

INTERVIEW with FRANK VAN BOGAERT
Interview + text: Paul Rijkens

THE STUDIO AS A HOME.

Frank Van Bogaert makes music that is a perfect blend of wonderful, emotional, orchestral EM and lovely spherical pop music interspersed with ethnic influences. Moreover, he is a first rate composer and an excellent keyboard player. Recently, his fifth album, "Closer", was released by Groove and it confirms his great musical abilities. This friendly guy from Flanders certainly has a lot of stories to tell, and it is amusing that the contents of his record collection match those of this interviewer.

What can you tell me about your musical background? How did it all start?

I have been making music for about 25 years. My first band was 1000 Ohm, this was in the early 80's. It was a kind of Belgian Depeche Mode. I worked with this group for seven years, and I consider these as my learning years. Following the band's break up in 1987, I kept hanging about in the studio. The studio became my home. This is also where I make my money. I cannot earn a living from the releases of my CD's alone.

It strikes me that your music is very emotionally charged. How do you achieve that?

It is not one of my tricks. I simply succeed in transferring my feelings to the piano through my fingers. I let my feelings wander. Am I a romantic? Sometimes. But please do not mistake romanticism for the Richard Clayderman school of music. To me, romanticism is akin to enjoying magnificent scenery.

Where does the inspiration for your music come from?

It comes from various states of mind. To me, the fact that there isn't enough of this kind of music being made anymore is important. That is why I consider it my mission to do this. I simply have to compose it. That is my motivation.

Your music definitely sounds a lot like Vangelis. Does he mean much to you, musically speaking?

A lot. I grew up with his music. My decision to start working with synthesizers was made because of him. I used to play the guitar and piano and then one day I heard "Albedo 0.39" (I must have been 14 years old at the time). It was a real eye opener for me. This music made me feel good.

In your music I hear references to the "world EM", like Deep Forest, but also to the music of the eighties.

I am a child of the eighties, you see. It is simply in my blood. On "Closer", for instance, there is this track "Dans (da:ns)". This song sounds very eighties like and almost follows naturally from what I was doing with 1000 Ohm in the end. It also has a kind of Yellow Magic Orchestra like mood to it, but in a different setting.

What exactly do you mean by the title "Closer"?

It is my most emotionally charged album up to now. It has become a "warm" disc. As I mentioned before, I am sensitive, but not sentimental.

The track "Rorogwela" on the CD is a traditional one from the Solomon Islands. Deep Forest and Jan Garbarek have arranged it. How did you come to record this piece?

I first heard the melody when Deep Forest used it and I thought it was fantastic. At the time I wanted to arrange it, but I did not go ahead with it because I thought it was their composition. It was not until two years ago, when I heard Jan Garbarek's version, that I found out that it was a traditional piece. I decided to stick a "Van Bogaert" arrangement to it. You always have to be careful with re-arrangements. Deep Forest have had massive legal problems because of the fact that they sampled the lyrics and vocals from a Unesco recording. Even though it has been settled by mutual agreement, it has cost them a lot of money. On the other hand, the melody itself is "free" to use.

Considering the ethnic influences in your music, do you travel a lot?

No. In my studio I work a lot with ethnic music and that is where these influences come from. I am drawn to the various cultures that enter here. For instance, recently, I have been working with a Moroccan group for three days. They came straight from the Sahara desert. It was during the

Ramadan and, consequently, I adjusted to them (including the rule not to eat by daylight). A week before that, however, I had been working with a gipsy orchestra from Hungary. All of these events result in musical influences that are very colorful. I also own a large collection of records in all sorts of musical styles. I cannot imagine listening to just one kind of music. Musical diversity enriches your life.

I think your style of music differs from other EM styles, meaning that you use a good deal of technology, but you do not allow the technology to take over the music. You are able to “simply” sit down at the piano and start playing music.

Mostly I compose at the piano. To me it is important that the tracks I compose still manage to hold their own without the technology. Most of my music I can play completely (“unplugged” so to speak) on just the piano. And, no, I do not have classical training. Of course, I also work with sounds or sequences, but in most cases the melodies composed on the piano are the essence. The ideas I come up with at the piano are processed on the computer. Currently, I use Logic Pro for MIDI programming and Pro-Tools for recording. My music has to grow until I am satisfied with it; I do not release everything I record, I even throw things out sometimes.

What instruments do you use? Do you keep track of the developments in that field?

Absolutely. I keep track of it. I am always involved in new developments and I also like to be up to date. I’m really interested in the development of virtual synthesizers; some of them are very good. I own quite a lot of old equipment. For instance, on each track on “Closer” you can hear a Roland Juno 106 or a Yamaha CS70. A lot of people seem to think I use the CS80, which is also one of the reasons why my music is compared to the music of Vangelis. Furthermore, I have a Yamaha CS5, a Roland SH2, a Sequential Circuits Prophet 5, and others. Currently, and most importantly, I use 3 E-mu samplers. The latter you could call my workhorses, and I know them inside and out.

Your music sounds very cinematic to me, so it could be used as film music. Were you ever involved in that, and, if not, what are your ambitions?

I do have some experience in this field. I wrote music for two Flemish movies and for several TV series. Apart from that, I also compose music for TV and radio commercials on a regular basis. To create this sort of music is a radically different way of working and it’s also very hard work at that. It is not something that comes naturally. As a composer of film music you should support the images and never get in the way of these images, and that is far from easy. Often you have to start all over again because the director simply has another kind of mood in his mind. As a composer you cannot impose your own style onto the music, and it has little to do with what you normally would release under your own name. It is the same with me, and besides, you work by assignment, right? The music for the Lexus’ commercial (an expensive car brand) was an exception. For that I was given complete freedom to use my own style. Like I said, good film music doesn’t really need to be noticed in a movie. For example, my wife and I went to see the movie “Gladiator” (featuring music by Hans Zimmer and Lisa Gerrard - PR). Afterwards, I asked her what she thought of the music. And she asked me “What music?”

What kind of music do you like to listen to?

I have a broad taste in music, for example, jazz, rock, pop, progressive rock, and electronic. Really, all kinds of thing. I buy quite a few CD’s, and I sometimes get new ideas whilst listening to them.

In 2002 you performed at the E-live festival. How did you like it, and what do you think of these kinds of festivals?

It was very nice to put in an appearance. I took a lot of time preparing for it. You have to rehearse well. I have only two hands, so for each separate piece you have to decide what has to be controlled by computer and what not. A concert with a complete live band would be very interesting, but this would make things more expensive, of course. At E-live 2002, I worked with a camera that was focused on my hands. I thought this had not been done enough during concerts up until then. Now you see it more often. Festivals like this are very important for the scene, especially for making contacts and/or to keep them current. People do not go there just to buy CD’s anymore, because it is so easy to buy through the Internet nowadays. On the other hand, the Internet has become a very essential source of communication for electronic music as well.

How did you join up with the Groove label?

My first album “Colours” was commissioned by Sony Belgium. It should have been a blend between Deep Forest and new age music. As the project progressed it actually became too electronic and as a

result the deal was off. Then I decided to go on my own and I distributed the CD myself. Since Groove sold a lot of copies for me, and apart from the fact that they are the biggest company in this field, I came to be with them. I invited Ron Boots to my studio when I worked on "Geographic". He was impressed, and ever since I stayed with them. My records are selling very nicely. Groove always has to produce a second pressing. The cooperation is good. Maybe next year Ron and I will be doing something together musically.

Speaking of your own CD's, which one would you say is your favorite?

That's a difficult one! Of course I should say the last one but they all come straight from the heart. "Geographic", more or less, provided the break through into the EM world, but "Docking", as well, which a lot of people say they like best. "Human" is also very special. It is a rather cheerful record. Up until now, all 5 CD's are different and surely everyone will have his own favorite?

The position of your music within EM is rather unique. What do you think of the quality of EM now and do you see any bright spots?

I certainly foresee a future for this kind of music. But, I do think it is important that people do not keep on copying the Berlin School ad infinitum, because I have heard it all by now. Someone, who in fact is doing interesting things with the influences of the Berlin School, is Gert Emmens. So I'd say it is very important that there are reviewers, such as you, who are objective and who know what they are talking about, for the sake of the consumer, and are able to separate the wheat from the chaff, as it were.

Discography

1998 - Colours

1999 - Geographic

2000 - Docking

2002 - Human

2003 - Hi-tech hippies / L'etang (CD-S)

2004 - Closer

www.frankvanbogaert.com

www.cestudio.be

www.groove.nl