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JAZZ REVIEW

PanAmericana Orquesta swings jazz series into action

By Howard Reich
Tribune arts critic
Published June 24, 2006

Anyone who doubted that a new jazz tradition has taken root at Millennium Park should have swung by the Pritzker Pavilion on Thursday night.

Though the "Made in Chicago" jazz series was launched just last year, Thursday's opening of its second season felt like a long-familiar Chicago cultural ritual. A large, gloriously diverse crowd nearly filled the formal seating area, and thousands more took in the music -- and the ambience -- from the lawn.

This year's edition of "Made in Chicago" carries the subtitle "World Class Jazz," a reference to a lineup of programs that will present major Chicago jazz figures alongside visitors from around the globe. With upcoming programs spotlighting Chicagoans Tatsu Aoki with Asian-American collaborators (July 27), Ernest Dawkins with South African partners (Aug. 17) and Ken Vandermark with European colleagues (Aug. 24), the "World Class Jazz" sobriquet seems richly deserved.

But the "Made in Chicago" series hardly could have sounded more international than it did on Thursday, when the Chicago PanAmericana Orquesta made its debut. Staffed by some of the most versatile jazz musicians in the city and led by no less than visiting reedist-composer Paquito D'Rivera (with trumpeter Jon Faddis as guest soloist), the new band played so proficiently that one wondered if these artists might have been rehearsing secretly for months (they haven't).

Embracing Afro-Caribbean rhythms and Argentinian dance forms, Brazilian melody and Cuban classical composition, the PanAmericana Orquesta poetically illuminated the relationship between music of North and South America (as well as the cultures between them). Tangos, blues, waltzes and quasi-orchestral suites kept the proceedings constantly in flux, with various musicians coming together or dropping out of the larger ensemble, as the scores required.

In large works, such as Orquesta composer Elbio Barilari's "Gondwana," the band conveyed a nearly symphonic range of color, texture and tone. If "Gondwana" proved startling for its sweeping main theme and brilliant instrumental effects, a sprawling homage to composer Ernesto Lecuona attested to Lecuona's gifts for expressing Cuban folkloric idioms in quasi-classical forms.

D'Rivera stood at the center of this great outpouring of sound, his nimble technique and penetrating tone cutting through the orchestral fabric. Faddisplayed simply, directly and disarmingly in the tango "Vida Mia."

Add to the roster such virtuosos as Howard Levy on piano and harmonica, Tito Carrillo on trumpet, Liam Teague on steel pan and Fareed Haque on guitar, and the Chicago PanAmericana Orquesta clearly deserves to be heard again -- soon.

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"Made in Chicago" continues with performances at 6:30 p.m. July 13 and



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27, Aug. 3, 10, 17, 24 and 28; for details, phone 312-742-1168 or visit www.millenniumpark.org.

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