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On the cutting edge of music

THE success of any festival lies in its ability to make the punters trust the brand, to inspire people to come to see acts they would not normally have heard of or been attracted to. On this criteria alone, 12 Points! is more and more successful each year. Now three years old, it doesn't feel like a festival in an expansive sense (it has only one venue, with the gigs coming three at a time each evening) but it did manage to pack out the Project Arts Centre in Dublin on each of its four nights last week.

The 12 Points! festival in Dublin offered the best of Europe's innovative young jazz outfits, writes **Alan O'Riordan**

There were no big names — just young musicians drawn from Europe's jazz scene, which is often seen as more dynamic, irreverent and experimental than the American scene. Whether this view is fair to the Americans who, after all, play an important role in serving their country's musical tradition, 12 Points! certainly showed that Europe's jazz scene covers all bases.

Given the incredible value for money (€20 for a nightly ticket, or €60 for all 12 gigs), 12 Points! is surely a model for other jazz festivals. With the right funding structures in place, and partnerships with embassies and cultural institutions such as the Goethe-Institut, Alliance Francaise and the Instituto Cervantes, it becomes possible to offer reasonably-priced gigs by some of the best talent from the continent.

Audiofeeling began proceedings on Wednesday, extending a welcoming hand in an accessible style. Their sound moved from lyrical melody to post-bop rhythm, never afraid to fall back on the kind of accessible riff or chord phrase that many jazz purists would abhor. If it sounds right, these guys do it. Nothing wrong with that. At the other end of the spectrum the first night were Dublin's Morda, creating microtonal soundscapes on guitar, sax and all manner of gadgets.

Young Swedish seven-piece Paavo finished the first night's selection.

Their Ethiopian-born singer Sofia Jernberg is a real songbird: chirping through notes in her scat improvisations. She sings over a palette of free jazz sounds with the group's three reed men pushing their instruments to the edge of noise before a recon-ciling melody is found. Despite its angular, unstructured solos, the music retains a lively brightness.

On Thursday, Berlin's Hyperactive Kid lived up to their name, building up to the thundering, rolling sounds unleashed from drums. A bassless guitar, sax and drums were reluctant trio. Hyperactive Kid were reluctant to improvise, but their tight solos more than made up for that. After Aki Rissanen's solo piano performance, full of lyrical beauty if somewhat unsatisfying as a coherent performance, came a draught of deep south: the Luca Aquino Quartet, who were unashamedly romantic in the trumpeting tradition of Enrico Rava.

Friday 13th was certainly not unlucky for jazz fans. Award-winning Norwegian piano-sax duo Albatross brought all their academic excellence to bear in an affecting performance. Their compositions were delect, their soundscapes remarkably warm given their austere setting.

Remarkably, London's Curios were the festival's only piano trio. But if you had to pick one, these guys would do, unafraid as they are to exploit the range of jazz's most enduring ensemble. Tom Cawley led self-deprecating, Tom Cawley led them to heights of ramblunctious bop and down melodious lyrical byways.

Soprano saxophonist Emilie Parisien was the festival's most striking performer. He stalked the microphone as if he was afraid of startling the notes, his instrument like some poison-dart-projecting tube. Behind his elastic, convulsed presence lay the playful pianist Julien Fouery, bassist Ivan Gelugne and drummer Sylvain Darrifourcq. Oh-so-Gallic quints did not distract from the Wayne Shorter-referencing playing that defied the youth of band leader Parisien. 26.

Putting the swing into string on Saturday were the Zapp String crowd-pleasers, the Zapp String Quartet. An insistent, dramatic thrill, almost like a film score, exuded from their combination of jazz, improv and folk. Finishing off on a more austere note were Magnus Fra Gaarden from Copenhagen, a group that managed to be post-bop and post-punk at the same time.