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New band, new venue show promise

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Arts critic

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When you own the club, you get to book the acts, which helps explain why a lustrous jazz octet crowded the tiny, storefront stage at Club Blujazz over the weekend.

Jazz rooms typically can't afford to present large ensembles such as violinist Diane Delin's Octagon. But because Delin recently opened Club Blujazz with her husband, guitarist Greg Pasenko, she was able to give this new group the kind of showcase it deserves.

Though Delin has led jazz-with-strings projects before, she plunges more deeply than ever into Third Stream territory with Octagon. The group played just once before, at the Hyde Park Jazz Festival, so it remains to be discovered by Chicago listeners.

Judging by its evocative performance Friday night, Octagon should build a loyal following in Chicago and beyond. The way Delin and these musicians merge jazz rhythm with quasi-classical instrumentation could lure both audiences.

The band's greatest asset may be the scores it plays, most composed or arranged by Delin and pianist Dennis Luxion. Each artist knows how to avoid the usual cliches of crossover writing: thick and sappy strings, heavy-handed rhythm, jarring shifts between jazz and classical vocabularies.

Instead, Delin and friends virtually transcend genre, playing a music that embraces many idioms, from Afro-Caribbean to pop, from high-toned blues to classical romanticism.

Any jazz ensemble that plays "My Favorite Things" risks evoking memories of saxophonist John Coltrane and his monumental transformations of the tune. Yet Octagon jumped right in, its Afro-Cuban arrangement stylistically so far removed from Coltrane's landmark as to avoid comparisons. To hear Delin and violinist Edgar Gabriel improvising in free-flowing duets was to understand the degree of musical invention that Octagon can achieve (though Delin's tone could use more bloom and sheen).

Delin's arrangement of Rachmaninoff's "Vocalese" captured the serene beauty of the famous melody, arranged as if it might have been played by a Hollywood studio ensemble of the 1940s. And Luxion's "Fredley No. 3," which re-imagined Chopin's Prelude in C Minor, bristled with inventive writing.

When was the last time, after all, that you heard Chopin's music expressed as a fugue, complete with piano quotations from Dizzy Gillespie's "A Night in Tunisia"?

As for Club Blujazz, the room sounded live and inviting. If the place continues to book music at this level, Chicago listeners will have cause to celebrate.

Club Blujazz presents music seven nights a week at 1540 W. North Ave.; cover varies; 773-360-8046.

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