

Review: The Sirkis/Bialas International Quartet, Arena Theatre, Wolverhampton

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Seeing quality jazz used to be a rare treat in the centre of Wolverhampton, a city more accustomed to a diet of heavy metal and indie rock.



Members of The Sirkis/Bialas International Quartet

But for the last two years the Arena Theatre has started to redress the performers on the contemporary scene.

Asaf Sirkis, who is renowned as one of the country's most innovative drummers, returned to the venue for the second time this year to introduce his new collaboration The Sirkis/Bialas International Quartet.

The band is 'international' in every sense of the word.

Sirkis, an Israeli who lives in London, shares band-leader duties with vocalist Sylwia Bialas, a Pole living in Germany.

Bassist Kevin Glasgow was born in Scotland and raised in Northern Ireland, while keyboard player and pianist Frank Harrison is an Englishman who cut his musical teeth in the States and around Europe.

Continuing that theme, the music the collective make could come from anywhere in the world.

They play supremely well-crafted jazz that effortlessly switches from sombre ballads to up-tempo latin and a few things inbetween - often within the same song.

Taking the stage at the sparsely populated venue, the quartet open up with Come To Me, the title track from this year's critically acclaimed album which they would play in its entirety.

The song ebbs and flows, while Bialas alternates between poetry sung in her native Polish and overtone chanting, her voice heard as more of a fourth instrument rather than a means of communicating lyrics.

The down-tempo ballad Ismael gives way to one of the night's high points,

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Vortex, an intricate Latin tune that starts with Sirkis treating the audience to what he describes as 'Indian-influenced vocal percussion language'.

Although rhythmic syllables may be a staple diet for music school students, the technique is seldom heard on stage – yet here it is strangely mesmerising.

It is also during Vortex that Sirkis' drumming really comes to the fore, combining with Glasgow – who plays a six-string bass guitar rarely seen in jazz – to dramatic effect.

The complex Mandragora, a Bialas piece, features a stunning piano solo from Harrison and further showcases Sirkis' skills behind the drumkit as he effortlessly switches from one time signature to another.

It reminds me of 90s Louisville band Rachel's, who did not play jazz at all but had the same ability to evoke a sense of deep melancholy giving way to hope through the composition of their songs.

This is emotionally-charged music, with each member weaving their own part of a tapestry that when pulled together results in a work of beauty.

After the haunting Dreams Dreams and the partly bass-driven A Hymn, the quartet close with Orgon, a track Sirkis dedicates to Austrian psychoanalyst Wilhelm Reich.

It sees the band at their finest, with Harrison building up to a crescendo with a wild electric piano solo before the track melts away with Bialas' weird, almost unearthly vocal effects.

It makes for one final twist to conclude a memorable - and occasionally downright strange – set from a supremely talented band.

By Peter Madeley