

Molde Fest Spotlights Violin Dynamo

PART OF WHAT MAKES THE MOLDE JAZZ FESTIVAL A PRIZE ON THE global jazz festival circuit is its delicate balancing act in the programming department, keeping a watchful eye on matters of art and issues of popular culture over the course of its annual feast in this fjord-hugged corner of Norway.

For the 56th edition, which ran July 18–23, a short list of highlights ranged from the mainstream American visitors—pianist Chick Corea and band, guitarist Pat Metheny in an intimate duet with bassist Ron Carter and an enlightened pairing of the Branford Marsalis Quartet with singer Kurt Elling—to the maverick freedom-within-structure magic of trumpeter Wadada Leo Smith’s Golden Quartet and pianist Django Bates, a player definitely deserving of wider recognition.

This was also a year in which the distinctive artist in residence role was particularly memorable and stocked with musical intrigue. That role belonged to the eclectic and ear-friendly violinist Ola Kvernberg.

At a press conference on the festival’s final day, artistic director Hans-Olav Solli (in his first official year as director) expressed his satisfaction over Kvernberg’s qualifications for the position. “Ola is close to a perfect example of someone with a huge range of talents,” he said. Of working with Kvernberg to develop the festival’s programming, Solli added, “It was big fun.”

Being on the receiving end of that program was big fun, too, with some nice surprises folded into the mix. Kvernberg’s July 18 performance was the grand gala of the residency, with the violinist at the epicenter of a large-ensemble fusion of jazz and chamber music. The reputation of this piece, “Mechanical Fair,” precedes Molde, having been commissioned by the Norwegian Kongsberg festival in 2013, and recorded for the Norwegian Jazzland label. The Molde performance, combining a jazz



Ola Kvernberg (left) and Joshua Redman perform at the Molde Jazz Festival in Molde, Norway, on July 20.

band in the center of strings and other orchestral timbres and blending melodic and minimalist themes into a sweeping suite, was an expansion of the original.

If strings prevailed for the night of July 18, then drums and seductively pummeling percussion ruled the next night, with Kvernberg’s new project, Steamdome, aptly booked for a late-night set at a club-style venue. The combination of grooves, interlocking riffs and slinky odd-metered pulses made up much of the program for what was essentially a cinematic post-rock vehicle, with improvisation kept to a minimum.

It was an entirely different story the following day, which found Kvernberg delivering an impressive duo performance with saxophonist Joshua Redman. Odd as it may sound on paper, the pairing was an inspired one, as the two agile players swapped riffs and danced around each other’s ideas.

—Josef Woodard