

Review: Ystad Sweden 2016



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Michael Tucker rather enjoys the 2016 festival in southern Sweden, including Marlene VerPlanck, Bill Mays, Paolo Fresu and Richard Galliano

At the 2012 Ystad Sweden Jazz Festival, where he was guest of honour, Quincy Jones spoke of the warmth, intelligence and humanity of the Swedish, calling them "360 degree people". Pianist and festival artistic director Jan Lundgren epitomises what Jones meant.

Together with the indefatigable festival president Thomas Lantz, a host of volunteers, and a great press office of Itta Johnson, Brian Ralph and Tove Waldén, for the past six years Lundgren has delivered what is generally agreed to be one of the finest festivals in the world. Blessed by a superb location on the Baltic and graced by some of the most characterful venues, both interior and exterior, one could wish for, Ystad is a place which casts a lifelong spell.

Lundgren turned 50 this year but there is not the smallest sign of any drop in the levels of energy, musical literacy and intellectual open-mindedness that have characterised his direction of the festival as much as his playing - the last richly evident in his two most recent CDs: *The Ystad Concert* (celebrating the music of Jan Johansson) and *Mare Nostrum 2*, both released this year on ACT.

The energy and affirmation that have characterised Lundgren's sense of what a festival should be were in plentiful evidence in the opening two days of this, the seventh, Ystad Festival. It is now a five-day event, with this year featuring the richest programme to date.

Following the fun of the opening afternoon's street "Yazz" parade by the Tuesday Night Brass Band, the evening's VIP concert at Ystad theatre - given chiefly for sponsors and friends of the festival - featured top Swedish vocalists Vivian Buczek, Hannah Svensson and Anna Pauline in a celebration of "All That Vocal Jazz". Delivered with tremendous zest and musicality their evident affinities and chemistry set up an unimprovable feelgood vibe for the rest of the week.

Combining fresh-sounding close harmonies with solo outings, including an outstanding rendition by Buczek of Billie Holiday's *God Bless The Child*, the music was driven by the potent combination of bassist Mattias Svensson and drummer Cornelia Nilsson. Nilsson was depping for Zoltan Csörsz and did so well, combining a driving lightness of touch with a good sense of texture and colour. Ewan Svensson's electric guitar fills and solos displayed his customary delicious blend of harmonic judgement and bluesy power.

If this concert was a wonderful demonstration of the breadth and depth of the jazz vocal tradition, featuring as it did tributes to Ella Fitzgerald and Anita O'Day, on the second day another vocal extravaganza gave ample testimony to jazz's roots in blues and gospel. Born in Florida but long domiciled in Sweden, LaGaylia Frazier describes herself as a soul singer more and more drawn to jazz.

Backed by the excellent Bohuslän Big Band, she delighted a packed audience at the 500+seater Surbrunnsparken hall with a programme which included several finely delivered jazz classics but which really came alive in her high-octane treatments of numbers by Marvin Gaye and Stevie Wonder. A Beatles medley (*With A Little Help From My Friends* and *We Can Work It Out*) also went down well.



The literacy of Lundgren's programme overall was especially clear in the concerts of the first two days. The wonderful Marlene VerPlanck (pictured above), backed by a fine British trio of John Pearce (piano), Paul Morgan (bass) and Bobby Worth (drums), entertained an appreciative crowd at the lovely outdoor venue of Per Helsas Gård with a typically incisive, beautifully modulated look at the Great American Songbook. She delighted the female part of the audience especially with her wry encore of *The Lies Of Handsome Men*.

Two further concerts profiled instrumental excellence on another level. At the intimate outdoor Hos Morten cafe drummer Per-Arne Tollbom's Kind Of New quintet put a new spin and shine on hard-bop and modal tropes with Anders Bergcrantz's trumpet outstanding in its mix of technical fluency and expressive range. The previous day, at Per Helsas Gård, another most accomplished drummer, Lars Beijbom, led a fine sextet through a groove-rich set which was both swinging and funky, soulful and fun.

A two-part lecture/conversation by pianist Bill Mays and critic Doug Ramsey offered a refreshingly open history of jazz piano, concentrating on pianists also known for their compositions, from Hines, Ellington and Morton through to Taylor, Corea and Hancock. Mays did a terrific job conveying the essence of each example and amused the appreciative audience with a spirited rendition of his own piece *Have You Heard Hank Jones?*

Openness of spirit was equally evident in exploratory concerts by Polish violinist Adam Baldych, appearing with Norwegian pianist Helge Lien's trio, and German pianist Joachim Kühn. A gentle duet between Baldych and Lien was for me the highlight of the set.

Kühn gave a densely woven solo concert, with some welcome moments of light and shade supplied by his fine reading of Ornette Coleman's piece *Beauty And Truth*, at an atmospheric new venue for the festival, the recently restored Klostret - just a short walk from the famous S:te Maria Kyrka in the centre of town.

The previous evening the Klostret was host to a unique, one-off concert where Paolo Fresu (trumpet, flugelhorn) and Daniele di Bonaventura (bandoneon) improvised in the company of the Ensemble Mare Balticum, a Nordic vocal and instrumental quartet specialising in early music. Luggage problems meant that Fresu was without his various electronic effects, including digital delay, but in the event this worked to the music's advantage as the haunting simplicity of his etched lines melded to poetic effect with the lucidity of the ensemble's simply cast lines.

Fresu - who had earlier played the now traditional opening trumpet fanfare from the tower of S:te Maria Kyrka - and Di Bonaventura ended the concert with a marvellous and moving sequence of duets, the whole concert receiving a standing ovation.



Standing ovations were also accorded to two superb and deeply memorable concerts of the opening days: one from French accordionist Richard Galliano, who offered an hour of his solo magicianship to a packed S:ta Maria Kyrka, and the other from the Mare Nostrum Trio of Galliano, Fresu and Jan Lundgren.

Those who know recordings such as Galliano's Paris Concert of 2009 will be aware of what an extraordinary range of musicianship this man is able to command. Perhaps only Galliano (pictured left with Paolo Fresu) could successfully piece together Debussy's *Clair De Lune* and Lennon's *Imagine* as he did in a programme which ranged across French chanson, tango, film scores, Chaplin and Bach - the whole fired by the kind of sinewy muscularity

one has long come to relish from a man whose first significant musical influence was Clifford Brown.

At 65 years, Galliano displays the energy of a man half his age. Just hours after this solo tour de force he was performing again, this time in a late-night concert with the Mare Nostrum Trio at the Ystad Teater. Opening with Lundgren's lovely *Mare Nostrum* from their first album, this exceptional trio ranged far and wide in a programme which at times was as rhythmically forceful (as in Lundgren's *Leklåt* and the concluding *Loveland*) as it was lyrically compelling (exemplified by the encore of Claudio Monteverdi's *Si Dolce È Il Tormento*). Fresu employed his

newly retrieved digital delay to prime effect on a lovely duo with Lundgren on a Swedish folk theme, typifying the manner in which this concert explored the dynamics of performance.

After an excellent opening two days the YJF continued to offer music of the highest order. All-in-all a healthy 8000 tickets were sold and the only thing that disappointed was the weather. However, if the sharp wind took the usual warmth out of the Ystad sun, the occasional rainy squalls helped supply one of the great images of the festival, as a determined crowd huddled under umbrellas and plastic macs at Hos Morten Cafe, intent on enjoying the liquid vocals of Karolina Vucidolac in her fine concert The Brazil Connection with Ann-Marie Henning (piano) and Augusto Mattoso (bass).

Festival director Jan Lundgren has always managed to strike a good balance between international and local, American, European and "world" talent and this year was no exception. Hugh Masekela (pictured right) made a welcome return appearance following his triumph at the YJF in 2013; a South African flavour was also evident in the concert by Italian pianist Franco D'Andrea and his compatriots Mauro Ottolini (trombone) and Daniele D'Agaro (clarinet) who played a range of blues-charged themes, including some appropriate Ellington, to a sequence of photographs of township life by leading Italian photographer Pino Ninfa who programmed his images from the stage.



Many an excellent Nordic player featured this year. Following the collaboration between Polish violinist Adam Baldych and the Helge Lien trio at the Ystad Art Museum on Thursday, on Friday there Norwegian guitarist Jacob Young and his compatriot Trygve Seim (saxophones) joined the fine Polish trio led by pianist Marcin Wasilewski to offer a spacious reading of material from their recent ECM album *Forever Young*. The Karin Hammar Fab 4 put this accomplished Swedish trombonist together with Norwegian tenor sax player Hannah Paulsberg for a well received concert at the Scala cinema. However, the Nordic concert I relished most was the debut appearance at the YJF of Danish pianist Kathrine Windfeld and her Big Band. Windfeld speaks of wanting her music to be vibrant, colourful and physical. At times reminiscent of George Russell as much as the Kenny Clarke/Francy Boland band, her music had cracking swing in abundance, full and richly diversified voicings but above all the confidence to exploit a wide dynamic range. Check out her striking compositions and the instrumental prowess of her young, chiefly Nordic, band on the 2014 *Aircraft* (Gateway Music).

Another feature of Lundgren's programming is an energising balance between the old and the new, conjuring a sense that the best of jazz exists in an "eternal now" of revitalised tradition and wide-ranging innovation. At the end of the excellent recital and lecture by Bill Mays and Doug Ramsey, Mays played a most spirited version of James P. Johnson's *Carolina Shout*; at the end of his robust (and to my ears, at times overly robust) concluding trio concert with Omri Mor (piano) and Daniel For (drums), bassist Avishai Cohen offered some welcome lyrical relief in a three-part encore which included moving vocal renditions of *Motherless Child* and the Nat King Cole classic, *Nature Boy*. And Bob James – a pianist often seen as one of the originators of so-called smooth jazz – brought his well-received Ystad set to a close with a stride-inflected reading of *Someone To Watch Over Me*. This veteran had not been to Sweden since his days with Sarah Vaughan in the early 60s and he clearly relished the experience. His fine quartet delivered a concert full of intelligently conceived grooves and changing moods, including a Bach--touched look at the old pop classic *Downtown*. Perry Hughes offered plenty of mellow electric guitar, mostly played with the thumb, while that excellent drummer Billy Kilson was throughout a model of taste and drive.



Another standout concert for many, including me, was the appearance of Joe Lovano (pictured left) – on tenor throughout – with the Bohuslän Big Band at a packed Ystad Teater. One of the highlights of LaGaylia Frazier's gig with this band had been a baritone-led, all instrumental reading of *Dearly Beloved* which showcased both the precision and depth of feeling these first-class musicians are able to muster. Lovano's appreciation of the band was evident from start to finish in an engrossing programme which ranged from the contemporary bop of the Lovano original *Bird's Eye View* to a soulfully paced reading and fine arrangement of Charles Mingus's *Duke Ellington's Sound Of Love*. Accordion and tenor sax from the band were featured respectively on Lovano's *The Streets Of Napoli* and Joe Henderson's *Inner Urge*; following the ever-building final number *Viva Caruso*, Lovano offered a solo encore which at times mined Webster-like depths, appreciated as much by the band as by the ecstatic audience.

Lovano has long been acknowledged as an absolute master of his instrument. So too has Swedish tenorist Bernt Rosengren who is just a year or so short of his 80th birthday. His morning concert at Per Helsas Gärd found the Swedish legend in the company of Christina von Bülow, a leading figure on the Danish scene who made a fine album with Rosengren in 2006, *Heartaches*, on Music Mecca. She is a most assured player who can at times bring Sonny Criss to mind and contributed incisive lines to a programme typified by the medium-stroll bounce of the concluding *Hip Walk*, which featured a tasty arco outing from bassist Hans Backenroth. It was great to see Rosengren in the kind of commanding form evident throughout his 2015 recording *Ballads*, on

pb7 records.

Two further sax players with world reputations graced the YJF and both appeared in the highly atmospheric space that is the Klosterkyrkan (abbey). The German Heinz Sauer is into his 80s but played with granite authority, his full and searching tone employed to maximum effect through the most economic phrases, offering judicious complementary contrasts to the flowing quicksilver romanticism of his compatriot, pianist Michael Wollny. Dave Liebman has a beautiful clear tone on soprano and deployed this consistently in his duo concert with pianist Jean-Marie Machado in a programme consisting chiefly of originals as elegantly phrased as they were rhythmically assertive. Engrossing as the music was, including a Ravel piece as an encore, I would have welcomed more of the dynamic contrast evident when Liebman put aside his soprano for one number to take up a wooden flute.

As already indicated, Ystad programmes are known for their breadth and depth and this year was no exception. Danish violin virtuoso Svend Asmussen celebrated his 100th birthday earlier this year and was present at a rapturously received concert to celebrate his life in music, featuring Bjerke Falgren and Gunnar Lidberg on violin and Jacob Fischer on guitar. Tradition of a different order informed a captivating concert by Martin Taylor and Ulf Wakenius: Taylor can claim 11 years with Stéphane Grappelli while Wakenius held the guitar chair with Oscar Peterson for 10 years. "So I guess that makes us the last of the Mohicans" joked Wakenius as he and Taylor delighted the crowd at the Saltsjöbaden venue on the shores of the Baltic with a programme encompassing Barney Kessel, Henry Mancini and Billy Taylor. There were also carefully crafted originals from each player and a lovely solo reading by Taylor of *They Can't Take That Away From Me*. Wakenius's feature was a Brazilian medley, and an overall feeling of warmth infused a gig which showcased these two masters' harmonic literacy, bluesy power and rhythmic range, the last typified by the Caribbean-flavoured encore.

To speak of Swedish jazz and tradition is to speak of many things but especially it is to speak of that melding of folk tropes and modern jazz which one associates above all with the music of the late Jan Johansson. Perhaps the finest concert at last year's festival was "Lycklig resa" (translating as *bon voyage*) – a tribute to Johansson by Jan Lundgren, Mattias Svensson and the Bonfiglioli Weber String Quartet, recently released on ACT as *The Ystad Concert*. Such was the demand for this concert last year that Lundgren felt it appropriate to revisit the material and the result was in every way as, if not more, compelling with the interaction of all the players outstanding. Last year I was fortunate enough to listen to this music in the company of Bengt-Arne Wallin, one of Sweden's greatest artists in the folk/jazz field. Sadly, Wallin died in November 2015. Trumpeter Goran Kajfes and his Oddjob Quintet with saxophonist Ruskträsk Johansson offered a fine tribute to him in a concert in which the spirit of latter-day Miles Davis was evident. Folk elements also dominated the concert *Plays Swedish Folk*, by the Filip Jers Quartet. Presented in the intimate setting of the Scala cinema the concert was so popular that it was presented twice. The harmonica playing of Swedish Jers was richly conceived in tone and phrasing and together with Henrik Hallberg (guitar), Johan Lindbom (bass) and Wille Alin (drums) brought a contemporary edge to classic pieces by Johansson.

Vocalists have always been given plenty of exposure at the YJF. In recent years there has been much discussion about what it can mean to speak of someone as a "jazz" singer. This year offered plenty to fuel that discussion, from the vocals of Ellekari Sander in her wide-ranging programme with The Other Woman quartet to Zara McFarlane's several soulful numbers with the Grégoire Maret Quartet, and from Iris Bergcrantz's textured musings in the Different Universe quintet to the French, multilingual Cyrille Aimée with a two-guitar quartet drawing delightfully on the occasional Hot Club de France riff. Aimée was particularly impressive, using loop technology to poetic effect on a solo piece and scatting excellently; you can check out her many qualities on her recent Mack Avenue CD *Let's Get Lost*. For me however, chief candidate for the "jazz singer award" this year was Britain's Anita Wardell (pictured right). Bob Dorough had been scheduled to appear but unfortunately was indisposed so, at very short notice Wardell was called in to help deliver an excellent tribute to Mr Hip in the company of trumpeter and vocalist Marten Lundgren, with bassist Helen Marstrand who also doubled on vocals. Lundgren is a really interesting personality whose excellent trumpet playing and vocals can be enjoyed on his Gateway Music release *Marten Lundgren Plays The Music Of Bob Dorough*. The CD features the young Sven Erik Lundqvist on piano and he excelled in the concert at the Klosterkyrkan; he also led three nights of lively jam sessions at the festival.



For anyone who did not know Anita Wardell's fine recordings *Noted* and *Kinda Blue* from 2006 and 2008 respectively, her assured intonation, pitch and rhythmic élan must have come as a revelation as she did full justice to the wit, wisdom and swing of Dorough and fellow spirits Dave Frishberg and Fran Landesman. As convincing in delivering a lyric as she was in scatting and vocalese, Wardell was simply superb. As such, she epitomised so much of what is compelling about the YJF.

And as usual, I can't wait for next year!

Photos by Markus Fägersten

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