

## WHAT THE PRESS HAS SAID ABOUT CLAUDIA QUINTET WITH GARY VERSACE'S ROYAL TOAST – CUNEIFORM 2010

“...*Royal Toast* is the fifth album from the Claudia Quintet, percussionist and composer John Hollenbeck's longstanding five-piece that is—in the eternal words of Duke Ellington—a band “beyond category.” ...

A former pupil of legendary jazz composer Bob Brookmeyer and an avowed student of the minimalists, Hollenbeck's compositions are imbued with both the intricate structural layering of the former and the forthright emotional directness of the later.

...Hollenbeck's intricate compositions allow his sidemen a modicum of solo space,...their subtle contributions blurring the line between the composed and improvised. Like a puzzle, Hollenbeck's modular arrangements feature interlocking counterpoint, cantilevered rhythms and modulating tempos; despite the high-brow approach, these pieces maintain an air of rhythmic immediacy and melodic accessibility.

Balancing dynamics that range from bittersweet balladry to ebullient grooves, *Royal Toast* is another un-categorizable yet accessible offering from Hollenbeck and the peerless Claudia Quintet.”  
– Troy Collins, *All About Jazz*, May 11, 2010

“...Hollenbeck's labyrinthine compositions get much of their subtlety and force from the individual players that have defined the group's identity from the start.

On *Royal Toast*, Hollenbeck yields the floor to each of them in turn...

Each improvised sketch flows naturally into the dense through-composed track that follows; cleansing the palate and helping listeners digest the music in all its extended brilliance.

...his writing for The Claudia Quintet involves a level of multipart detail expected from a new music ensemble.... The key difference is the fitful improvised component, as well as the raw rhythm lurking under every shimmering harmonic texture or contrapuntal flourish...

For all its clashing asymmetry and constant, baffling change the music radiates with steadiness and grace.”

– David Adler, *All About Jazz*, May 11, 2010

“...when I say that the Claudia Quintet combine elements of jazz and modern chamber music, the jazz I'm referring to is...post bop... small ensemble music that doesn't necessarily lean on swung rhythms, is built on modal composition, and doesn't fear dipping into the avant-garde.

On *Royal Toast*, the Quintet...augmented to a sextet by pianist Gary Versace, moves easily between improvisation and intricately arranged composition.

The band's unorthodox instrumentation-- bass, drums, reeds, accordion, and vibraphone-- gives it a distinct sonic signature. Ted Reichman's accordion is used in every conceivable way, playing leads, soloing, harmonizing with the clarinet, and in some of the album's...most rewarding passages, hypnotically vamping in a static dance with Matt Moran's vibraphone. Though they can clang along with the best of them, they do quiet and meditative well. ... It's fitting they'd land on the Cuneiform label.”

– Joe Tangari, *Pitchfork*, August 19, 2010

“...impressive are the personnel Hollenbeck assembled for the Claudia Quintet. Ted Reichman....one of the rare accordion player specializing in improvised music.... Vibraphonist Matt Moran...Chris Speed...DrewGress...

For their fifth album...Hollenbeck brings in a sixth member...pianist Gary Versace. ...The addition brought a subtle change in their sound, one that allowed Hollenbeck to step back behind the tonal instruments and concentrate further on layering rhythmic patterns for his intricate songs.

...the band sounds like it does because it's largely scripted... Melodies stay in place or they might lurch from one spot to another on the other side of the musical room, but it's by design. ... It's one of those records you call “jazz” simply because you don't know what else to call it, although “avant garde chamber jazz” comes closer.

...Hollenbeck loves to catch listeners off guard, and the opening ambient piece “Crane Merit” would not have been the way I'd expect him to open an album with. It's very straightforward and plodding by Hollenbeck's standards. Following that is the first of a half dozen brief interludes. ...

...relieves from the highly structured nature of Hollenbeck's compositions, as they are all solo improvised pieces...

...the title track “Royal Toast” is the most intriguing. It's multi-sectional without segues, with Hollenbeck and Moran acting as co-conspirators...it's a head-nodding, toe-tapping vibe all the way through. Versace's intelligent improvisations are made more astounding when you notice the rhythms keeps fluctuating beneath him. One could spend a whole day dissecting this song alone, but the remaining nine fully formed songs have their own puzzles to solve, too.

...*Royal Toast* continues their tradition of not following tradition.”

– Pico, *Something Else Reviews*, August 8, 2010

“When The Claudia Quintet played at Rumor's Boutique in Richmond in October of 2007...There was something about that music that I had never heard before, and being there while it happened made it even more amazing.

...my feelings after that live show, the elation, starts to come back when listening to *Royal Toast*.

The meditative opening track “Crane Merit”...makes it clear that bandleader, composer, and drummer John Hollenbeck was going for something different this time.

“Keramag” is The Claudia Quintet you know and love, with its unique color of accordion, vibraphone, and clarinet playing Hollenbeck harmonies. There's a bit of Zappa logic in here...

Here, Versace joins the band in a featured capacity with both hands on the piano, lending a new timbre and solo voice to the palette.

The pieces “Ted Versus Ted,” “Drew With Drew,” “Matt on Matt,” and “Chris and Chris” are all sub-one-minute tracks of playing juxtaposed with another sub-one-minute track of their playing. ...an experiment by Hollenbeck...

... Hollenbeck and his bandmates still manage each time to push the limits of what small ensembles are capable of.”

– Dean Christesen, *RVA News*, May 6<sup>th</sup> 2010

“On *Royal Toast*...one of the innovative aspects of this CD can be found in the five short interludes on which Hollenbeck got each quintet member to unknowingly record a duet with himself.

But the heart of the Claudia Quintet's approach is the deft manner in which Hollenbeck...blends both notated and improvised music. ...

Instrumentally, and in the album's far-flung rhythmic and harmonic textures, *Royal Toast* is a world of ideas, sometimes diverging from sharp, angular rhythms to haunting ambient harmonies. On “Paterna Terra,” ...the quintet creates a swath of wonderfully imaginative solos set against intricate, rhythmically complex percussion beats and bass lines...sonic vastness akin to the sprawl of a rainforest teeming with life. At other times, as on “Keramag,” the arrangements are tightly wound with driving rhythms reminiscent of the progressive rock of Frank Zappa. ...

Sonically, Hollenbeck (who also serves as producer), along with engineers Andy Taub and Ben Liscio, has created an airy, open soundstage that complements these rich harmonic textures while bringing the soloists into sharp focus.”

– Greg Cahill, *The Absolute Sound*, September 2010

“...the Claudia Quintet comes from a jazz foundation, and it's played by musicians fluent in jazz. But there's a lot of other stuff mixed in... There are cries of free improvisation and interlocking layers of minimalism, and there's the complexity and clean precision of math-/post-/prog-rock. ... It's played by the quirky combination of clarinet or tenor sax, vibraphone, accordion, bass and drums, with the addition of piano on this record. And it rocks.

This music definitely grooves, unconventionally but head-forward and throbbing ("Keramag," "Royal Toast"). But it also develops over time as its beats shift shape ("Paterna Terra," "Armitage Shanks"). And it isn't afraid to slow down in search of the probingly beautiful ("For Frederick Franck," "Crane Merit").

... All of this is music that resists idiom. ...” – Patrick Jarenwattananon, *NPR Music*, [www.npr.org](http://www.npr.org)

“... With John Hollenbeck...everything he puts his name to claims a worthwhile place... His large ensemble record...was my most-played release of 2009...

The small group work...Claudia...is equally compelling. ... The prevailing mood...is sombre, and almost elegiac. ...

...“Ted Versus Ted”, “Drew With Drew” and “Matt on Matt”...make an important point about the internal dynamic of the group, in which the players...confront their own stylistic boundaries, playing in and out of character at once....

...stand-alone tracks...contain enough musical information to spin off an average jazz date each. ... The title piece is pure, distilled Hollenbeck, witty, lateral, insistently driven but with a one-hand-on-the-wheel insouciance. Along with Matt Wilson, he's the most interesting jazz percussionist around at the moment... What's especially interesting about this recording is how easily Versace is assimilated. ...

It's a record that is perhaps best absorbed slowly and by stages, but it is essential listening and consolidates the Quintet's high standing on the current scene. ...”

– Brian Morton, *Point of Departure*, #29, [www.pointofdeparture.org](http://www.pointofdeparture.org)

“... If John Hollenbeck is approximately the hottest drummer/composer in New York jazz circles, then the Claudia Quintet is the hottest of his many projects as well as one of the city's most passionately complex live bands. ... the neon-knotted compositions on *Royal Toast* (Cuneiform) torque and twist... A mighty fine album by any standard-but don't miss Claudia in the flesh.”

– Richard Gehr, *Relix*, June 2010

“...starkly beautiful new CD with The Claudia Quintet, *Royal Toast*. ...

... *Royal Toast* is steeped in Hollenbeck's catchy fascination with prog rock's complexities married to the sonorities and refinement of chamber music, not to mention his abiding love for minimalism a la Steve Reich. Hollenbeck's Claudia Quintet may also be unique in jazz -- for it is surely that kind of band too -- thanks to its always innovative grooving that values not just rhythms but more basic pulsations. ...

The music on *Royal Toast* is wide-roaming. There are slow and often austere beauties such as the opening track *Crane Merit*, the closing, uplifting track *For Frederick Franck* and the rarefied ballad *Ideal Standard*. There are rabble-rousers too, including *Keramag*, *Royal Toast* (which features a star turn by Versace at the piano) and *Sphinx*, a riveting, four-minute burst of energy. In between are especially enigmatic compositions such as *Zurn* and *Paterna Terra*...

Finally, there are four vignettes -- *Drew with Drew*, *Matt on Matt*, *Chris and Chris* and *Ted vs. Ted*. ... overdubbed snippets of each bandmate ...

You could say that *Royal Toast* relishes reconciling opposites -- wood and metal, cerebral melodies and forthright grooves, stuttering rhythms and simple ... it's mind-expanding... it will reward your attention many times over.”

– Peter Hum, *Ottawa Citizen*, May 21 2010

“The Claudia Quintet...turns out music of clockwork intricacy and crisp premeditation. ... “Royal Toast”...striking a similar accord between the factions of progressive jazz, classical Minimalism and low-glare experimental rock.

... Jazz and new music and post-rock...have been steadily encroaching on one another's turf for a while... The overlap has a lot to do with textural dynamics, which is what the Claudia Quintet has always been about.

Well, that and groove, on a cellular level. ...

Mr. Hollenbeck composes with an ear for passing tensions, some breezier than others. His band mates, all thoughtful improvisers, fill in the gaps...

... Structure and liberty are both so integrated into the band playbook that they don't assume any kind of opposition. That's more commonplace than it used to be too, though this group still makes it feel special.”

– Nate Chinen, *The New York Times*, May 16, 2010

“...Touching on enough influences to resemble an expertly curated corner record shop — a thicket of Steve Reich-informed vibraphone here, a dash of knotty chamber jazz there — the Claudia Quintet is one of the more adventurous jazz ensembles working today. Often built around the unique harmonic interplay of saxophonist-clarinetist Chris Speed and accordionist Ted Reichman...the group is also joined by guest pianist Gary Versace... unexpected pleasures lie below the surface. ...

Rich with ambition and empathetic interplay that never allows one player to rise above any other for long, the Claudia Quintet doesn't entirely sound like anybody else. Which is exactly what makes them worth seeking out.”

– Chris Barton, *Los Angeles Times*, May 17, 2010

“... The Claudia sound is unique, the material, mainly by Hollenbeck, is through composed but allows plenty of scope for improvisation...

Hollenbeck's tunes range from the deceptively simple to the mind bogglingly complex, a continually shifting pattern of melody and rhythm that has drawn comparisons with the work of Steve Reich and Philip Glass. Although rooted in jazz the band's unique blend of instruments gives the group a sound all it's own. ...

I like to think of Hollenbeck as the equivalent of the UK's Seb Rochford. Both are phenomenally talented drummers but it's in their compositional skills that their real genius lies. Both head groups with a distinctive, probably unique, instrumental line up ...

...the titles are representative of Hollenbeck's humour and love of word play. ...

Of the more formal compositions the opening “Crane Merit” is lush and atmospheric...possessed of a certain majesty. ...this is a fine example of the group's ensemble playing, each musician serving the beauty of the composition. ...

Versace introduces “Ideal Standard”, a title that alludes both to a “standard” in the jazz sense but also, if I'm not mistaken, to Hollenbeck's lavatorial obsession. ... The tune itself is the closest the enigmatic Claudia get to a jazz ballad, a shimmering, slowly unfolding rubato piece with more excellent interplay...

“Royal Toast” is as good as anything Claudia have ever done. Versace integrates perfectly into the ensemble sound and it’s this unique group identity that sets Claudia apart from their peers. Their blend of jazz, minimalism, chamber music and even experimental rock is quite unlike anything else I’ve ever heard. Cuneiform, with it’s commitment to experimental music from all fields seems very much the natural home for them. ...  
... In concert the group are simply awesome and seeing this music performed live greatly enhances the listener’s understanding...  
... British readers...if you like Polar Bear the chances are you’ll like this. [4 out of 5 stars]” – Ian Mann, *TheJazzMann.com*, September 10, 2010

“This fifth release by my current favourite group finds them joined by pianist Gary Versace... His addition means that half the band is now playing percussive instruments, giving Hollenbeck more compositional opportunity to indulge his polyrhythmic passions. ...Claudia’s music is edgy, angular and often intricate, the different instruments layering across each other in almost contrapuntal fashion. ... I...find the music of this group endlessly fascinating and intriguing. This latest installment does them proud.”  
– Simon Adams, *Jazz Journal*, July 2010

“...The piano/vibes/accordion combination gives Hollenbeck a really rich harmonic resource for his writing and arranging...  
The whole thing balances between composition and improvisation, between jazz and other contemporary musics, with minimalist suggestions always there, shifting just beneath the skin. ...  
Another stand-out is the finale, *For Frederick Franke* – a elegy for the late painter – which has Moran bowing his vibes at the beginning, in conversation with the bass – truly gorgeous. In fact, that is one of the other principal sources of pleasure throughout this album – the richness and inventiveness of the combinations of timbres.  
There is so much going on throughout the album, and so much to choose from – all of it enriching, while also hugely enjoyable too. ...”  
– Peter Bacon, *thejazzbreakfast*, September 2, 2010

“...the eclectic Claudia Quintet can always be counted on to make interesting and unusual music. ... The group covers a wide range of musical territory on this album. ... There is a lightness and an airy feeling to the music that separates it from most contemporary jazz being made today. ... Speed's clarinet and saxophone gently float over a luxurious bed of shimmering vibraphone and swirling accordion. Hollenbeck's compositions and agile drumwork are the foundation of the groups overall sound, carving out a unique niche. ... "Keramag" raises to tempo to a spritely fast level with agile drums and vibes and punchy accordion. This combination of instruments is unusual in jazz and makes for a very cool and enjoyable sound. ... This is multi-faceted music that always deviates from the expected. ...filled with a gentle impish humor ... compelling listening.”  
– Tim Niland, *Music and More*, May 24, 2010, <http://jazzandblues.blogspot.com/>

“... Royal Toast adds pianist Gary Versace, introducing even more contrapuntal potential without over-thickening the stew, and releasing the remarkable Hollenbeck to play a freer textural role. ...the overlays of vibes motifs, sax riffing, flowing accordion improv and thunderous drumming makes Armitage Shanks...a melodically mercurial triumph. Short, overdubbed dialogue solos by Speed, bassist Drew Gress and vibist Matt Moran add diverting interludes, and there's plenty of dreamy humming-glass sounds and luxurious accordion sighs to balance all this fine album's industrious busyness. [4 out of 5 stars]”  
– John Fordham, *The Guardian*, September 16, 2010

“The best chamber jazz band in the world do it again with another challenging and successful set of dense ensemble work that succeeds on every level. Whether fiercely polyrhythmic or totally strung out and devoid of momentum, the Claudias swing with an identifiably jazz feel, but are at ease with a dizzying array of genres and techniques. What's always so scary about this band is the songwriting...there's a distinct sound to each song to give it identity. ...”  
– David Dacks, *Exclaim*, August 2010, [exclaim.ca](http://exclaim.ca)

“A good chamber music composer lets you hear all of the combinations a group can offer. A great chamber music composer makes the group sound larger than it is. John Hollenbeck is in the latter category, and this newest Claudia Quintet offering confirms his mastery of form and orchestration on an expertly programmed disc.  
The decade-old quintet has long been praised for eschewing category. Hollenbeck, Matt Moran, Drew Gress, Chris Speed and Ted Reichman are all veterans of musical situations that involve boundary busting; Hollenbeck brings their talents together, along with guest pianist Gary Versace, in a compositional vision that encompasses everything from groove-based minimalism to tonally ambiguous ballads. His trademark rhythmic interplay and tempo juxtaposition is ever-present, as is his penchant for beautifully chosen instrumental color. That said, a new level of concentration is achieved here, making these fairly brief tracks seem longer than they are. Watch the miniature masterpiece “Paterna Terra” travel its path from atomistic free jazz toward increasingly dense layers of counterpoint and rhythmic complexity to see how much Hollenbeck can pack into five and a half minutes. By the climax, the quintet seems to have grown to twice its size. ...  
...The recording is as good as the music...  
Gary Versace’s pianism is a perfect addition to the group aesthetic. ... His contributions are just one more reason for Royal Toast’s overwhelming success. For those unfamiliar with this exemplary quintet and its composer, there’s no better place to begin.”  
– Marc Medwin, *Dusted*, May. 18, 2010, [www.dustedmagazine.com](http://www.dustedmagazine.com)

“This album is my first introduction to The Claudia Quintet...and it is quite an achievement. ... Classical and jazz have mixed nicely over the years...I've never heard it so bright and fun. ...the complexity is hidden beneath dance-able rhythms and extremely melodic statements.  
The opening piece "Crane Merit" is used to awaken the record. Slow moving melodies gently increase in volume while subtle syncopation floats throughout the piano and bass. The piece ends with all the instruments pedaling in slightly different time signatures. This is just a taste of what is to come. ... "Keramag" ... This piece is a good example of some of the structuring ideas going on throughout this record. ...  
That is just one way the composition can mutate within itself. ...  
Overall, *Royal Toast* is a beautiful recorded, expertly played and arranged collection of challenging compositions. ... Highly recommended.”  
– David Bernabo, September 06, 2010

“Although it’s led by a drummer, the Claudia Quintet is not necessarily about groove. Percussionist/composer John Hollenbeck instead goes for odd mixed meters and a precisely detailed robotic herky-jerk that’s underlined by the sharp-angled dissonance of his melodic lines.  
... With Claudia...Hollenbeck leavens the severity of his attack with instrumental warmth and unusual ensemble timbre...  
...this isn’t body music, but you could call the tempoless reverie of “Zurn” — with clarinet, accordion, piano, bass, and vibes circling one another as

brushes patter — a kind of dance. [3 out of 4 stars]” - Jon Garelick, *The Boston Phoenix*, May 26, 2010, www.the phoenix.com

“In the sometimes murky world of experimental jazz, New York’s Claudia Quintet stands out with a playful spirit and utterly distinctive sound that gets hips swaying and heads nodding in even the most austere music-nerd performance spaces. A not-found-elsewhere front line of accordion (Ted Reichman), clarinet (Chris Speed), and vibraphone (Matt Moran) makes for bright tones filled with folksy allusions and plaintive undercurrents. ... On “Royal Toast,” its fifth album, the quintet adds Gary Versace on piano, and he blends in seamlessly, sometimes as ensemble player with a perfect grasp of Hollenbeck’s jolty, elastic sensibility, and elsewhere with a cool pianism that brings the sound back to more familiar jazz terrain. ...”

- Siddhartha Mitter, *The Boston Globe*, May 17, 2010, www.boston.com

“The buzz around this New York ensemble has grown to a roar over the last few years, which is a delicious irony given that The Claudia Quintet is often at its most affecting when playing sotto voce, as if content to whisper rather than bellow... Ted Reichman’s accordion, Chris Speed’s clarinet, Matt Moran’s vibraphone, Drew Gress’ double bass, John Hollenbeck’s drums and (guest) Gary Versace’s piano often blend into an ensemble sound that has the vaporous drift and haze that one might associate with hushed ambient electronica or at least very produced or studio sculpted music. ...sounds hover and glide and then incrementally shift weight and trajectory to create the kind of textures and tightly mapped grids...reminiscent of...Manitoba/Caribou. But the improvisatory dynamic of the music is too strong...to be too confined to a serial-based aesthetic...the band regularly breaks out of a scored framework to create the slide, swerve and omni directionality that largely defines jazz. ...

... Claudia’s timbres, eerie and winsome in equal measure, prove its greatest strong point. The combination of clarinet, accordion and vibraphone fashions an electric whistle and whir that squares the circle between 90s indie science frictioners Stereolab and 60s proto-proggers Soft Machine ... Claudia is a jazz group questioning the divide between genres and points in time.” - Kevin Le Gendre, *BBC Music*, 2010-09-07, www.bbc.co.uk

“... The resulting music is...bold, groundbreaking, and spread across numerous colorful sonic palettes. Many of these performances have solo preludes from individual bandmembers... Versace’s role is that of shading or propping up these melodies, and one should listen closely to his contributions... It’s another extraordinary musical experience from the Claudia Quintet, who deserve all the high marks they receive as an innovative, thought-provoking, singularly unique contemporary ensemble. [4.5 stars out of 5]” - Michael G. Nastos, *All Music Guide*, www.allmusic.com

“Recommended New Listening: The Claudia Quintet (with Gary Versace)—*Royal Toast* (Cuneiform)”

- Laurence Donohue-Greene, *All About Jazz-New York*, June 12, 2010

“WMUA - Top 50 CD’s of 2010... 24. The Claudia Quintet - Royal Toast - Cuneiform ...” - Ken Irwin, *WMUA-FM*

“...Too rigorous for cocktail jazz, even though the soft instruments lean that way...” - Tom Hull, *The Village Voice*, September 29, 2010