

In Love with "Sad Songs"

Neue Presse Coburg

A voice for all occasions: Steven Santoro and his band make music with passion at "Quiet at the Market"

At the beginning of the evening, host Antoinetta Bafas didn't have much to talk about in terms of personal details about the artists. She quotes the pianist, who simply says, "My name is Walter and I play piano," and both the percussionist and bassist remained silent. Which means: the three of them simply want to play music, which they enjoy much more than talking about themselves.

Vocalist and band leader Steven Santoro, who was born in Massachusetts as Steven Kowalczyk, does share some details about the songs, and that they all took turns creating the arrangements. He relies on his own and his band mates' musical abilities, and rightfully so. They are tuned into each other, and he communicates with them mid-song, gives and gets directions. He stays focused throughout, gives tempos, decides when and how to end a piece. When, at the very beginning--he has just sung the first few notes of a song--a wineglass shatters on the floor, he smiles, says "perfect", while the sound mixes in with the performance.

Rousing and sentimental

His voice pulls you in from the very first moment: for a vocalist of medium height and light build it is surprisingly powerful and pleasant. Handled with precision it allows the vocalist to access all his registers. From a resonating bass range via soft vocalese and scat rich in contrast all the way to breathy falsetto he successfully navigates through all of them--seemingly effortless--never affected, always within the stylistic and thematic demands of the piece.

Some songs--well-known standards by famous composers such as Cole Porter or Charlie Parker--get rousing renditions, transport the lyrics well (although not always understood), and allow the drummer the opportunity to tickle the audience's ears.

It seems that sad songs are the truly great passion of the vocalist. Here he can wallow in love lost or dreams unfulfilled. He either lets his voice soar through great melodic lines or whispers his desire into the microphone in a way that let's the audience fully feel the emotion.

Through all this the band carries him either with an orchestra-like, full sound or with immense tenderness: drums are only touched with soft brushes or hands and fingertips, the piano becomes a gentle string of pearls, and the bass quietly joins in. The vocalist continually leaves enough room for his musicians to take solos, staying fully present in the music, not just through facial expressions and gestures, but through movement,



Jazz mit Herzblut: Steven Santoro und seine Band begeisterten das Coburger Publikum. Foto: Paul Vogt

dancing on the tiny speck of a stage left for him next to the equipment, bending his knees, tapping the beat on his thighs, and joining in when he feels like it.

The musicians said in the beginning, "We just want to play". But they also know when it's time to stop. After all the 2-hour show, filled with heartache and joy, and encompassing no less than 14 sprawling songs, demands the full focus and concentration of all involved.

They play one encore together, the cleverly titled "Run away", and when the audience demands more, Steven Santoro returns to the stage one final time, assisted by the pianist who sets up the vocal mic at the piano and surrenders the keys to the vocalist. With one last, heart rending song he says good-bye for now to a deeply moved audience in Coburg.