

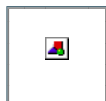
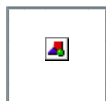
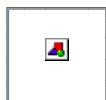
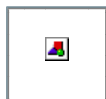
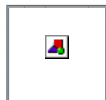
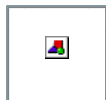


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 Forrest Bryant
 November 2002

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SFJAZZ Show Spans the Pacific

 By [Forrest Bryant](#)

Over the years, the San Francisco Jazz Festival has become a regular setting for the premieres of major new works. On the second night of its 20th annual festival run, the SF Jazz Organization (SFJAZZ) presented the world premiere of Jon Jang's "Up from the Root," part of a double bill that reconciled Asia with the jazz tradition while giving several former locals a grand homecoming.

The October 24 concert, which drew a respectable crowd of hipsters to the Herbst Theatre downtown, had to compete for attention with another SFJazz event just up the street, as well as game five of the World Series. But those who chose Herbst chose well.

BUILDING FROM RAW MATERIALS

Pianist Vijay Iyer and alto saxophonist Rudresh Mahanthappa, together known as Raw Materials, provided a compelling opening set. The duo performed selections from a suite entitled "Sangha: Collaborative Fables," a commissioned work which premiered in New York this past May. Their interplay was extraordinary, a tightly wound double-helix of sound. The pair traded solos continuously, each engaging in dense, polyrhythmic exploration before dropping back to repetitive chordal patterns, thus giving the other space to respond.

Iyer mined the rich fields between jazz and classical music. At times, he sounded like a modernized Erik Satie, moody and spiraling. His hands walked, ran, and leapt over the keys like twin spiders, spinning dizzying webs of notes into complex rhythmic spaces. At one point, he veered entirely into the jazz tradition, offering an updated rag line that careened around the stage like a clown car. Mahanthappa stood bolt upright, a lightning rod offering minimal resistance to the electric flow of his ideas. His free blasts were aggressive but rounded, allowing no sharp edges to distract the audience from his insistent message. Coltranesque sheets of sound gave way to churning postbop riffs, then wove around Iyer in a careful *pas de deux*. There were also occasional flashes of the duo's Indian heritage, as in the ritualistic opening piece, "The Shape of Things."

Closing the 50-minute set was "Remembrance," a composition for Iyer's grandparents, "or anyone in need of remembering." This emotionally loaded piece came across like a stream of rainwater on a slope: pooling gradually, welling up to some undefined brim, full of swirls and eddies, at last spilling over and tumbling down in a little cascade of feeling.

THE ROOT OF THE MATTER

After intermission and an official update on the baseball score (16-4, Giants), Jon Jang took the stage beaming with excitement. Along for the ride were dynamite saxophonist David Murray, stalwart drummer Eddie Marshall, and three members of the acclaimed Melody of China Ensemble. All of the musicians have local ties, past or present. As the jocular Jang pointed out before the set, one of the most satisfying aspects of the San Francisco Jazz Festival is the way it balances an international cachet with a commitment to the Bay Area's own jazz community.

The next 45 minutes were simply dazzling. "Up From the Root!" is Ellingtonian in conception, spirit, and ambition. Blending Asian- and African-American music in a way which makes the pairing seem natural, Jang's suite has one foot in the traditions of the past and the other firmly in the future. The title refers to an old proverb which states that a new tree may grow from a transplanted root (or new art from the meeting of cultures). Although there were a few rough edges typical of a first performance, it was quickly evident that Jang has composed a masterpiece.

The first movement, "Moonlight Night in Xunyang (by way of Philadelphia)," opened with a lyrical, traditional Chinese introduction from the trio. A lush exposition of the Chinese theme for solo piano gave way to a loose, funky statement by the full group. After a fast piano/drum clash, Murray entered into a fiery duet with Hong Wang, who played a flared horn called a *suona*. Murray's sax playing was throaty and unfettered, exploding into a frenetic free-jazz freakout that soon consumed the smaller horn. Eddie Marshall provided plenty of rocket fuel as Murray stood writhing, seemingly jamming the notes into his horn. A brief reprise from the

ensemble led into a virtuoso solo by Yangqin Zhao on the *yangqin* (hammered dulcimer), an evocation of wind in the rushes. Zhao's impressive turn led gradually into a soft landing by the group.

For "Jasmine Among the Magnolias," Jang took his source from the Chinese of Mississippi, and his own Baptist faith. Picking up from a solo *yangqin* intro, Jang offered up a nostalgic gospel line. As the ensemble joined in, the theme became optimistic and uplifting, with a hauntingly rustic undertone. Murray again took charge, joyously testifying with a warm-hearted and free solo. As his churchy fervor grew, Murray's sax even seemed to speak in tongues before dropping back to earth. A relaxed reprise of the movement's theme floated the ensemble gently home.

BRINGING IT TOGETHER

"When the Snake Celebrates the Golden Dance," the third and final movement, was the real heart of the piece, clocking in at 20 minutes. With Murray on bass clarinet and Wang on Chinese fiddle, the ensemble achieved a true fusion of Asian and African-American sounds. A clearly Chinese melody was established, then refitted with a soulful urban beat. Jang, meanwhile, played a series of unadorned piano chords that could have come on the latest downtempo electronica record. The clarinet and fiddle proved to be a natural match, as did Marshall's drum kit and Wei Wang's Chinese percussion. The unusual groove slowly ramped up, faster and faster, finally breaking down into a slow solo for gongs. Wang set up a gamelan-like melody of pings, boings, and clunks, then transferred it to his phalanx of small *paigu* drums. Letting the pattern evolve and accelerate, Wang eventually threw his entire body into a mad display of festival acrobatics, a one-man drum ensemble that floored the crowd.

When the group returned to the theme, it found a new heavy-duty strut, a hip-hop sensibility that contrasted sharply with the cuteness of the melody. Murray now took his shot, starting a cacophonous dialogue with the Chinese trio, popping and twisting his clarinet lines with abandon. When the piece finally came back to rest, the visibly pleased Jang accepted a thunderous ovation. He closed the set with a new version of the venerable "Butterfly Lovers Song" that continued the concept, marrying the Chinese melody to an r&b flavored rhythm.

"Up From the Root!" will be performed at other locations around the country in the coming days; let us hope that a recorded version will not be far behind. This suite deserves to be heard, and may prove to be a standout in Jang's compositional legacy.

When Forrest Bryant isn't writing about jazz or reading the box scores, he can be heard on the Bay Area airwaves as the host of a weekly radio show called "No Cover, No Minimum" (on [KZSU](#), 90.1 FM). He also spends too much of his free time looking for things to write about, so if you're a part of the Bay Area jazz scene, [drop Forrest a line](#) and let him know what you're up to.



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