

# The Telegraph



Treacle-voiced: Gregory Porter

CREDIT: ERIK UMPHERY

- [Ivan Hewett](#), CLASSICAL MUSIC CRITIC

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Any jazz festival has to strike a balance between big crowd-pleasing names and the kind of challenging acts that will tempt hard-core jazz fans. This the Cheltenham Festival does extraordinarily well. And because much of the music-making takes place in marquees set in Cheltenham's beautiful Montpellier Gardens, the Festival has a charm lacking in other festivals. It suggests jazz is an outdoor, carnival sort of thing. The crowds for big-name acts such as treacle-voiced singer Gregory Porter, veteran South African pianist Abdullah Ibrahim and eternally youthful and sharp-suited R & B singer Georgie Fame in the specially enlarged Henry Weston Big Top and Town Hall have been bigger than ever.

Alongside these hugely popular acts were those whose fame is measured in the almost cultish intensity of their fans, rather than their numbers. The American trio The Bad Plus was one such. The arrival of new pianist Orrin Evans hasn't essentially altered the trio's style, which flipped between two modes, the hectic and the portentous. The hectic numbers got their somewhat dogged energy from their annoyingly irregular repeating patterns that seemed to transfix the player's brains – and ours too, alas. Their favourite method of escape was via one of the trio's signature "surprise endings", or a sudden flip to a completely different mood. The portentous numbers usually launched off with a solemn and square chordal pattern, soft and almost diffident at first. This very slowly acquired weight, drummer David King creating a fire-storm on cymbals, bassist Reid Anderson thrumming below, Orrin Evans alternating between intense tremolandos and massive chordal thumps. But it felt strangely hollow, as if the players were trying to force energy and weight from something essentially small.

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Much more satisfying was the set from American pianist Marc Copland, who had generously made the trip across the Atlantic at very short notice, to stand in for his friend the wonderfully subtle but unfortunately indisposed Fred Hersch. Before he began, Copland told us that he hoped his set would have something of the generosity of his much-esteemed friend, and his hopes were fulfilled. Copland is a pianist of vast experience, gentle touch and huge harmonic resource, and yet the playing has a touching nakedness about it, his hands fluttering towards one harmony only to change their mind at the last minute and dart to a different chord.

The result was that this entrancing hour-long set, made up of one or two numbers from Copland's recent album of Gary Peacock compositions, plus My Favourite Things, Greensleeves, and Bill Evans's love theme from Spartacus had an extra pathos, a sense of myriad paths suggested but not followed. At times the pedalo-swathed harmonies were almost too lush, but the last number revealed an invigorating rhythmic sense too. The Cheltenham Jazz Festival's keenness to cast its net wide is admirable; thank goodness they also understand the importance of inviting musicians like Copland, who are really steeped in the jazz tradition. \

Hear Marc Copland's concert and other highlights of the Cheltenham Festival on Jazz Now on BBC Radio 3, and on Friday Night is Music Night on BBC Radio 2.