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Esperanza Spalding draws young new audience to jazz

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Esperanza Spalding performs at Symphony Center Friday. (Chris Sweda/ Chicago Tribune)

Howard Reich
Arts critic

10:35 a.m. CDT, October 8, 2011

A very different kind of audience crowded into Symphony Center on Friday night.

Different, that is, from the listeners who typically attend jazz events in the grand old home of the **Chicago Symphony Orchestra**. This time, Chicagoans who appeared to be in their 20s and 30s helped fill every inch of a sold-out auditorium, the young concertgoers dressed up for the occasion and representing an enormous segment of the audience.

This is precisely the crowd that jazz needs to cultivate for its second century: a hip, young contingent that goes out at night. The 26-year-old bassist-vocalist Esperanza Spalding

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No doubt many came because of Spalding's new-found fame. In February, Spalding won the best new artist Grammy Award, to the despair of **Justin Bieber** fans everywhere. Yet judging by this audience's reaction to Spalding's luminous but sometimes challenging music, these listeners weren't simply dropping in on the flavor of the month. Their enthusiastic ovations suggested they were responding to an ultra-sophisticated music that rarely enjoys this kind of attention in American popular culture.

The credit, of course, goes to Spalding, who has wrapped some thorny musical ideas in a gleaming, difficult-to-resist package. The very sight of a slender, willowy woman holding her upright bass up-close and moving constantly to the beat – her outsized Afro swaying all the while – instantly commands attention.

Far more important, however, is the sound that Spalding produces, her soft, slightly gauzy vocals riding high above her plush, deep-amber bass lines. Both musical strands originate from the same remarkable source: a musician who makes complicated melodic ideas sound easily accessible and appealing.

How Spalding does this remains something of a mystery, for she makes no musical compromises along the way. Study her vocal lines, and you won't hear the tuneful little hooks that sell by the millions these days. Instead, her sung phrases bob tirelessly

from high to low, stopping briefly at unlikely spots, implying unconventional harmonies and celebrating oddly angular intervals. Meanwhile, she produces similarly restless ideas on bass, her two-part counterpoint a feast for the ears but not easy listening, that's for sure.

Part of Spalding's allure surely owes to the unusual band she has assembled and the warmly glowing arrangements she and Gil Goldstein have penned for it. Whether exploring Brazilian bossa nova or vintage American songwriting or her own ethereal compositions, Spalding bathes this music in shimmering color. A classical string trio provides velvety chordal support; a jazz rhythm section gives the music drive and thrust; an accompanying singer amplifies and augments Spalding's mercurial vocals. There's nothing else quite like this in jazz today.

The concert drew entirely on music from Spalding's breakthrough CD, "Chamber Music Society" (Heads Up), the compositions slightly rearranged to better suit the ebb and flow of live performance. But just as happened last December, when the pre-Grammy Spalding offered an abridged version of this repertoire in the same venue, the music-making proved significantly more effective in concert than on a somewhat sugary, overly precious recording.

Here listeners encountered a fearless, free-flying vocal duet to open **Antonio Carlos Jobim's** "Inutil Paisagem," which then developed into a tour de force for Spalding and singer Leala Cyr, the two musicians weaving no less than four threads of sound.

In Spalding's "Winter Sun" and "Really Very Small," she dared to offer a bit of performance-art commentary before each piece, thereby giving valuable dramatic context to the music.

Granted, Spalding's often whispering soprano does not rank as one of the great vocal instruments of our time.

And yet that small, airy, lovely voice suits her just fine, its delicate tone an apt metaphor for a most disarming music.



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