

Sybilla Poortman: How am I to review your albums when you yourself say that you are unable to describe your own music? I feel the kind of thing you do is most difficult -if not impossible- to put into words.

Jason Kahn: Yes, you certainly chose a difficult vocation for yourself! I don't envy critics, as they try to put into words what is most difficult to express. Two of my favorite music critics were Lester Bangs and Richard Meltzer (in the same lineage, I suppose). I liked how they avoided analysis and description of the music they were writing about; sticking more with their place in relation to the music. I've read reviews by Lester Bangs where he didn't once mention the recording he was--supposedly--writing about; but approached it more anecdotally. I mean, you knew that this was a critique of a certain recording--because the text was headed by the title of the record, etc--but the writing wove its way around the work being reviewed, leaving the reader to think about how this music had affected this person (Bangs). Henry Miller had, for me, a similar approach to expository writing, such as in "The Air Conditioned Nightmare" or "The Colossus of Maroussi," though Miller wasn't writing about music, he was trying to describe his feelings in relation to people or places; something not so far off from trying to capture the impression a recording or music performance leaves on you...

Sybilla Poortman: AMM were my first interviewees. I was so shy to meet these men that I admired so very deeply... And then my first question: "How do you get this unmistakable AMM-sound?" kept the three of them talking for half an hour incessantly. There is a certain self-restraint about 'Streaming' that reminds me of the atmosphere AMM create on their albums. Please tell me more about this collaboration!

Jason Kahn: There's not so much to say about the recording of "Streaming." It was recorded live. In a way, it came about quite by accident. At the time, I was organising a series of concerts--The Sonique Serie--in Zurich. I had a tour coming up with Dieb13 and we wanted to play in Zurich. Normally speaking, I don't like to play at events which I also organise. I find it hard to concentrate on the tasks at hand: organisation and giving a concert. A very bad combination, if you ask me. In any case, I'd known G nter M ller for a few years and we'd always wanted to play together. This seemed like a good opportunity, as Zurich is not so far from where G nter lives in Switzerland. We didn't talk about what we were going to do beforehand. I think it was already clear that all of us had ideas about music which intersected at certain points. So, we had a good basis to start with. The rest was just listening. It's flattering that you should compare this recording to AMM, as, of course, they are a great favorite of mine. I'm not sure where this similarity lies. Some critics reviewed this recording as "ambient improv." To me, though, ambient implies something which doesn't necessarily require your attention--it drifts more or less in the background and creates an atmosphere (which is all fine--I have no problem with "wallpaper music," in the sense that Satie coined this term). For "Streaming," though, I tend to think of this sound as more of a "pointillistic ambient;" which for me means, the sound hovers and wavers there somewhere between background and foreground, but still demands your attention. You can leave it, but if you do, it might be difficult to get back into the atmosphere of it. So, in the classical sense of the term "ambient" I suppose "Streaming" doesn't meet the requirements. In terms of AMM, and as I understand their concept of "meta music," I can see more similarities. Here we come down to the question "what is music?" I think of "music" as organised sound, however this organisation may occur. To me, meta music approaches this concept of organised sound, with the exception being that the sound is allowed more autonomy to evolve on its own--this meaning, we start a process and, though we are part of this process we are also listeners; we guide the sound but it also

guides us. I always like this famous quote of Morton Feldman's, "don't push sound around." And I imagine this is what meta music is about: not pushing the sound around; but letting it breathe, being inside the sound and evolving with it. What I like about "Streaming" is this feeling of expanding and contracting. The pieces move along of their own accord, yet they don't drift. No one is in a hurry.

Sybilla Poortman: The question that keeps haunting me: should improv be recorded and listened to repeatedly? You say yourself it exists in the moment and that you can't capture the same feeling twice. For me, the real experience is in the spirit of a live gig and recordings that 'bring back that feeling' are mere surrogates (though I must agree with Jim O'Rourke on this: most of the time it's all you have...).

Jason Kahn: Yes, definitely improv should be recorded. The recording cannot possibly replace the experience of being part of the performance, hearing it as it unfolds; but a recording can impart other impressions to us. We travel to another country and we send a postcard home. The people receiving the postcard could never imagine what we have experienced but it sets their imaginations wandering, if only for a brief moment. A good recording, of course, can do much more than this. Some of my favorite recordings were recorded live. Just to imagine having been there can even be too much, sometimes...

Sybilla Poortman: When Arnold Dreyblatt was in Amsterdam for his Memory Project, I tried to arrange an interview but I guess the magazine I work for wasn't important enough for him (or at least for the people around him who denied me the request). So I just did an article about the Project for the mag. What was it like to work with Arnold Dreyblatt? He doesn't strike me as the easiest of employers...

Jason Kahn: I had a really good time working with Arnold. I found the experience very interesting and stimulating, the way he approached the concept of "composition." I always had the feeling that he composed with the musicians of his group in mind. What he brought to the rehearsals were never "finished" compositions, but also not sketches. The pieces had a definite direction but Arnold was always open to input from the members of the group. This made the experience of creating his music very challenging yet also very inspiring. Once the compositions were more or less complete, there was still room when playing them live to expand or contract them, as the members of the group felt at the time. Arnold was usually at the mixing board, so we didn't have a conductor or anyone telling us how to play. In addition to playing in the group, I also had the chance to perform with Arnold in duo and as a trio with Dirk Lebahn, the bassist of The Orchestra of Excited Strings (Arnold's group) at that time. Even when playing with Arnold in such small groupings, there never arose a working character of "I'm the composer here, you're the musician." We all really came out equal, each putting in ideas. Arnold has a really great ear and a very unusual approach to listening, after working so many years with just intonation. I started to realise very early on that he was listening for something different than other people I'd played with, that he was sensitive to certain aspects of harmony which I, up to the point I'd started to work with him, never experienced before. The music seems quite simple--and on the surface it is; but it had a quite deep and complex emotional effect on me. At times, when performing live, it really felt like the stage was going to take off into the air. This is hard to put into words--Steve Lacy said, "raising the bandstand"--but the harmonies arising from Arnold's tuning system had an invigorating effect. Even at moderate volumes, the music surged with energy.

Sybilla Poortman: I think musicians I interviewed earlier like Oren Ambarchi (have you heard his guitar-drones? awesome!) and Rosy Parlane, are somehow related to you. Rosy was interested in the flow of things, you want to let things breathe and run their natural course. Rosy stated to be 'a musician rather than a sound artist'. He also couldn't be bothered by what you call 'technical prowess in place of what you want to express'. So how do you avoid this pitfall?

Jason Kahn: Funny you should bring up Oren Ambarchi and Rosy Parlane...because we are all drummers?! I have some recordings from each of them and really like what they are working at. They achieve a sense of place and an atmosphere--that is to say, when I hear their recordings I am in the place of their sound for the time it is playing: it fills my space. Avoiding technical prowess in place of what I want to express was never really a problem for me, especially the longer I continued to make music and the closer I came to realising what exactly it was I wanted to express, which is to evoke a feeling. It really only comes down to this for me. Technical ability is only required to the point at which it is useful for me to achieve what I want to express. I can feel when the sound is working for me, when it moves me, when I sense that I have created something which succeeds emotionally for me, when I arrive at a place and feel inspired by the sound. I am just not interested in technical ability for its own sake. Of course, a virtuos musician can be awe inspiring, as in "I can't believe they are playing that." But for me, a really virtuous musician exceeds beyond the mere motoric skills. Take Pablo Cassal's famous recording of the Bach cello suites. What struck me about these recordings was not Cassal's phenomenal technique, but the depth of emotion he brings forth in the music. And this emotion has nothing at all to do with instrumental mastery, more to do with the ability to hear, to listen, to be sensitive to the instrument, to the room it is being played in, to feel one's own emotions in relation to the music being played and, lastly, understanding what the music is about, what the composer (or the improvisers) are trying to say. Some of these abilities can occur as a result of years practicing an instrument, becoming sensitive to sound and one's place in the sound. But this is not mutually exclusive--there are many other ways to be sensitive to sound, to learn about sound, or to know oneself in relation to sound or a composition. If someone creates music which moves me, but which also happens to employ a high degree of instrumental virtuosity, then I have no problem with this. Of main importance is my feeling in the sound: does it inspire me, does it move me? It's actually appropriate that I should have the chance to answer this question now, as a while back I was in the kitchen of my house--I live with a lot of people and we all share the same kitchen--and there was this woman I live with cooking. She was listening to some music, very precisely played jazz-rockish sort of sound. And I asked her what she was listening to. She said, "Gentle Giant. I like this music because they play their instruments so well." I was really astounded that she could so concisely make a statement summing up what for me is antithetical in music, and that this could be a reason for liking music (nothing against Gentle Giant, for all you prog fans out there...)!

Sybilla Poortman: Taking risks in performing is important for you and for the audience. Of course this goes for live gigs but where is the risk in recording, when you can try things over and over again? How do your CD's relate to your live gigs?

Jason Kahn: Some of my cd's are recorded live, and in this case the idea of recording a live-in-concert cd is to capture that feeling of having the audience there, contributing their presence and energy and attention to the music being created. This is a special situation which can yield a special recording, another kind of recording than is possible in the studio. On the other hand, studio recordings for me are not necessarily about having the possibility of trying things over and over again. Much of what I do, be it in the studio playing with other musicians or alone at home mixing on the computer, has to do with the impulse of the moment. Of capturing a sense of inspiration and going with this. It is true, of course, that in the studio, unlike performing before an audience, that we have the chance to investigate ideas more deeply and to take several tries at recording them. For me, though, after too many tries, the feeling is gone and that spark of inspiration is no longer there to carry the moment. This also happens when I'm mixing, as I like to think of a mix as also a kind of improvisation. I'm neither very technical nor methodical in this. I try to get things sounding the way I like them, and a lot of this has to do with feeling inspired about the results I am getting; if I get bogged down in running the same track over and over again I tend to lose a sense of freshness and movement. This is not to say that I can't spend hours working with sounds, finding new possibilities; but when it comes down to the mix, to the recording, to the per-

formance, then I like to be impelled by the moment, by a sense of inspiration.

So, to answer your question, all my solo cd's relate very directly to the way I approach a live performance, as they all take their impulse from the moment when I feel excited about the sound as it is happening. Much of the material which went into my solo recordings arose from improvising and through this discovering new ideas and sounds. "Plurabelle" and "Drums and Metals" were both recorded live, with no overdubs. In the case of "Drums and Metals" the pieces were composed beforehand--more roadmaps than strictly annotated compositions--but the actual performance of them was left up to the feeling of the moment as they were played in the studio.

Speaking of the studio, I'd just like to mention here that I recorded many of my cd's at Bob Drake/Maggie Nichols/Chris Cutler's "Studio Midi," near Carcassone, France. This has been a special place to record for me because, unlike nearly all of the studios I've recorded in, Studio Midi has huge windows which fill the room one records in with daylight. The changing light conditions have a great effect on how the music is played, as the atmosphere in the room is always gradually changing. Recording here really made me realize what Indian classical music is aiming at by having ragas composed for different times of the day, as each time of the day requires a different mood. Recording in Studio Midi thus takes on a more "performative" aspect for me, as I never feel as though I'm just getting tracks down on tape, but playing with the changing conditions in the room, reacting to the different phases of sunlight.

Sybilla Poortman: Why do you feel that live gigs exclude any real contact with the audience? Were you never influenced by an appreciative audience or encouraged to push things a bit further? I know I felt real contact and interaction at a few gigs. Is it perhaps an isolationist thing? (I remember Jim O'Rourke would prefer playing with his back to the audience, or behind a screen like Tony Conrad!). Isn't it all about grasping the listener's attention and making him aware of his expectations concerning the music?

Jason Kahn: Hmm, it would seem that somewhere you read or understood that I said that live gigs exclude any real contact with the audience. I wouldn't say this, as, quite naturally, I sense the audience, even if it is a very big audience which one can only sense as a presence and not as individual people. Some of my greatest live experiences were playing in small, packed clubs, where you can just feel the energy ready to burst the walls; or likewise where you can hear a pin drop, despite the presence of many people--this great tension. For me, the audience is important, otherwise I wouldn't take the time and trouble to play live. It is important for me that the people are there, though, as I've said elsewhere, I am not satisfied with the conventional way of giving concerts: i.e., the musician is on a stage, the audience is sitting in front of the stage, the sound coming out speakers facing the audience, and so on. I'd like to discover a more all-encompassing approach to live performance, where perhaps each entity--the audience, the performer--gives up some of their roles and becomes a little less of each: less audience, less performer; maybe the two coming more together, somewhere the lines between the two blurring. Something, perhaps, between an installation and a concert.

When I play live, however, I am not out to grab the listener's attention nor to make them aware of their expectations about music. I am only there to offer my sound, which they can make of as they will. It would be too much for me to worry about their expectations, especially as so many people have so many different ideas about what music is or should be, about what a concert is. And if I can't grasp their attention with what I do naturally, then there is no point in changing what I do in order to achieve this! All I can do is be myself, play what I can play and see what happens. This isn't to say I exist in a vacuum, as the audience also contributes to what I play; their presence, their energy also affects me, whether I or they know it or not. The energy in a room alone at home is not the energy in a room with many people. And even if you play behind a curtain, or with your back to the audience, or blindfold everyone...whatever, the fact remains: there are people there and their presence, like the musician's, fill the room, and, for better or worse, will have an effect on the music.

Sybilla Poortman: It is interesting that you see the parallel of repetition in minimal music, techno and some ethnic music. Is that why your collaboration with Toshimaru is called 'Repeat'?

Jason Kahn: Actually, at the time of Repeat's first recording, for which Toshi and I decided on the name of the project, the music had less to do with minimalism or repetition. There was, of course some aspects of this, but the "Repeat sound," if you could call it that, was really only to arrive with the second cd, "Temporary Contemporary." I came up with the name and, basically, I just liked the sound of the word. There is a This Heat (whom I love) recording of the same name, but this had nothing to do with choosing the name for the project with Toshi.

Sybilla Poortman: While your solo albums don't sound like percussionists' albums at all, the ones with Repeat seem to have much more 'real drums and percussion'. Is this because of dividing tasks in some way between you and Toshimaru?

Jason Kahn: I actually did do a, as you term it, "real drums and percussion" recording entitled "Drums and Metals." This was my second solo cd. In a sense, though, it doesn't sound like what many people would expect from a solo percussion recording, though the cd was recorded with only acoustic drumset and metal objects. It wasn't my idea to do a Buddy Rich vs. Max Roach kind of recording--I wanted to concentrate on the sound of the instrument, which is what first got me interested in playing the drums in the first place. Playing with Toshi never involved dividing tasks. Actually, we never really spoke very much at all about the music we played. We basically just played and maybe afterwards said, "oh yeah!" or "oh no!." This wasn't because we don't have much to say to each other--we do--it's just that in terms of the sound we had a good enough feeling to approach the music on a primarily intuitive level. In most cases this proved to work out very well. I'd also have to say that I never really think in terms of "dividing tasks" musically, in terms of the instruments at hand. I think that nowadays, more than ever, the instrument one plays is less important than what kind of sound one makes with the instrument one plays. Maybe we could replace the word "musical instrument" with "sound generating device," though this sounds way too wordy and dumb! What I'm trying to say is, in my musical world, instruments don't have tasks anymore. They are only making sounds. For example, what I really liked about playing with Gnter Mller was the fact that here were two drummers both interacting in a way that defies the "task" of a drummer; or at least the preconceived notion of what a drummer is to do. I recently did a workshop in Lisbon where people came to improvise. Now, I don't claim here to teach improvisation or even think that improvisation can be taught. The workshop was more about people coming together and playing and then, afterwards, if they had anything to say about the music played, say it and exchange impressions. I was only there to give the proceedings a shape. Anyways...what I found great was that, beside the more "conventional" instruments like guitar, drums, saxophone, etc we also had people showing up to play with a mobile phone and mini disc--it was really like, "what is a musical instrument, what are 'tasks', what is valid? In the end, I think all the workshop participants had to agree that everything is permitted--one can make music with anything.

Sybilla Poortman: You studied Arabic percussion. Is there anything specific you learned during that year that you still (consciously) use in or apply to your playing? Perhaps this kind of brooding undercurrent in your solo work?

Jason Kahn: What I became more aware of, playing Arabic and Iranian percussion, was making the most of something simple; of coaxing as many nuances of sound from what would seem like a very limited musical instrument. I was fascinated at how far one could go with such finite material. The more time I spent with these instruments the more I could see how deep a sound could go; or how far one could expand on a basic rhythm. The rhythm itself became less important than the tension and release arising from repetition, from the swinging between the two poles of the "dum" (bass tone) and the "tak" (the high tone) of the drum (be it a frame drum, a darabuka, a

tombak, etc). After playing a rhythm long enough, the idea, as such, of the rhythm vanished and the presence of its movement became the focus. The great percussionist Z'ev wrote in his book on rhythm and numerology "Rhythmajik - Practical Uses of Number, Rhythm and Sound," that "Repetitive rhythms gain their power through the fact that they can fuse the discrete event [the stroke] with the continuum [the subjectively experienced time-dilation of the trance state]. This is the cause of the effective quality of the proportions and the conditioning potential their sounding holds." The key here for me here is when he says "their sounding." Which means that, the repetition of rhythm de facto leaves rhythm behind for the sound distilled from the rhythm. Playing middle eastern percussion and, earlier, the snare drum, made me realise how valuable it was to concentrate on simple structures and limited material, focusing on micro events, rather than macro vistas.

Sybilla Poortman: If the sound of the instrument reveals something about the musician -as you said in an interview-, then you must be a very balanced person. This also reflects in the way you do interviews: calm, precise and very eloquent. So how do you get this rare combination of intensity and vulnerability, this meditative, at times mantra-like sound on your solo albums? How do you hold this tension while keeping things transparent to a transcending degree? (if this sounds like I'm stunned - I am. In fact, I found some of your solo-work quite mind-expanding...)

Jason Kahn: I can't really answer this question in a categorical way. I mean, and I've said this before, what I am striving for is a sense of place in the sound I am working with. I am not trying to expand anyone's mind--though if this is a positive aspect of my music for them, then I'm glad!--nor am I thinking in terms of meditative music. Perhaps what I am doing comes across this way as I concentrate on repetitive, gradually changing textures. The idea here is to experience the sound as it changes and feel that we as listeners are in the center of this change: an immersive experience.

Sybilla Poortman: I've studied arts and languages and I feel like I've come full circle with listening to the music I listen to today -and writing about it. The account of your encounter with Mark Rothko's paintings in London gave me the shivers. I think I had a similar experience listening to 'Piano2' on 'Analogues', the sounds of the organ-like drone just washing over me in a spiritual way and leaving me very tranquil. Can you remember how you created all those overtones (and undertones)? It feels so acute, so much 'in the now' that it drains out every other notion. This is definitely a favourite of mine (among many others...).

Jason Kahn: Piano2 is named, in fact, from an old, broken down upright piano standing in the corner of a rehearsal room I had while living in Geneva. The "organ-like" drones, as you call them, are in fact samples I made from several notes played on the piano. I generally like to tinker around on a piano if there happens to be one handy, and I especially like when they are a bit out of tune. This piano in my rehearsal room more than met my requirements and actually had a quite beautiful sound, aside from its exotic tuning...What I discovered later, as I started to work with the sounds at home, was that I'd inadvertently recorded, along with the piano, the sounds of traffic. My rehearsal room was in a building at the corner of a very busy intersection. Though in the cellar, we still heard a lot of the traffic. I realised that, like the slight (and not so slight!) dissonances from the untuned strings of the piano, that the unwanted sound of cars driving by added a sense of time and place to the recording--an atmosphere which made me think of this room, of this piano, of the time of day I recorded this. I also realised that in and of themselves, the sound of the cars was not a bad thing and that they actually worked in quite well with the piano tones (providing, I believe, the undertones you asked about). I am always glad to be surprised by something I'm working on. When the unexpected turns up and I learn something from it or, better yet, it makes me smile! This piece in particular really made me aware of residual sounds--the sounds which are there, but perhaps only lingering on the edge of our consciousness or hearing capabilities. It is something analogous to "reading between the lines" in literature, whereas here we could

mean rather "hearing between the sounds."

Sybilla Poortman: Where does your preference for chime-like structures come from? Is it the reverb and the resonance? On track 6 of 'Pool' they're absolutely hypnotising, you should warn people for wearing headphones!

Jason Kahn: Good question. I mean, I would often ask myself the same question: why this, why that? But in the end, I don't know?. Why blue, why vanilla? I would say, though, that I love the dirty sounds, the sounds that comprise a good deal of noise, though perhaps not noise in the sense as we conventionally might understand it; rather, as sound which seems to pass in and out of phase with itself. Percussion is naturally quite a good source for this quality of sound as by its very nature it has many innate, un-tuneable timbres.

Sybilla Poortman: Are you still interested in literature? What do you read?

Jason Kahn: Lately I've been reading the books of Philip K. Dick. He's so great!

Sybilla Poortman: Those sound-installations you sent me, can you tell me more about them? Was this released, will it ever be or did you make this copy just for me....? They sound quite disturbing and comforting at the same time (hell, all these paradoxes, I love them!), like giant machines in an industrial setting.

Jason Kahn: I sent you these recordings to give you a better picture of what I am doing. It would be hard to imagine releasing them as they were designed for certain spaces and for multi-channel sound systems. The first excerpt I sent you was a piece done in St. Pölten, Austria for the Klangturm, which is a multi-story glass tower constructed especially for sound installations. The text "Dropped From the Sky" gives a detailed description of this piece. The other excerpts were taken from an installation I did last year in Berlin entitled "Unheard Berlin." This was a four-channel, 24-speaker work for the Urban Drift symposium. The premise for this piece was to turn the listener's attention towards the sounds of an urban space--in this case Berlin--which one might not consciously hear, though which play an important role in how we perceive a city. I spent a week going around Berlin--a city I know quite well, having lived nine years there--recording these peripheral sounds. In the end I had a kind of phonogram presenting a side of Berlin's sonic character which most people in their everyday lives might fail to appreciate. For me, these sounds are very important as they work on a nearly subliminal level, a place where we are most vulnerable.

Sybilla Poortman: You moved from one country to the other many times and are described as a true nomad. Still, there's no feeling of loneliness in your music, only perhaps a feeling of 'aleness' in a self-contained way. Are fellow musicians your family? Is music your love and live-fulfillment? Am I being too impertinent?

Jason Kahn: I guess a unifying factor in all this movement has been the music. Most of my travel was tied to musical activity, and when I find myself in new places, no matter where I am, working with sound is always a place I can come back to, a place I know best and a place where I can feel "at home," no matter where I might be.

Sybilla Poortman: The releases on Cut look absolutely terrific! A design that is both ascetic and very aesthetic (like the music). The print is also quite outstanding (I can tell, I studied graphic arts). Please tell me how you find the time to do all this and why you do it all yourself! Well, I guess nobody does it better....

Jason Kahn: Glad you liked the covers. I design them myself because...it's fun! When living in

Los Angeles, I used to work as a typographer and graphic artist--and always the most fun was to design something for myself. Maybe having cut is only an excuse to be able to do graphic design again...

Sybilla Poortman: Last one: will we be able to see you perform in the Netherlands some day soon?

Jason Kahn: That would be great! I played in the Netherland three times last year (Amsterdam, Rotterdam, Nijmegen...). I hope to have the chance to play again sometime soon, though nothing is planned right now.