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Palmieri Mourns in Public

by Philip Reyes

(Music 2202)

The Chicago Symphony Orchestra presents jazz performances at least once a month at Symphony Center, and I was lucky to attend the January installment of the jazz series, which featured the Eddie Palmieri Latin Jazz Band. Palmieri, a 2013 NEA Jazz master and winner of ten Grammy Awards, had not performed at Symphony Center since the late nineties, and a packed auditorium warmly welcomed him back. The crowd was an intermingling of the normal CSO clientele- white haired, pearl wearing, society types- and young people who were either students, fans, or couples on dates; and also on this night there was an especially strong showing of the Latin/Hispanic community.

Eddie Palmieri has been an innovator of jazz and Latin music for over 50 years, since the trombone section of his band, La Perfecta, blew the doors off dance halls everywhere. Even now as a 78-year-old man, he thrills audiences with his own brand of music that is always Latin, and sometimes jazz. Palmieri opened the concert with a solo piano composition entitled “Life” which he wrote for his wife, who has recently passed away. This first piece set an authentic tone, deeply emotional at times, yet ethereal and light on the whole; it was a touching tribute to his beloved spouse. This tone of authenticity would carry through the entire night in his solos as they all had a powerful raw edge.

The performance got off to a rough start with technical difficulties challenging Palmieri. The sustain pedal on the hybrid electro-acoustic Yamaha piano was not working properly, so all the notes he played were fully sustained; stopping mid piece, he called technicians to the stage to reset the piano, saying “don’t everybody come help me at once”. Ever the seasoned entertainer, Palmieri apologized to the audience, then killed time with a little light shtick until the piano was ready.

Once they got going, the show was great; the band played classic groove tunes like, “Noble Cruise” and “Bloero Dos”. I loved Palmieri’s montuno or tumbao piano rhythms, though they were more sparsely employed throughout the night than expected. His solos were wrought with dark dissonant sonorities, obtuse sounds and “outside” harmonies; his temperament in general reflected a man in mourning. The tone of his piano accompaniment and solos was quite heavy and at times intense, and one can only imagine how hard it would be to perform while dealing with such loss. The exact notes I took in my program were “atonal, chromatic, dissonant, sad”. There were, however, glimmers of happiness and joy and beauty in his solos, almost like a memory that was gone just as quickly as it came. Back and fourth he went all night, it was almost exhausting to watch, but when we left, my wife and I agreed that this performance was truly raw, and honest by comparison to all the others we have seen at symphony center.

Palmieri talked about the early origins of the Latin rhythms that would eventually fuse with jazz, and he took the opportunity credit slaves of the Caribbean islands for developing what he called, “the most rhythmically complex music on earth.” He said, “These people were captives in a foreign place, far from their homes, and we must remember where this music came from”. The raw, intense nature of this music and its history was indeed captured and edified by Palmieri’s band. The incredible percussive grooves of the night were created by Camilo Molina on timbales, Little Johnny Rivero on congas, Anthony Carillo on bongos and cow bell, and Louis Fouche on bass.

The highlight of the evening for me, was after the performance had ended, we had already excited the auditorium, walked through the interior corridors towards Adams street via the rear

theatre exit, and as I was walking out I found my self face to face with Eddie Palmieri as we were both leaving. I gently shook his hand and said, “Thank you for a wonderful show and thank you for your music”, and he said with a great smile “Very nice to meet you! Thank you very very much!”.