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A beautiful voice – A Q&A with Derek Piotr

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Derek Piotr's music approaches the human voice with a curiosity that abstracts its literal connotations in the context of composition. He finds music in the most obscure processes of the voice, moulding it in the realm of the digital, to create evocative soundscapes that forge ahead in the experimental, absconding with the traditionalist ideas of music as the artist develops a unique voice. It can be said that **Bahar**, Piotr's latest work, is the closest the artist has gotten yet to establishing this voice, and ironically it also marks a return to his formal musical education. Piotr creates disjointed soundscapes to accompany his vocal in a way that highlights his fascination with pop music. He manipulates the popular form with an experimental aptitude, drawing the listener in through engaging melodies that hover uncomfortably over the instrumentals before they invariably combine in a bigger sonic landscape.

The New-York-based artist has been steadily developing his methods and creative output since AGORA in 2011, with each album focussing on different areas of interest for the artist. His work has been conducted for the most part through the computer, after Piotr, disenfranchised by the institutional development of his classical musical training, sought refuge "off the grid". In Bahar he's made a slight return to his formative education, scoring and conducting woodwinds in the context of the electro-acoustic arrangements, but the work is still very much grounded in the same experimental nature of his previous work and it begs the question why? Why did he return to the techniques he dismissed in the past and what lies behind that very disconcerting vocal arrangement?

These are some of the questions we got to ask Derek Piotr in the following Q&A session over email.

[Bahar](http://derekpiotr.bandcamp.com/album/bahar) by Derek Piotr

Let's start at the title of the album. It's ambiguous meaning both sea and spring. What associations do these things have with the album for you?

Woodwinds for me have always been associated with the spring, this might be due to the fact that when I was a young person of 12 or 13, I took up the clarinet – the spring recitals were always quite a big deal for students. But beyond that I definitely perceive woodwinds as feeling like the earth in April, burbling with new growth and kind of in this cold, wet transition mode, but still poking new growth through. The main imagery I had for Bahar was of blooms and piles of fresh fruit, both of which are quite spring like as well. All of my albums, from AGORA onward, have featured titles with more than one meaning, so the suggestion of a large body of water (“sea”) does not hurt. Bahar is indebted in many places to Turkish music, and of course you have the Black, Aegean and Mediterranean Seas.

You mention fruit, and I believe jackfruits were used as some of the inspiration for the cover art. You've had a clear vision of the colours and the image of the cover from the start. How does this relay what we hear on the album?

When I first saw what Antye (Greie-Ripatti) was doing for her [husband's live shows](#), I was immediately magnetized. She and I had worked together before on projects, but only sonically, although she is a proficient visual artist and calligrapher. When she started doing max-driven visuals that were techno-nature, I realized immediately that this fits the sound-world I had created for Bahar. The idea that something could be so rough and digital up close, but from further away look like an organic structure really fit the music. I already had the colours in mind: a deeper yellow to signify desert, and a darker reddish brown to represent an enormous fruit arriving like a mirage in the desert. One of the ideas I had for this record was that springs and fresh fruit would arrive to save a desert civilization. I see the album cover as totally representative of that.

You've returned to your classical compositional training for the album. What prompted a return to the very institutions you were trying to get away from at the start of your career?

I think boredom, foremost. Musicians who are very melodic or notation-minded may at some point have a desire to work with more spontaneous, intuitive processes in their career – I'm thinking of Radiohead. I think the same is true in the opposite way too. My music has always denounced straightforward musicality and been very off-grid, but I finally thought it was an interesting challenge to myself to step back up to conventional notation. In another, more practical sense, I had to communicate with the woodwind players on this record somehow, and scores are obviously extremely helpful in that regard. I still did a fair amount of conducting on the spot, and wrote almost no expression parts into the scores I handed the players. It was very satisfying to realize that these pieces could be reproduced exactly, in other situations, with other players. I've done a few shows where Bahar material has been performed by a woodwind trio, and that's incredibly exciting to me. Though I suspect if my first albums had all been string quartets or something, I'd have a huge desire at this point to just use a laptop and get some more unpredictable results. I do think boredom or restlessness has a lot to say in the processes one uses at any given time, and I think that's incredibly healthy.

What effect do you believe it had on the album compared to your earlier works?

It's hard for me to see my work from the outside, but I do hope that there is a certain amount of cohesiveness that arises from my use of woodwinds on nearly every track. Most of my albums that came before explored a number of styles within their running time, and I guess that could be a bit overwhelming for the listener. I definitely think I reined it in a bit on this one.

Is it a method of working that you see developing further in future works?

Definitely. It was ultimately very rewarding to work with acoustic instruments. My original blueprint for my solo work was voice and samples only, no instruments. I broke this blueprint almost immediately, but

I've definitely strayed further and further from it with each record. I think there is also a bit of paranoia on my part that the digital domain may not be around forever. Electronic music is pretty ethereal in essence, so I really was out to prove to myself that I could make music with reeds and wind, wood and metal, acoustic sources, not rely on a screen. It was, in a way, very reassuring. It also made my arrangements less esoteric, which was rewarding. There's an amazing video on YouTube of a [children's choir that covers Crystal Castles](#). I love things like this: where the starting point is electronic, but it gets amplified by acoustic sources. I think this is partly why I use voice in my work.

Ah yes, let's get to the voice. Your voice is quite raw on the album and the way you hover around pitches is certainly is very evocative, creating something of a disconcerting atmosphere. What effect do you strive for in your voice?

This is a difficult question to answer, mostly because my voice is a tool for me, and often I end up editing it in subtle ways to fill sonic gaps in tracks, a nuanced rhythm or low bass part for example may actually have its origin in a voice sample. To express warmth or intimacy or above all beauty is my goal, but voices are polarizing as a rule, so I can't expect that that comes across for every person.

Much of your work actually focuses on the human voice. What particular aspect of the human voice do you find intriguing and how did you interpret the role of the instrument specifically for Bahar?

Human voices are immediately perceptible by other humans, like if you're tuning between channels on a radio and the announcer just barely flickers in, in a millisecond you know it's there. That's incredible. Maybe not so far off from the "faces in the cloud" phenomenon – humans are hardwired to recognize other humans. I grew up listening to a lot of pop music, which is obviously vocal-driven. I think the voice is an amazing sonic path of expression, and extremely malleable in a sonic sense, because you can program the voice to sound like anything. It's a tool. It's a very direct line from me to the listener, anyone can hit a key on a Roland, but you only have your own voice, which is totally unique. I find that so beautiful.

Is there some significance to the addition of woodwinds with relation to the human voice for you?

I think woodwinds are my favourite instrument because they sound so vocal, any kind of reeds really. It's about warmth, I think. Winds don't need to be mic'd live but they aren't as loud as brass, so there is a certain kind of intimacy to them that I find really compelling.

The music itself still largely focuses on the electro-acoustic element for me as a listener. How did this element combine with the woodwinds for you and what role did you see for each within the songs?

It's tricky to say song by song, because each time I think there is a different relationship happening. For instance on "Sprawl", the main carriage of the song is electronic, and the woodwinds support that, or fill gaps in the atmosphere in subtle ways. On "Exchanges", the opposite is true. A piece like "Forest Floor" feels successful because the electronics have done exactly what I wanted them to do, which is evoke the feeling of walking around in the woods, but often the electronics are the mysterious part for me, so I'm excited by whatever form arises. There is always careful editing, for instance I did 50 versions of some Bahar tracks, but I guess what I mean is electronics can often be a bit amorphous so it's hard to say exactly what their role is in a literal sense.

Agora marked your first statement to the world, back in 2011. How do you see Bahar in the context of that first record and have you marked a progression as an artist?

I've certainly progressed. AGORA was just insane – I was doing spoken word and industrial noise and got my friend to sing faux-Italian operatic vocals on one track, it was just a crazy sandbox. It's cohesive in a strange way, but I hadn't yet developed a sonic vocabulary for myself, that is to say I hadn't located the elements or techniques that I now think of as signature to what I do – choral files of myself, almost no

vocal reverb, certain drum sounds. But obviously these things take time to develop. Bahar is as close to how I uniquely see music as I can get at this point – everything else feels a bit like an exercise in a particular style (Raj being “noise”, Tempatempat being “gamelan”) – Bahar feels very personal in that sense, and that’s something I’m proud of.

There’s certainly a notable difference in the vocals from Tempatempat to Bahar. They appear far more processed on the preceding album. Was there any intent to feature a more organic vocal for Bahar?

Absolutely. I wanted very little vocal doubling or overdubs, and very straightforward, “pop” performances, with (hopefully) memorable choruses. This was very deliberate.

Was there anything you were specifically trying to express with Bahar through these methods?

Just the pop thing, I guess. I wanted to make a record that was more accessible than anything I’d done before, something more succinct, but also hopefully something subtler that rewards deep listens, and is more relaxed. I think a lot of my records have some kind of nervous aggressive undertow to them, and I wanted Bahar to breath a bit more.

In a recent interview with ATTN: magazine you reiterated how you seek universality in your music, and specifically within the reception stages of the work through keeping the channels open between you and your audience. What would you like to say to them now after Bahar has been out there for a while?

Interesting question. I never really considered that I talk directly to my audience through interviews or anything, I think it’s more a desire to document my work with clear visibility in the hopes that some questions might be answers, or light shed on certain elements of the work. There are artists that I deeply admire, and sometimes they put out work I really don’t get, but then I read somewhere the reasoning behind something, and it will all fall into place. I guess if I were to say anything to my audience, I’d say: stay tuned, there’s much more to in store for the fall...