

Biologic Music

1973, in the south of the Netherlands, the city of Heerlen and its surroundings nurtured a strong musical heritage and culture. A number of young musicians were developing their skills in one of the many music schools established in a 30 km radius (in Kerkrade, Landgraaf, Brunssum, Hoensbroek). This new blood would join fanfares, symphonic orchestras, choirs, and later have a strong influence on dutch pop and jazz music...



HPE during *Biologic Music's* promotional tour (Golden Tulip Hotel - Heerlen - 1986)

Jelmo Piovesana was a key musical figure and the founder of various percussion groups within the neighbouring music schools. In order to provide entertainment during a town hall inauguration, or simply to quench his thirst for collaboration, "Pio" (as his pupils called him) started talent scouting.

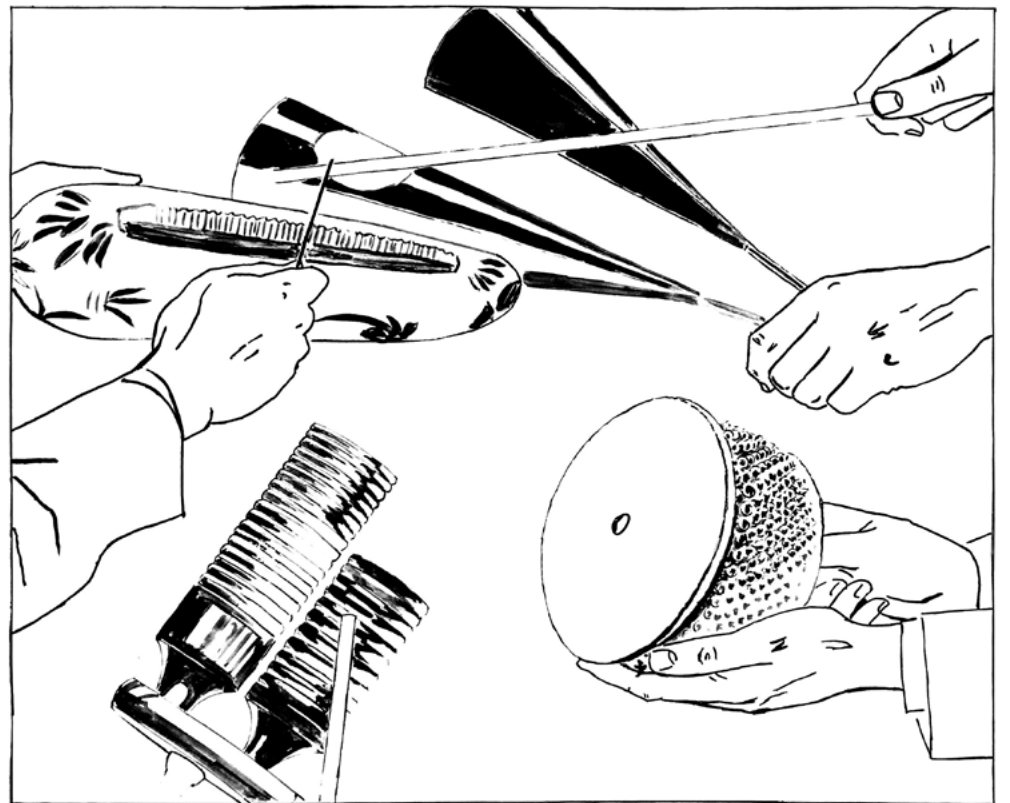
These experiments would lead him and four of his most promising students (including future HPE members Frank Rademakers and Paul Franken), to form a band called PX Marimba Sound. During that stint, they performed latin oldies, wearing sombreros and ponchos, until 1976 when Henk Mennens joined the ranks.

They expanded their repertoire towards program music and the project was renamed: Heerlens Percussie Ensemble.

Gradually, and with the arrival of John Jacobs and Maurice Schipper in 1979, improvisation sessions became more frequent.

By 1982, strong from its experiences acquired in conservatories and outside of HPE (performing pop, jazz or contemporary chamber music), the definitive lineup noticed a musical shift within the ensemble. A new identity was emerging.

H.P.E.



Muziekschool Hoensbroek
Vrijdag - 25 Jan. '85
Aanvang - 19.30 uur.
ENTREE: 3.= INFO: 054-791497



Back: Frank - John - Paul - Jelmo / Front: Henk - Maurice (1986)

Henk Mennens: Pio graduated as a classical percussionist at the conservatory. For that reason, his teaching methods in the fields of small drums, timpani, xylophone and later on marimba and vibraphone were fairly traditional. Nothing wrong with that of course, but improvisation, and cultural influences weren't really addressed within his course.

When I joined the conservatory I was eager to learn about Pop, Jazz, African and Brazilian music. Modern percussion compositions and minimal music quickly caught my interest. All of these influences resonated very strongly with every HPE member. We were all studying in different conservatories (Tilburg and Maastricht), learning about distinctive cultures prevailing in each one of them.

We attended workshops with Steve Reich, lectures by masters like Sulawesi's Nippy Noya, Bob Becker, Han Bennink... The learning process was wonderful and we all brought these experiences back to the ensemble.

Ultimately, for Jelmo, this meant he had to let go of his traditional methods to let us fully express our enthusiasm. As a result, the band's repertoire changed enormously.

John Jacobs: At times, Henk & I went too far on our quest for musical innovation. We were heavily influenced by Fusion and were desperately looking for ways to bring those elements back to HPE. We went to the annual North Sea Jazz festival where we discovered wonderful acts who made big impressions on us. Pio did not like this, it went against what he stood for, the traditional approach. So he rejected these ideas quite radically at first.

Paul Franken: It's fair to say that during our time together, Pio gradually broadened his horizon. He started going out of his comfort zone and set his sights on songs such as "Tico Tico" / "The Girl From"... He really wanted "to keep up" with us youngsters and even took lessons at the more progressive Ruud Wiener Conservatory. I remember having a lot of respect for that back then.

Henk: Usually Jelmo came up with an idea or a theme and we would start experimenting with it, improvising, until it finally took shape. We mostly played march-like music with the local percussion groups and were drawn to the fact Jelmo was looking deeper into program music.

John: I found Pio's perspective on music interesting. It was often created with a socially critical subject in mind. For example, one of our songs called "Greenpeace" described the hunt for whales through heavy African music influences.

Maurice Schipper: Of course we had several compositions in our repertoire that didn't make it on the LP. One of them was "Greenpeace", a number that received a lot of very positive feedback back then. Jelmo wanted us to create a very peculiar musical atmosphere. Sounds were created to simulate whale vocalizations, navigation at sea, various water effects, rumbles from an engine room and even a harpoon shot. I was using a bucket full of water with a sponge: above it a microphone was placed to capture water noises in the background. On numerous occasions, visuals would be projected during the performance of this piece.

John: The other thing I found appealing was Jelmo's flexibility. Every note wasn't set in stone and we were able to think, discuss, and ultimately have a genuine influence on the final result. It did feel like a real creative challenge! This is how *Biologic Music* came about.

Henk: If you listen to "Biologic Music", the title song, you will hear our experiments with minimal, African, groovy and swinging music. Mixing our influences and trying things out was how they way created our sound. Interestingly, we only became fully aware of that creative process much later in our lives. New musical influences helped us create new sounds and we decided it was time to share our music with an audience. So we started hunting for venues and theaters around town. Audiences reacted very positively to our first live performances. In both theaters and open air concerts, HPE created a palpable interaction between crowds and us players. This was certainly due to our contagious enthusiasm.

Paul: Perhaps our music was created in reaction to that Gerard van der Kolk ensemble in Groningen at the time? All of those canned performances... We really felt we were different: the whole groove, swing, feel and excitement of our music mainly came out of improvisations and, above all, the feel we would get from each other as players. It was precisely the later that wasn't valued by our "drum band culture" at the time.

Frank Rademakers: Our music couldn't be put down on paper and was entirely ours. We felt the need to record it one way or another. At that time we were one of a handful of percussion groups performing this kind of percussive music. I still remember the day we performed Bohuslav Martinů's "Field Mass", with more than 100 singers and six other professional percussionists. After about four bars none of us knew where we were anymore. We immediately lost the conductor. Same thing for the wind section. For some reason it worked out well in the end.



John in the studio during the recording of *Biologic Music* (1986)

Henk: We knew that people would understand and find our music fascinating. In 1986, we naturally decided to make a record that we could sell on tour. Making money wasn't really the point, the impulse came from the need to share our art with the world.

The recording took place in 1985, in Kerkrade's music school, with a mobile studio located in front of the building. Because our budget couldn't allow more, we only had 2 days to capture the HPE sound.

Maurice: Recording music in a school was slightly different from a "real" studio experience. The fact that we weren't locked in a room in front of a glass window gave us a sense of freedom. It was all very relaxed. It sort of felt a bit like being home, with professional equipment.



Jelmo playing the balafon (1985)



Announcement for a concert in Maastricht (February 29, 1984)

Henk: In high spirits, we dove into the first session (recording the title song). We hired Toine Mertens (recording engineer), who was always very composed behind the console and Arno van Nieuwenhuizen, who was an experienced producer in our percussion world. Both went bananas when they heard the first song we played. The band felt completely thrilled with the whole recording experience after sound check and during that first take. Consequently, the second attempt was an instant winner and *Biologic Music* was in the can! Listening to the tape with the sound team made our exhilaration grow even more.

John: I still remember the euphoria when we heard the recording of *Biologic Music* back in the mobile studio. What a kick, that sound. We all felt like we'd just made something special.

Henk: Many wonder where THE deep bass drum sound came from. Toine was also impressed and puzzled. The effect was produced by rubbing a moistened finger over the head of a large concert bass drum. The skin vibrated enormously as a result, creating that very deep sound. We came up with the idea for the uplifting bass drum driving the groove by playing an 18 inch open bass drum with a rod. These particular sounds became very characteristic of the HPE aesthetic.

John: We found alternative ways to play our instruments: finger-rolls on the congas, increasing the skin tension while playing by pressing the sheet with our elbows or using a stick. We also used instruments acquired in exotic stores (for decent prices) with which we could do things at the same time. I remember some kind of Tibetan prayer wheel that, by being rubbed between hands, would produce a super tight 16th note groove. It did take a bit of focus to keep it tight. Just listen to the end of "Black Africa" and you will know what I mean.



Henk & Jelmo with marimbas (1984)

with pieces like "Black Africa" and "Back to the Factory". Their contributions were certainly a key factor in making *Biologic Music* a creative success.

Maurice: The input of session musicians definitely added value to our project, giving the HPE sound even more of a jazzy and funky feel.

Henk: The bass themes of Jan Hollestelle, but certainly also the influences of Leo Janssen (sax), gave us a strong boost. Keep in mind Leo and Jan didn't know the songs at all. But thanks to their musicianship they were able to perform incredible jazz improvisations. Their parts were created on the spot and the songs finally felt complete after that.

Paul: I was so proud of the record when I first held a copy in my hands. I couldn't believe I had been given a chance to be a part of this adventure. My (now grown-up) children often ask me "if i REALLY was in that band all those years ago".

Frank: I'm still under the impression that we did this as a tight unit. It is undoubtedly an original record. Made of our ideas and techniques. We did not go the easy way but kept looking for innovation.

Henk: The music still inspires me, and when I listen to the LP, not only many memories come to mind, but I keep on hearing new details. Thirty years have passed and I still admire all players' contributions. Regarding March Donkers' artwork: No one understood what the photo represented, but everybody appreciated its "biological" quality.

Mark Donkers (Graphic Designer): I used to make music with a cover band, together with Henk Mennens, and also enjoyed listening to Jazz, Fusion and deviant pop music. Henk had become a good friend within the band and we seemed to share common musical interests. I regularly watched performances of HPE so I was already aware of their sound. Until one day when Henk offered me to get involved, asking if I would like to create the album's artwork.

The structure of their music and the different ways of dealing with sound impressed me enormously. Their compositions and performances

of percussive music suited exactly my musical aspirations at the time and the album opened a world of drums and melodic percussion music to me. So I naturally accepted.

Listening to the record, I couldn't help but get sucked into details and I was trying to think of a subject completely alienated from the percussive music visual aesthetic. I only knew the art would have to stand out and encourage listeners to make up their own story. This was, in my opinion, the best and only way to listen to the album. It had an other-worldly beauty, and evoked something outside of our field of vision.

I once got a photo from someone who worked in a laboratory and made experiments with a microscope. It showed the eye of a fly. That was fairly rare at the time, so I kept it in my archives, until the opportunity arose. I found it in my drawer and it immediately made sense. So I decided to use it for the project.

At that time, graphic designers wouldn't use computers, but instead technical cameras and typesetting to make a working drawing. This then went to a lithographer and printing company. So manual work was the only way for me to get things done.



Leo Janssen (1986)

Despite the fact that *Biologic Music* was a creative success, the band struggled to sell the 500 copies they pressed. A string of successful concerts to promote the release followed but the members slowly started to grow apart musically. Being increasingly busy teaching at various schools, working on solo projects, and spending more time with their families, they unanimously decided to part ways in 1988. While a certain void was felt they remained friends

HPE's mastermind and percussion master, Jelmo "Pio" Piovesana passed away at the age of 80, on the 10th of May, 2018. He is survived by his wife Lilly who gave us her blessing for this project.

Henk, John, Paul, Frank and Maurice have devoted their whole lives to their craft. They are still teaching, performing, and composing music until this day. They carried out this reissue with us as a tightly welded team, with much of the same enthusiasm they had when recording the album 34 years ago.



Frank on the tabla (1986)

Henk: Naturally, it wasn't easy to get in our zone without a live audience, but we enjoyed each other's musical performances. Particularly when we started recording "Back to the Factory".

Leo Janssen (sax), Jan Hollestelle (bass) and Arno van Nieuwenhuizen (producer), had a lot of experience, playing regularly in the Metropole Orchestra. Their vision and influences (jazz / pop) helped us tremendously



Jelmo playing the bass drum with a rod (1986)

TRACK BY TRACK

KPANLOGO

"Kpanlogo" is a recreational piece that originated in the late fifties, around the time that Ghana gained its independence. This Ghanaian dance is a constantly evolving style of music with new variations. HPE has developed its own variations in which an ostinato groove gives room for improvisation.

It was the American percussionist Bob Becker who inspired various members of HPE to try and give this dance new defining characteristics.

BIOLOGIC MUSIC

The LP's title song is a composition that originated during one of the many improvisation sessions of HPE. Only the pentatonic theme was set.

Thematic thinking from the biological origin and the emergence of living organisms were the impulses from which improvisation took place.

The input of each players' various musical influences (Minimal Music, African music, Groove) helped shape the backbone of the piece.

BACK TO FACTORY

A composition by guitarist Jan Akkerman (Focus) served as the inspiration for Henk Mennens to create a percussive arrangement. Experimental in sound, especially during the intro, it grows into an explosion and subsequently evolves into a kind of mechanical-like rhythm, giving room for improvisation.

Jazz saxophonist Leo Janssen's performance allowed the band to highlight their fusion influences. "Back to the Factory" distinguishes itself from the other compositions with its particular sound and distinctive nature.

ADOWA

A second composition with African roots. "Adowa" is a dance that surfaced in Ghana through the Akan people. It is a popular traditional dance in Ghana and is performed during cultural ceremonies such as festivals, funerals, engagements and parties.

Just like with "Kpanlogo", HPE has used "Adowa" as a vessel to illustrate the typical African percussive music traits. The choice of instruments in particular was decisive to produce the song's warm overall sound. "Adowa" is an invitation to dance.

BLACK AFRICA

These compositions were also created during one of HPE's many improvisation sessions. The polymetric in the intro provides different rhythmic experiences.

During the build-up (4/4 time signature) it is mainly the uplifting bass drum that keeps the listeners on their feet. In this work, the band has opted for a broad sound idiom of percussive instruments.

The saxophone theme and improvisation connects the dots between different music cultures. The experience and passion expressed through the complexity of rhythm are the two ingredients making this composition unique.

SPECTAKLE

While most of *Biologic Music's* compositions originate from jam sessions, "Spectakle" is a completely written composition in which the various elements featured in this LP can be heard. This piece is extremely technical and difficult to perform. Mostly due to the complexity of its polyrhythmic structures. Different tempos, time signatures and characteristics ensure complex moments of interaction.



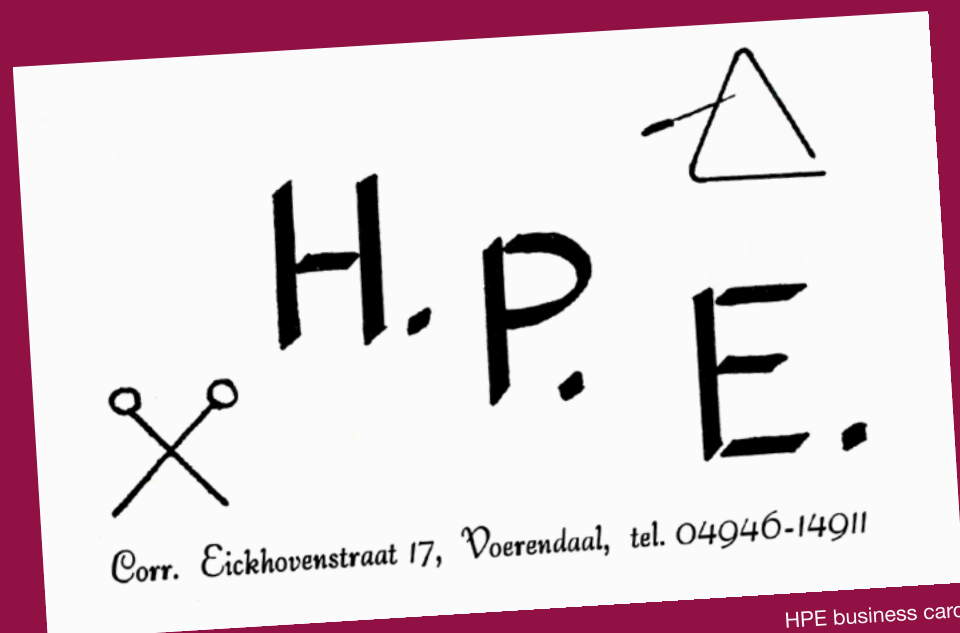
HPE's instruments

"I came across *Biologic Music* at the world's largest record fair in Utrecht. I found this record in the five-euro bin at a stall there. It is one of those records that proves the adage: you should always judge a record by its cover... and the instrumentation listed on the back. I stood there staring at the cover which had, what appeared to be, an electron microscope picture of an insect on the front - it didn't look like any of the other records I was looking for. When I turned it over and saw the list of instruments: electronic drums, marimbas, balafon, shekere... I knew it was going to be good. But when I got it home and listened to it I couldn't quite believe just how good it was.

The hypnotic rhythms on the record swaggered in a way that sounded like nothing else. There was a fantastic sense of space in the arrangements and the music seemed (and still does) totally contemporary despite being recorded in the mid 80s. I knew right away this album was something special. I can't remember when I made an edit of it - these tracks don't need any alteration to sound at home in a contemporary club - but at that time I was making loads of edits and tracks really quickly, enjoying the possibility afforded by the transition to digital DJing. Which meant that I could work on something in the afternoon and play it that night. Whatever the particulars of when or where I made the edit, there's no mystery as to why I chose this record to work with.

This music still possesses an instantaneous, timeless atmosphere about it that's evident from the moment the needle touches the record."

Dan Snaith - 2019



CRÉDITS:

Audio restoration:
Frédéric D'Oria-Nicolas
Audio mastering: Nicolas Thelliez
Lacquer cut: André Perriat
Artwork restoration & additional design: Erwan Coutellier
Project management:
Louis Hautemulle

SPECIAL THANKS:

Henk Mennens, John Jacobs,
Paul Franken, Frank Rademakers,
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