

Istanbul Jazz 2019

N. Buket Cengiz says everything was more than fine at the 26th Istanbul Jazz Festival

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Bill Charlap at the Istanbul 2019 jazz festival. Photo by Selcuk Polat

After 25 years, Istanbul has elected a social-democrat mayor, Ekrem İmamoğlu, who carried an incredible campaign with his slogan “everything will be fine!” And indeed, everything was more than fine at the 26th Istanbul Jazz Festival which started on the weekend following that historic victory.

The festival, sponsored by Garanti BBVA, started with the free of charge Jazz In The Parks concerts on 29-30 June. This year the headline of the event was Balkan Paradise Orchestra, a new generation jazz band comprising nine women from Barcelona. The first day of the event was held at the Yaşam [Life] Valley, a vast green space created while İmamoğlu was the mayor of the district. In this place with great symbolic importance where he made speeches to tens of thousands during the election campaign, he was invited on stage as the mayor of Istanbul, to sheer delight of the audience.

The rest of the festival passed in the spirit of İmamoğlu’s slogan. Balkan Paradise Orchestra took stage also on the Festival Award Night where Turkey’s legendary jazz drummer Hasan Hürsever was presented with Lifetime Achievement Awards at the lush garden of the Austrian Culture Office on the Bosphorus.

The difference principle

The most anticipated name of this year’s festival was Kamasi Washington. The revered saxophonist introduced his father Rickey Washington on flute and soprano saxophone as the person from whom he learned everything he knew. The amazing atmosphere of the concert was sparkled with Quinn’s vocals, leaving the audience in awe as she sang Fists Of Fury, noting that “our difference is something not to be tolerated but to be celebrated”.

Another enthralling performance of this year was by Paolo Fresu playing the trumpet and fluegelhorn, with Lars Danielsson on double bass and cello. The duo played songs from their album *Summerwind* (2018) which was praised for its minimalist attitude underpinning a serenity of atmosphere. Their original compositions as well as stylised versions of the standard Autumn Leaves and Polish composer and jazz pianist Krzysztof Komeda’s Sleep Safe And Warm put a spell on the audience at the Venetian Palace Garden.

The Night Out event, held for the fifth time this year, offered again a kaleidoscope of the independent music scene in Turkey at an array of venues around the Kadıköy coast. Concerts of the headline Liraz from Israel and the support band Nusaibin from Turkey were marked among the most unforgettable moments of this edition. Iranian-Israeli Liraz invited Melike Şahin on stage, gave messages of friendliness between Turkey and Israel hand in hand with her, and also shared messages of women’s empowerment as she told stories of her Persian songs no longer sung in public by Iranian women. Nusaibin is a band that has shone in the alternative music scene in Istanbul in the last couple of years especially with their great stage performance,

and their concert before Liraz was another example of their on-stage energy and skills. This band with their earnest music combining instruments of Eastern Anatolia's ethnic traditions with electronic basis and arrangements is very likely to be appreciated internationally in the next couple of years.

Refugee narrative

Esma Sultan Mansion this year hosted two highly talented Cuban musicians: jazz pianist and composer Alfredo Rodríguez and percussionist Pedrito Martínez, both of whom also contribute to their music with vocals. One of the most special moments of the festival was when, as two artists living away from their homeland, they dedicated one of their songs to all the refugees in the world. With their improvised rendering of Kissas Kissas and Billie Jean accompanied with Pedrito Martínez's great dance figures, it was an unforgettable night framed by the stunning view of the Bosphorus in the background; Alfredo Rodríguez described it as one of the most beautiful places he had played in his life.

A very special concert took place at this year's festival leaving a taste of nostalgia. Mozaik, a cult band made up of a group of intellectuals and active in 1980s and 90s, performed almost with its original cadre 35 years after its creation. On the night of the concert it was possible to spot many old friends seeing each other after many long years giving each other long hugs and chatting about the good old days.

An international lineup

Festival-goers spent a beautiful festival night under the trees of the Sultan Park with the composer and singer José James on stage with the Bill Withers repertoire as well as his own songs, particularly enjoying his signature song Come To My Door. Joss Stone was once again at Istanbul Jazz three years after her earlier performance to the pleasure of her fans. At this year's festival the audience also found the opportunity to experience the live performances of musicians and bands such as Jacob Collier, Snarky Puppy, Melanie de Biasio, Bill Charlap Trio, Shai Maestro Trio, Shake Stew and Makaya McCraven. This summer the Jazz Boat was back too, sailing on the Bosphorus to the tunes of The Busquitos; Talking Horns and The Brassist. The Vitrin Showcase for Contemporary Music from Turkey came to the fore as an important element of the festival, bringing young artists together with the audience and the sector.

This year, cutting edge Scandinavian jazz visited the festival with Rymden at the idiosyncratic venue of the former shoe factory by the sea in Beykoz. The avant-garde music of the trio was followed by Nubiyan Twist's tunes blending Latin and African breezes with jazz improvisations on a joyful summer night. At the beautiful Fistikli Terrace of the Sakıp Sabancı Museum on the Bosphorus the Elchin Shirinov Trio took stage before Cyrille Aimée, the French vocalist.

Jazz as liberator

In addition to the free concerts of Jazz In The Parks, this year's festival featured a great night on a Golden Horn park featuring three very special concerts all free of charge: clarinet master Ramazan Sesler, American brass band Soul Brass Band and Mood Band, comprising Syrian musicians who continue making music despite all their sorrows. In this conservative neighbourhood this was such an extraordinary night with head-scarfed women dancing to New Orleans jazz and hipsters sipping beers next to them, the Syrian gay community with their super-cool dances and families from different nations enjoying the night out of the routine.

At this year's festival, a complimentary copy of *Renk Renk Caz (Colourful Jazz)*, an illustrated book about jazz music aimed at children and early teens, was handed out at all the concerts. This is the fourth one of IKSV's free-of-charge children's books, supported by the Bernard Van Leer Foundation, with themes encouraging interest in arts and intercultural dialogue.

Many a family whose road would never otherwise cross with jazz ended up at free jazz concerts in parks and went home with their children holding in their hands their complimentary copy of a beautiful book with engaging texts, illustrations and activities about jazz. Thanks are due to the Istanbul Foundation for Culture and Arts for this and all the amazing music it brought to Istanbul once again this year.