

Let music do the talking, with rhythm

M. Taufiqurrahman

The Jakarta Post/Jakarta

For musicians, especially bandleaders holding a lead instrument, ego is a demon that they have to constantly keep at bay during a show.

But for Dutch guitarist Esther Steenbergen, she not only kept her ego in check, she even allowed the rhythm section of her quartet — that usually only backs her lead guitar — to stand out in a recent performance at the Dutch Cultural Center Erasmus Huis.

During parts of the show, Steenbergen just laid her instrument down and observed her fellow musicians, bass player Eric Calmes and percussionist Enrique Firpi, work their instruments, delivering a tight and interlocking rhythm section, probably the most solid in recent memory.

Calmes played his axe earnestly and ecstatically to produce a supple, rhythmic, and at times melodic background to the show's repertoire, contemporary Latin compositions from Spanish-speaking composers like Leo Brouwer, Astor Piazzolla and Isaac Albéniz.

The Uruguayan-born Firpi, for his part, beat his instrument, a Peruvian box drum *cajón*, with relative ease compared to Calmes, to produce diverse percussive effects for the compositions.

It's a small wonder that such a rich sound could be produced from such a small and simple instrument.

In the last part of *Reflections on Beauty*, a Latin-

tinged composition penned by Calmes, the two musicians literally conversed with their instruments, trading licks and kicks to build a glorious coda to the composition.

Calmes' guitar-slapping technique works against the energetic beat from Firpi, climbing from the lowest note to the highest register the two percussive instruments allowed, before making a sudden stop at a breathtaking speed.

The three-minute coda alone was worth the admission, only that concertgoers did not have to pay for the performance.

When Steenbergen returned to the stage as lead musician, she did so seemingly without any intention of attempting to

eclipse the previous work of her two colleagues.

Mostly working on minor chords, Steenbergen with her ever-present smile and strange way of holding her guitar, gave color to the performance, channeling the intention from the compositions' original composers.

She was the one tasked to give the audience a hint on how to recognize the composition, whether it be salsa, flamenco or bossa nova.

Steenbergen also acted as spokesperson for the outfit and occasionally threw in some jokes.

"Some say that guitar or bass players spend half their lives playing their instruments, and the other half tuning them," Steenbergen said to

the burst of laughter from some in the audience.

In the second part of the show, Steenbergen, Calmes and Firpi were joined by Olga Fransen, a seasoned musician in their home country, who in her own way changed the mood of the remaining part of the concert.

Fransen, a classically trained musician, had the inclination to play the contemporary Latin compositions, in the classical way.

The intensity with which the two guitars were played took over from the carefree approach of the first part of the show, making the night a very rich musical experience.

— Profile of Esther Steenbergen on Page 24



JPM. Taufiqurrahman

Members of the Esther Steenbergen Quartet (from left to right) Enrique Firpi on percussion (Cajon), Esther Steenbergen on guitar, Eric Calmes on bass, on stage at Dutch Cultural Center Erasmus Huis, display their musical savvy. (Guitarist Olga Fransen is not seen in the picture.)