

BILLY BULTHEEL  
NELE RUCKELSHAUSEN

## A SMALL MASS FOR THE ARMED MAN

**Billy Bultheel** is a Belgian composer and performance artist based in Berlin. His musical practice is occupied with an extended notion of polyphony and counterpoint, working from the renaissance *Ars Nova* and *Ars Subtilior* towards contemporary algorithmic music. Most recently he collaborated with artist Anne Imhof, composing the music for the 3-part exhibition-as-opera *ANGST* (2016) and the awarded work *FAUST* (2017) for the German pavilion at the Venice Biennale. For the Gruppe Residency Opening at Blake & Vargas on February 8th, 2018, he adapted his piece 'Small Mass For The Armed Man' on two free-standing speakers and a subwoofer. He talks about this piece and his work with Nele Ruckelshausen. Pictures taken by Spyros Renn.



**Nele: Musical composition is at the centre of your work, yet your pieces often inhabit museums and galleries, as opposed to traditional contexts of 'listening'. How does that influence your approach to composition?**

Billy: Traditional spaces for music, like concert halls or opera buildings, have been obsessed with the idea of 'perfect acoustics'. Clubs and spaces for electronic music are also always in search of the 'perfect' sound. But I don't believe in perfect acoustics. I love complex resonances that allow me to create depth within the composition. To me, the space is the first element of a piece of music, I consider it an instrument. Working in spaces that have not been designed to create the perfect sound is somehow liberating. There's no scripted way of perceiving the music, so the audience is more open to listen differently.

Instead of changing sound over time, the spatial layout conditions the sound. The composition becomes a map or a geography in which different terrains and objects are connected to one another. A point or person moving through or folding the map, triggers, modulates and shifts the composition.

**You composed music for Anne Imhof's pieces *ANGST* and *FAUST*, and performed in these pieces yourself. What were some of the themes and motives that inspired your work with her?**

Anne wanted *Angst* to be an opera, so this was a great opportunity to musically challenge the operatic form. Opera music is interesting because it's only one part of a larger, more complex composition that also includes text, drama, stage, and costumes. And even though the music is one of the main aesthetic carriers, it also has other obligations: to be functional and structured, for example.

I focussed on developing musical atmospheres in relation to each of the characters Anne had created for the performance: the prophet, the falcon, the rope dancers, the diver, the lover, the clown, and more. In reference to the structural aspect of opera music, I applied those musical ideas to overtures, interludes, arias, chorus dances, etc. For example, the large Marshall amplifier sculptures that welcomed the audience at Hamburger Bahnhof became a reference to the brass ensembles that open Baroque and Classical operas to summon the audience. Sonically we wanted to create really epic music, so we used a lot of brass and choir synths – but we pushed them rhythmically and melodically to a point where they couldn't possibly be played by real musicians. Anne also contributed two songs that she had written some years before the show, *Brand New Gods* and *Muscles*, and Franziska brought in this poem by Sappho which became part of a song that we wrote that she later sang in in the performance, *Dive Song*.

Together with the performers we developed this practice of playing back music over phones. I divided my compositions into different layers and distributed these over the performers' phones. During the show people would come together and sync their phones, playing back the composition as we moved through the space.

The music for *Faust* was inspired by two ideas. It started with a piece by Olivier Messiaen called *Quartet for the End of Time*, a piece of chamber music that guides a ceremony for 'the end of time'. I found the ceremonial structure especially interesting. It had a big influence on how melodic themes travelled through the pieces of music and how they lined up in the show. After *Angst*, we all felt the desire to put the music closer at the centre of the performance, and Anne wanted more pieces that were song-like, as in *Angst*. So for one week, I worked together with Anne, Franziska Aigner and Eliza Douglas on sketches of songs. Together we wrote three songs which became the anchor points for the music of *Faust*: *Medusa Song*, *Queen Song*, and *Owen Song*. Functioning as leitmotifs, the themes of these songs translated into my compositions and developed a certain musical dramaturgy. Eliza Douglas also composed two large vocal pieces which integrated these melodies beautifully as she performed them live during the show.

**How did the creative exchange with Imhof affect your work?**

Music has always been a strong tangent between Anne and I. Anne is a brilliant musician herself and since the moment we met we've been exchanging music and mixing our tracks together for performances and installations. I have a conservatory degree in electronic music, while Anne comes more from a self-taught practice, playing noise music. I really enjoy putting our stuff together, I think we've influenced each other a lot in developing an interesting musical language.

Creative exchange happens very vividly and is very important during the entire creation process of the performances. Not only with Anne, but with all the people who are closely involved in the process, the so-called 'core group', which are all great artists in their own respect. I feel each one of them has affected my work to a certain extent. Right now I'm spending time in the recording studio collaborating with Anne, Eliza and Franziska on making an LP of the music for *Angst* and *Faust*.



**For the exhibition with Gruppe, you drew from a medieval protest song to create a spatial sound work on a subwoofer and two monitors. How did you come across 'L'homme armé' and what drew you to it?**

Polyphonic music from the Renaissance has been an obsession of mine for many years. I find it a very interesting time in the history of music: a sort of cerebral turn that made composers think about composition in algorithmic, almost alchemical, ways. They were interested in hiding obscure numbers and messages in their compositions and developing new ways of reading and writing scores.

*L'homme armé* triggered something new in me, something that I've only started to be interested in recently, namely the history of politics in music. Politics is not often discussed or translated in contemporary music. Instead, music seems to be this abstract medium that is not much affected by global politics.

But when we leave the big musical institutions, we can see that grassroots music has historically been a huge influence on political movements, as both instigator and voice of change, and that it reflects the social conditions, concerns and desires of a time. Music can have a political agenda.

*L'homme armé* is a chant that originated somewhere in the 15th century. Based on the melody of a trumpet call, it was probably used as a protest song against the Ottoman invasion of Constantinople, today's Istanbul. In the middle ages it was common practice to write a mass based on a *Cantus Firmus*, a religious melody, and build a polyphony on top of this melody.

So around 1500, there were many composers across Europe who used the melody of *L'homme armé* to write music for church masses. In this way this protest chant was weaved into institutional music and surfaced in large social and religious gatherings across Europe – solidifying a politically charged, Christian position against the Ottoman invasion.

I find it fascinating that this melody became an artefact of this long conflict. Slowly passing around Europe, like a microbial parasite, diffused in compositions, over many years, infecting music, and the communities it instantiated with political ideas and convictions. It is interesting to trace back how these cultural identities are constructed and how they cultivates a history of violence, as they are still very present today, causing similar problems.

**How did you treat and transform the piece?**

I used a technique that was developed by Guillaume Dufay, a franco-flemish composer from the 15th century, called iso-rhythm. Not to go into too much detail, but it's about applying a certain rhythmic pattern to a melody and multiplying that to create rhythmic complexity. I applied these rhythmicities to field recordings and sounds I've collected over the years, creating subtle and fragile electronic disturbances.

**If you had to use local genre terms, where would you locate your artistic practice? Is it music, performance, installation, or visual art?**

I think of it as a practice in between music and visual art. But honestly, I would prefer not to box it in. I find the 'traditional genres' limiting and confusing, because they are very specific to institutions. Music is supposed to be for the concert hall, visual art for the museum or gallery, performance for the theatre, and so on. I try to avoid these limitations and rather work from project to project, to see in which direction it takes me.

