



Laszlo Gardony Showcases Solo Piano Artistry in Manhattan

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Since arriving in the United States 31 years ago to study on full scholarship at the Berklee College of Music, Hungarian pianist Laszlo Gardony has been showcased mainly in trio settings on his 10 CDs for Sunnyside Records.

On Aug. 21 at One Liberty Plaza in New York, listeners got a chance to hear Gardony in a more revealing context. As part of the "New Directions in Solo Piano" series, the pianist gave an afternoon recital that featured aspects of two of his solo albums: 1990's *Changing Standards*, in which he put personalized touches on familiar tunes by Thelonious Monk, John Coltrane, Sonny Rollins, Billy Strayhorn and Duke Ellington; and his most recent release, 2013's purely improvised session, *Clarity*.

A professor in the piano department at Berklee since 1987, Gardony is an inspired improviser who reveals traces of Keith Jarrett and Bill Evans influences in his playing, while also mixing in elements of his Hungarian roots and aspects of African rhythm.

He opened his solo recital in the lobby of One Liberty Plaza—right in the heart of downtown Manhattan's bustling Wall Street area—with a provocative reharmonization of The Beatles' "Eleanor Rigby," which flowed seamlessly into a spirited take on "Sometimes I Feel Like A Motherless Child." Right from the start, one could hear that Jarrett's solo albums *Facing You* and *The Köln Concert* were probably a touchstone for Gardony when he was studying at Béla Bartók Conservatory in his native Budapest.

He proceeded to take Monk's "'Round Midnight" through a myriad of mood changes, from sparse introspection to exuberant swing, full of dazzling right-hand lines and marked by authoritative left-hand exclamations. He followed that pianistic showcase with an improvised number that melded Middle Eastern-sounding lines in the right hand (the kind of strains sometimes heard in Bartók's writing) while holding down a compelling Brazilian *baião* rhythm in the left hand. No title on that one since he made it up on the spot.

Gardony delved into a contemplative mode on his entrancing "New Song" (from his 2008 Sunnyside album *Dig Deep*), then he came out swinging on an ebullient "Days Of Wine And Roses." From these two songs, you could tell that he might have been similarly affected by Art Tatum's dazzling right-hand runs, Hank Jones' sublime touch and Phineas Newborn's syncopated genius.

A romp through his "Bourbon Street Boogie" (from 2011's *Signature Time*) showed his genuine affection for Professor Longhair and a singular command of New Orleans piano vocabulary. Following a radically reimagined take on George Shearing's "Lullaby Of Birdland," Gardony delivered a moving, reharmonized rendition of Neil Diamond's "Sweet Caroline," the song that brought comfort and unity to Bostonians in the wake of the Boston Marathon bombing of 2013. The anthem was given a newfound sense of gravitas in the hands of this gifted interpreter.

Then, following a gospel version of another Beatles tune, "Lady Madonna," Gardony closed out his performance with the frantic finger-buster "Breakout" (the title track of his 1994 quartet album).

Other artists previously featured in the "New Directions in Solo Piano" series curated by Jim and Genevieve Luce included the dynamic Cuban pianists Elio Villafranca and Manuel Valera, along with Ukrainian-born Vadim Neselovskyi, who is currently an assistant professor on the piano faculty at Berklee and also a former student of Gardony's.

—Bill Milkowski



Laszlo Gardony (Photo: Richard Conde)