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PHOTO BY CHRISTIANA RIFAAAT

*Derek Piotr is a Poland-born composer currently based in New England. His work centres on the use of the human voice (decorated with undulating beats and faint melodic traces), and his upcoming record *Bahar* adopts a more forthright, pop-derived approach to the presentation of his vocal than ever before.*

In some respects, *Bahar* feels like a much more straightforward record than its predecessor, *Tempatempat*. Do you see it this way? Was there a reason for this shift?

This was very deliberate. *Tempatempat*, my last album, involved a lot of vocal weaving and layering, and in retrospect I thought I used the voice a bit too much actually. It can burn out the mind! So for this record I started with nine pieces and really worked them into their final forms. This is a new working method for me, normally I write songs and finish them without a specific amount or structure in mind, but for instance with tone offering I went through literally fifty versions. I definitely wanted this record to feel much more approachable than my previous efforts, so there was a lot of refining happening. Also emphasis on blunt, direct beats, single vocal lines, and personal lyrics sung in English.

In particular, your voice is much more forthright. The influence of pop music feels more prominent than ever. Does pop music form a particularly large part of your listening?

I listen to a lot of pop music. When I was younger I really championed music that was part of the avant-garde, sites like [UbuWeb](#) and such, but as I've gotten older I've realized a lot of that music is maybe not so moving or potent, and have increasingly tilted my ear towards what's beautiful. I don't think in genres necessarily; I get as much from a Gregorian chant piece as I do from blistering drill 'n' bass, Brazilian rap, Chinese opera, Joni Mitchell...as long as the intent is pure and there is focus and drive to the music, I can appreciate it, and ideally find some kind of elevation through it.

You have the most bizarre and ethereal sense of vocal harmony, which seems to levitate above the music rather than slotting in on top of it. It's really beautiful. How did you come to develop this approach to harmony?

I don't think I'm the best person to ask about this but I have one friend who has been an engineer for 20 years and his explanation was that I dance just around the tonic, in a consistent manner, so that it feels somewhat unfamiliar and yet very comforting. These are sensations and aspects I respond to as a listener, so I suppose all I can say is that I'm very honoured that those traits come across in my own work. But I do listen to a lot of music that has more chromatic structure than western tonality offers, in particular a lot of gamelan and the work of Harry Partch, so I guess that's been kind of hard-wired into my brain.

You also make a very explicit use of auto-tune. What encouraged you to start using auto-tune in this way?

Auto-tune is not always something I feel the need to use but there are certain instances where it does add a kind of heightened state to vocals. It's a very dislocating effect, and since my work foremost deals with vocal production I guess I came around to it as a result of trying 999 things with the voice. I really like auto-tune in the works of people like CocoRosie and some of the trance music from other parts of the world, like Raï music.

***Bahar* also utilises your formal musical training for the first time. Were you consciously avoiding formalised musical practices up until now? What revived your desire to explore them again?**

Revisiting my formal skills was a simple matter of having to communicate with the players on the record. I knew from the outset I wanted to include woodwinds on the record; I took clarinet at a very early age and wanted to return to it. I had been consciously avoiding using my training until now, I had basically burnt out on it at school and went the other extreme – not caring to know what key something was in and going purely by intuition. This produced some exciting results, but it is equally satisfying to have a score of a piece and being able to replicate it exactly. For instance some of the *Bahar* tracks are being re-arranged by one of my composer friends for a winds trio, which is something I am very much looking forward to performing.

How was the experiencing of bringing woodwind into the compositional process? Was it easy to combine this “classical” approach to music with the more intuitive method of composition that has underpinned your work up until this point?

It was mostly enjoyable, but the one thing that I found curious is that recordings of woodwind are very finicky and surprisingly difficult to EQ. Also challenging was the fact that their tonality clashed horribly with some of my normal hand-fisted processes of cutting and pasting or DSP-ing, the notes would not always nestle as smoothly as a field recording might when subjected to that kind of treatment. So I had to be pretty conservative with the arrangements actually.

Your beats always feel very vibrant and three-dimensional. Do you strive to evoke any particular qualities or sensations with your utilisation of rhythm?

Thanks for the compliment, that's very humbling. I do try to pay very very special attention to timbre and keep what I do very alert and focused, I am pretty picky when it comes to beats and I generally try to do something that feels very real and not plastic, which is of course a casualty of many electronic beats these days. I am a relentless self-editor. For instance “Tone Offering” and “Tennis” both went through about 20 different beats each and 40 or 50 different versions, and I found the key to success there was to strip them way, way back.

This record was entirely self-produced. Is it important for you to have creative governance over every aspect of your work?

It's not necessarily important that I produce or do everything myself, but I do definitely micro-manage the final product regardless of who is involved. I always have intensely specific vision for each record so I do try my hardest to insure that the interior instructions match the exterior product. For this album I was incredibly fortunate to have AGF do the artwork, and she very much hit the nail on the head with what I was after visually...kind of a big rough digital fig arriving like a mirage to save an entire desert civilization!

You've spoken before about striving for "universality" in your music. Why is this important for you? Is it difficult to strike a balance between conveying universality and retaining identity?

Not really actually, I find it pretty natural that things I find exciting, others might too. I also have a natural tendency to not like extremes so much; I've definitely made way more extreme versions of songs and toned them down, or very pop versions and roughed them up lightly. I almost always arrive at a happy medium, just in conversation with myself.

Also, I try not to think about whether something is "approachable" or not while I'm working, but at the end when the record is finished and mastered, I make the effort to keep the visuals very in line with the world of the record, and liaison with press and keep the channels open. I find that helps more than anything else.

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