
Profiles

Eclecticism abounds this month, with a Braxtonish prog-funk ditty, covers of Stealers Wheel and Gus Khan and fusion *au Stravinsky*

The Claudia Quintet



Steven Guntler

THE CLAUDIA QUINTET

A genre-defying jazz-and-more band with a great capacity to both intrigue and entertain

Subtle, elusive, tricky, clever, and too clever by half, intellectual and self-knowing are just some of the words thrown at the music of the Claudia Quintet. But so too should be charming, amusing, fascinating and intensely satisfying. For theirs is a music that does indeed stretch the mind and test the intellect with its constant shifts and changing moods, but it is also a music that can make you smile, even laugh out loud, for its audacity and wit.

The quintet started life when, in the mid-1990s, drummer John Hollenbeck was making waves every Monday night in the alt.coffee Internet café in New York's East Village. His Refuseniks trio, with accordion player Ted Reichman and bassist Reuben Radding, managed to grab some surfers' attentions and word soon spread that this was a group worth checking out. One night, a woman called Claudia walked in professing love and devotion for the band. As Hollenbeck recalls, "She rambled on and on about how she was going to make our gig a regular thing - she was going to tell all her friends." When she eventually finished singing their praises, "Reuben and I sauntered up to our instruments for the next set. He softly whispered to me, 'She's never coming back.'"

Radding was right, but the trio continued the relationship with jokes about how one

of them had seen Claudia on the street or that she had left a message to say she was coming next week. Claudia however remained awol, and Radding soon joined her, leaving New York for higher education. Hollenbeck then began to form a new group around him and Reichman in 1997. The then barely known vibraphonist Matt Moran was signed up, along with reedsman Chris Speed and bassist Drew Gress, both known through their work with avant-sax player Tim Berne. Claudia failed to join the band, but Hollenbeck named the new quintet after her. "I wanted the group to have a sensitive, feminine quality," he said, and, as he intended the band to play fully notated as well as improvised music, he used one of chamber music's conventions by giving it a name, like the Arditti Quartet and others.

Their elusive moniker reflects an elusive, slippery music that is hard to pin down. Hollenbeck is classically trained, and until their last set the sole composer. It's his vision that informs everything they play. The Claudia's eponymous first set, elegantly recorded and packaged by Blueshift Records in 2001, introduces the band's distinctive sound, the shifting clarinet or tenor, vibraphone and accordion voices shimmering over Gress's driving bass and Hollenbeck's mercurial, insistent drumming. The structures they play are tight and controlled, yet the music flows naturally. Love songs, three varied celebrations of Hollenbeck's favourite day, Thursday, a stylistically fond tribute to Gil Evans and Tim Berne, and a "Braxtonish prog-funk ditty" designed to

entertain, fill out an intriguing debut set.

Shifting to Cuneiform Records, the quintet has since recorded four more increasingly acclaimed CDs. *I, Claudia* (2004), *Semi-Formal* (2005) and *For* (2007) develop their approach, the catchy and often very tuneful melodies revealing hidden rhythmic and harmonic complexities. Moran's vibraphone recalls the overlapping marimbas of Steve Reich's more minimalist works while Reichman's accordion delivers klezmer and fair-ground atmospheres. Elsewhere, ambient sounds, insistent grooves and edgier jazz influences make their appearances.

The big change comes in their most recent set, *The Royal Toast* (2009), in which the group are joined for the first time by an outsider, pianist Gary Versace, who contributes one short piece. His presence transforms the balance of the music, for now half the band is playing percussion instruments, allowing Hollenbeck to indulge his polyrhythmic passions. Of equal interest here are the four pieces where Hollenbeck got each other member of the group to improvise a short overdubbed duo with himself, resulting in almost mirror image performances. Experimental music making at its best.

Away from Claudia, Hollenbeck is an active big band leader, his three sets with various large ensembles attracting much critical comment. These rightly grab the attention, but it is the Claudia's music that excites. Wherever Claudia is now, she should be proud of her group.

Simon Adams

IAN SHAW

British singer with a repertoire encompassing Cole Porter, Johnny Mercer, Michael Jackson, Joni Mitchell and Gus Khan

Go to see Ian Shaw in concert and the chances are you'll catch him in solo mode or in a duo setting with one of the top female vocalists currently on the scene. That would include Claire Martin, Gill Manly, Georgia Mancio and Clare Teal, "All of the birds," as he put it when I caught one of his shows at Greenham Common recently. He claims to have no preference for any particular band format and says he finds all settings equally enjoyable. He does, however, perform and record on occasion with a purely instru-

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