



## FEATURE

# EFG London Jazz Festival 2013, Part Three.

Saturday, December 07, 2013



JOHN HOLLENBECK with CLAUDIA QUINTET and the ROYAL ACADEMY OF MUSIC BIG BAND

Saturday evening at the Purcell Room was given over to the music of New York based drummer, composer and educator John Hollenbeck. Hollenbeck's main creative outlets are the long running and prolific Claudia Quintet and his more occasional Large Ensemble with both projects featuring some of New York's leading creative musicians.

I've been fortunate enough to see Claudia Quintet on a couple of occasions, "discovering" them at the 2007 Cheltenham Jazz Festival and catching up with them again in 2010 at the Harmonic Festival in Birmingham. Both performances were outstanding and I've also enjoyed exploring the band's recorded output on Cuneiform Records.

The music of Hollenbeck's Large Ensemble is equally intriguing and consistently inventive. Economically it wouldn't be viable to fly the whole ensemble to London for a festival appearance so instead Hollenbeck turned to the young musicians of the Royal Academy of Music Big Band to bring his large scale works to life. Also an acclaimed educator Hollenbeck was a visiting professor at the Academy during 2013 and had spent two days rehearsing and woodshedding with his young colleagues just prior to tonight's performance which saw Hollenbeck and the RAMBB playing the first half on the concert.

The first set began with Hollenbeck directing the RAMBB with JJ Wheeler at the drum stool. The opening piece was "Guarana", drawn from the Large Ensemble album "Eternal Interlude" (2009). This was a Brazilian flavoured tune named after a Brazilian herb with Viagra like properties (or so Hollenbeck informed us) and was inspired by a trio made by the Claudia Quintet to that country. The influence of Hermeto Pascoal could be heard on the music with Ralph Wyld's vibes a distinctive element and with Oliver Martin on trombone the featured soloist.

Hollenbeck has had a long running creative partnership with the American avant vocalist Theo Bleckmann. Bleckmann's role was filled here by young singer and multi-instrumentalist Jacob Collier, the subject of the "Taking Off" feature in the December 2013 edition of Jazzwise Magazine. Hollenbeck's recent output has placed a greater emphasis on the role of the human voice with Bleckmann's vocals an increasingly important component in Hollenbeck's recordings. The recent "Songs I Like A Lot" recorded with vocalists Bleckmann and Kate McGarry plus the Frankfurt Radio Big Band" puts Hollenbeck's unique stamp on an eclectic range of material that includes Jimmy Webb's "Wichita Lineman". For this Hollenbeck moved to the drum kit with a suited Nick Smart taking over the conductor's role. Collier made a good job of filling Bleckmann's shoes with guitarist Rob Luft also making a significant contribution.

Hollenbeck remained at the kit for the rest of the set, beginning with his arrangement of Thelonious Monk's "Four In One", a deconstruction that Hollenbeck has re-branded as "Foreign One" and which also appears on "Eternal Interlude". Embracing startling dynamic contrasts and hard driving rhythms the piece featured a rousing tenor solo from Sam Rapley, one of several band members who had also lined up with Troykestra earlier in the day.

"Constant Conversation" featured both non verbal vocalising and spoken word passages alongside avant jazz passages featuring bowed bass and Hollenbeck's cymbal scrapes. The drummer/composer has an abiding love of contemporary classical music as well as jazz and this is often reflected in his writing.

"Abstinence", which originally appeared on the 2005 Large Ensemble album "A Blessing" is a piece that Hollenbeck has returned to often. "It's really about abstinence and the about the absence of abstinence" explained Hollenbeck, and basically it's a second line tune cloaked in contemporary and avant garde trappings. With rousing ensemble passages including soaring wordless vocals, FX laden guitar and plenty of instrument swappage between the reeds this was actually great fun and it was easy to see why this piece has become something of a favourite in the Hollenbeck repertoire.

An intriguing first half ended with Hollenbeck's adaptations of Kraftwerk's "The Model" which included dramatic contrapuntal horn arrangements and the use of electric keyboards by pianist Nathan Morson. And should anybody be in any doubt Hollenbeck reminded us that it was his show with a closing drum feature.

This was an interesting first half with the RAMBB acquitting themselves well on some very challenging material. For the record the full line up was;

Composer/drums; John Hollenbeck

Conductor; Nick Smart

Vocals; Jacob Collier

Reeds; Alex Hitchcock, Matthew Sulzmann, Greg Barker, Ronan Perrett, Sam Rapley

Trumpets; Louis Dowdeswell, James Copus, Ben Rodney, Dan Walton

Trombones; Owen Dawson, Oliver Martin, Quinn Parker, Courtney Brown

Piano/keyboards; Nathan Morson

Guitar; Rob Luft

Vibes/percussion; Ralph Wylde

Bass; Fergus Ireland, Misha Mullov-Abbado

Drums; JJ Wheeler

The second half of the concert featured Hollenbeck at the helm of his most acclaimed and most prolific outlet Claudia Quintet. Formed in 2001 the personnel includes original members Chris Speed (tenor sax, clarinet), Matt Moran (vibraphone) and Drew Gress (double bass ) plus newcomer Red Wierenga on accordion who replaced original member Ted Reichman in 2011.

This combination of instruments is almost unique in jazz and driven by Hollenbeck's artistic vision the group's music is richly textured and rhythmically complex, full of ingeniously interlocking melodic, harmonic and rhythmic patterns that draw on jazz and folk forms plus the influences of contemporary classical composers, particularly minimalists such as Philip Glass and Steve Reich.

The distinctive but continuously developing Claudia sound has been documented across a series of excellent albums, most of them recorded for the Cuneiform label. Their latest offering is the recently released "September", from which the majority of tonight's material was sourced, a semi conceptual affair named for the time of year when Hollenbeck does most of his composing.

Of course it's a loaded title, the name of the month forever associated with the events of 9/11/2001 (or 11/09 as we Brits would have put it). Indeed tonight's opener "Coping Song" was written at that time, a response to the horrific events of that never to be forgotten day. Hollenbeck himself was safely ensconced in the Adirondack Mountains at the time but there can't be an American, or any other citizen of a western democracy for that matter, who hasn't in some way not been touched emotionally by what happened. The song itself was full of the other worldly beauty that so often distinguishes the Claudia sound.

Each tune on the album has a date as well as a title. September 9th is represented by "Wayne Phases", Hollenbeck's tribute to Wayne Shorter. This was a good example of the tightly knit, finely meshed ensemble playing that is so representative of the group's work. Claudia don't do "jazz" solos as such but pass the baton around in more organic fashion. Nevertheless there were strong showings here from Wierenga on accordion, a worthy successor to the excellent Reichman, Moran on vibes, who attacked the bars with a surprising level of intensity, and finally Speed on tenor whose playing also became more impassioned as his solo progressed.

"Somber Blanket (25th September)" was more reflective in tone with Wierenga on accordion and Speed on clarinet exchanging melody and counter melody above a bed of gently shifting polyrhythms.

"Interval Dig (24th September)" began with an extended solo feature from the excellent Gress, the backbone of this quintet and of so many other adventurous jazz ensembles. Moran's dazzling vibes solo upped the pace with Wierenga on accordion and Speed on tenor making similarly spirited contributions before Gress stepped into limelight once more. This was Claudia at their most exuberant and joyous.

Hollenbeck's continued fascination with the human voice was expressed in this context by the use of samples of a Franklin D Roosevelt's "New Deal" speech of 24th September 1936. Subtitled "Let Me Warn You" Roosevelt's repeated phrases were a constant throughout the piece, mantra like incantations that meshed effectively with the quintet's playing, Speed providing the only instrumental solo on tenor. Reviewing the piece for Jazz Journal Simon Adams compared the piece with Steve Reich's "It's Gonna Rain", a perceptive insight as to just where Hollenbeck was coming from here.

The vocal theme carried over into the following "The Rapidity Of Silences" sourced from the previous Claudia album "What Is The Beautiful?" recorded with vocalists Theo Bleckmann and Kurt Elling. Inspired by the words of American poet Kenneth Patchen the piece saw Hollenbeck move to the piano for a piece of atmospheric and ethereal chamber jazz that began with a solo piano introduction and weaved the ghostly whisperings of Speed and Moran into the fabric of a tune that featured the gentle accordion drones of Wierenga alongside Speed's clarinet. This was a highly effective exploration of the interface between sound, space and silence.

The group returned to the new album for "Lemons (September 18th)", which Hollenbeck dedicated to pianist Jason Moran. This was a hugely successful set closer with its hypnotic bass and drum grooves fuelling solos from Wierenga, Moran and Speed. The vibraphonist made use of extended vibes techniques including the use of bows on the bars as the tune adopted a freer structure in mid tune. Moran has been a considerable influence on young contemporary vibes players such as the UK's Jim Hart and the American was at his most exploratory and adventurous here. When Gress picked up the groove again it was Speed's turn to shine with an increasingly impassioned tenor solo.

For the deserved encore Hollenbeck chose to calm things down again by moving to the piano for "Flock", an effective aural depiction of the behaviour of a flock of geese featuring Gress on grainy arco bass and with Speed making appropriately goose like noises on his clarinet. The addition of vibes and accordion took the music into area where the focus was on beauty rather than humour and the final result was a delightful minimalist miniature that perhaps drew its genesis from Messiaen and his use of birdsong as a source of inspiration.

On leaving the stage Hollenbeck thanked the RAM Big Band again as well as acknowledging the skills of his Claudia Quintet colleagues. Listening back to recordings by both Claudia Quintet and the Large Ensemble again post event it's even more clear what a distinctive compositional personality Hollenbeck is as he mixes genres with skill and daring. A true musical visionary.

<http://www.thejazzmann.com/features/article/efg-london-jazz-festival-2013-part-three/>