

Music

Compelling improvisation from Craig Taborn at London's Vortex Jazz Club

The audience was transfixed by the pianist's dramatic juxtapositions, technical finesse and his unique use of pedals



Craig Taborn at the Vortex Jazz Club © Roger Thomas

Mike Hobart FEBRUARY 2 2022

Sign up for our life and arts newsletter

Get a shot of inspiration with the FT Weekend bulletin - the best in life, arts and culture. Delivered every Saturday morning.

Enter your email address

Try it free for 30 days

American pianist Craig Taborn's solo performances are rich with raw emotion, stark juxtapositions and full-pedal resonances that threaten to shake the room. At this second-house gig, he played three through-improvised pieces, each laden with detail and technical finesse, each one unfolding with its own narrative arc.

The audience, almost to a person and mirroring the pianist, sat perfectly still throughout. Eyes closed, leaning slightly forward, they savoured every nuanced note. And when each creation ended, the room erupted with appreciative whoops and shouts. The Vortex has a deserved reputation as a "listening" club, but I have rarely seen an audience as focused as this.

Taborn has built a unique personal style out of dramatic juxtapositions, shadowy jazz references and technique pushed to the edge. Occasionally, lines dazzle at lightning speed, rhythms erupt and fully voiced chords rampage round the keyboard. But these are passing moments, and it is his use of the grand piano's pedals to control dynamics, space and tone that bears a truly personal stamp. Even their squeaks and thuds are brought into play as a rhythmic effect.

The evening began with a slowly unfolding, splayed downward arpeggio; Taborn left the last note hanging, as if waiting for its implications to sink in, and repeated it further up the scale. As he developed this germ of an idea, the form was squeezed and then expanded, time was stretched and he manipulated the piano's tone to soften or strengthen its emotional force.

As the piece progressed, new ideas were introduced as established notions faded. Ripples of notes tinkled over a decaying sustain, later to be developed into a dazzling conversation between left hand and right. Later, a fading echo was repeated with the full force of a slammed door, then deadened and slammed again to establish a new train of thought.

The long first improvisation included a romantic interlude, hints of the blues and a passage so minor-key that a single low-register note seemed etched with despair. It ended with Taborn's trademark evocation of ringing bells cascading over a seething maelstrom of asymmetric bass, with a soulful trill adding a novel touch.

The second piece began as a scattering of notes, cohered into ripples that fractured like glass then juxtaposed full-pedal violence with barely audible, soft-pedal calm. Swinging jazz was referenced, clean chords delivered and a sudden stop launched thunderous applause.

The third piece was equally detailed, but the outline was new. Warm beginnings acquired a sombre note, dynamics were probed in the middle range and long syncopated lines generated a tremendous pulse. The gig ended with a soul-jazz snippet repeated endlessly over low rumbling bass. The left-hand figure was eventually discarded, the snippet slowly faded and then a moment's silence cued clamours for more.

★★★★★

vortexjazz.co.uk