



Erica Seguire / Shannon Baker Jazz Orchestra: New York, October 20, 2011

By [DANIEL LEHNER](#), Published: November 9, 2011

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Erica Seguire/Shannon Baker Jazz Orchestra
Somethin' Jazz Club
New York, NY
October 20, 2011

Egyptian author Naguib Mahfouz postulated that the present becomes the past only when a new present emerges. The existence of the contemporary big band—exemplified by restless creativity but a somewhat limited playing capacity—seems to belong to a handful of critically lauded ensembles like [Maria Schneider Orchestra](#), [Darcy James Arque's Secret Society](#) and [John Hollenbeck Large Ensemble](#). However, as these ensembles begin to receive widespread notoriety and take root in modern jazz culture (exhibited by performances at the Newport Jazz Festival and annual events at The Jazz Standard), a process begins by which new big bands, inspired by the aforementioned ensembles but committed to solidifying their own vision, begin to crack through the soil as fresh but resilient organisms in the jazz ecosystem.

One of these new big bands is the Erica Seguire/Shannon Baker Jazz Orchestra. As students of contemporary arrangement masters like [Jim McNeely](#) and [Bill Dobbins](#), Seguire and Baker are particularly poised to take on the challenge of forging a new path for this format, in which a new big band, full of mostly as-yet-unidentified players on the jazz scene, carve out a new present.

One aspect in particular that gave the Seguire/Baker band uniqueness was a strong appreciation for quietness. Many of the intros, middle sections and solo exhibitions were defined by extreme sensitivity to space and texture. The beginning and end of Baker's "States," which was mostly charged throughout with a sense of urgency, was a haunting and mournful piano interlude played with deft appreciation of touch and bell-like clarity by Pennsylvania-born pianist Billy Test, playing that would have been soft even in the context of a solo piano performance. The solo sections for Seguire's "Dawn's Rise" didn't come down in volume so much as they seemed to melt away, giving soloist Steve Kortyka room to sketch out a slightly intense but lush clarinet solo that flowed with the same compositional logic as the piece itself.

Much of Seguire and Baker's music relied on an aleatoric quality, by which players were given directed freedom to help create an atmosphere through an environment of sound. The duet between vocalist Sonja Szajnberg and Test during "States" swirled textures together into crystalline ECM-style waves while splashes from Brooklyn-based drummer Kate Pittman and Ben Thomas's bowed bass deepened the sound further. Sometimes the aleatoric sections worked in the complete opposite direction. One section during "Bach Adagio A la Tango," a cabaret-meets-

Piazzola style piece based on a Bach piano work, recalled the aesthetics of the [Art Ensemble of Chicago](#) and [Charlie Haden's](#) Liberation Music Orchestra, in which layers of folk melodies were armored with shouts and howls of cacophony.

Seguire and Baker both have enormous capacity for harmony, melody and concept. In stark contrast to some of the previously aerial, spatial pieces, Seguire's "Ice Storm," the second movement in a three-part suite about phases of water, had a section in which huge columns of thick harmony regally stomped and charged forward like serially-arranged Goliaths. Even in the quieter sections, the piece embodied a peculiar and disconcerting harmonic field, reminiscent of the polytonality of [Charles Ives](#) or Darius Milhaud, in which familiarity and pleasantness are casually subverted.

Melodically, many of the pieces were strung together by strong motivic statements. The complicated mixed meter of "Dawn's Rise" was assuaged by Arizona-born guitarist Eric Burns' radiating guitar line. In Baker's "Entrance," melodies were passed and echoed by different musicians, sometimes as a carbon copy and sometimes in an altered format.

Like any good big band, it peppered the night with strong and thought-provoking solos. Baker showed her skills as a pensive and alchemistic soprano player who relies on texture as much as linear melody. In "Ice Storm," some of her faster note collections coalesced so thoroughly they seemed to disappear in the construction of the line, conjuring up images of snowy wind devils. Tenor saxophonist Ben Kovacs was given the unique challenge of matching his controlled, linguistically rich bebop vocabulary with a tango backbeat, effectively contributing the third ingredient to the anachronistic bebop/tango/classical stew. South Jersey trumpet player Dave Pomerantz lent a supremely lyrical solo, an effective counterweight to Jon Saraga's more verbose style of post-bop organization. Kate Pittman inhabited the band's lyrical atmosphere well but added a layer of spontaneity in her drumming, the occasional "bangs" accompanying an ever-present slow burn.

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