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It's a shame that most of the Quad Cities will see only one side of Danilo Perez during his week-long visit here as part of Quad City Arts' award-winning Visiting Artist series. When he performs on February 10 at Augustana College's Centennial Hall, you'll have the opportunity to see the focused jazz master infusing the most American of music forms with folk music and the musical history of his native Latin America.

And while you'll be treated to some great jazz trio infused with Latin American flavor, you'll miss the pianist who was playfully coaxing students at area schools this week.

The students at the 2001 Alternative School in Davenport got to see both. In the middle of an hour-long session, Perez sat down at the piano for a lengthy improvisation, showing the audience that the man who had seemed like a good-natured, supportive music teacher could play.

Perez the performer keeps his head low, concentrating, oblivious to his surroundings as he works a bouncy but intense improvisation. He contorts his face, talks to himself, and keeps a beat with his foot. The music is filled with Perez's Panamanian heritage, with Latin rhythms sneaking in initially and sometimes taking over.

Several times, the music seems to reach a natural stopping point and trails off. But just as it seems to be nodding off, Perez wakes it up and sends it scurrying in a new direction.

When he's done, he makes a request of the students. "I need a rapper," he said. Some teens volunteer their classmates, but there are no takers this time. Perez explains why he wants one.

"Music is actually everywhere," he says. "Music is in the air. That's why rap is so important now." He continues, saying that hip hop, like jazz long ago, needs to be taken to the next level, to make it really matter.

Perez gets a convert right there, if not a rapper. "He knows what he's talking about," says one audience member.

In the next exercise, Perez tries to get the teens to understand how music can be found in unexpected places – such as conversation. He gets two very reluctant volunteers to the front of the room, and asks them to chat. “I’m just talking to him?” the girl asks. Perez watches them awkwardly contrive a conversation and eventually picks up on the rhythm of “Where’d you get your shirt?” He recruits a few more students and tries to get the handful of participants to work with and shape the beats and cadences of talk, making it into music.

The exercise works in fits; whenever the kids get going, somebody laughs or stops and the whole thing falls apart. It was a lackluster if funny ending to what had been a lively and remarkable session.

Each exercise followed a pattern. A student who sang or played the piano was called to the front of the room, mortified and embarrassed, professing not to know much music or not having much skill. Perez would patiently give encouragement, with little success at first. And then, suddenly, a breakthrough, when the student’s confidence took off, taking the performance with it.

One student flubbed her tune on the piano. “Don’t worry,” Perez encouraged. “Don’t worry.” She started again, only to stop suddenly when he started to accompany her on his melodica.

The next time, she let him play along with her, she knocking out the notes she’d been taught, he soulfully riffing on it. The duet was like a conversation, he explained, with each person responding to and anticipating the other. “It’s like real life,” he said.

Perez kept encouraging the student. “That’s all I know,” she said. “Let’s make something up. Let’s find something,” he said. He asked that the lights be turned off, implored the other students to keep a beat, and then took over with the melodica.

The next student was a singer who wanted to do “Amazing Grace.” Perez took the piano, and the singer seemed shy. Perez’s fingers were on the keys as she started singing, but his head was turned to the student, making eye contact and smiling with his lips slightly parted, giving her nonverbal encouragement. She seemed joyful when she was singing.

“This is where you make the changes,” Perez said after the students had left the room. “The kids are hungry. … They don’t know how talented they are.”

Children, whether they realize it or not, acquire an acute sense of music just from things around them. “Music is a language,” he said. “It’s in the air. [But] they don’t know how to apply it.”

Perez began to tap into his musical talent at a young age but didn’t decide to pursue it full-time until his college years. (See sidebar.)

Still a young man, Perez has won acclaim for the way he’s broadened the scope of jazz music. He’s already been nominated for a Grammy, and the New York Times last year called his *Moth erland*

album “a bold example of the musicological rethinking of jazz that so many musicians are engaged in right now.”

Incorporating his Pan American musical background into jazz might seem natural for somebody like Perez, but it’s also conscious. Jazz, like classical music, can be too intellectual and sterile and drive away listeners, he said. That’s one reason he frequently employs folk-music motifs in his work. “Folk music is always in touch with the community,” he said.

That was clear from his performance. Perez’s improv in front of the students careened from style to style, but it always felt familiar and never became too abstract. This was meaty jazz easily digested.

The goal in improvisation is “to develop, to get to another place” with a piece of music, he said. In his solo performance at the alternative school on Monday, the pianist was always in control on the music. Perez said that while his fingers are in the present, his mind is plotting the future, what he wants to do next. “Sometimes you see things in slow motion,” he said.

Jazz and classical music are frequently considered of different worlds, but Perez points out that in improvisational jazz, the artist is playing the role of composer and performer at the same time. Improv, he said, is “composing in a fast spot.”

That level of concentration is more than evident when Perez is playing. But as involved and wound as he is performing solo on the piano, he claims that he was once much wilder on the stage. “I used to be very energetic and have nothing left,” he said, adding that he was often completely spent for a full day afteward. “I manage my energy a lot better. It’s a lot of energy you put out there.”

And as everybody who attends Saturday’s performance will discover, a more controlled and judicious Danilo Perez still fills the air with a charge when he plays.

Tickets for the 7 p.m. Danilo Perez concert at Augustana College’s Centennial Hall in Rock Island are $10 for adults and $5 for students. The Augustana Jazz Ensemble will open.