

Jazz

Elan Mehler

Vortex, London

★★★★★

Even the jazzbos only started picking up a buzz about Elan Mehler in the past couple of weeks, but the Vortex was crowded for his first gig in London. Discovered in a hotel bar in Switzerland by jazz-loving DJ Gilles Peterson, he was not likely to remain a secret for long.

Mehler is likely to collect members from the fan clubs of every artist from Tord Gustavsen to Solveig Slettahjell for his introspective, slow-motion music that runs counter to the hyperactivity of much orthodox jazz. Some jazzers fidget at the disincentive to tap a toe, but Mehler's touch is as nuanced as Bill Evans's, and his phrasing draws on both jazz and classical music without directly importing licks from either. The subdued certainties of his playing bring a crowded room to total silence.

Mehler's quartet for the most part worked their way through the current Scheme for Thought album, with its wistful tunes, softly precise bass counter-melodies, understated tension between the two pianos, and airily drifting sax lines from Andrew Zimmerman. Mehler's writing is distinctive in a dreamily tone-poetic way, but his three partners are mostly there to complement those qualities – so it is the young pianist's compelling improvising that is the strongest spontaneous element.

Mehler's freely swirling elucidation of the inner melodies in Muse Suite and a trademark reduction of a country song to the essentials of its barely struck chord changes were highlights of the first half. The second began with the band's most rhythmically compelling and grippingly edgy piece, the hook-based, atonally warbling Pale 45s. It ended with Elvis Presley Blues – without a wail or a boogie in earshot, of course.

John Fordham

At Ray's Jazz, London (020-7440 3205), and Brook's Bar, London (020-7603 2516), on Tuesday, then touring.