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A fine tapestry of rhythm, song

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The Izzy Asper Jazz Series continued Saturday night with the highly creative African guitarist Lionel Loueke and his trio with special guest vocalist Gretchen Parlato. This was not a performance that relied on the century-old jazz standards and recognizable melodies of so many jazz shows, so those expecting to hum along would have been disappointed. Instead, the audience was treated to a rich tapestry of rhythm, improvisation and songs that spoke on a level not often experienced in jazz shows here in town.

Loueke comes from Benin, West Africa, where he studied music from his own culture before moving to and studying jazz in both Paris and the U.S. He caught the attention of people such as Herbie Hancock and Terrence Blanchard, who mentored the guitarist and today Loueke is one of the most talked-about jazz guitarists on the scene.

Saturday night's performance was a perfect example of his unique style of blending African rhythms with a jazz sensibility. Backed by his regular trio, Massimo Biolcati (bass), Ferenc Nemeth (drums) and vocalist Parlato, all former classmates at the Berklee College of Music, Loueke eased into a mellow opening number, *Vivi*, which loosely translated means nice and sweet. It was an appropriate title for the slow groove that introduced both Loueke's clean, crystal guitar sound and Parlato's sweet, enchanting vocals. The words of the song, if there were any, took a backseat to the percussive, wordless sounds that Parlato excels in, and Loueke looked at ease as his fingers softly guided the band through the number.

Parlato left the stage for the next song and Loueke took the vocal lead as he would on several occasions throughout the show. While he has already developed his own signature guitar sound, Loueke also likes to sing along with his guitar and is known for his ability to create his own percussive sounds by clicking his tongue. Nemeth and Biolcati deftly and subtly accompanied Loueke as he sang and played a solo that bordered on a blues sound, but retained the rhythms of African music and syncopated jazz chords in the same breath.

When Parlato was with the trio on stage, she and Loueke created a hypnotizing mix of complex rhythms. Parlato was born and raised in the U.S., but along with her jazz training she has devoted much of her time to learning the music and rhythms of Brazil and Africa. This came through on songs such as *Djavan Flor de lis*, a song about the end of a love relationship, which sounded more upbeat and happy, as Parlato sang and clapped her hands, Loueke plucked out rhythmic notes and sang harmony, and Nemeth and Biolcati churned out a funky beat.

Saxophone player Steve Wilson, who is in town teaching at the University of Manitoba Jazz Program, joined the group on stage for a couple of songs, including the final piece, which had a real African bounce, light, hopeful and ended the evening on an upbeat note.

Concert Review

Lionel Loueke Trio & Gretchen Parlato

Barney Theatre

Nov. 8

Attendance: 200 (sold out)

4 out 5 stars

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