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LIVE REPORT: Craig Taborn balances power and poise on his Irish return



CIARAN BRENNAN

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It was the first night of the pianist’s European tour and his first Irish gig since his sold out show at the National Concert Hall in 2019.

A grand piano sat on the stage of the John Field Room in the National Concert Hall, reflecting the faces of the seated crowd and the crystal chandelier that dangled above. The piano was inanimate — as most pianos are — but jazz’s finest improviser was waiting in the wings to bring the keys to life.

Craig Taborn played the National Concert Hall in 2019 to a sold out crowd the last time he was in Ireland. Since then, we’ve had a pandemic, some protests and *Shadow Plays*, a critically acclaimed improvisational project from the Minnesota-born musician. A crowd of roughly 200 were eager to welcome the pianist on the first night of his European tour.

Taborn took the stage silently, clad in a charcoal grey suit jacket and pants, and the black t-shirt that is never far from his broad shoulders. Craig struck the first note, a dissonant jab of the keys, before the audience's applause had faded away.

The Brooklyn-based artist built his first piece up slowly. Care was taken with every note as he splashed the canvas with a variety of musical colours. He explored the beauty of discordance purveyed by



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Craig Taborn on playing in Ireland:
"There’s a connection to music, and a willingness to engage with it — regardless of the style of music"

Then the melody would resolve into a beautiful chord that brought you back home. Craig’s ability to balance contrasting textures was what made his playing so entrancingly beautiful. He juxtaposed harmony and dissonance, power and poise.

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As the piece developed, the audience witnessed the tremendous power that Craig possesses as he pounded the keys with his left hand. Simultaneously, his right hand flitted over the keys and crafted dazzling melodies of liquid gold.

He created a kaleidoscopic palette of sound that the crowd got completely lost in. Craig was like the conductor of a hypnotised train, guiding his passengers on a journey of captivating brilliance.

Craig seamlessly transitioned between contrasting dynamics. Some notes whispered, others roared but every single note mattered. Towards the back end of piece one (yes this was all one piece) he went on a marauding melodic run where melodies intertwined around each other and flirted with the notes to come and those that had already grown silent.

The piano seemed to be listening to him, such was his control. Much of the crowd closed their eyes and allowed the music to command them as Craig steered the melodic ship towards its destination. After 20 minutes (at least) of playing that passed in the blink of an eye, Craig came to a gradual halt, squeezing the last drips of sound out of the final chord before the crowd’s enthusiastic applause.

There was barely time for a breath before Craig broke into his second piece full of slick runs and a lovely left hand rhythm that anchored the melody. Craig seems to base his artistic expression around this notion of duality. While one half of his brain is calculating and dissecting possible melodies, the other interprets the information and runs freely with it.

Craig seemed to achieve the “dissociative state” he spoke about in his [interview with Hot Press](#). There was a remarkable subtlety in his playing as he dabbled in dynamics. At times, there was a huge contrast between the volume of notes others leaked into one another.

Craig’s reflection shone from the underside of the piano and a smile spread across the intensity of his face as he bounced between keys. This piece was built around a number of catchy motifs as Craig fingers waltzed gracefully across the piano.

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As it progressed, Craig began to hit the keys in a unique fashion that sounded like he was plucking a string. His wrist flicked into the air as he deftly hopped off the keys. It was incredible to witness the command Taborn had of the instrument.

The piece lightened off into a cluster of lullabies as Craig began to wind down. Despite another performance clocking in at 20 minutes at least, the crowd didn’t want it to end and they were waiting intently for the next installment in Craig’s ode to improv.

But before his final piece of the evening, Craig spoke to the crowd.

“I’m not much of a speaker,” he noted. “I prefer playing the piano.” The Brooklyn-based artist then thanked the crowd for coming out and sat down at the piano for one last performance.

Craig hunched over the piano for his closing piece. It started off much more simple than the previous two and he let each note run its course into silence before he played the next.

Craig gathered momentum until he reached a pique where he relentlessly twiddled a series of trills as his left hand sauntered along the bass. Then the entire performance reached a breathless climax as he skipped off the notes and set a ripple of sound coursing through the crowd.

Craig got to his feet after the piece reached its brilliant conclusion. He bowed to each segment of the audience and made his way back to the wings as the crowd applauded and cheered. The air felt slightly empty after he left the stage as the audience loitered around for a few minutes in the hopes that he might come back.

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There were no chants of “one more tune” here and Craig didn’t come back out. But those in attendance whistled the melodies he had created as they filtered out the doors of the National Concert Hall.

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