

Review: Istanbul Jazz Festival

N. Buket Cengiz doesn't demur at the presence of Nick Cave and the Bad Seeds at a jazz festival along with such more likely fare as Avishai Cohen and Melody Gardot

Every July, Istanbul Jazz Festival, organised by the Istanbul Foundation for Culture and Arts (İKSV) and sponsored by Garanti Bank, is one of the few things that sooth Istanbulites' resentment at being in the city rather than on the Mediterranean coasts of their country. Held between 26 June and 17 July 2018 in 27 venues in different parts of the city, the 25th edition of the festival gave the gift of some unforgettable moments to 52,000 music lovers who attended the 50 concerts by musicians from all over the world.

The most anticipated concert of this year's festival was that of Nick Cave and the Bad Seeds. Fortunately, it created less of the pointless argument on whether such music was appropriate for a jazz festival than that stirred up in 2001 when both they and PJ Harvey performed at the festival.

Since Nick Cave and the Bad Seeds made their best albums in the 1990s, the concert meant some serious confrontation with the past for a majority of the 9,000 people at the venue of Küçükçiftlik. Ironically, this is a former amusement park which is the epitome of cheerful lightness for the very audience who were picking the scabs of their long-forgotten wounds through Nick Cave songs on 12 July, 17 years after seeing him live in Istanbul, a little way up the hill at the Cemil Topuzlu Amphitheatre. As might be expected, this was an unforgettable night not only for this year's festival but for all of its 25 years, indeed more of a ritual than a concert.

Another marvellous night at this year's festival was with bassist Avishai Cohen (pictured above right), who opened his concert with a splendid performance of *D'ror Yikra*. He instantly clicked with the crowd, mentioning his relatives who migrated to İzmir in the Ottoman era and inviting his audience to leave their seats and come to the front of the stage. "You people are such nice people" he commented and added, indicating his band, "Ask these guys, I don't say this every day". What made the night so amazing was the Mediterranean spirit uniting Cohen, members of his band and the Turkish audience, as well as those from Israel and Arabic countries.

Night Out felt like a festival within the festival. Held for the third time, in this event simultaneous concerts by some cutting-edge Turkish musicians are held. What left the brightest mark on this spectacular night of music were the superb performances from the Turkish alternative scene's inspiring, courageous and utterly talented women: Kalben, Nilipek, Selin Sümbültepe and Melike Şahin. Seeing these sophisticated women so strong on stage and so confident owing to the quality of their music, brought on not only a great artistic pleasure but also a faith in the future of the country's women and thus in the country itself on a night only three days after an election held amidst serious claims of election fraud.

One of the most beautiful venues of Istanbul Jazz Festival is the historic Esmâ Sultan Mansion on the Bosphorus. This year it hosted the legendary Afro-Cuban jazz musician Omar Sosa, accompanied by Yilian Cañizeras on vocals and violin (pictured left). The atmosphere was like a fairy tale with ferries passing behind the stage almost like a visual effect for the poignant music of Sosa and Cañizeras.

That said, the venue of the festival is now and forever the Cemil Topuzlu Amphitheatre, in walking distance of the Gezi Park. Two breathtaking concerts, both by British musicians, took place here: Benjamin Clementine on 5 July and Robert Plant & The Sensational Space Shifters, the closing concert of the festival, on 17 July. Plant's performance of Led Zeppelin hits such as *Whole Lotta Love* and *Babe I'm Gonna Leave You* was one of the peak points of the whole festival. Two hundred refugees were able to attend this concert as a result of the collaboration between İKSV, Vehbi Koç Foundation and Sabancı Foundation supported by UNHCR and three NGOs working with refugees.

Melody Gardot visited the festival for the second time this year, to her fans' delight. Caro Emerald, who also gave a concert in Istanbul before, was another favourite of the festival leaving behind a heart-warming mark. Also this year, the festival audience watched the brilliant and ultra-energetic performance of the South African band BCUC followed by the electronic music duo Knower from Los Angeles, at Beykoz Kundura, a former shoe factory. This is a highly popular venue at the northern end of the Bosphorus, on the Anatolian side, reached by an hour-long boat trip from the city-centre, which is a lovely activity itself.





The showcase and networking event Vitrin – Contemporary Music from Turkey, sponsored by SOCAR, was organised for the second time at this year's festival (The event was reviewed by Jazz Journal [here](#)). Within the activity, the best examples of jazz, rock, electronic music, ethnic sounds and global fusions of the musical output in Turkey were brought to the attention of invited international music professionals who attended the concerts as well as the networking events in the first three days of the festival.

This year's Istanbul Jazz Festival, with one of its best line-ups ever, hosted 450 musicians in total. This was the last festival for Pelin Opçin who has been directing the festival for the last 17 years. She will continue as the programme director of the London Jazz Festival while leaving the Istanbul festival in the safe hands of former vice-director Harun İzer. Opçin will be remembered for her courageous and highly successful acts of opening

the festival to local musicians as well as widening the scope of its venues.

Almost all foreign musicians who perform in Istanbul emphasise how they admire the city, calling it spectacular, magnificent, amazing, fucking beautiful. The soul of Istanbul, which keeps its people in this city despite all its chaos, is probably the core of Istanbul Jazz Festival's charm. It turns the light on the parts of the city which make it worth living there; reminds people about this other face of the city which can easily be ignored in the hustle and bustle of the metropolis life, bringing them together at an old mansion on the Bosphorus or in a former factory in a fishing district. In addition to all the delight and happiness the festival brings through music, the audience must be thankful to the organiser IKSVM for this as well.

Photos by Ilgin Erarslan Yanmaz
