

# NEW JAZZ OTTAWA WINTER MUSIC FESTIVAL: SIDE-EYE & GRACE AT THE LABO THEATRE 03/29/19

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OTTAWA WINTERS ARE BRUTAL. BECOMING A classically trained musician? also brutal. uOttawa violin student Lev Nesterov has attempted to ease the seasonal blues by founding the **Ottawa Winter Music Festival**, a three-part showcase of classical, jazz, and vocal concerts. The first installment: what might seem to be your conventional night of string ensemble works... except that it included a North American premier of Alexy Kurbatov's *Train*, and acclaimed violinist Yehonatan Berick as soloist (!)

Next up: newly-formed, Ottawa-born jazz combo, **Side-Eye and Grace**. Regardless of how fresh (and young) this group looks, they played an inviting show that was equal parts quirky charm and utterly contagious music-making. Offering the listener a variety of original tunes, arrangements, and jazz standards, Nesterov lucked out in programming what is sure to be Ottawa's latest taste of purely warm, catchy, uncomplicated jazz.

This one marked another first in musically christening the brand-new LabO Theatre at the Ottawa Art Gallery. I arrived last Friday evening to the dark black box sized venue, which hosted a sizeable yet intimate gathering on the tiered, bleacher-style seating. The audience looks down to the wide floor stage: simple set-up with three stools, four personal amplification systems, and a whole wash of moody lighting. No later than seven-thirty, the four musicians walk out, immediately sparking bright applause and a few "woo!"s from the audience, no doubt full of supporters and friends of the casual crew on stage. And they are keeping it casual: right from the start, jazz violinist Erik Johnson-Scherger greets the audience, immediately shattering any notions that this is going to be conventional chamber music. Despite it being a "chamber" concert, this is **jazz**...and there isn't a wall between them and the welcome listeners.

"So hello everyone. We are... Side-Eye and Grace...I think so." Johnson-Scherger opens the floor for all the witty banter that will follow over the course of the two-hour show, mostly contributed by himself and guitarist/arranger virtuoso: Garrett Warner. "We're playing chamber jazz, and I don't know how many of you saw the promotional materials explaining exactly what that is, because I know it sounds like a nebulous term... but basically, it's jazz, but like, post-modern. Also in a chamber." [cue audience giggles] The lack of stuffy distance typical of chamber concerts was fully apparent throughout the show, and these blazer-clad gentlemen boasted exceptional talents at both performing and writing.

They performed tunes written by each member, opening with Johnson-Scherger's adorable and quaint *Ducks, 'neath the Crab-Apple Tree*, followed by guitarist Kyle Jordan's catchy rounds *O*, and *loop'd*, the upbeat and folky title track *Side-Eye and Grace* by Johnson-Scherger, bassist Christ Pond's gorgeously sweet untitled ballad, Warner's smoky-cool tribute to great jazz pianist Bill Evans, and a handful of other great originals. The group also nailed classic jazz standards like the famous *What is this Thing Called Love* and Miles Davis' *Blue in Green*. They played everything with a cool, collected vibe, and a groove that was undeniably contagious.

Both Jordan and Warner boast a huge capacity in their guitar skills, not only with flashy technical chops, but by their own unique playing styles. Jordan offered a constantly present rhythmic drive, smooth tone and a laid-back presence, while Warner's silky sound and (sorry to be blunt, but) nearly orgasmic facial expressions let the audience know that he was always *there*, completely in the moment. Pond's navigation around the bass had the audience in rapture...an unreal sense of groove that never let up. Johnson-Scherger tied the group together with dazzling harmonic feats, spot-on articulation that could go from folky to jazzy in a second, and that cutting, edgy tone that spoke above the warm foundation.

The sounds these guys were making simply drew everybody in: it was less a chamber concert and more of an opportunity to absorb the effortless sounds of (really talented) friends jamming on a Friday night. The sense of community was palpable; the energy in the room held an unmistakable buzz, and you could feel it as we all walked out into the brightly-lit hallway for a brief reception: nobody wanted to leave. The event was another hit success for Ottawa Winter Music Festival, and left us all wanting to know what's next for this ensemble. I'm fairly confident that we will all be keeping at least one (side) eye out. <sup>SH</sup>