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## Mendocino Music Festival

2012-07-08

### North Coast festival a musical potpourri

One of California's most varied summer music offerings is the Mendocino Music Festival, held for two weeks in the quaint town of Mendocino, an arts and culture magnet on the Northern California coastline.

Founded 25 years ago by Allan Pollack, this festival reflects his own eclecticism, as he not only composes and conducts great works of the classical repertoire with the Festival Orchestra, but, as a sax player, performs rather different "classics," and last year headlined with the Festival Big Band Jazz Orchestra. That penchant for connection is also a family affair, with wife Susan Waterfall leading thought provoking programs, including this year's brilliant afternoon piano series. No slouch as a jazz pianist/composer, son Julian Pollack is director of the JazzSeries and often performs with his own jazz band. This year he will also star with the orchestra in his own *Concerto for Piano and Orchestra*.

Saturday's opening concert featured the full orchestra in a lively program of Rossini, Beethoven's majestic *Eroica*, and Lalo's violin concerto, *Symphonie Espagnole*. Gathering from across the state each summer, the musicians are housed by town residents in a partnership that each anticipates. They perform in a huge tent that is erected on the headlands each year, measuring 16,000 square foot and seating over 800 people.

Opting to explore this year's variety, I arrived Sunday for a concert by the Turtle Island Quartet, and was wowed by this classical foursome's adaptations of jazz and rock greats. John Coltrane and Jimi Hendrix were the inspiration for this concert, with four-part adaptations that veered between classical, jazz and rock to epitomize the delicate strands of Coltrane's "A Love Supreme" and the raw scream of Hendrix' electric guitar.



Founding violinist and composer David Balakrishnan and cellist Mark Summers were joined by two new "turtles," Polish wunderkind Mateusz Smoczynski on violin and German violist Benjamin von Gutzeit. Replacing Celtic fiddler/violist Jeremy Kittell and the popular Mads Tolling for this concert, the two were exceptionally bright-toned as classical musicians and awesome improvisers to boot. Creative jazz licks are a rare talent among the quartet set, and balancing that with blend and sonority is rarer still.

After opening with chords that had the vigor of Dvorak and high lines of ole-timey fiddling (Dvorak in a plaid dew rag), they found their groove in a Chick Corea inspired arrangement. Then cellist Summers introduced their take on Jimi Hendrix' "Electric Ladyland" and "House Burning Down", and the audience started screaming. Huge Bayou slides, down home funk, and brashly discordant train whistles set the stakes, as the cello laid down rhythms with plucks and slaps.

"Doing this in string quartet is admittedly bipolar," quipped Summers.

Turning to Coltrane, they slid into an arrangement of "Naima" with overlapping hues and gentle watercolor notes, with wistful tones and languid love illuminating the interweaving parts.

Jimi Hendrix' arrangement of Bob Dylan's "All Along the Watchtower" underwent another transformation into magical string chords that bristled with energy.

One of the high points of the night lifted their crossover attempts to cultural extremes, with the first movement of Balakrishnan's four-movement *Tree of Life*, inspired by Hendrix. The violinist described it as a "sick Hindu Celtic jig," though that hardly does it justice. *Ashwattha* began with an Indian drone, strings slowly twining through a tambura's wealth of overtones, tonics and fifths merging with octaves in "just" tuning, and then slid into a rhythmic, toe-tapping jig using a bizarre scale that merged Indian with Irish modes. Whew!

Their approach was emblematic of what this festival inspires: an inclusive approach to music making.

### Looking ahead

This Friday afternoon, July 13 at 3:00 p.m. will be a piano recital by James D'Leon, featuring Beethoven's beloved 32 *Variations*, the Zen colorations of Takemitsu, the dark virtuosity of Liszt's *Ballade No. 2* and the eerie power of contemporary composer George Tsontakis' *Ghost Variations*. This promises to be worth the three hour drive by itself!

But at 8:00 p.m. that same evening the Festival Orchestra performs Ginastera's exhilarating *Variaciones Concertantes*, Tan Dun's *Concerto for String Orchestra and Pipa* and Mozart's "Jupiter" Symphony. Then Saturday is Big Band Night with vocalist Kathleen Grace, and on Sunday the dance troupe Viver Brazil will electrify the stage with contemporary Afro-Brazilian samba and choreography to an ancient Yoruban tale.

And if your weekend in the Redwoods stretches to Monday, the afternoon piano recital by Lisa Moore looks stunning: Ives, Cowell, Glass and other American composers, culminating in the vividness of John Adams' *American Berserk*. Many more events follow through the week, culminating in the final Festival Orchestra concert July 21.

*After a lovely peregrination through the Anderson Valley, the coast around Mendocino is thick with B and B's. Or one can go cheap, camping two miles away at Van Damme State Park and at private campgrounds. Call 707-937-4041 or visit [www.mendocinomusic.com](http://www.mendocinomusic.com) for tickets.*



### —Adam Broner

Top, Turtle Island Quartet, from left: Benjamin Von GutZeit, Mateusz Smoczynski, Mark Summer and David Balakrishnan; photo by Bill Reitzel. Bottom, photo of main tent taken July 8; photo by A.B.

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