

LondonJazz

Review: Youn Sun Nah, Ulf Wakenius/ Vortex



Review: Youn Sun Nah (above), Ulf Wakenius/ Vortex

It seemed an impossibly exotic juxtaposition: a Swedish guitarist plus aKorean singer.

I hadn't heard guitarist **Ulf Wakenius** in a small venue before, so this was a good opportunity to do so. The Swede has, after all, been right to the top: the guitar chair in the Oscar Peterson Quartet. According to Peterson in one interview shortly before he died, Wakenius used to earn Peterson's admiration by waging all-out war with the master. Wakenius has been a major figure in European jazz for many years.

But I knew nothing of his partnership with **Youn Sun Nah** (above). And frankly, the PR blurb ushering in a "Korean jazz diva" hadn't helped....

At the interval I was a neutral. Musically things seemed to be working, but there had been distractions. But by the end I had been completely won over. Two consummate musicians had worked very well in a happy and interesting collaboration. Their musicality and their sheer communicative power had spoken. It had been a very good gig indeed.

Through no fault of the performers, it didn't start well. Some of the audience had either failed to locate Dalston, or else were employing an extreme interpretation of jazz time. They arrived noisily right in the middle of Wakenius' hushed opening solo number on acoustic guitar, Keith Jarrett's *My Song*. Dreamy rubato, impressionistic. Crash. Bang.

LondonJazz

In the second number, *Blues for OP*, it was Wakenius who upped the aggression, hiding his face under his Yankees baseball cap, as if up to no good. He was hitting hard, right through to a thumped percussive and lowdown ending.

Wakenius switched to a gentler nylon string Brazilian guitar for Youn Sun Nah's arrival. At first she seemed nervous, declaring herself "excited" to be singing in London for the first time. And there were distractions, like hand semaphore to trace the melodic line in the air; other-wordly phonemes for scatting like "mwa-hoo-mwa-hoo" or "ini-ha-ha-hhh"; phrases sometimes broken into fragments; plus that strange sight, the **Hohner melodica**, an instrument which sits on the lap- so the audience sees a musician blowing into what looks like the plastic hose of a breathalyzer.

But musically things were starting to happen. Youn Sun Nah appears to have absolute pitch, a voice of very great agility, an interesting palette of vocal colours, a comfortable compass of at least three octaves, and a dynamic range to die for. What stayed in the mind during the interval was her repeated, scampering, tumbling scale in fourths at great speed, in unison with Wakenius in a final bossa sung in very convincing Portuguese.

After the interval - how often does this happen?- things seemed to flow so much more easily. The opener was another slow 3/4 number *Voyage*, sung in hushed tones culminating in a magical, endlessly held pianissimo hum. There was a nice switch into French for Brel's "*Ne me quitte pas.*" An interpretation of Tom Waits' *Jockey Full of Bourbon* found Youn Sun Nah able to match Wakenius pound for pound in weight and guts, suggesting that some of the kittenish politeness of the first half had just been a playful trope.

The set finished with a complete contrast : a traditional Korean song, and then an encore without Wakenius: *My Favourite Things* for voice and mbira. It was humorous- the favourite things included fish and chips and kimchi. It was musically interesting, with a cleverly re-cast melody. It moved the audience to give it totally attentive silence. Above all it was a moment of sheer magic.