

BS: How did you come to sound poetry?

JB: In the late seventies, I had been in university for about five years doing mathematics and physics and I quite not too long before finishing. So I was doing several odd jobs, cleaning offices and things like that, thinking about what I would like to do. I was playing saxophone at that time and already had begun writing some little pieces which were like simple jazz tunes, which were the first kind of compositions I did. I was working at that time with a group of people who recited poetry, not their own poetry but from rather well-known Dutch poets, and I came into that group to make music on the saxophone and to write pieces in between the poems or to set some poems to music. There was one member of the group who was a singer, and there was a piano player, and that was nice for me, because at that time it gave me a chance to write something and have it performed immediately, not put it on a shelf and look at it. So, it was a good way to start music for me. I also took some courses. In the seventies you had lots of "expression" workshops and courses you could do, like "body expression." There was also poetry reciting, and in that I remember, I think it was 1979, I saw a sound poem for the first time. This was one of Hugo Ball's six sound poems, actually "Sea Horses and Flying Fish." There was a little presentation after the workshop, and I chose that poem to perform. I liked it a lot more than the regular poems in Dutch or in any existing language. Not long after that I heard a performance of Kurt Schwitters' "Ur Sonata" and I found that very interesting. I went to the Institute of German Literature and made a serious copy of the whole piece and started to practise it. But it took more than two and a half years—I was just playing around and not planning of making a big performance of this piece, but I noticed that I almost knew it by heart, so at a friend's birthday party I stood up and performed this piece. People liked it. Then I was asked to perform in cafes and other places. At first it was actually separate from what I was doing with the saxophone. I had founded a little jazz group playing our own compositions. When I look back to that, I note I can see that I was more and more inclined in my improvisations on the saxophone to use sounds that were actually like voice, to search for making voice sounds on the instrument. I wasn't aware of that at all at the time: I was looking for unusual sounds like many people were doing in free improvisation. But then all of a sudden there was a breakthrough. It was after I had attended a workshop of actors from Poland, a voice workshop, very physically oriented, strong body work. When I got back and was sitting in my living room (I just had an attic room in Amsterdam), I put on a free jazz record by, I think, Archie Shepp, and all of a sudden I improvised along with it with the voice, and I noticed I was still doing that when the record had long ended, and it kind of felt really good, but of course I had no idea of what other people would think. I was not aware of other people doing this kind of stuff, but I soon found some improvising musicians in the Amsterdam scene who enjoyed improvising with me on instruments, so I could develop it. And out of these improvisations, the first little sound poems came. There was a little idea that came up in some improvisation, and I thought, "Well, this can be a little piece." At first, I had been doing performances of "Ur Sonata" and some other sound poems from Dadaism and Futurism for several years, but, especially this Kurt Schwitters work is really a big thing: I was kind of intimidated by that: "This is really a masterpiece. How can I come up with something to stand up against that?" But these little pieces came out of the improvisations. Then I started to make longer pieces, and after a few years I trained myself to work with the international phonetic alphabet for a little bit more opportunities for structure and writing larger pieces and add more variety in the sound poems, not using just the pronunciation of one language but mixing several languages and also more possibilities, finding notations for many sounds I was making in my improvisations, although many sounds are not expressible in the phonetic alphabet.

BS: So, if I understand you right, your early work is like "A Small Thought" on *Flux de Bouche*, which came from an improvisation and was then scored and then structured and then taken from there.

JB: Yeah, or also ready-made, *objet trouvé*, texts like the "Der Minister" piece, which was just a headline in a Dutch paper.

BS: So, you began with improvisation, you articulated a way of notating and structuring based upon the "classics" of sound poetry. How have you progressed from there?

JB: In classical sound poetry, we don't know about the performances, how they were. I think Kurt Schwitters did improvise in some performances and this helped him to develop the definitive form of "Ur Sonata," but for me improvisation is very important, and it still has a really important place in what I'm doing. That's not usually associated with sound poetry, and at this time in the international sound poetry community, there are only very few people who improvise. Most of them have fixed texts, or some of them publish their work only on CDs, on tape, and some work with tapes running along when they perform. In that sense, I consider myself a musician using the voice rather than a sound poet. But, in terms of sound poetry, I went on exploring things, like in what I call several phonetic etudes. "Rhotic" on the "R" and "Frictional" on the voiceless fricatives are on *Flux de Bouche* and another is on the new CD *Vocalore*, with lip sounds. The important thing in getting to know the international phonetic alphabet was the method it uses. It works by the mechanics of the mouth, e.g., you put your tongue there and there and give so much air pressure, let the vocal chords work or not, and so on. This was a really different approach. Up till then I had been doing research, listening to myself, but then there was another method just working with the mechanics. If you make a little drawing of the mouth cavity and throat, you can make a systematic search of all the possibilities. This is still very useful to me. As well, I

started to compose music for instrumentalists and my voice, so I had a way with the phonetic alphabet to notate my own parts, which was not possible before. And so, with several groups, one of them is my group Splinks, a more jazz-oriented group, which was founded in 1983 as a quartet when I was not working with the voice, not yet, I started in '84, incorporating more and more vocals and texts into that music. By now it's an ensemble of thirteen musicians. We released a double CD last year, *Consensus*. And there's another group, a trio, Braaxtaal, I performed with two years ago at the Victoriaville festival, with synthesisers and drums—now it's only electronic drums, but this is a different approach. In Splinks, I compose all the music, and there's different kinds of scores, but also traditional scores with just arrangements and notes and so on. With Braaxtaal, we don't use that. It's more like a rock type approach. Somebody comes into the rehearsal room and we work with that. This was a good thing, because, when we started, the keyboard player was playing the DX7, making his own sounds, not using the factory presets, so it was very interesting to work, as it were, on the spot—an interesting combination of my voice sounds and his sounds on the DX7.

BS: So, you're really coming to sound poetry more through jazz, as it were. There are sort of jazz precursors to sound poetry as well: there's scat singing, for example. There's the saxophone solo, the free jazz you were referring to. Do you feel yourself drawing more from that or equally from the sound poetry tradition we've had in the past century or so?

JB: It depends. For me, the area between, let's say, semantic speech or literature on one side and more "regular" music on the other is very wide. I want to keep using this whole wide area, feeling free to borrow from literature or to use principles from literature and also from music and make, let's say, new laws of form for every new piece I write. So, there are pieces that are maybe just a short motif then the rest is just improvisation. Other pieces are texts reworked in some specific way. I still now and then make things that are close to the old 20's sound poetry, but also things that are much closer to contemporary music scores.

BS. I want to remark a little on that "old" a bit. As you remark on the liner notes to *Flux de Bouche*, sound poetry is "possibly the oldest form of sound poetry." Sound poetry is often linked or related to traditional or archaic "wordless" poetries—Khlebnikov modelled poems after Russian magic-spells, Tzara compiled an anthology of chants from around the world, Jerome Rothenberg has assembled similar collections, and you yourself use a traditional form of vocalisation—overtone singing—in your "Mnemosyne"—do you draw on these more "ethnopoetic" sources as well as jazz?

JB: No, not really. In this piece "Mnemosyne": I hadn't really heard much throat-singing yet. It is just a very modest example of using some overtones. According to the title, Mnemosyne was the mother of the muses and so the image would be that the little overtones would be the newborn muses from the mother which is the sounds of the title word. Of course, I'm influenced by many different sounds. Sometimes I buy language courses with cassettes, not to learn languages, but just to listen to exotic languages like Korean or even Native American languages that are almost extinct now.

BS: You work with musicians and jazz groups. Since the earliest sound poems, sound poets have worked collaboratively. I'm thinking of "l'amiral cherche une maison à louer" to Canada's Four Horsemen. Have you or do you perform collaboratively?

JB: I had a quartet for about four years in the late 80's, early 90's. It was called "zzzzaaaa." There's a radio recording, but it survived only on cassette, because they destroyed the tape. Zzzzaaaa stopped, actually, because one member died. Ever since, I have been thinking of having a little vocal group but still haven't gotten down to it. That's really a problem: there are so many things you'd like to do, but there's only limited time, and you have to make choices. If I would, say, start a new vocal quartet, I would have certain specific people from different countries, so it would be a lot of work to get some funding even to get them together, and so it still hasn't happened. It's still one of the things I want to do. Actually, we are thinking, with Paul Dutton, of trying to get a quintet, which will also feature Koichi Makigami from Japan and David Moss and Phil Minton, so it would be like a vocal summit! I don't know if it will ever happen, but we're trying to make recordings soon, by sending tapes to each other. Then hopefully there will be the possibility to make a little tour.

BS: I'd like to ask something a little more general, now, but let me just set it up a little. Many people, it seems, both with and without a literary education, are unsure of just what to make of sound poetry. You have written that "good sound poetry is very direct communication" without the obstacles of words. How and what does sound poetry communicate directly without words?

JB: You could compare it to music. Generally, music is aestheticised: the use of voice in contemporary music is still very much within the aesthetics of trained singing, whereas sound poetry is definitely not. It has all the sounds that occur in real life, so these sounds can work in a very direct way. It can convey very direct emotions, and sometimes is balanced between "Is it a real sound?" or "Is it art?"

BS: Your own work ranges from the almost sub-phonemic to other pieces like Robert Wilson's "Dina Sore" and your own "Der Minister" which is right on the line between sense and nonsense. How do you see this play between the "purely expressive" and this play where phonemes become morphemes and "more meaningful" structures?

JB: I enjoy that a lot. Trying to find a nice way to have some words influence the rest of the piece. For instance, if you have a piece with only sound and a word emerges, then it's like the king of the piece. The word dominates the piece. But I like to play with that, and also to challenge this domination of language. In regard to "Der Ministerî: I made a formal British translation of it, which goes "The Prime Minister finds such utterances extremely ill-advised.î And there's the two versions [on *Flux de Bouche*], where one drops the vowels and the minister gets very angry and almost explodes, and the other where he gets very sad and cries like a child that doesn't get what it wants. That was actually a *trouveil*, a found thing, like I said, a newspaper headline, which I found with these two very simple manipulations could really hit the two sides, especially where, in the original, 'bedauert' means both that he is very sad but also, in political language, that he's very angry.

BS: "Der Ministerî is one of my favourite pieces, because removing the vowels and consonants you unmask the emotions behind what's being said. This very—it seems to me—satirical aspect of the piece, links it up with Dada as a satirical reflection of the absurdity of the slaughter and destruction in Europe during the First World War.

JB: Yes, although for me, this piece has more of a link for me with concrete poetry as it originated in the 50's and 60's with people like Gomringer and Jandl. That's why, actually, I hope the way I wrote in the booklet with *Flux de Bouche* would show it as a concrete poem, but one that is very effective in recitation, also, which does not go for all concrete poetry. Much of it is more effective as an image on paper or a concept.

BS: But, to pursue this link with the political or social. You perform a piece by Rudolf BIDER Ministerî piece, people ask me, "How can you get so angry every time you perform the piece?" I say that I'm not angry at all. I'm enjoying presenting this piece as a musician and putting all my concentration and energy into the sounds and not into any emotion, which is the same for "Totenklage.î But then the audience can feel much stronger emotions than if the actor or performer would be emotional himself. Then it wouldn't be so nice. I think the expression can be as wide as music. What I have not done yet is to have a really long piece, maybe an hour or so, which in music is very common. I hope to be able to make maybe a really long piece with a good structure and organisation of the tension.

BS: This is interesting: one the one hand, there's a great deal of improvisation in your work, both in the performance itself and in the development of the work; on the other hand, complementing that, you have the jazz background—the musical background, you've got your research into linguistics and the international phonetic alphabet, I don't know, do your studies and mathematics and physics come into it, because I discern a very structured approach to the whole compositional and performative activity.

JB: Yes, I have constructed some pieces using mathematical series and working with random factors. Even more strongly now, I'm into using algorithmic composition on the computer, which has not been recorded yet, but something will be coming out. I did one piece that was actually by the Braaxtaal trio, which set a direct quotation from a mathematics book as a theme.

BS: So, you're starting to use computers and mathematics in your composition, and many poets, sound and otherwise, have experimented—and continue to experiment—with electronically modifying the voice. Whereas, the liner notes to *Flux de bouche* make it explicit that "no electronics have been used on the voice sound.î What are your feelings toward the electronic exploration of the phonic art?

JB: I'm very much into electronics right now, using samples and manipulating that, and so on. I've never had anything against that. Even at the time I recorded *Flux de bouche*, I was using, in another group, some processing on the voice. It's not to be understood as a statement against electronic processing. Before releasing the CD, I had some friends listen to the recordings, and we talked about it, and someone said some pieces almost sound like electronic music, especially the frictional piece, which is hissing sounds. Also, *Flux de bouche* was for me maybe even more important as a promotion thing than a work on CD. I added that little phrase so people would know if they invite me for a performance I could do it on the spot.

BS: I want to get back to the question of reception for a moment, though, because this does concern me. In 1916: Hugo Ball's "poems without wordsî were met with derision and boos and catcalls at the Cabaret Voltaire, while, today, you give some six performances a month, which are politely and appreciatively received. What happens to sound poetry when it loses this shock of the (apparently) radically new? Is it "Dadaî anymore, or is it just "another kind of poetryî beside the sonnet or the lyric, popular and otherwise?

JB: The reception is so dependent on the context you are invited into. Especially in the earlier years, I had many performances where people got angry. For instance, in clubs where I was the opening act for a rock band, the biggest example being opening for The Strangers in a big concert hall in Holland for 2,000 people in 1986. Six guards before the stage were struggling to keep people from hitting me, and people throwing beer at me all the time. I have no doubt that the same thing could still happen now. It's only that I can't really afford to go to a club and get \$50.00 for my performance. Usually I accept only invitations where I get better payment and that entails that you get on a stage where it's obvious that you are a respected artist. I sometimes regret that. Sometimes, if it does not involve a long journey I like doing performances in less respected places,

and also in high schools.

BS: You mentioned earlier your interest in putting on an hour long piece and anyone who listens to you carefully, and now with the idea that there's the international phonetic alphabet going on there, this is a very physically demanding performance. For someone who doesn't know what the demands are, what are the physical demands of performing sound poetry?

JB: I do performances of an hour or even longer, but then, usually, and also for the audience, you make a good balance between very exacting pieces and pieces that are more quiet, like for instance "Dina Sorei and also as a relief I give some explanation of how pieces originate. Several sounds I could develop only very slowly over the years, because some sounds are a bit heavy on the throat such that you can practice them only for thirty seconds and no more, but then if you do that every day, something develops.

BS: Do you rehearse every day?

JB: When I'm at home I try to do that every day. Touring, sometimes it's more difficult.

BS: You do a lot of work, too, with classic sound poetry, which must involve a great deal of interpretive effort on your behalf. If you just look at it written down, there are a lot of possibilities. How do you approach a written score?

JB: It's pretty intuitive. I try many different things. In the case of Hugo Ball the titles at least say something. I found, at least in the case of "Totenklage" I jump from a high beginning then it goes into a very low register, because the text is different, but also because of the relation of the syllables "wo – umi give me 'warum' or "why" in German.

BS: So again when you're interpreting your open to the play of the words creeping in, and the expressiveness of the sounds, and the registers, and the volumes, and so on.

JB: It was important for me starting out with these people like Ball, Schwitters, Khlebnikov, and so on, who were in anthologies and were printed and respected now, they gave me a kind of legitimation to be on a stage and perform these pieces, and even when people raised protest or even threw things at me, which sometimes happened at the beginning, going on and finishing, which I would not have done so easily, if it would have been my own work.

BS: The early sound poems used the alphabet to notate their work. Over the years, over the century, many sound poets have developed their own notational schemes. Have you a notational system of your own?

JB: Yes. It's the international phonetic alphabet with a lot of new sounds I added, but it has to be developed more. For me, it's almost sufficient, but especially if I were to go make compositions with other vocalists, I would have to make it more precise. A great work was done by Trevor Wisheart [?] with the notation he made for his vocal ensembles that's so finely detailed, it's great. It's maybe even possible to adopt that. It's an example of a very highly developed notation system.

BS: The international sound poetry community came up earlier, who are some of the people who make this up?

JB: Paul Dutton is interesting, balancing between the semantic and sound. There is Valeri Scherstjanoi, a Russian born poet who has been in Berlin since 1979, and now living in Munich. He's very much inspired by the Russian Futurist tradition, but has moved into work of his own. He's a specialist in all kinds of clicks and pops, making multi-track radio pieces with involving texts in German or Russian, but a whole phonic landscape of that kind of voice sounds. There's Amanda Stewart from Australia. She does a nice combination of more meaningful language and voice sounds, and a good improviser. There's of course the older French people like Bernard Heidsieck and Henri Chopin, who is very ill now. There are not so many new people to my knowledge coming up right now. I know some, but either they are to be considered more as singers that make more or less frequent excursions into the realm of voice sounds, performance or sound poetry, or the more language-based poets.

BS: What do you see as the future of sound poetry? Of your own sound poetry?

JB: I actually see rather the merging of various art forms. Actually, many things are being done, especially in electro-acoustic music, like what, for instance, here in Quebec, the Avatar people do, could be considered sound poetry. I've never been very happy with making distinctions between genres, but I think it will be even more blurred. There will be no separations.