Sandoval applies flawless technique to bebop style

The Artes

Sandoval brings a quintet to the Regattabar in Cambridge for two evenings of spirited jazz last week. The Cuban-born trumpeter, who defected to the United States in 1990, is perhaps the most dazzling trumpet player on the jazz scene these days. Discovered by Dizzy Gillespie in 1977, Sandoval combines a good understanding of jazz with a flawless technique that allows him to play his trumpet dazzlingly well, often hitting notes that seem to be in the stratosphere.

Sandoval began his career in America by composing and performing jazz in the Cuban style, as played on his album, Flygirl in Freedom. It is clear, however, that he is interested in performing bebop jazz in the style of his master Gillespie, Clifford Brown, and others. This is evidenced in his Clifford Brown tribute album, I Remember Clifford, and in the dedicated bebop playing he and his quintet presented at the Regattabar.

Sandoval started his show in a novel way, with an unaccompanied piece on the piano. The tune was neither remote and reflective, providing a good showcase for Sandoval's piano talents. After this, Sandoval brought out his sidemen (tenor sax, piano, bass, and drums), and picked up his trumpet, leading the quintet into the fast bebop piece, "I Get a Kick Out of You." The melody in this was very quick and intricate here first, perfectly rendered by Sandoval and Kenny Andrews on tenor sax. Sandoval played an excellent solo, offering superb articulation and the high notes that have made him famous. Andrews added a nice tenor sax solo, and the tune concluded with Sandoval and Andrews trading 4-bar solo lines back and forth. This was a real treat, as each tried to outdo the other.

For a change of pace, the quintet then played a slower, funkier tune. Sandoval again played the flugelhorn in this piece, offering a free-form melody over the rhythm section. He used the pedal tones on the horn to great effect as he wove a pretty melody. He then turned the microphone over to Andrews, who offered a similar solo on tenor sax. The rhythm section became more lively, and Andrews' solo gave way to a piano solo. The piano brought the tempo back down, and Sandoval finished the tune with a nice flugelhorn solo. In this, he showed his playful side, using his left hand to mimic a trombone slide as he hit a particularly low pedal tone. The quintet eventually returned to the sound to nothing on one of the pieces.

The next tune had a sort of slow, slinky feel as the bass player laid down a "cool" bass line. Sandoval went back to trumpet, offering some excellent improvisation. Andrews contributed some nice work on the alto sax. This was a rather playful piece, with an uplifting tone.

Sandoval then put his composing ability on display, by performing "I Left This Space for You," dedicated to Clifford Brown. Sandoval played piano on this number, allowing Andrews to shine on tenor sax. The melody belonged to Andrews, who also contributed a nice improvised solo. Sandoval played an excellent piano solo, and a bass solo was offered as well. Andrews took the piece to the end, with a very moving free-form tenor sax melody. This was a beautiful and emotional piece, a testimony to Sandoval's formidable composing ability.

The last piece began with Sandoval playing unaccompanied on the trumpet. Presenting quite a contrast to the preceding tune, he started with a flutter-tongue on a very loud note, as if to "wake up" the crowd. He then "jammed" for about five minutes, using almost every conceivable sound one could make on a trumpet. These included both very low pedal tones and some screeching high notes, each of which brought applause from the standing room only crowd. As the conclusion of this solo, the rhythm section laid down a hard-driving groove. This led to solos by Sandoval and Andrews, and the tune concluded with Sandoval hitting perhaps the craziest thing he had ever done the evening. The crowd applauded enthusiastically, and Sandoval brought the quintet out for an encore performance of "Mack the Knife." Sandoval began this song unaccompanied on his flugelhorn before the bass was added. The rest of the rhythm section then came in and Andrews played a tenor sax solo. During this solo, Sandoval switched to trumpet, and at the conclusion of the solo, Sandoval played the familiar melody up about two octaves. This served as a good encore, and was a good conclusion to the show.

Sandoval has shown himself to be a major musician and composer on the jazz scene. His adoption of the bebop style should win him wider audiences, and the jazz world can expect major contributions from him as his experience grows and he settles into his role as a leader. America is fortunate to have had such a gifted performer come to this country.