

## Thunderous, Generous Spirits Pervade John Hollenbeck Large Ensemble

When drummer-composer John Hollenbeck says “large,” he means something along the lines of “magnanimous.” Everything about the ensemble he brought to New York’s Jazz Standard on March 1 for the first stop on its U.S. mini-tour was generous. The size (19 pieces plus conductor) was the given, but other aspects were more subtle, including Hollenbeck’s skillful use of singer Theo Bleckmann. The role of a vocalist in a big band has been well defined since the days when Ella Fitzgerald was fronting Chick Webb’s orchestra and Herb Jeffries was featured with Duke Ellington, yet Hollenbeck casts

Bleckmann’s voice as focal point and as instrument, foreground and ensemble player. As the band launched into the opener, “Guarana,” the singer’s tenor was an added color within the soaring passages and the punchy rhythmic cycle that became the melody, in step with brass against the volley of piano, vibraphone and Hollenbeck’s hand-drumming on the traps. Later in the set, Bleckmann would inject *khomei*—known in the West as Asian throat-singing—techniques into the mix.

If it all sounds epic, that was precisely the objective. Each piece introduced novel twists

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that pushed it beyond the 10-minute mark. Hollenbeck and the rest of the rhythm section (bassist Kermit Driscoll, pianist Matt Mitchell and vibraphonist Patricia Franceschy) supplied plenty of propulsion, but the charts on pieces like “The Blessing” and “The Music Of Life” swelled with classical flourishes that made the music feel gauzy and weightless rather than traditionally muscular.

One after another, however, Hollenbeck’s soloists crashed through the gossamer facade. Trombonist Jacob Garchik sliced across the shifting rhythms of the opener, while saxophon-

ist Tony Malaby answered the call repeatedly, on soprano for “The Blessing” and as one of three tenors (with Jeremy Viner and Dan Willis) on “Perseverance,” the evening’s most thunderous groove exercise. As perhaps a cooldown from tom-toms that veered into rock territory before turning martial, what followed was another stellar example of Hollenbeck’s largesse: He invited up singer Kate McGarry to duet with Bleckmann on an ethereal arrangement of “Wichita Lineman.” Astonishingly, this performance featured the evening’s most traditional use of vocals.

—K. Leander Williams

