

**A Vast Area of  
Intersection:  
Jaap Blonk**

Braaxtaal (CD); Splinks (CD); Flux de Bouche (CD); Lieder en uit de Hemel (CD with book) Solielmoon Recordings, PO Box 83269, OR 97283, USA.

(Jaap Blonk will perform in the Music Gallery on October 26, 1994 as part of a six week tour of Canada and the United States.)

by René van Peer

A man in a three-piece suit stands in the spotlight. After a long bout of grunting and other, more extravagant, vocalizations of high pressure, he inspects the contents of his bowler hat with an expression of diabolic glee and satisfaction. Later he formally announces that, "the minister regrets such statements." Reiterating this line he leaves out more and more vowels at every new turn, ending in an aggressive hiss. He regains his composure for another try. This time he gradually withdraws the consonants from the words, and the utterance is reduced to a whine.

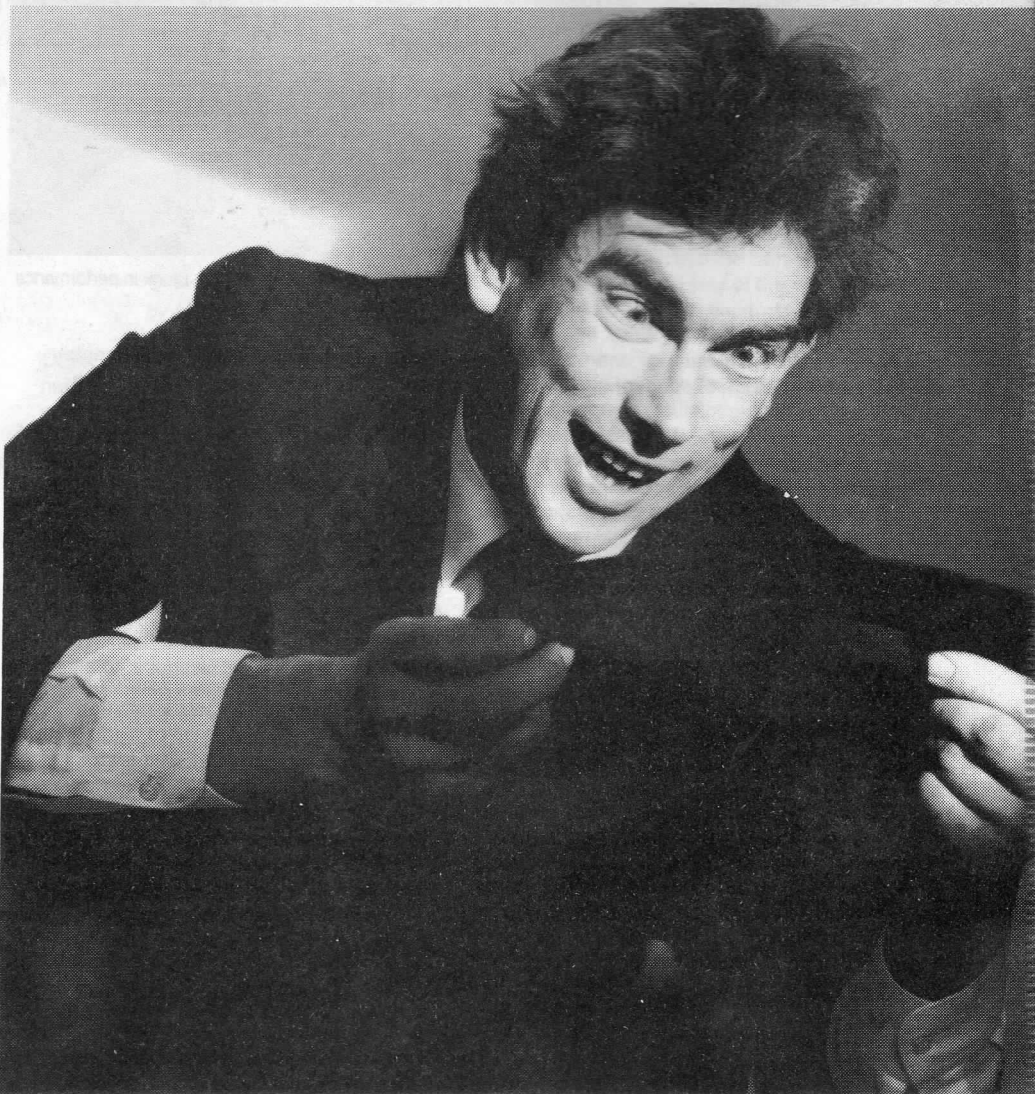
These are two pieces from a performance of the Dutch sound poet Jaap Blonk. "Being there on stage is a higher and more intense mode of existence," he says. "The quintessence of sound poetry lies in performing." He launched himself into this

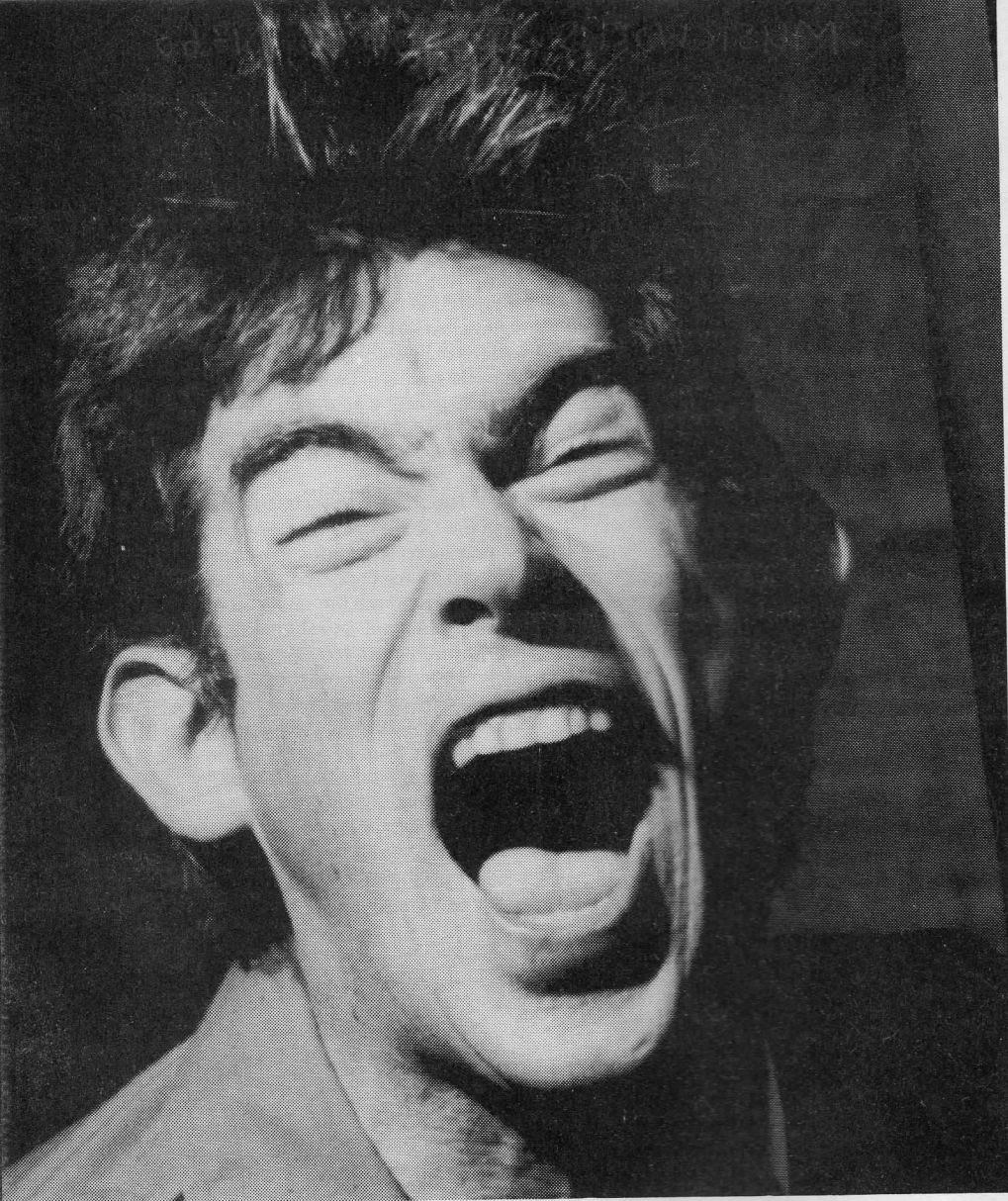
genre out of a deep love for jazz and saxophone playing, after he heard Kurt Schwitters' *Ur Sonata* in 1979. He fell for the piece immediately and started learning parts of it that he would recite on various informal occasions. Three years later he performed the entire work in public for the first time. Since then he has extended his repertoire with a selection of sound poetry ranging from the early 20th century Russian futurist Velimir Khlebnikov through the Dadaists to Lucebert and Robert Wilson. Almost inevitably he drifted into making his own pieces, drawing his inspiration from anything that involves the human voice, or suggests its use.

In an adaption of Khlebnikov's *Bells of Reason* Blonk does become (simulates) a bell: humming and booming and reverberating in luscious overtones. His own poems may be built around Finnish place-names, or take their inspiration from bird-song transcriptions as shown in field guides. Some of his pieces originate from vocal exercises and phonetics, exploring sound groups such as labials, sibilants or fricatives. The last few years he draws 'scores' that serve as maps, so that during a performance he may go roaming around the territories of these sound families.

The fields intersecting in his performances are diversified: expression, exercise and exploration of the vocal organ in its entirety converge; meaning and nonsense hold each

Jaap Blonk in performance





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other in an unsteady balance; there are elements of speech, of song, of declamation — in ever changing mixture; composition and improvisation alternate. Blonk also teams up with musicians: he is a member of the trio Braaxtaal (with synthesizer and percussion), and of the septet Splinks; in both of these he plays the saxophone besides taking care of the vocals.

Last year Jaap Blonk released four CDs that cover most aspects of his work. The CDs with his bands (the discs named after them) show him in the role of *chansonnier extraordinaire*. *Braaxtaal* focuses mostly on language. A piece may move from comprehensible phrases to abstractions from these into a realm of sounds suggesting the language that was used as the starting point. Synthesizer and percussion loosely underscore two sides of speech-rhythm and melody (or: patterns of stress and intonation). When Blonk lifts off into sound improvisations

the instruments travel with him, alternately leading and following, on the way to the unspeakable. *Splinks* pays tribute to jazz, Blonk's first love. The musical format is rather straightforward, but the lyrics are weird. Take the Dutch poet Lucebert's sonnet: "I, me, I, me, me, I, me, I, I, I, mine, mine, mine, I." Or: "Obbele boep 'm pam bè'm boem," the first line and title of a track that starts with a bop-inspired duet of voice and saxophone, showing how thin the line is between jazz (composed and improvised) and his sound poetry.

The other two releases, *Flux de bouche* and *Liederen uit de Hemel* (Songs from Heaven), give an impression of what Blonk's solo performances are like. The former consists of a selection of 20th century sound poetry and poems that he wrote or developed himself. The latter is a package of CD plus book, a collaboration between Blonk and graphic designer Jan Maarten Buissant:

poems visually interpreted, graphics vocalized, and a lot of intermediate ground covered. The *Liederen* themselves are a 20-minute cycle, the components of which are more or less fixed: Blonk makes separate pieces flow into each other meaningfully, without there being overt meaning attached to them.

Both solo CDs testify to the diversity of his repertoire, to the dedication with which he approaches his work: roaring 'Brüllt' (German for 'roars') at the top of his voice for nine minutes; accurately, but swiftly, declaiming a poem that consists of phonetic signs; or making a speech that shifts consecutively towards a thundering sermon and a desperate public confession, while none of the sounds uttered are literally intelligible. They show how he manages to move in an area of intersection — an area of considerable extent, although physically speaking the area he uses is limited in size. It is as if, on the road from A to B, he has left his car for a hike around a field and found it teeming with all kinds of intriguing life-forms. Boldly, yet attentively, he proceeds into the microcosm of his own voice, as if to verify that the final frontier does not lie outside the body but within it.

René van Peer is a writer based in the Netherlands who has often contributed to *Musicworks*.

## The Music of Eloquent Machines

Jaron Lanier: *Instruments of Change*  
(POINT CD 442 132-2)

by David Rothenberg

This recording is not what you might expect from Jaron Lanier, one of the pioneers in the Silicon Valley culture of virtual reality R&D. It is the ninth release from Philip Glass's Point Music label, a company dedicated to the promotion of the unexpected.

Lanier, co-inventor of the data glove and other virtual reality accoutrements, has become well-known in the popular media as a prime creative force behind the whole VR movement. On this record he reveals that his approach to life and invention may be primarily artistic, and only secondarily technological. Of course, these two come from the same *techné* of ancient Greece, and now is probably the time to merge them once again together.

The biggest surprise here is that there are virtually no electronic instruments. Lanier is a practical connoisseur of world music, and when he travels across the globe to give lectures on the promises of future technology, he has been known to ask for rare musical instruments in lieu of payment. What is the