

## Delight in the Trumpeter's "Tropics" and Beyond: Charles Lazarus and Company at Orchestra Hall



Written by Andrea Canter, Contributing Editor

Tuesday, 26 May 2009



Charles Lazarus

Billed as "A Night in the Tropics," this production on May 23rd from the Minnesota Orchestra's eclectic trumpeter Charles Lazarus went beyond the implied geography. At its most relaxed moments, the music was surely as warm as a Brazilian breeze or island beach. At its most incendiary, the music ignited a hot wire that encircled the entire southern hemisphere and beyond, its flash fires connecting the cultural dots across Eastern Europe, Africa, and North America. Reprising the original production of 2007, Lazarus and company (the full orchestra and his jazz quintet) played a varied program with elegance, intensity, and humor to the delight of a near-full house. Neither the gorgeous weather outside nor holiday weekend seemed to deter attendance or enthusiasm.

Experienced beyond his years in a variety of classical and jazz contexts, Charles Lazarus launched his professional career on stage at Carnegie Hall at 19, still a student at Juilliard. He has since performed with major orchestras and brass ensembles across the U.S., Europe and Asia, coming to his current post with the Minnesota Orchestra in 2000. His first recording, *Solo Settings* (2005), provided ample evidence of his interest in and affinity for tropical themes in his compositions, and three of those works (inspired by a visit to Hawaii) became part of "A Night in the Tropics." His follow-up *Zabava*, released in late 2008, continued his global explorations, this time leaning more toward East European traditions. The jazz quintet of *Zabava* (Lazarus on four variants of trumpet, Tommy Barbarella on keyboards, Jeff Bailey on electric bass, co-arranger Craig Hara on drumset, and Shai Hyo on percussion) provided the musical core for "Tropics," appropriately integrating Minnesota artists, Afro-Cuban percussion, Latin rhythms, East European/Middle Eastern harmonies, and post-bop sensibilities. Although press has described this program as "lounge exotica" and "orchestral pops," neither seems sufficiently respectful nor accurate. The arrangements are accessible yet sophisticated, the original writing draws on exotic traditions without exploiting them for the sake of applause.



Jeff Bailey©Andrea Canter

Each half of the program opened with the Minnesota Orchestra sans jazz ensemble, but the orchestra was nevertheless augmented by more percussion than I have ever seen on their home stage. George Gershwin's "Cuban Overture" (originally titled "Rumba") introduced the program with a sweeping "An American in Havana" feel, alternately drenched in rumba and more classically European rhythms; the congas kept feet tapping throughout and a lovely if short clarinet solo elevated the tropical charm. A three-part suite of what Lazarus termed "tiki torch vibes" followed with the quintet and orchestra, each a composition from *Solo Settings*. "Kilauea Fountains" began with a trumpet incantation buoyed by pizzicato strings before accelerating with dazzling runs from Lazarus. Moving on to "Waves," the trumpeter's gorgeous hollow tone paid homage to the tropical gods as the rest of the musical party stepped back as if acknowledging this moment of prayer. Barbarella on electric keys, then Bailey and the trombone section built a slowly rising chorus, reaching climax with the full orchestra in a majestic swell reminiscent of Maria Schneider. "Dance Honu" featured Barbarella, again on electric keys, weaving a floaty tapestry with Bailey. On muted trumpet, Lazarus introduced a folk-inspired melody, and with Barbarella, the two evoked the Caribbean and particularly the sound of steel pan drums while the cello section provided extended basslines. Switching to the higher pitched piccolo trumpet, and without mute, Lazarus transformed the colors, his tone bright and crisp, then again switched to muted trumpet in closing.

With just the quintet, Lazarus launched an invigorating arrangement of Duke Ellington/Juan Tizol's classic "Caravan," probably evoking Tizol himself with his trombone-like squeals and slides on muted trumpet. Moving the mute back and forth, Lazarus created a menagerie of sounds and grunts; Hyo and Hara held a percussion debate, the quintet as powerful and harmonically dense as a full orchestra. (And the orchestra? The strings were uniformly

tapping their bows in time.) Closing the first half of the show, quintet and orchestra romped through the oddly titled “Gopher Mambo,” not a Minnesota-meets-Cuba tune but one composed by Billy May, whose associations included Glenn Miller, Nat King Cole, Nancy Wilson, George Shearing and most famously, Frank Sinatra. The tune was originally recorded by “the queen of Latin exotica, Yma Sumac, who Lazarus pointed out could cover five octaves, hence his use of the piccolo trumpet. Barely three minutes, the heat and energy generated plenty of sparks.

Marimbas and strings dominated the all-orchestra arrangement of Ginastera’s “Malambo” from *Estancia* to open the second half of the program. A “Mexican Hat Dance” vibe pulsated throughout and led to a thunderous conclusion. The quintet joined the strings for Latin dances, “Upa, Neguinho” from Eduardo Lobo (arranged by Marion Evans) as well as Evan’s own “La Teresita.” Bright and silky, these short pieces flowed like a lyrical soundtrack. A standout composition on Lazarus’ *Zabava*, “Dancing Gypsy” expanded to a sextet featuring surprise soloist Osmo Vänskä himself on clarinet. Here East European folk traditions meshed virtuosically with American jazz, the harmonic interplay of trumpet and clarinet seamlessly integrating cultures while Barbarella’s electric keys and the driving percussion whirled with a cosmic energy.

From the songbook of the Buena Vista Social Club, Carillo’s “Dos Gardenias” with quintet and strings was filled with a sumptuous melancholy, arranged by John Wasson as a Cuban blues featuring Lazarus’ open trumpet. Wasson also arranged the bossa Tribute to Jobim, starting off with “Desafinado” as introduced assertively by bassist Jeff Bailey and featuring a mildly snarling trumpet; on both “Quiet Nights” and “Wave,” Lazarus switched to flugelhorn, then back to trumpet for the sizzling “No More Blues.” While the orchestra was in fine form, the quintet’s symphonic power was more than sufficient on its own. The theme from “Zorba the Greek” (also arranged by Wasson) capped the evening, Vänskä again picking up the clarinet and now Barbarella hoisting an accordion.

Charles Lazarus named his latest recording *Zabava*, referring to an East European party with virtuosic musicians. This party covered more global territory, but the spirit and joy, as well as virtuosity, definitely defined celebration.



Osmo Vänskä