

The Berkshire Eagle

Pittsfield CityJazz Festival

By Richard Houdek, Special to the Eagle

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PITTSFIELD -- Those who still believe that jazz is a down-and-dirty genre of music must cast their ears toward Armen Donelian, who, with his original music and arrangements of the scores of others, brings a serene sense of dignity and elegance to every measure. Donelian, presiding at a parlor-size Yamaha grand Friday evening at Baba Louie's music room with the other members of his trio - bassist David Clark and percussionist George Schuller -- displayed a synergy suggesting that they can read each other's thoughts.

In their hands, the Latin standard, "Besame Mucho," became a mini-concerto with luxurious cadenzas from each, and "Mexico," a tune Donelian said he composed in Arizona, bore an enticing Debussy sheen, touches of Rachmaninoff and shades of Falla, while still retaining a fresh originality that offered evidence of a solid education in classical music.

Clark often gathered melodic riches normally expected of a guitar, pushing his instrument to its pizzicato limits. One wished occasionally that he would apply his bow to lyrical passages such as those in "Kani Vor Jan," Sayat Nova's lovely Armenian ballad, or Donelian's arrangement of "Sunrise, Sunset," embellished with a repeated bracing four-note motif in contrast to its otherwise balladic thrust.

Schuller is a restrained, subtle and sensitive drummer, a team player still capable when the moment comes, of erupting with consummate power, as he demonstrated in a solo during Donelian's "The Scattered Brotherhood."

The Armen Donelian Trio travels in unexpected directions. It's a delight to be along for the ride, which, with two sets Friday evening, was far too short.