

Jaap Blonk - Voicing the outer limits

Jaap Blonk with René van Peer

Jaap Blonk is known primarily through his work as sound poet and vocalist extraordinaire. His rather spectacular performances have, however, eclipsed the drive underlying that work: to bring together and process sounds - in other words, composition. This has become more evident through the increasing use he makes of electronics in his music, and through his approach towards the production of albums. Over the last twelve years he has released more than fifteen titles, of solo work, duo and trio improvisations, and his bands Splinks and braaxtaal. Splinks was founded as a vehicle for Blonk's composing with notes and creating suitable improvisation spaces inside compositions for musicians of his choice. braaxtaal resulted from his interest in improvising with sound, his fascination for combining, juxtaposing and mingling sounds. Every rehearsal starts with a long improvisation, just like in the early days. braaxtaal compositions come about in the same way as they do in most rock bands: members contribute ideas that are worked on in rehearsal, and then go through various stages of decision to arrive at a definitive version. There are no scores to speak of. Splinks rehearsals start with practicing arrangements, after which the bands works on improvisations within those frames. There is no clearcut distinction between the two - it was somehow self-evident that braaxtaal merged into Splinks.

What follows is the result of an exchange via email between Jaap Blonk and music journalist René van Peer about the various aspects of his work, based on that output.

I have always understood your work as an exploration of the outer limits of your voice. Did you start working with electronics because you had the feeling you had exhausted the possibilities of your voice in these sonic explorations; in other words, did you reach the boundaries of what your voice is capable of?

First of all, there is a widespread misunderstanding that I started out as a vocalist, and turned to composition afterwards. That is not the case. I have been writing music since 1977, and began performing sound poetry in 1983. Up till the present day I see myself first and foremost as a composer (in the widest sense, that is, as someone who wants to arrange sound in such a way that something comes into being that I find beautiful), and only after that as a vocalist. I think there's a significant distinction between the two. If, as a composer, you want to write a piece, you will start from an image how the piece should sound, and determine from that image the means, the tools you want to use - the instrumentation. As a performing musician (a vocalist, for instance) you will try to expand your capacities through exercise and by testing where your limits are. For me, as a composer, electronics are an extension of my possibilities for instrumentation. As a vocalist I will keep looking for new possibilities, but at the same time I know that through electronics I can achieve sounds that no human voice will ever be able to produce.

This must give a wholly different perspective on my work. The fact that I have over the course of the years performed more often as a vocalist, and solo at that, than with bands, has largely been the result of the demand - such performances are spectacular, and appeal to people directly, and they are relatively cheap. It has not really been a matter of what I would personally prefer.

These days I put part of my compositional motivation and creativity into making electronic work - it has a huge practical advantage over writing for musicians in that you won't have the fuss of organizing concerts for a group. In essence you can see it as a continuation of what I have been doing since 1977 - bringing about self-composed music, whenever I can. Apart from that I have come to view the performance element less and less as interesting and significant, and therefore I don't have such a strong urge anymore as I used to to produce all sounds with the naked voice. I want certain sounds to come about. How exactly that is done, is only of secondary importance.

When did you start using electronics?

I can't remember exactly what was the motivation to buy the first devices, but it was for a variety of reasons. The very first was the BOSS RPS-10, which combined pitch shift and delay functions. From 1990 I used it sometimes as an effect with my voice, for instance in Michiel Scheen's band Filaal with musicians Ab Baars, Jan Nijdam and Michael Vatcher. One of the aims for using it was to make the tone of my voice less personal and direct, so that it wouldn't be immediately recognizable as mine: I wanted to function like an instrument, which is after all less direct and doesn't identify the player as immediately as the voice does.

The next step was a simple digital sampler, the Akai S 01, that I bought in 1994. I used it for the first concerts of the extended version of Splinks, especially for playing my vocal sounds polyphonically via a MIDI-keyboard, for achieving complex melodies with intervals that I would not be able to sing, and for the pitches that lie above and below the vocal range.

Things really started, as far as I am concerned, with the purchase of a PowerBook in 1998. The first audio software I used was LiSa, developed at STEIM for live sampling. Originally it was my intention to create a 'partner' for improvisation: in solo concerts a computer can really act as a partner in a dialog, up to the point even of being unpredictable in its utterances.

For processing sounds in the computer I favor rather obscure types of software, often programs that have been written somewhere at a university or by a lone enthusiast as freeware, or cheap shareware: Thonk, oversyte, Cloud Generator and PulsarGenerator (both developed by Curtis Roads, the author of the classic The Computer Music Tutorial; he sent the latter to me in exchange for a sizable bar of first rate chocolate), SoundMaker, SndSampler, CellSynth, to name a few.

Do you see electronics as an extension of your voice, or as something that is separate from it?

In most cases you can still say it is an extension of my voice, also because as a matter of principle I only process the sounds of my own voice. In projects like Iles Flottantes and on the Off Shore CD I took it a step further: there I processed all instruments played by the trio, and sometimes merging them into sounds floating halfway between a banjo and a clarinet.

To my idea the voice is the most direct, and most directly physical of all instruments, integrated in the body. Electronics, on the other hand, work almost exclusively outside the body, sounds created don't have a linear relationship with movements of the body, in other words, they are the least physical tool at our disposal. Do you experience such a difference between the two? Does the control of electronics come as naturally as your command of your voice? What would be differences in your view? What similarities are there?

Actually I think that percussion is even more direct and concrete than the voice. There are many vocal sounds of which it is not immediately obvious how they are produced (for instance, on an inhalation or an exhalation), or through which organ in the tract - the uvula, the tongue or the larynx. That is even true among colleague sound poets, experts you would think: we regularly exchange questions on this.

That suggests that the voice is as much a black box as many electronic devices and software, with which you can work without knowing how exactly it works, in other words, there is an intuitive control that contrasts with the development of a physical technique necessary to play a musical instrument. On the other hand you can develop a degree of virtuosity in the control of the voice; to what extent is that true for electronics?

Virtuosity is possible there, too. An old example is the theremin. Then there is the analog synthesizer virtuoso Thomas Lehn. Speaking for myself, I have certain combinations of electronic devices that I especially like to work with in live situations. I practice with those setups on a special table in the attic, in order to achieve greater skills, possibly even a level of virtuosity. I don't only concentrate on a single device, but rather on acquiring a rapid overview of the various combinations that are possible with the various component devices. I am aware that concerts in which there is no visible relationship between the actions of the musicians and the resulting sound are often unsatisfactory to an audience. In performance I prefer equipment where the changes in the sounds are linked to movements in a one-to-one relationship. For that I use KAOSS Pads, AirFX, and I have recently started to use game controllers through STEIM's junXion software. The advantage of junXion that you will not need more than a computer, a game controller and a small mixing board, so you won't have to take fragile equipment with you on tour. The game controllers that I like best on stage are tilt sensors, which have a gyroscope built into them. Because they are sensitive to rotation around the two horizontal axes transecting the device, the movements are clearly visible to the audience and they are evidently related to the changes in the sound. If, on the other hand, you don't want to work with a computer, the KAOSS Pads are the most versatile devices to use. I prefer to use two of them, one for each hand.

But what is your experience? I wonder if you perceive a difference between how you control your voice and how you control electronic equipment.

To me controlling sound through the organs of the mouth and throat (most significantly the tongue, the lips and the larynx) is more direct and subtle than controlling most electronic devices. I have been experimenting with controlling electronic sounds through sensors that respond to the movements of the lips and send the information via MIDI to the computer, but that system is far too crude. On the other hand there are ways to control electronic sounds that are more accurate than what I can achieve with my voice, for instance through AccuTouch panels or through instructions in a computer program. The latter makes exact repetition possible, which you can never attain with your voice.

But to return to the point of transparency, in the studio this is of course totally irrelevant for the audience. In pieces that need a gesticulation similar to that of the voice, I do like to use the controllers I mentioned. In other pieces I use various algorithms that I have always applied in compositions: mathematical rows and functions, chance, harmony and tonality.

Algorithms suggest an order that I would associate with composition rather than with improvisation. Can you expand on this?

Yes, algorithms have to do with order. But it is very well possible to improvise with them. You can build variables into algorithms that are determined by chance, and parameters that can be controlled from outside. They can also provide interesting possibilities to deviate from standard controls. To give an example: the force of the touch on a keyboard (the 'velocity') does not determine the volume, but the selection of one sample out of a set, or the rate at which certain changes occur. To achieve this you have to write an algorithm. But algorithms can work on other levels as well. In the text of Schele Schoft and Muzikaret from the Speechlos CD the number of syllables is determined by variants of the Fibonacci row. Mathematical patterns and relationships can be found in the way two component groups of Splinks play together in Consensus and Caldera Galeras on the Consensus album. The chords in the arrangement of Vesuvius on the same album have been derived from the fricative sounds of the voice through a matrix. I have applied mathematical functions mostly in processing samples into interesting and suitable new sounds, but not yet in the construction of entire compositions. The bass lines in Krakatau (from Consensus), Hoe Tarr (from Dworr Buun) and Erra (on Off Shore) have been chosen through a chance operation from a predetermined tone row. The gesticulation of the voice (that is, the way it moves, the character of its expression) is approximated in a variety of pieces: Spruicht, Blebbem and Averschuw on the Averschuw album, and the middle section of Zikse on Off Shore.

Differences between the use of the voice and electronically processed sounds could lie in the suggestion of meaning associated with the former, but not the latter. Or is that something you do try to achieve on a certain level?

I don't think it makes much sense to look for differences between the two, they are such distinct entities.

I agree with you that they are different. Nevertheless, you say yourself that the electronics often are an extension of your voice.

That is especially so in improvisation, because I am convinced that this is for me the source, the most direct and 'true' way to express myself artistically - when I started my vocal improvising I immediately gave up free improvisation on the saxophone. Therefore I was happy when several critics wrote about Averschuw that it came close to the quality of my vocal improvisations, and that many pieces could be recognized as being by Jaap Blonk, even though my voice wasn't recognizable in them.

This is less important in compositions. On Off Shore I have used processed samples of instruments and voice that are much further removed from their source, but are more similar to how instrumental music is written: rhythm patterns, bass lines, sonic fields as a backdrop for acoustic instruments and voice.

There are also correspondences, however. The voice can be a carrier of semantic, psychological and musical meaning, but so can electronically processed vocal sounds and electronically generated sounds.

I don't know if I can follow you here. The way you use your voice is an extension of speech and song, and is quite often a play on apparent, implied linguistic and emotional connotations, an association game with words that may or may not exist. Maybe that is different for me, being Dutch like yourself, than it is for a listener who does not know any Dutch, because you use that language as a starting point, or seem to do so.

That is true for the voice, but what I actually wanted to say is that anything that the voice can communicate of semantic, psychological and musical meaning, can be suggested with electronic sound, if you work long enough on it. For semantic meaning there are ever more sophisticated speech synthesizers. On a psychological level it is possible to generate screams of fear and joy electronically. Musically of course it has been applied for a long time now.

Do you prefer to combine electronics with your voice (as you did quite emphatically on Averschuw), or do you prefer to use them separately?

I do both. As a matter of fact, the voice has not been used live on nearly half of the pieces on Averschuw (Zieuwis, Plokkel, Blebbem, Hakjetoe and Tekrofter). In pieces that are more improvisatory I will more readily use the voice live. What also appeals to me is combining electronic sound with acoustic instruments, preferably when they are played with conventional techniques. I have a great admiration for the work of the Dutch composer Ton Bruynël, especially his lyrical pieces in which he embeds the often beautiful melodies of the instruments in the electronic sounds.

Do electronics in their various applications play different roles in your work? What examples can you give?

In Zood Vooig and Hoe Tarr on Dworr Buun the rhythmic basis is a voice sample played by an algorithm, a simple mechanism. In Koekela Dast and Riekeley Vuisma on the same CD rapid speech fragments are being played side by side with the live voice as part of the sonic environment created by the pieces; in Dworr Buun itself loops of the voice are being played that are so short that they turn into engine-like sounds, which contribute to the mood of the piece.

Some pieces on Off Shore, for instance Zikse and Har, also use an algorithm to lay down a basic rhythm - in Har it is a processed sample of a clarinet; in Flode the rather static substratum is made up of voice samples that are either played as a glissando (in the beginning) or slowly change their color through a filter (at the end).

The Averschuw album consists of various explorations of the way the voice can be processed electronically. In Plokkel you hear the same vocal sound from the left and right channel, but the pitch and the resonance frequency have been varied independently (in LiSa, through a MIDI-controller). In Spruicht eight short voice loops are alternated and modified by the live voice through a vocoder and a ring modulator. Tekrofter is a mechanical device that plays short percussive samples of the voice through a veil of extreme distortion.

On the Bek CD the voice was not processed. Radboud Mens and I worked intentionally with different categories of sound in relation to the function they were supposed to have in the music - bass and snare drum, other percussion, bass line, background or lead. It is in a way a continuation of what I did in Hakjetoe on Averschuw.

Sometimes I use several effects simultaneously, changing them independently from each other, to push them to the edge, where sound may or may not come anymore, or where the sound seems only half-ready or starts to crumble - it's an aspiration towards occasional stammering and faltering. This heightens the tension and the intensity, and is a real joy. Pieces like this, such as Glomrijk on Averschuw, are a celebration of noise to me.

Do you have the feeling that you have started to speak another language? Zikse on Off Shore reminds me in some places of excited frogs in a sultry pool. Sometimes, as on Bek, your voice moves towards an impersonal sound source, that seems closer to electronic music than to human (and therefore, motivated) expression.

I believe that I have expanded my vocabulary quite substantially, and it is still growing. Funny, actually, that the electronically distorted fragment from Zikse comes across as more organic than Bek, on which the voice is absolutely and totally natural. I enjoy having the pure voice approximate a machine quite as much as creating the illusion of living creatures through a machine (that is, electronic equipment).

How about the albums you release? It is something you always did, of course, but it seems as if your approach towards the CD as a medium has changed. Somehow that seems at odds with the emphasis you put on improvisation in your work, creating music as a result of forces and flows on the spur of an unrepeatable moment - an ephemeral, changeable state that has solidified on CD, and can be repeated with no change occurring anymore. What experience do you want to offer an audience that can't be offered in concert?

It is a question that is often on my mind. After releasing Dworr Buun (which is still a collection of pieces - pop songs in fact, with lyrics and all) braaxtaal has played totally improvised concerts, in which really wonderful things happen. In spite of that we don't want to release any of these on CD. That would amount to an awkward, insufficiently motivated and apparently haphazard choice. I have been fantasizing about a new type of medium that could be ideal for improvised music. It would hold fifty concerts of the same group, but whatever you listen to would be erased immediately, so that you can only listen to it once, just like with a live concert.

There are so many things to be said about the distinction between live performances and recordings. I find the frenetic motions of many string quartets distracting, especially when the music itself is hardly moving and the pulse should be indicated extra-musically. I'd rather listen to those at home.

You are talking about 'creating music as a result of forces and flows on the spur of an unrepeatable moment', but I think that would be putting it too sharply. On CDs like Consensus, Come to Catch your Voice and Off Shore there is much that is fixed, and therefore repeatable. And even in the 'improvisors' series a selection has been made from an amount of material that was often three to six times as long as what has eventually been included on the CDs. That series is also intended as a demo - the only way to get concerts with a group is to send a nice recording.

And I am thinking about interactive formats, that could be realized on DVD: music and imagery that would be different every time you play it.

Are there things you would do in performance, but not on CD?

Oh yes, there are many aspects of the music that will work perfectly on stage, but cannot be done justice on CD - extreme dynamics, physical energy (an intense climax that works live, can sound overdone on CD), surprise effects ('surprise only works once'), the placement in or movement about a space, eye contact with an audience or between musicians. Part of the beauty of improvised music is that there are many moments at which an audience (provided it is intelligent, and is in an optimal state of empathy) can think: "what will happen next?", "how will they get themselves out of this mess?", "what a splendid solution!", or rather, "I would have opted for a different solution". On a medium for repeated listening this is of course lost.

Do you have specific aims with CDs?

That is different with every CD, although on the whole I think that each CD should be a unique statement. I don't fancy releasing limited edition CD-Rs - that often leads to sloppiness. I appreciate good design. Apart from that they are valuable as documentation and as calling-cards. I would be really happy to make profit with my CDs, so that I could make them pay for at least part of my sustenance, and wouldn't need to do so many performances, but that hasn't happened so far.

Does this mean a new approach in your work? Is it an evolution? A revolution? A new dimension?

Yes, it's a coming full circle, a coming home again to the world that I felt attracted to most as a boy; that of mathematics, which is now organically wed to the sound that breathes life into it. What I have most liked doing these last years is making a piece of music, recorded on a medium: a painting in sound, so to speak (a painting, not a sculpture, because stereo is sufficient for me; I am not into surround

sound). I want to experiment with making moving versions of my sound poetry scores, using animation software, and add soundtracks to them.

As far as performing live is concerned, most important is to go on doing what can only be done live: improvisation. As for composed music, I prefer to record that as best as possible and then make it available on CD, rather than play it live.

Discography:

Five Men Singing (with Paul Dutton, Koich Makigami, Phil Minton and David Moss), VICTO cd 092, 2004

Kurt Schwitters' *Ursonate*, Basta 3091452, 2004

Blonk, Zach & Grydeland ('improvisors' series), Kontrans 950, 2004

Maja Ratkje & Jaap Blonk ('improvisors' series), Kontrans 850, 2004

Off Shore (2CD), compositions for wind and string instruments and voice in combination with electronics, Kontrans 1649, 2003

Hübsch, Van Bebber & Blonk ('improvisors' series), Kontrans 749, 2003

Bek, vocal techno by Radboud Mens & Jaap Blonk, Staalplaat/Brombron 05, 2002

Dworr Buun by BRAAXTAAL, Kontrans 448, 2001

Come To Catch Your Voice (music to Dylan Thomas' poems), LopLop LLR 006, 2001

Averschuw (electric solo improvisations), Kontrans 947, 2001

Consensus (2CD), Jaap Blonk's compositions played by 13-piece ensemble Splinks, Kontrans 1545, 1999

First Meetings with Fred Lonberg-Holm and Michael Zerang, BUZZ ZZ 76002, 1998

Vocalor (solo voice, follow-up of 'Flux de Bouche'), Staalplaat STCD 112, 1998

Six Sound Poems of Hugo Ball by baba-oemf, Kontrans 844, 1998 (live recording from 1989)

Speechlos by BRAAXTAAL, Kontrans 244, 1997

Blonk, Nijdam & Van der Putten ('improvisors' series), Kontrans 343, 1996

Blonk, Gustafsson & Zerang ('improvisors' series), Kontrans 143, 1996

BRAAXTAAL, voice/synthesizer/percussion trio, Kontrans 939, 1993

Flux de Bouche (sound poetry & other pieces for solo voice), Staalplaat STCD 046, 1993

Splinks, jazz & improvised music, Kontrans 739, 1993