

## Top jazz players put 'hip' in Christmas

Winnipeg Free Press  
Monday, December 16, 2002  
Page: D6  
Section: Entertainment  
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### Asper Foundation Jazz Performances

Berney Theatre

Dec 15

CHRISTMAS music can be hip in the right hands.

Especially when those hands belong to a half-dozen of Canada's top jazz musicians who joined American pianist Bill Mays for two concerts yesterday.

Billed as the Toronto Chamber Jazz Septet, the piano, bass, drums and four-horn ensemble performed material from Ravel to Monk to Tchaikovsky's Nutcracker Suite.

The Sugar Plum Fairy has to add a twist to her dance when she has to keep up with four of the country's best woodwind players Phil Dwyer (tenor sax, clarinet); P.J. Perry (soprano sax, flute); John Johnson (alto sax, alto flute); and Perry White (baritone sax, bass clarinet) and a rhythm section of Mays, bassist Neil Swainson and drummer Terry Clarke.

The horn section was a delight with great ensemble playing and even better soloing. Dwyer may have had the highlight of the afternoon show with his extended tenor sax soloing on the Arab Dance movement from the Nutcracker.

The baritone sax is usually seen, at least in these parts, as an ensemble instrument in big bands, but in White's hands yesterday it was a top-notch solo instrument, especially on Thelonious Monk's Stuffy Turkey.

Mays, who has performed here before as part of the **Asper Foundation Jazz Performances** series, opened the two-hour concert with the Bill Evans tune, My Bells, before the band joined in for a terrific version of My Favorite Things. In typical jazz fashion, the musicians went through a series of solos, but it helped introduce the audience to the exceptional skill of each of these players.

Debussy's Clare de Lune took on a Brazilian tinge in Mays' arrangement, and Have Yourself A Merry Little Christmas was another showcase for the pianist as he opened the tune solo before bass and drums were added.

P.J. Perry's flute playing was superb on Ravel's Pavane from the Mother Goose Suite and Johnson's solos on alto sax and flute were a treat throughout the show.

The four horns were dead on in the ensemble playing, and the combination of bari solo and alto, tenor and soprano ensemble playing on Stuffy Turkey was a real treat.

Bassist Swainson and drummer Clarke are naturals to anchor any jazz band, but they are inventive soloists as well.

This group was put together last year when the CBC commissioned Mays to perform the Nutcracker for broadcast and he enlisted Clarke to find the players. They performed then, last Friday in Edmonton and here yesterday.

It was the second time in eight days that a jazz version of Nutcracker was performed in the city. On the previous Sunday, the Winnipeg Jazz Orchestra included the Ellington/Strayhorn version of the suite in its holiday concerts.

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