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MUSIC REVIEW

Rhythms Enlivened by Echoes of Haiti
Bobby Avey at Symphony Space

By NATE CHINEN
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By nature if not by definition jazz musicians are tireless consolidators: of languages and rituals, of literatures and styles. Some artists exercise that impulse entirely within the jazz tradition, building on roughly a century of precedent (or, in too many cases, just a choice decade or two). Others seek purpose in charting unexpected routes or teasing out unlikely connections — something you may have noticed more of lately, especially among musicians under 40, and especially in New York.

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Ian Douglas for The New York Times

Bobby Avey The jazz pianist performing his "Authority Melts From Me" at Symphony Space on Thursday evening.

The pianist Bobby Avey is in his 20s, and has firmly aligned himself with those aims. A former protégé of the saxophonist David Liebman, he made his recording debut in 2006 with "Vienna Dialogues" (Zoho), on which these two improvisers played lieder by the likes of Schumann and Brahms.

Mr. Avey followed that in 2010 with "A New Face" (Jay Dell), a strong and purposeful album made with the bassist Thomson Kneeland and the drummer Jordan Perlson (and in a guest capacity, Mr. Liebman). The rhythmically expressive piece that opens the album, "Late November," won the Thelonious Monk International Jazz Composers Competition the following year.

Mr. Avey's most recent work, and so far his most ambitious, is "Authority Melts From Me," an hourlong suite performed on Thursday night as part of the Music of Now series at Symphony Space. The piece, for jazz quintet, draws inspiration from the Haitian slave rebellion of 1791 and more pointedly from the voodoo drumming traditions that haven't changed much since.

Mr. Avey — supported by a grant from Chamber Music America — did his own field research last year, recording

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a ceremony in the small Haitian town of Soukri, and transcribing its hypnotic rhythmic patterns for his use. (He also studied recordings of the [Société Absolument Guinin](#), from Port-au-Prince.)

Those patterns form a bone structure for “Authority Melts From Me,” which began and ended with syncopated lines

played by Mr. Avey and the guitarist Ben Monder, first in unison and then in a tangle. A wide-interval melody, articulated in long tones by the alto saxophonist Miguel Zenón, came on like a shroud, as Mr. Kneeland and Mr. Perlson laid down an urgent and lurching pulse. Throughout the piece the band attacked asymmetrical structures with cyclonic intensity, clearing space every now and again for a solo (most often by Mr. Zenón, who was uniformly dazzling).

Well before his Haitian fascination Mr. Avey showed [an attraction to trancelike rhythm](#); it’s one reason “A New Face” earned him comparisons to the pianist Vijay Iyer. Here he often hammered a two-handed counterpoint meant to echo the polyrhythmic churn of manman, segon and boula drums. It would have helped to incorporate sound clips of that source material, as a key to understanding the work.

But that might have raised the issue of cultural appropriation, which Mr. Avey, in his program essay, was careful to disarm. With “Authority Melts From Me” he isn’t laying claim to an ancestral heritage — he grew up in the Poconos — but rather digging into a tradition outside his experience, with scholarly enthusiasm.

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