

Pianist shows refreshing grasp of classic values

JAZZ

By ZAN STEWART
STAR-LEDGER STAFF

In an era when so many artists are stretching the boundaries of jazz — and doing it persuasively — it is still a boon to hear musicians who embrace the classic values of melodic warmth, rhythmic subtlety and plain elegance.

Madison pianist and composer Jerry Vezza is one such musician; his trio mates — bassist Tom DiCarlo and drummer Glenn Davis — are two others. The three revealed their multitude of gifts in a beguiling first set Tuesday at Shanghai Jazz in Madison. The evening benefited the Kiwanis Club of Madison.

Gershwin's "S Wonderful" exemplified Vezza's approach, and that of his colleagues. The pianist began with a slow, expressive solo introduction that drew the listener in. Then over a bossa beat delivered via Davis' brush ruffles and DiCarlo's melodic bass lines, Vezza offered the theme. At points, he played the written notes, in his own way; at others, he injected other, compelling ideas. His touch produced a glowing, ringing tone in the manner of Bill Evans, a seeming influence.



Jerry Vezza's performance displayed warmth, subtlety and elegance at Shanghai Jazz in Madison Tuesday.

In his solo, Vezza was, above all, relaxed. He played conversationally, following a fall from a higher register with rising lower tones, or ending a swerving line with a tap-tap-tap, on-the-beat thought. He often scored with sumptuous chordal textures that filled the air.

In accompaniment, DiCarlo and Davis found ideas and rhythms that

answered what the leader was playing. This type of interplay made all the renditions in the set feel fresh.

The bassist then soloed, emitting a bright, muscular sound in his higher notes, a fat, firm one in the lower range. Working songlike, he also played call-and-response, leading from a complex figure at one point to a repeated, single note. DiCarlo always found a tidy phrase to end a thought. Then in phrase trades with the pianist, Davis demonstrated his melodic approach at the drums, balancing the snap of the snare with lower-ranged thumps at the tom-tom, the crisp high ring of the ride cymbal with the whoosh of a quickly-closed hi-hat.

Another bossa, "Alone Together," boasted a fine DiCarlo solo built around a moving three-note idea. A faster song was "How About You," with Davis delivering propelling time via his sticks, and Vezza opening things up with floating chords off the beat.

Other enticing items: the famed jazz waltz, Freddie Hubbard's "Up Jumped Spring, and Porter's "Everything I Love," from Vezza's 2006 CD, "You Are There" (Bridge Pin).

The evening opened with a few numbers from the Madison High School Travel Band. Then Vezza's chil-

dren — clarinetist Julianna, 14, and drummer Alex, 11 — joined the trio for three numbers. On Porter's "I Love You," and Horace Silver's "Song For My Father," the pair revealed poise in the spotlight, Julianna offering good theme statements highlighted by solid low tones, Alex keeping perky time with both brushes and sticks.

Veza, whose website is jerryvezza.com, returns with his trio to Shanghai Jazz, 24 Main St., on June 13. He also performs April 25 at KC's Chiffafa House, 5 Hilltop Rd., Mendham. Call (973) 543-4726.

Other artists set for Shanghai Jazz include pianist Emmet Cohen's trio, tonight; harmonica player Rob Papparozi's quartet, tomorrow; saxophonist and singer Jerry Vivino, Saturday; pianist Dan Crisci, Sunday; guitarist John Zweig and bassist Steve Freeman, Tuesday; and guitarist Bucky Pizzarelli Wednesday. No music charge; \$20-\$30 minimum at tables, \$10 at bar. Call (973) 822-2899 or visit shanghaijazz.com.

Zan Stewart is the Star-Ledger's jazz writer. He is also a musician who occasionally performs at local clubs. He may be reached at zstewart@starledger.com or at (973) 324-9930.