

KARRIN ALLYSON: UNADORNED AND UNSURPASSED

By Jeffrey Kaczmarczyk | The Grand Rapids Press

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Press Photo/Delbridge Langdon Jr. In tune: Karrin Allyson sings during Wednesday's concert in St. Cecilia Music Center.

Referring to an artist as a "musician's musician" is something you hear all the time, but seldom, if ever, is the term explained. It applies to Karrin Allyson, and in the case of this jazz artist, it means unaffected, unadorned and unsurpassed.

The Grammy-nominated singer and pianist, plus her trio, returned Wednesday to Grand Rapids for St. Cecilia Music Center's Jazz Series.

The classically trained pianist, bred in Kansas City, Mo., has evolved into a globe-trotting jazz musician with 11 albums on the respected Concord Jazz label.

She touched upon a good dozen of those recordings, singing in several languages, in her first appearance in Royce Auditorium in nearly nine years.

Though the house wasn't full, there were more people than for that gig in February 2000. Sporting a retro look -- short, black sheath dress to go-go boots,

Allyson dabbled in many styles, dazzling the audience with all of them. She opened her



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14-song set with Antonio Carlos Jobim's "A Felicidade," from her latest album, "Imagina: Songs of Brasil." The title translates from the Portuguese as "Happiness," and the uptempo melody set the tune for the night.

Several Brazilian tunes were in her set, but there were some with surprises, such as Jobim's classic bossa nova, "Desafinado," only with Jon Hendricks' English lyrics, thus "Slightly Out of Tune."

Allyson massaged extra intimacy into ballads, such as "I Wish I Knew." At the piano, she coaxed "Double Rainbow" from an instrument that's often more percussive. On "Les Feuilles Mortes," or "Autumn Leaves," she alternated in English and French. Either way works for connoisseurs.

She isn't a belt-it-out singer, but she announced her presence with authority in the bluesy "Everybody's Cryin' Mercy," from her album "In Blue."

Allyson's alto voice doesn't have a particularly wide range. Curiously, neither did she venture much beyond the middle range of the piano.

Just the opposite for her guitarist Rod Fleeman and drummer Todd Strait. Fleeman played every inch of his electrified acoustic, and Strait dabbled in ever-varying textures on the drum kit.

There was no doubting either had been with her a long time; their background work was spot-on.

As soloists, Fleeman, in particular, mesmerized the audience with one action-packed solo after another. If he has a flaw, it's that he doesn't always have to play so many notes so much of the time in his solos.

Allyson's encore was a bouncy Latin number, "Yeh! Yeh!" from her album "Sweet Home Cookin'." Cuban percussionist Mongo Santamaria recorded it first, but he didn't look as good doing it.