

FRED HERSCH PLAYS LEAVES OF GRASS AT JAZZ AT LINCOLN CENTER (CONCERT REVIEW)

By: Peter Hum
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Before a note was played last Friday night, pianist and composer Fred Hersch went out of his way to secure a little co-operation from the crowd that packed the Appel Room of Jazz at Lincoln Center. Please, no applause until the music ends, Hersch requested. What was to fill the room for the next 70 minutes — a rare performance of Hersch's *Leaves of Grass* song cycle — would be best presented and appreciated as a "unified dramatic arc," uninterrupted by smatterings of clapping, he said.

Of course, he was right. The landmark long-form chamber-jazz piece, which has been performed just a few times before and after the 2005 release of Hersch's album of the same name, was captivating and uplifting. As expected, Hersch plus his seven-piece ensemble, supporting star vocalists Kurt Elling and Kate McGarry, ennobled the celebration and gravitas of Walt Whitman's titular poetry collection with deep lyricism and musical bravado. My only complaint is that after 70 minutes quickly passed, I wished that there had been more music.

In the jazz canon, Hersch's *Leaves of Grass* is a new-millennium masterpiece with an intriguing backstory. In his just-published memoir *Good Things Happen Slowly*, Fred Hersch dedicates a full chapter to the creation of *Leaves of Grass*. With characteristic candour, Hersch relates that the ambitious project was at first a blue-sky proposition shared in early 2002 with Robert Rund, his manager. Rund was so good at his job that he was able to line up three performances for the piece in 2003, even though Hersch hadn't committed a note of it to paper. Hersch rose to the challenge and made a stunning creative leap to craft his powerful and memorable work.

Hersch also wrote in his book that at the 2005 *Leaves of Grass* CD release concert at Carnegie Hall, when he heard McGarry sing his work's opening lines of Whitman's poetry, Hersch was moved almost to tears. In the Appel Room, I knew just how he felt. The combination of her voice and Hersch's music zooms in a listener's vulnerabilities. Indeed, moments after the work's invocation, I was getting a little choked up. Although Hersch's *Leaves of Grass* is greater than the sum of its parts, there were circumscribed but impressive contributions by its instrumentalists that popped out of the lush and engrossing larger setting. Whether the material needed propulsive power or a cavalcade of colours, drummer John Hollenbeck met its needs. Nadjé Noordhuis, who did not appear on Hersch's album as had most of her peers on stage, subbed ably in the role of what Whitman himself dubbed the "mystic trumpeter." Tenor saxophonist Tony Malaby added impassioned melodies when the space was afforded. Hersch, who always dazzles in solo and trio settings, only took centre stage during his work's touching ballad *At The Close Of The Day*.

It was usually Elling or McGarry, conveying Whitman's words with absolute authority and warmth, who kept listeners transfixed. I can only imagine that every heart in the room was making connections between the timeless poetry and their own lives and present circumstances. I have my own reason for taking the work very close to heart, as you may read below. For Hersch, *Leaves of Grass*, which first cast its spell on him when he studied Whitman while at the New England Conservatory, was a glorious ode to nature, humanity and also love between men. (Hersch who is gay and HIV-positive, has been open about

his sexuality and health for decades.) In his book, Hersch also wrote that after 9/11, he found solace in Whitman's art. For its part, the press release for Hersch's concert stresses Whitman's relevance with "the legendary poet's timeless ode to the miracle of nature and openhearted love of all beings seems especially vital in our present socio-political moment."

Jazz fans are familiar with Eric Dolphy's proclamation: "When you hear music, after it's over, it's gone, in the air, you can never capture it again." At the same time, Hersch's infrequently performed but continually resonant work makes a strong argument for artistic permanence. Yes, at the rate it's going, its creator and its cohorts will only play it a handful of times every decade, optimally in the splendour of surroundings such as the Appel Room, which afforded listeners a floor-to-ceiling view of Central Park and the bustle of humanity in cars as dusk fell. But just as Whitman's poetry has outlived him well beyond a century, so should Hersch's majestic, intimate, magnificent setting for it.

Source: <http://ottawacitizen.com/entertainment/jazzblog/fred-hersch-plays-leaves-of-grass-at-jazz-at-lincoln-center-concert-review>