

## JAAP BLONK

by **Luna Allison** ([/author/luna\\_allison](#))

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[Jaap Blonk \(http://www.jaapblonk.com/\)](http://www.jaapblonk.com/)'s child-like playfulness, powerful stage presence, innovative integration of technology and sheer vocal dexterity have brought him renown as a sound poet and composer the world over, first gaining international attention for his vocally gymnastic interpretation of Kurt Schwitters' '[Ursonate \(http://jaapblonk.com/Texts/ursonatewords.html\)](#)'.

More recently, he has been working on developing algorithms to shape the electronic sound that accompanies his live vocal performances. This algorithmic control allows him to work with a mix of structure and spontaneity, sound-wise.

"I have a background in math, but I didn't finish. I quit university after about four or five years," says Blonk. "But, in 2006, I took a year off from performing, and I got into learning programming languages on the computer. That made me, of course, study a lot of mathematics again. So I'm sort of back into that. Mainly, I'm looking at ways to generate and construct material with some amount of randomness and some amount of structure."

Let's say, for instance seventy per cent of the sound accompaniment in a given performance is determined ahead of time, and the rest is spontaneously chosen from a bank of processed samples of Blonk's voice that have to meet the constraints of the algorithms. The result is a semi-random composition that is never the same from one performance to the next.

"When I started, there was not really the possibility to do what I wanted. I had the choice only between completely random and completely structured. But, thanks to the computer, you can have 27 per cent randomness and the rest structured, or 83 per cent randomness or anything in between. That's very good for me. Many times, when I was writing texts or music, the exact 'local' decisions were very difficult for me to make. I mostly had some general idea that 'it should be like that.' A lot of the piece would be filled in with those constraints, but randomly. So that's a great possibility to have now."

One of Blonk's most recent projects – and the piece he'll be presenting twice during a [visit to Ontario and Quebec in late May \(http://www.litlive.ca/event/310\)](http://www.litlive.ca/event/310) – is a BBC-commissioned reading of Antonin Artaud's 1947 radio play, '[To Have Done with the Judgement of God \(http://jaapblonk.com/Pages/pourenfinir.html\)](http://jaapblonk.com/Pages/pourenfinir.html)'.

Artaud has been a major influence in Blonk's work throughout the years – in fact, he was instrumental in getting Blonk into vocal performance in the first place.

"I was involved with a group of people making theatre productions of poetry and music –

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this was, like, late '70s, early '80s – but I was the musician at that time. I was playing saxophone and composing music for these productions,” says Blonk, who is a self-taught musician and composer. “The funny thing is that, for several years, they wouldn't let me recite any poetry. They didn't like the way I did it or, well, who knows. So I was just the musician.

“In 1982, we were planning a show of Dada and surrealist poetry, and there were several texts that nobody actually knew how to do. There were some Schwitters texts and some sound poetry and some texts by Artaud. I asked to do something with them. They're very intense texts, and they helped me to cross some borders onstage and to trust that I could go further in intensity than I had thought before, and still ... well, still be effective for an audience, not have people run away from it and say 'This guy's crazy.' So that was a very important experience for me.”

In 1989, Blonk revisited his connection to Artaud in a production of 'Ci-Git' and, in 1996, he made a multi-media performance entitled 'kré', a quotation from a phonetic poem by Artaud, in celebration of the centennial of his birth.

“Off and on, I've been coming back to Artaud. I've even been planning on doing a complete recording of his phonetic poetry but, for recordings, it's very complicated with the rights. The publisher is really difficult. The BBC recording of 'To Have Done with the Judgement of God' took place in November last year, but they still haven't gotten permission to broadcast my show. Live performances are okay, but broadcasts are still a problem.”

The approximately hour-long composition that Blonk has created for his upcoming performances of 'To Have Done with the Judgement of God' includes the complete original text of the radio play, translated into English by Clayton Eshleman, as well the fragments of sound poetry Artaud inserted into the piece, with improvisatory elaborations on these by Blonk.

“I'm using electronic sound, also, as a 'dialogue partner' – samples of my voice that I've processed through the computer in various ways.”

Recently Blonk has also started work on creating interactive programs that make sound from images and images from sound.

“Voice or other instrumental sounds generate visual animations and vice versa – the animations generate sound through the computer. So far, I've integrated a few fragments of it in live shows, but not so much. I'm working on that.”

No matter the project or the genre, finding a playful balance between randomness and structure is at the heart of Blonk's work. If you ask him, it always has been.

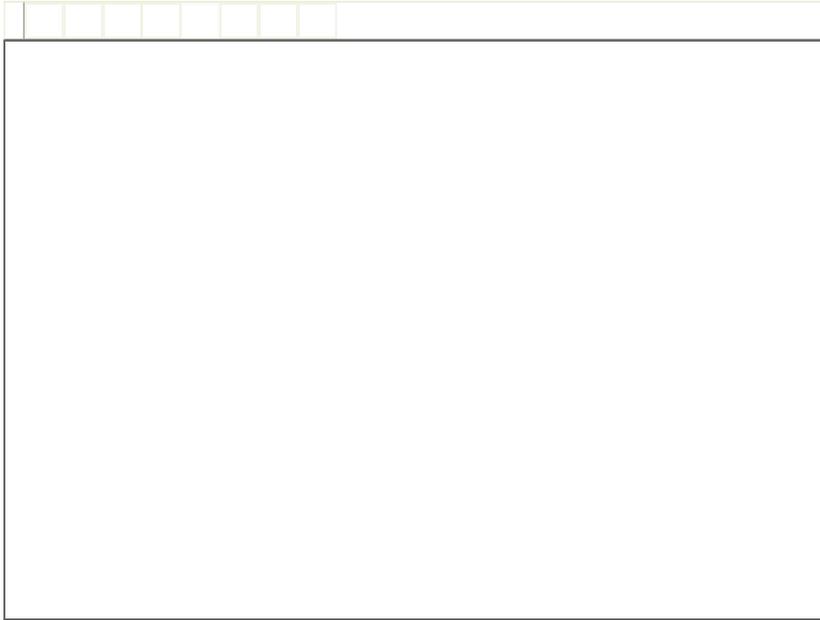
“From the beginning...when I wrote my first texts, I had used all kinds of mathematical processes. Even in some pieces where, for the general audience, it would sound like Dada, there were mathematical structures there. So my work has always been somewhere between very spontaneous and very structured. Or a very structured text that allows for a volatile performance – where the structure is strong, you can give it a very wild performance and it still doesn't fall apart.”

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