerging from a dark Thelonius Monk theme into the sunshine (he recently premiered his own Monk and Bach project at Lincoln Center, and earlier at the Tanglewood Music Festival). A jazzy contemporary riff suddenly sounds like The Air on the g String! A Bach coda sounds like Monk! From St. Thomas Church in Leipzig he takes us to Harry's Bar in Venice, seemingly, all in the same night.

When Fox brought out his special guest of the evening, acclaimed cellist Maya Beiser, the two were in total sync with their classic-to-jazz improvisations, and the Argentinian tango was added to the mix. Beiser, the child of an Argentinian father and French mother, was brought up on an Israeli kibbitz, and she plays with the sensuality of a Latin soul and the technical virtuosity of an Israeli musical performer. The two played music of Argentinian composer Astor Piazzolla, who himself mixed the classics with the tango. They also brought out music from Argentinian Grammy Award winning composer Osvaldo Golijov and Joaquin Nin, the father of French writer Anais Nin.

You could say these two musicians are joined at the cello, when you hear them play their Catch the Melody game, throwing it back and forth to each other with impeccable timing. Beiser caresses her cello with an almost erotic touch, and she can mashup those classical melodies and themes and the jazz riffs with the same rock-star pizzazz as Fox. Called the Cello Goddess by the New Yorker, her playing is exciting. She has commissioned the likes of Golijov, Philip Glass and Steve Reich for her cello pieces and it is understandable why she is in demand to perform all over the world.

But these two musicians playing together are exceptional, and if we're lucky, they'll be onstage as a duo in many more performances.