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Amina Figarova Sextet in San Diego

By [Thomas Conrad](#)

The Athenaeum Music & Arts Library in La Jolla, Calif., is as polite and patrician an environment for jazz as the planet provides. It is a nonprofit membership library (one of only 16 in the United States) located three blocks from the beach in a city where, after the real estate bubble burst, average home prices plummeted to \$1 million. The Athenaeum was not designed as a performance space, but it works beautifully for music. The acoustics are excellent in the main gallery, where 150 chairs are set up for concerts, and a beneficent ambience is created by the long shelves of music books and the art covering the walls.



Amina Figarova

Libraries are supposed to be places where silence prevails, but the quiet of the Athenaeum feels expectant, perhaps because jazz has been presented there for 20 years. Program Coordinator Daniel Atkinson has brought in important artists (Lee Konitz, James Newton, Harold Land), many of whom were not yet widely perceived as important when he first booked them (Brad Mehldau, Tomasz Stanko, Steve Wilson, Bobo Stenson, Bill Charlap, Tord Gustavsen).

The sextet led by Amina Figarova that played the Athenaeum on Feb. 26 was a band uniquely suited to the library's atmosphere of high culture. Not that Figarova's music lacks energy and passion. But her ensemble plays an especially refined, disciplined, sophisticated iteration of the jazz art form.

Figarova is from Azerbaijan, where she trained at the Baku Conservatory. She pursued an active career as a classical concert pianist in Baku and in Moscow until 1990 when, at 24, she moved to the Netherlands and switched to jazz. She first got noticed in the United States when she released *September Suite* in 2005. It is a nine-piece song cycle composed as an “ode to mourning” for the victims of 9/11. *September Suite* received strong reviews in Europe and the United States, and announced a major new composer on the international jazz stage. In 2008, *Above the Clouds* offered 12 new tunes that expanded her reach into new subject matter and confirmed the promise of *September Suite*.

At the Athenaeum, Figarova played mostly music from *Above the Clouds*. Five members of her sextet had appeared on that album: flutist Bart Platteau from Belgium, trumpeter Ernie Hammes from Luxembourg, and bassist Jeroen Vierdag and drummer Chris “Buckshot” Strik from the Netherlands. Tenor saxophonist Marc Mommaas, from the Netherlands but based in New York, has never recorded with Figarova but proved to be a compelling interpreter of her music.

“‘A’ Dance,” which opened the evening as it opens the album, is the kind of piquant, intricate, ascendant anthem that has led critics to compare Figarova’s writing to that of progressive mainstream masters like Herbie Hancock and Wayne Shorter. But her compositions have a clarity and elegance of craft and light touch that is her own. Her band contains fully articulate, expressive soloists, and on “‘A’ Dance” both Platteau and Hammes made vivid personal statements. But in a Figarova arrangement the solos are always focused and concise and emerge directly from her compositions. Solos are interwoven into finely detailed designs including meticulous transitions and deep backgrounds and meaningful recurrences.

One of her most alluring songs is the title track to *Above the Clouds*. At the Athenaeum it began with a meditative piano solo that is not on the album, a prologue that eventually opened out into the floating, gliding theme. In stark contrast to the songs of *September Suite*, which deal with the darkest human emotions of “losing someone you love with no chance to say goodbye,” “*Above the Clouds*” is a piece that portrays ecstasy. Most air travelers have forgotten how magic it was to fly in an airplane the first time and look down on clouds. One reason why Figarova’s music often feels lighter than air is that Platteau’s pure, penetrating flute is at the leading edge of her ensemble sound.

Another gentle, luminous piece from the album was “*Summer Rain*,” with graceful trumpet and piano solos. Figarova’s gifts as a composer have perhaps drawn attention from the fact that she is an exceptional pianist with a jazz spirit of openness and a classical sense of form. On “*Summer Rain*” her solo spilled upward, got caught in chiming circles, and then broke free to climb again. The piece ended with a drum epilogue by Strik, his brushes pattering rain.

If it sometimes seems that each passing month brings forth another interesting tenor saxophone voice, then assign February 2009 to Marc Mommaas. Although he has been in New York for 12 years and is a player with a distinctive, deft, edgy concept, he has remained under the radar. Even in a band where individual identities are secondary to overall ensemble purposes, it was impossible not to notice that every Mommaas solo was surprising, with ideas that seemed unrelated to Figarova’s structures until they tied back into them. In the second set the band played three pieces from *September Suite*: “*Rage*,” “*Trying to Focus*” and “*When the Lights Go Down*.” Mommaas’ encounter with “*Rage*” was profound. His solo was deceptively quiet, a reluctant rage, a contorted rage, rage as suffering and bafflement. Only a boldly creative tenor saxophonist would have come up with it.

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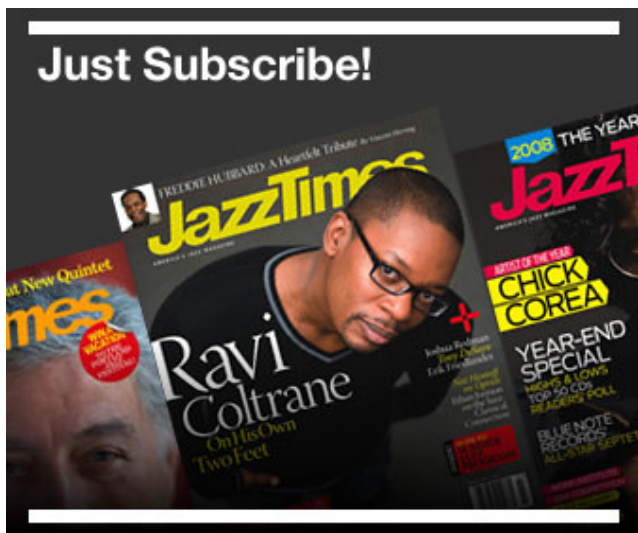
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