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Evolutions: American Chamber Music meets Jazz
Presented by Washington Musica Viva and composer John Kamman

May 8, at 7:30 PM

St. Columba's Church
4201 Albemarle St. NW
Washington, DC

Tickets: \$15 advance/\$18 at the door
202-265-7297
<http://www.owlson.com/events/evolutions.htm> [etickets.com/](http://www.etickets.com/)

The second Evolutions: American Chamber Music Meets Jazz program took place March 20 with Carl Banner & his Musica Viva guest ensemble playing three jazz-influenced classical music compositions followed by John Kamman and Afro Jazz Explosion improvisations led by vocalists Armand Ntep and Grace Chung.

You can depend on Carl Banner, producer of Washington Musica Viva, to entertain and enlighten his audience. Start with his selection "Music for a Farce" by novelist-composer Paul Bowles; "Love After 1950," a contemporary poetry song cycle by Libby Larsen, and "La Revue de Cuisine," a Dadaist kitchen fantasy by the Czech composer Bohuslav Martinu. It's clear Banner loves the music he chooses to play (he is the pianist) and wants his audience to understand something about each piece. In a few words, he whets the appetite and then gets to the music.

"Music for a Farce," played masterfully by Chris Royal on trumpet, Rhonda Buckley on soprano sax, Banner on piano, and Marty Knepp on percussion, is an evocative chamber ensemble in eight parts. Originally written for the troubled play *Too Much Johnson* by Orson Welles and John Houseman, "Farce" conjures venues like the circus, dancehall, a smoky bar, a cabaret, and a marketplace like the souks Bowles frequented in Tangier where he lived most of his life. Whimsy, ticking clocks, a screaming heroine suggest themselves in the music that runs the gamut from lyrical to jazzed to dissonant. The music gave Chris Royal the opportunity to deliver a standout performance.

Larsen's five-part song cycle included poetry by such poets as Rita Dove and Muriel Rukeyser. Song 3, "Big Sister Says, 1967" is a honky-tonk number that mezzo soprano Karen Friedman delivered with punch. "Beauty hurts" are the opening words. Under the vocal line, a Jerry Lee Lewis riff plays. It's a wild ride that Banner and Friedman delivered well. Song 5 "I Make My Magic" is described as Isadora's Dance and one assumes this is Isadora Duncan. What is fascinating about this piece is the complex musical counterpoint that includes what Carl Banner calls turbulent figuration and sunlit glissandos. Banner's performance was outstanding and one should know that he said he practiced this piece as much as he practiced the rest of the music he played.

The last entrée on the classical side, "La Revue de Cuisine," has an odd story that accompanies this ballet work. It concerns a fight between cooking pots. Musically the composition includes trumpet fanfare (another opportunity for Chris Royal to display his skills), plucked violin (good work by Hasse Borup) that resounds again a piano produced oom-pah (Carl Banner), and an ominous minor prelude that gives way to tango (enhanced by the sounds of bassoonist Ben Greanya, saxophonist Rhonda Buckley, and cellist Amy Leung). Charleston melodies weave in and out. To cap the performance as well as keep the musicians together, guest conductor Masa Mitsumoto provided his own element of dance movement.

Banner's opening remarks indicated that even in classical music there is an element of improvisation but largely what the audience heard was a well-rehearsed concert by musicians who enjoyed each other's contribution.

In the second half of the program, jazz composer John Kamman offered a set of improvised pieces that he collectively labeled "Five Tones." The best segments of this work included an uncharted, unrehearsed performance by vocalist Armand Ntep and guitarist John Kamman. Also noteworthy was the trance inducing music that closed the program. This work was very much like some of the Moroccan music Paul Bowles recorded for the Library of Congress. As expected with African influenced jazz, percussion (Kamman briefly on a djembe drum, Flaco Woods on Congo drums, Marty Knepp on traditional jazz drums) played a large role in the sound of "Five Tones." To this add Alan Lewine on bass and Kamman occasionally on piano. One of the problems with this kind of jazz performance is that it takes a critical amount of time for the players' energy to arise and for the connection to occur between the players. What this reviewer longed for in the second portion of the evening was a cushioned banquet with something soothing to drink and not a hard church pew.

Reviewed by Karren L. Alenier