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Playing it Fast, Furious and Full of Clarity

By [JON PARELES](#)

There are no speed barriers for Michel Camilo, the Dominican pianist who played a JVC Jazz Festival concert on Friday night at the Rose Theater. In solos, duos, trios and quartets, his hands flew across the keyboard. He played quick, clean-lined melodies and elegant two-part counterpoint, shimmering harplike arpeggios and percussive Afro-Cuban montunos. He played limpid ballad lines, splashy runs in block chords and volcanic two-handed tremolos. Sooner or later, even in the most pensive compositions, he found uses for velocity, whether for a filigreed ornament or a rippling backdrop.

The priority was not dazzling the audience, although he easily did that. It's simply that Mr. Camilo thinks in cascades of notes. For all the lavish virtuosity, the music was always lucid, with each tier of melody and accompaniment architecturally defined. He also thinks like a percussionist, striking every note - even the briefest ones - with clarity and rhythmic purpose. Structure was never lost in the rush.

Latin jazz musicians like Mr. Camilo aren't rooted in the blues. He has classical piano training and a heritage of Afro-Caribbean rhythms, and his music mingles analysis, exhilaration and pan-American possibilities. In his compositions, hard-bop and modal harmonies segue in and out of three-chord patterns. And Afro-Caribbean drive and jazz swing - two different idioms - are equally vital.

Mr. Camilo moved between introspection and elation. With the solos that opened the concert, he touched on gospel (and Keith Jarrett's gospel vamps), blues, Chopinesque ballads and, in his own "Reflections" and "Caribe," volatile Caribbean rhythms.

The program matched him with Latin jazz peers. A duet with the Puerto Rican tenor saxophonist David Sánchez on "Bésame Mucho," full of pensive melody lines and impressionistic intertwined arpeggios, drew deep romance from a familiar song. "Giant Steps" was its polar opposite, full of staccato exchanges, brittle harmonies and dizzying, breakneck motion.

In trios with Charles Flores (bass) and Dafnis Prieto (drums), both from Cuba, the drummer caught and stoked every syncopated accent of the uptempo pieces, using rims, cymbals, bell and woodblock as much as his drumheads. The bass and drums also provide hushed elegance, with brushes and quiet undercurrents, for ballads like the bolero "Twilight Glow." And when Mr. Sánchez returned to make it a quartet, Mr. Camilo chose pieces by Latin-jazz pioneers Dizzy Gillespie ("A Night in Tunisia") and Mario Bauza ("Mambo Inn").

The arrangements worked ingenious changes on the originals, stretching and then accelerating the phrases of "Tunisia," extrapolating new rhythms in "Mambo Inn." And, like the best Latin jazz, the music never forgot to dance.