

International Jazz Day, Hagia Eirene, Istanbul – review

By Daniel Dombey

Herbie Hancock, Rubén Blades and Dianne Reeves were among the 40 stars at this Unesco event

Herbie Hancock, for decades a part of the firmament of jazz, marvelled at the 1,700-year-old church in which he would soon perform. On most days Hagia Eirene in Istanbul is shut up, a museum for which there is no ticket. But last week it served as the stage for Hancock and a host of other musicians – including Wayne Shorter, Dianne Reeves and Branford Marsalis – in a new and enormous event: International Jazz Day.

Last year's inaugural IJD had the United Nations in New York as its main venue – the event is backed by Unesco and the Thelonious Monk Institute of Jazz – but took in concerts across the globe. Organisers claim the audience, whether in person or via the internet, reached a billion. This year they boasted of having events in all of the world's 196 countries – from Afghanistan to Zimbabwe. But the focal point was this monument of late antiquity, whose name means Holy Peace and which serves as a mysterious little sister to the nearby, bigger and better known [Hagia Sophia](#).

Hancock, his rehearsal over, stood to one side, the Byzantine columns shining out from the the darkness behind him, the simple giant cross presiding on the dome above, shafts of light streaming down from the windows.

“Visually, this is astounding,” he told the Financial Times. “I can’t compare it to anything that I’ve experienced in real life . . . The natural lighting is just unbelievable and acoustically it is unique and somehow everything feels balanced and complete. . . When we are playing here it feels as if we are in touch with a part of the history of humanity.”

Or at least, the history of jazz – Hancock was one of four musicians at Hagia Eirene who had served as sidemen for Miles Davis, the others being Shorter, Marcus Miller and John McLaughlin. Other jazz veterans present, their gifts in varying states of preservation, included Rubén Blades, the Panamanian singer, [Hugh Masekela](#), the South African trumpeter, and Al Jarreau, the inimitable American vocalist, who seemingly thinks nothing of lending his voice for an instrumental line.

Jazz history has a Turkish twist – Munir Ertegun, the country's ambassador to Washington DC in the 1930s and 1940s, held some of the first concerts in the city to integrate black and white musicians. His sons Ahmet and Nesuhi later founded Atlantic Records, a label that became synonymous with the 1950s, recording some of the great performances of [John Coltrane](#), as well as the likes of Ray Charles. Quite apart from all the hackneyed words about the city's role as a bridge between cultures and continents, the decision to take jazz's travelling circus to Istanbul, to the church with the pockmarked stones and surviving scraps of mosaic, was a fitting one.

But on the night, although Hancock promised, in true showman style, “an unforgettable extravaganza of epic proportions” featuring 40 artists from 15 countries, the heavy hand of Unesco – the sheer worthiness of the enterprise – proved hard to escape at times. The first 20 minutes were taken up by speeches from some of the dignitaries present, including the head of Unesco and Turkey's minister of culture.

Still, there were moments that were little short of sublime, many of them unlikely duets and trios between artists from quite different milieux. (The organisers were not too strict in their definition of jazz.) At one point, Dianne Reeves' effortlessly commanding voice seemed to fill every inch of the church as it swooped, growled and chanted in a wordless song. She was answered and accompanied by Husnu Senlendirici, the hometown hero of the night, a Turkish clarinetist whose Anatolian lilt darted and dived above her.

Later on came a spellbinding musical conversation between Zakir Husain, the tabla virtuoso, the French violinist Jean-Luc Ponty and McLaughlin, the guitarist who reshaped [Miles Davis's](#) later oeuvre. In performing McLaughlin's "Lotus Feet", Ponty's yearning tones merged with Husain's rippling beat and McLaughlin's simple runs to mesmerising effect, infusing the shadows and arches of the Hagia Eirene with mystery.

The event concluded with the inevitable all-star finale – a raucous affair, more singalong than jam session, its victim the be-bop era standard "Night in Tunisia".

Then they were gone, the effort to usher jazz in from the cultural margins and to conduct diplomacy through scat singing over for another year. Despite the longueurs of the night, its ambition was admirable, as was the accompanying educational effort – Hancock et al began the day by performing a history-of-jazz concert in Turkey's oldest high school.

Not content with gazing around Hagia Eirene, Hancock tried to video the church on his iPhone, inadvertently filming a reporter in the process. "That's wrong," I said. "I should be taking a photo of Herbie Hancock, not the other way around."

"That's because you're in the way," the jazz great replied.