

JÓHANN JÓHANSSON

“People seem to need labels, but they can be needlessly reductive.” These are words that Icelandic composer, musician and producer Jóhann Jóhannsson lives by. His music is a unique blend of electronics and classical orchestration, drawing on minimalism and drone music, as well as electronic and classical forms, but never settling into any pre-defined genre.

“I’m obsessed with the texture of sound,” he says, “and interested in minimal forms, with how to say things as simply as possible, how to distil things into their primal form.” It’s an approach that’s served him well, whether in his own solo work or in collaborative projects across media as diverse as theater, dance, and cinema.

Today, it’s the latter for which Jóhannsson is best known, and in the past couple of years, his status as a master of the film score has been put beyond all doubt. His 2014 soundtrack for James Marsh’s Stephen Hawking biopic *The Theory of Everything* rightly won a Golden Globe, while his supremely brooding score for Denis Villeneuve’s FBI thriller *Sicario* picked up Oscar, BAFTA, and Critics’ Choice nominations.

But to understand how Jóhannsson became the musician he is today, you need to look back to his past. After studying languages and literature at university, he began playing in indie rock bands, using feedback-drenched guitar figures to create multi-layered soundscapes. From there, his palette expanded.

“When I discovered the albums on Eno’s Obscure Records label from the 70s, my interest moved into creating minimal, ambient structures with classical instruments,” he recalls. “I set the guitar aside and started writing music for strings, woodwinds and chamber ensembles, combining acoustic and electronic sounds.” By manipulating the resonances of acoustic instruments with digital processing, Jóhannsson created something unique and new. “My ideal is music where the electronic and the acoustic sounds blend seamlessly.”

Now based in Berlin, Jóhannsson was born and raised in Reykjavik, where the fertile creative community was small and collaborations between musicians, artists, actors and dancers were common. In 1999, he was a founding member of Kitchen Motors, an art organization, think tank and record label that encouraged interdisciplinary collaborations. “We tried to amplify the opportunities that already existed, pulling together people from the worlds of jazz, classical, electronic music, punk and metal to encourage new hybrids. My own music grew out of those experiments.”

It’s a sensibility that’s stayed with him ever since. In March 2015, for instance, he teamed up with ACME (American Contemporary Music Ensemble) and the Grammy Award-winning vocal ensemble Roomful of Teeth to perform *Drone Mass* at The Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. Indeed his list of collaborators is extensive, stretching to include Tim Hecker, Hildur Guðnadóttir, Pan Sonic, CAN drummer Jaki Liebezeit, Marc Almond, Barry Adamson, and Stephen O’Malley of Sunn O))).

Jóhannsson’s first solo album, *Englabörn* (Touch, 2002), was a suite based on the music written for the theater piece of the same name, a meeting of classical strings and electronics. “I recorded the strings, then processed them through digital filters to take apart the sounds and reassemble them. I like going to the microscopic core of the music to extract the essence, then use that to build up layers of sound.”

Writing music for plays, contemporary dance and theater led to work on film scores. His eclectic work in film has included documentaries (*The Good Life* by Eva Mulvad, DK 2010), and international film festival favorites, such as Lou Ye's *Mystery* (CN 2012) and *Blind Massage* (CN 2014), Janos Szazs's *Le Grand Cahier* (HU 2013), and So Yong Kim's *For Ellen* and *Lovesong* (US 2011, 2015). 2016 sees the release of *Arrival*, his third collaboration with director Denis Villeneuve and *The Mercy*; his second with James Marsh.

Beyond his scores, Jóhannsson's discography is a veritable treasure trove. He followed up *Englabörn* with *Virðulegu Forsetar* (2004), a drone heavy hour-long fanfare for pipe organ and brass. Two years later came *IBM 1401, A User's Manual*, an album inspired by his father, an IBM engineer and one of Iceland's first computer programmers, who used early hardware to compose melodies during his downtime at work.

Jóhannsson's interest in modular synthesizers and ancient electronic instruments also found an outlet in his all-analogue side project Apparat Organ Quartet, a band he formed in 1999 with three fellow synth and keyboard enthusiasts, and which he left in 2012 after two albums.

Much of his work deals with place. In 2008, he released *Fordlandia* (4AD), an ode to the city Henry Ford tried to build in the Amazon jungle, followed two years later by *Copenhagen Dreams* (NTOV, 2010), a city symphony and a tribute to his then place of residence, made in collaboration with director Max Kestner. 2011 saw the release of *The Miners' Hymns*, a melancholy tribute to the coal mining culture in Durham, England, featuring Bill Morrison's heartrending collage of archival footage and Jóhannsson's brooding music, full of low sustained notes played by brass instruments that pay homage to the brass bands in which the coal miners once played.

Jóhannsson's new solo album *Orphée* is due out in September 2016 on the Deutsche Grammophon label – the latest release from a musician for whom the term boundary-pushing is not a platitude but a reality.