



Billy

Bultheel

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Silver-necklace Acne Studios
Earcuff Johanna Gauder

Ready to check

Berlin and Brussels-based BILLY BULTHEEL is a pioneer of contemporary performance art and breath-taking compositions. Having studied and acquired his BA in Music at the ROYAL CONSERVATORY, The Netherlands, and receiving his MA in Choreography and Performance from JUSTUS-LIEBIG, Germany, Bultheel has a theoretical inventory that he seamlessly employs when approaching his work. His polyvalent skill set allows for him to compose not only music, but the entire energy of a space, enhanced throughout his collaborative projects, such as the notable *SEX* trilogy directed by ANNE IMHOF, and co-composed by ELIZA DOUGLAS. Subverting traditional musical practices; interweaving sounds derived from the Baroque period with dynamic modern electronics and heavy punk-like sounds, his use of space, sound, and movement is confronting and visceral. In talking with the artist, our technical understanding of music was completely expanded, reconceptualising how I hear and feel sounds, making me consider how music truly moves us.

Words by **Issy Wharton**
Photography by **Erik Cesla**



Hi Billy! Your approach to music is truly unique. Can you begin by telling me a bit about your practice and the inter-disciplinary spheres you encompass?

As a composer and artist first and foremost, my main medium is music. But, I feel like my approach to it is a bit more nuanced — I have a strong sentiment towards using music to break boundaries into other disciplines, such as performance, dance, sculpture etc. I'm often collaborating with other artists to create works that are, some kind of, as you say, inter-disciplinary cobweb.

Within this cobweb, you remove boundaries and evoke new contexts to how we engage with art. What inspired you to bring traditional music concepts into contemporary, choreographed performance settings?

I am deeply interested in the process of synaesthesia — being able to translate sounds into other sensory experiences — and therefore, the tactility of music. Breaking down institutional pillars and traditional architectures for music or art is, for me, always a good starting point in the journey of creating something completely new.

Environment also must contribute to this, as Berlin and Brussels-based, how do these spaces influence your practice?

Berlin, I feel, has especially influenced my work. I found a very supportive community here, one that remains forever unhinged and intimate. People from every walk of life come to this city, mingling and inspiring one another. And because of the active arts and nightlife scene, there is an ease when it comes to sharing creativity, ideas, and lunacy. It's just so innately Queer and leans towards the unconventional, leaving this feeling of strong community support.

And Brussels?

Brussels, on the other hand, is my home town. I like it, but to me, it still feels a bit more conventional. I think it is harder for communities and institutions to break habits in Brussels; things tend to stay within their lane.

Does the freedom you experience through the Berlin nightlife contribute to this pool of inspiration?

I'm not sure clubs inspire my creative process directly — they definitely offer an escape from daily life which is ultimately beneficial to my process. Nightlife in Berlin, especially post-pandemic, is such a cathartic experience. There's a strong sense of community, you can be hyper-social, horny and silly, all at the same time, without being judged or protocolled.

Totally. In the same way, your work is detached from hierarchies and genres, collaborations feel like marriages of talent. Within this, do you have any specific influences that you try to channel?

Right. I really don't care about styles and I really don't want to create hierarchies between musical genres. I just feel music needs to have an effect. There is a project I'm currently working on, which is for sculpture, flutes and percussion. We're working a lot around the orchestration of noise. KARLHEINZ STOCKHAUSEN was a big influence, but, in the end, I think the music sounds more like BURZUM — played on flutes.

Bodywear Ninamunah
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Ah yes, I totally see this, particularly with Stockhausen's perception of music as 'spiritual food'. Voice also can be such a key ingredient when it comes to creating a track, a tool you use with extreme particularity.

I use voice very differently in each piece of work I create. For example, in *When Does Cry*, a performance by two countertenors and two tubas, I only used voices that had prosthetic qualities. Thinking of the voice as a tool to alienate expression from the human body. We also used a lot of choir techniques that split one melody into two voices, creating the idea of a schizo-singer. A subject that exists in two performers at once. STEVE KATONA, my sweet friend and colleague (and a very talented countertenor), was with me this summer in Greece when we wrote music for a play at the amphitheatre, EPIDAUROS. He embodied the god HERMES in SOPHOCLES' *Trachens*. His character was hidden from the other protagonists on stage. He performed behind the scenes in proximity to microphones connected to different speakers surrounding the theatre, giving him access to move his voice through the theatre while singing. His arias were often accompanied by electronic sine waves that imitate the qualities of his voice, constantly blending and obscuring his voices with synthesised music.

You mention using the voice as a tool to alienate expression from the body. But you also use the human body as another one of your many creative tools...

When I think of the human body, I believe that fragility is necessary; being able to offer yourself uninhibitedly. Dancers and performers know this, but musicians are used to regularly hiding inside an orchestra pit, or behind a black suit in a band formation. They are used to becoming instruments on stage, not people. It demands some courage from them to be visible as a person, or a subject, which allows itself to act as a mirror for the spectator

The act of collaboration is an integral part of your composition; regularly working alongside artists such as Anne Imhof and Eliza Douglas. Could you tell us a little more about your collaborative process?

I really like to work with other artists. I would actually go as far as saying that collaboration is one of the most valuable assets to my working methods and practice. Collaboration, for me, functions both as a mirror and as an aggregator. Working in dialogue leaves less space for doubt and makes it easier to take risks. Anne and I have been working together since 2012. We always shared this fascination with music and performance and I think our collaboration has really pushed us to fuse into these epic performances. Working with Eliza, she brought in her amazing voice and aesthetic and became a central figure within the performances. Eliza gave a voice to the performances, and her position was largely narrated through the music that we wrote together. She contrasted the coldness of the performance with more fragile and sentimental underside.

This unity is so clear in the piece *SEX*; a punk-energy interlaced with Baroque and classical influences. What ignited your interest in the Baroque period and how are you able to bring together opposing motifs so successfully?

It's been a long process. I graduated from the conservatory with a thesis in Renaissance polyphony and algorithmic composition. I was always fascinated with composition methods from the fourteenth century and how to use them within my own music. When working with Anne, I moved gradually from the renaissance towards the baroque. Baroque music had the invention of opera and brought in an idea of story and expression; using the performer and the performativity (aka the body) as a tool for expression.

This act of using not just the 'voice' or 'skills' of the performer, but also their physical presence is so integral (and often forgotten). It's interesting to hear this was conceived within the Baroque period.

For example, CLAUDIO MONTEVERDI'S *Lament of the Nymph* from his *Eighth Book of Madrigals* is an aria where the soprano separates herself from the choir to become an actual Nymph that laments lost love. I proposed this aria to Anne and Eliza while working on *SEX*, and wrote a song that weaved some of that harmony into it. Anne and Eliza then borrowed words from a poem of BERTOLT BRECHT, and that's how the song *Dark Times* was made where Eliza laments on the dark time we live in.

In a previous interview, you described your musical performances as 'a field or kind of map through which the audience and musicians move'. Creating for the TATE, how did The Tanks allow for both physical and sound movement?

SEX was composed specifically for The Tanks at TATE, two gigantic circular spaces. One was padded and had an echo acoustic, the other one wasn't padded and had an echo of almost eleven seconds. The spaces worked as these contrasting resonating chambers, where one sounded close and the other one was covered by echo. In terms of movement, the echoing chamber only used Bluetooth speakers, carried by the performers, allowing the audience to follow the music as it moved through the space. While in the dry space, we set up a powerful, circular system that surrounded the audience. I think these sonic pathways from inside to outside changed how music was listened to. From overbearing to intimate, it was some sort of compositional trajectory that we constantly worked with.

Similar to the Bluetooth speakers, you often entwine different electronic devices in your work. For example, the music you composed for *Angst* alongside Anne Imhof takes on the form of Opera, with very classical sounds, but works with phone syncing.

The medium through which you play or listen to music heavily shapes *how* you listen to it. So, using the phones was a way of bringing that institutional music into our twenty-first-century context; listening through our phones as we would on the street or at a party. Similar to the Bluetooth speakers, we also just liked this idea of actually carrying music around. Guiding the audience through sound from one spot to another. *Angst* was a proposal to break Opera from its traditional institution. Re-inventing it with the means that we have as young people, embedding it into a space that we control and giving it a *sense* from our perspective. Making epic stories out of anger, loss and love without following conventional storylines or character development — never explaining ourselves.

Next page:
Left — Trousers Ninamounah
T-shirt Billy's own
Right — Top Gucci
Trousers Botter

In many ways you're fighting against the gate-keeping of traditional formats, such as Opera. Translating your work from live performance to the digital scope, I saw your piece *Songs for Contract* was born during the Pandemic. How did the digitalisation of your work differ from in-person, audience-facing events?

The pandemic killed live performance, which was kind of great? It was a really good moment to think about how this medium could be translated online. I think that the live aspect is maybe not *the* most important feature of the performance. Instead, I found that audience agency was way more important in keeping the performance alive — finding yourself in a space where you negotiate an experience (something gamers do all the time). I realised; online performance should probably be something close to gaming. I also believe that the meta-verse is upon us, and I feel performance should start considering how it wants to engage in digitisation and platform migration.

Totally! This gaming realisation actually makes perfect sense when contextualising *Songs for the Contract*.

Exactly. By using the 360 camera and the ambisonic sound, the performance became more of a captured moment that could be revisited in an infinite number of ways. *Songs for the Contract* was also an experiment in contract making, and decentralising the control over revenue of a performance work between *all* collaborating artists and performers. We wrote a smart contract for each NFT where every performer had a share of the revenue made.

A very punk approach to the highly contractual (and often advantageous) music business.

Since collaboration is such a central part of my practice, I really want to dive deeper into decentralised finance and online governance structures like DAOs. It's time that we reinvent the financial flows of the art market, and find other structures to support the complex creation of value that happens in art projects.

The future is decentralised! Are there any new upcoming projects we can look forward to seeing from you in the future?

I'm currently working now with a sculptor and artist VIVIANA ABELSON, who builds absolutely beautiful instruments. We made a performance called *Unter* which was shown in Berlin and GRAZ this fall. Later on, this year I'm putting together a solo album. A compilation of pieces I have written and recorded over the past three years in an attempt to archive all that music. I started a band project with my friend, ALEXANDER LEZZI, under the name 33. We made an album during the pandemic which is more oriented towards industrial EDM and techno. The album will be released soon.

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