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Ensemble seduces fans with softness

January 23, 2006 | By Howard Reich, Tribune arts critic

Until last weekend, the Chicago Jazz Ensemble was widely considered a muscular, aggressive big band that could roar with the best of them.

The ensemble still may hold those credentials, but on Friday night at Symphony Center the band showed a decidedly softer, gentler side. Offering scores that tended to whisper rather than shout, the CJE explored subtleties of tone and gesture that listeners have not usually associated with this group.

Nor would anyone expect that it would be trumpeter Jon Faddis, the band's artistic director, who would take the ensemble into such hushed territory. Faddis, after all, often plays with such force and fervor as to render microphones unnecessary.

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From the opening notes of this performance, a modern-day arrangement of "Smoke Gets in Your Eyes," Faddis coaxed from the band the kind of slyly understated, coyly articulated phrases one associates with music of Count Basie, at its most refined. The tonal contrasts that Faddis achieved, with sudden orchestral exclamations punctuating long stretches of muted passagework, showed that the CJE is attaining a new kind of virtuosity, one built as much on brains as on brawn.

The finely wrought, incredibly muted wind-section playing in "You'd Be So Nice to Come Home To" and the deeply burnished ensemble colors in "Sure Thing" underscored the point: Faddis and the band were showing listeners that they can do more than merely vanquish an audience -- they can seduce it.

The inherent risk in playing a set of mostly soft-spoken repertory, however, lies in its transparency, for every instrumental detail becomes plain for listeners to hear. Sure enough, for all its gauzy beauty, the musicmaking also occasionally revealed technical flaws. These were minor shortcomings, however, in an otherwise impressive program that included the world premiere of "Shapes in Time," composed in honor of Russo by Bill Holman. The piece, a thoroughly attractive work, offered intriguing transformations of its musical themes capped by a brilliant Faddis solo.

Jazz Links Lions

One of the most exciting developments on Chicago's music scene has been the Jazz Links Student Jam Sessions at HotHouse, organized by the non-profit Jazz Institute of Chicago to give students a chance to perform in a club setting.

Several of the students converged on the Chicago Cultural Center on Friday night, turning in performances of remarkable enthusiasm and skill. Alto saxophonist Jabari Liu, tenor saxophonist Michael Davenport and baritone

saxophonist Jonah Parzen-Johnson -- billed as the Jazz Links Lions -- played with irresistible verve and promise, attesting to the enduring value of the Jazz Links program. Long may it swing.

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