

Throughout the twentieth century, musicians have crossed the Atlantic frequently and in both directions. Europeans have sought sanctuary and opportunity in the New World, while the American musical love affair with Europe has by now a long, if checkered, history. Until recently, relatively few American musicians had chosen to make their home and to establish a career for themselves in the Old World; the more prevalent model was the student (Copland) or the visitor (Gershwin) who absorbed European manners, behaviors and aromas and returned home to write American music. By the 1980s, however, this picture had changed. This was due in part to economic factors: the increasing dearth of funding for experimental arts in the U.S. led young American musicians to look elsewhere for support. It was due also to the possibility of easy travel connections around Western and, later, Eastern Europe, suggesting new networks for the exchange of information and ideas. There was also the inspiration of a fresh generation of European composers and performers, themselves responding to contemporary musical developments in the States. This new Europe has given rise to many forms of new music, the constituents of which are as complex and multilayered as the population that now walks its city streets—and nowhere more so than in Amsterdam, which at the beginning of the twenty-first century could stake a claim to be the most pluralistic and active center for new music on the continent.

In the world of new Dutch music Anne La Berge, born in Palo Alto, California in 1955, is a unique presence, a pioneer who defies easy categorization. She is a flutist, composer and improviser, often simultaneously; she is also, as this disc demonstrates, a computer musician and a *sui generis* poet and story-teller. Although much sought after as a teacher, she has never held an institutional affiliation; instead, she has the happy knack of nurturing new performance platforms in her adopted city that respond to the ever-changing musical world and create their own “scene.” The five pieces recorded here are not compositions in the usual sense of the term, and none has anything like a conventional score: she describes the first four as “guided improvisations,” while the final track was originally part of a joint lecture/performance devised with her scientist father. In all these and other ways, La Berge is a precursor of some of the important things contemporary composition has now come to mean.

She grew up in a small town near Minneapolis in a musical family; her mother was a talented violinist and her father a professional psychologist who directed the choir of the local Bach Society. In her teens she took up serious study of the flute, and music soon became more compelling than anything else. “I remember when I was about fifteen and the boys had cars . . . I tried that out for about a month and then they’d call and I’d say: ‘You know, I have to practice.’ Because I’d decided: they were not interesting. Well, not until later.” She became involved in the youth orchestra and wind band scene in Minneapolis. The band leader wanted to teach her jazz, but it didn’t really click: classical music was her obsession. She briefly attended Northwestern University before transferring to the University of New Mexico where she studied flute with Frank Bowen and began to play medieval and Renaissance instruments. She had already discovered Varèse and Stockhausen at music camp; thanks to the demands of her “independent study” requirement at UNM she became intensely interested in more recent repertory, and read and indexed the entire run of the journal *Perspectives of New Music*, skimming the articles she didn’t understand and explaining her discoveries every week to her musicology professor. She went on to do a Masters degree at the University of Illinois, then moved to Los Angeles, where she got involved with as much new music as she could. “I played in the Monday Evening Concerts, I filled in at Cal Arts whenever they needed a guest performer, and I improvised with all kinds of

adventuresome folk, in the fringe jazz and the new-music scenes.” There her improvising began sometimes to seem more like composition. Larry Polansky, whom she’d known in Illinois, had started the publishing collective Frog Peak, “and he said, well, write it down. So I started to write a few things down, because they said they would publish it. That was how it started.” Personal circumstances led her to Amsterdam at the beginning of 1989, and she has lived there ever since.

In The Netherlands La Berge initially made her name as a flutist playing mostly new music, occasionally her own. She was not interested in trying to live as a composer in her adopted land. “In Holland the composition world was very male-dominant. It was so incredibly behind, in a way, socially, that I didn’t want to touch it.” As a consequence, in moving to Amsterdam “I lost much of my written music ground. Whereas the composer/performer ground was such private territory, I didn’t have to fight for it.” The earliest of the works she composed in Holland, like the works written in California (several of them documented on her 1994 portrait CD *blow*), she describes as “composer/performer pieces, more like written-out improv”; they are gutsy, noisy sound worlds, involving a range of new flute techniques in the domains of timbre and intonation. Already in these early pieces the amplified flute emerges as a new instrument in its own right, analogously to the electric guitar: indeed, much of La Berge’s playing, then and now, is closer to punk guitar styles than to anything from the classical wind tradition.

The aspect of Dutch music life that attracted her more strongly than composition was the improvisation scene. Initially, she says, “I was naïve enough not to see that in the improv field there still are hardly any women. They’d all gone into performance art.” Soon, though, she felt she wanted to contribute something in that domain, and here the use of electronics really became her ally. “I learned in working with David Dramm [composer/electric guitarist, her husband] that if I was going to play with the guys I had to play loud enough. Amplified flute is not loud enough, but processed, amplified flute has a characteristic that lets you be up there with the rest of the boys. As does all that mouth sound, highly amplified.” As a consequence her technological set-up expanded to include an array of effects pedals, and later an interactive computer system that permitted digital processing techniques in live performance. The testing ground for much of her work in these years was Kraakgeluiden, an improvisation series she, together with drummer Steve Heather and keyboard player Cor Fuhler, founded in Amsterdam in autumn 1999, and which continued until 2006. The aim of the series was to make improvised music that explored combinations of acoustic instruments, electronic instruments, computers, and real-time interactive performance systems. Kraakgeluiden literally means “creaking (or crunching, crackling or rustling) sounds,” and also invokes the Dutch word “kraakpand,” a squat; the series mostly took place in a series of squatted buildings in various locations in the city. Its placing of cutting edge performance work in an informal, workshop-like setting was highly successful and influential; La Berge says she learned much from the Kraakgeluiden series, not only in acquiring greater hands-on familiarity with increasingly complex technology in a live situation, but in refining her sense of time, and material, in improvised performance.

A new strand in La Berge’s compositional world in the early 2000s, quite independently of her focus on improvisation, was the use of text. Sometimes listening to her performances one imagines that part of her would like to write songs, to emulate the apparent straightforwardness of the singer-songwriter genre, where a whole world is brought into being by a single voice and an amplified guitar. The pieces on this disc are perhaps her equivalent of that world, reinventing the song medium with spoken, rather than sung, texts, and through unlikely intermediaries: the flute, and more or less complex software programming. For all her devotion to collaborative

undertakings La Berge still functions effectively as a solo performer, and these pieces are all—either literally or potentially—solo works, for the individual performer enhanced and augmented by technology.

Drive was originally composed in 2003 using two computer programs created at STEIM in Amsterdam. The speaking voices heard here were recorded then, during a residency at Dartington College of Arts in England. In 2006 and again in 2009 La Berge made revised versions, now in the programming environment Max/MSP, which she has used in the majority of her recent work. The piece was inspired by the curious story of the invention of the windshield wiper by a woman from Alabama, Mary Anderson, who on a trip to New York City was bothered by the fact that the driver of the trolley car on which she was sitting was obliged to drive with the front window open because of the difficulty of keeping the window clear of falling sleet and snow. The original version of *Drive* marks the centenary of Anderson's successfully acquiring a patent for a hand-operated lever with a rubber blade, the first effective windshield wiper. La Berge wrote an imaginary interview with Anderson, which weaves a fantasy around the motivations for her invention. The live performer (in this recording La Berge herself on flute) interacts with a pre-recording of this "interview" material, as in a kind of séance (Anderson died two years before La Berge was born). Later in the piece we hear further texts that juxtapose descriptions of the anatomy of a diesel engine and the anatomy of a girl in puberty; toward the end a male voice reads a text about the uterus. "These text sections", La Berge writes, "function musically as abstract songs which frame the more 'expressive' opportunities of the purely musical solo and ensemble playing. Without delving into clear narratives, [these texts are] thrown into the performing space somewhat like an improvising musician playing a solo." The listener is presented with textual threads of free association around themes of cleanliness and the workings of women's bodies and mechanical engines; the purely musical moments in the piece (some of them based on transformed samples of the sounds of windshield wipers) provide space for ideas and feelings suggested by the texts.

As with *Drive*, the score of *Brokenheart* (2007) consists of pages of detailed verbal descriptions of the materials of the work, a timeline, and screenshots of the computer patches used. The piece is described as a "guided improvisation for musicians and Max/MSP/jitter"; it was commissioned by the European Bridges Ensemble (EBE) and the Dutch ensemble LOOS. A performance will normally involve computer-controlled electronics, any small ensemble of improvising acoustic instrumentalists using small loudspeakers on and in their instruments, and live video. As with all of the works recorded here, any two realizations might vary considerably—although not totally—from each other, and what we hear here is only one, albeit highly polished, studio version. Much of the instrumental material in this recording was improvised by La Berge's long-time collaborator Cor Fuhler on the insides of a piano. The starting point for the piece is the phenomenon that doctors call "broken heart syndrome," a condition in which intense emotional or physical stress can cause rapid and severe heart muscle weakness similar to that experienced in a heart attack, but not life-threatening. For reasons that are not fully understood, the vast majority of sufferers are post-menopausal women. In *Brokenheart* the computer patch plays a random selection from a bank of samples (with random "envelopes" that cut and shape the sounds in unpredictable ways). The samples include pre-recordings of instruments built by Wessel Westerveld, recordings of La Berge reading a text describing the broken heart syndrome, and sine tones generated by a Clavia Nord synthesizer. The small speakers are used almost as performers in their own right, and the musicians must interact with them.

ur_DU, begun in 2006 and put in the form in which we hear it here in 2009, is a meditation on the chemical element uranium. Again, the piece is a guided improvisation in which the performer (here vocalist Stephe Büttrich) is asked to adhere to certain guidelines—essentially, the placing of certain sorts of material in specified time frames—in interacting with the computer patch. The prerecorded material in this case is of two main types: the recorded sounds of metal balls striking against each other, and La Berge’s voice reading a letter to a friend written late in life by the Polish-born French physicist and chemist Marie Curie describing her determination to continue her research in the laboratory despite declining health. Uranium when refined is a weakly radioactive substance, and in the letter Curie, in an almost hallucinatory passage, describes her sense that the hours she spends in the laboratory are “a sort of dreamtime” in which “I have the sense that I become the radioactive rays that can penetrate all objects, warm the world with a permanent glow, cure all physical, psychological and spiritual afflictions.” Here the sonic meeting between the resonant percussive clatter of the metal balls and the processed female voices seems to symbolize the significance of the letter, in which the practice of “cold” scientific experiment is underlined and supported by the warmth of the human passion for discovery.

away, commissioned in 2008 by the English trumpeter Stephen Altoft for his newly-designed 19-tone trumpet, is in one sense a return to an interest La Berge developed during her years of graduate studies in the U.S., that of accurate performance of microtonal tuning systems on acoustic instruments. Some of her earlier pieces explored the sometimes idiosyncratic tunings that could nonetheless be realized on her flute, and in Holland she herself was a consultant in the development of the quartertone flute that has been her main performance instrument in recent years. *away* uses the system of nineteen equal divisions of the octave, one of the several possible tuning systems built from cycles of fifths (like the familiar 12- and the rare 31-tone temperaments). The piece uses the 19-tone tempered scale throughout; the Max/MSP patch plays synthesized tones tuned in this way with a somewhat brass-like quality (in keeping with the nature of the original commission), creating a controlled random environment against which the musician improvises. The strangeness of the tuning—at least to ears not accustomed to it—seems in keeping with the emotional world of the original poem La Berge weaves into the piece, which describes the experience of separation, both that caused by the emigration of someone close to her and by death.

The CD closes with the more apparently whimsical *300 speakers*, an extract from the lecture/demonstration *Resonant Dendrites* she devised in 2006 with her father, David La Berge. Here, the voice reads a quasi-autobiographical story about a lifelong involvement with loudspeakers, an essential but often invisible component of a contemporary musician’s life; meanwhile, a computer scatters clicks and pops across the auditory image and a flute improvises a largely unpitched but nonetheless highly articulated counterpoint. The piece modestly integrates three aspects of La Berge’s performance practice—text, flute and computer—into a single whole. Characteristically it directs our attention—gently, not confrontationally—to an aspect of our lives that rarely comes to conscious attention (the physical appearance and sheer quantity of the loudspeakers that accompany our lives). And it manifests once again a characteristic of all La Berge’s work—the powerful interaction of improvisation and composition mediated by the human quality of live presence.

—Bob Gilmore, Amsterdam, March 2011

Bob Gilmore is a musicologist and keyboard player born in Northern Ireland and presently teaching at Brunel University in London. He is the author of the award-winning Harry Partch: A Biography (Yale University Press, 1998) and is artistic director of Trio Scordatura, an Amsterdam-based ensemble specializing in music using alternative tuning systems.

ur_DU

Letter from Marie Curie:

Dear Sylvia,

Thank you for the lovely birthday gifts. In all my 60 years I have never seen such exquisite embroidery. I have to admit that I am indeed more than grateful to have received your yearly installment of hankies as my health continues to worsen and I find myself wiping my nose and eyes more and more throughout the day. I will keep the pink ones in the pocket of my lab coat and the white ones in the top drawer of my night table.

I suffer from short bouts of dizziness each morning and there are strange hums in my ears that come and go with my little fevers. In spite of the ailments, I'm still able to spend time in the lab everyday boiling, stirring, pouring, distilling those glorious pitchblends.

I cannot begin to explain how attached I have become to my research. My thoughts, my deeds, my fantasies all melt into hours upon hours of what I can only recall as a sort of dreamtime. During those times I have the sense that I become the radioactive rays that can penetrate all objects, warm the world with a permanent glow, cure all physical, psychological and spiritual afflictions.

Please reconsider my last invitation to you. We would love to have you with us for a few days here in Paris. Everyone here loves you.

with warm affection,

Marie

away

In my head is a room designed by you.

Fierce love is the floor.

The room is not empty.

But you are away

breaking trail on a beeline forward.

In my heart is a room designed by you.
Memory is the ceiling.
Daydreams steer the enduring walls.
I trust that the room won't ever go missing.
Goodbye deeply never happens.

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Anne La Berge's career as a flutist/improviser/composer stretches across international and stylistic boundaries. Her performances bring together a ferocious and far-reaching virtuosity, a penchant for improvising delicately spun microtonal textures and melodies, and her wholly unique array of powerfully percussive flute effects, all combined with electronic processing. Many of her compositions involve her own participation, though she has produced works intended solely for other performers, usually involving guided improvisation and text. Following her studies in the United States, she moved to Amsterdam in 1989, where she has lived ever since. In 1999, she co-founded Kraakgeluiden, an improvisation series based in Amsterdam, exploring combinations of acoustic instruments, electronic instruments and computers, and using real-time interactive performance systems. Many of the musical collaborations that have resulted have taken on a life beyond the Kraakgeluiden series, which ceased in 2006. La Berge's own music has evolved in parallel, and the flute has become only one element in a sound world that includes computer samples, the use of spoken text and electronic processing. Her music is published by Frog Peak Music (U.S.) and by Donemus (Netherlands). She is the co-director, with her husband David Dramm, of the VOLSAP Foundation that supports composed and improvised music in Amsterdam.

Cor Fuhler aims to push the piano as far as he can within the acoustic domain. His instruments include antiquated electronic keyboards, battery-powered gizmos, and the insides of electric organs and pianos. Under the hood of a grand piano, he scrapes objects along the strings for slide guitar effects, places magnets across the strings to change their pitch, places E-bows on strings for sustained humming, and zooms in on single strings with pickups. He can be heard as a composer/performer on the DATA, UNSOUNDS, Potlach, Geestgronden, and Conundrum labels. Cor Fuhler grew up and worked in The Netherlands until he moved to Australia in 2010.

Stephie Büttrich, born in 1968 in the gritty industrial town of Gelsenkirchen, Germany, became a vocal acrobat right after her first scream. She escaped the coal mines via various detours to become one of the Netherlands' premiere vocal artists and performers. Following residencies in Cologne and Berlin she landed in The Hague to study music, sounds, and theater. She has performed with Grand Mal and Hexnut and worked with such artists as Fred Frith, Matthew Ostrowski, Kristina Fuchs, Lukas Simonis, Anne La Berge, Yannis Kyriakides and Louis Andriessen. She has worked as a singer, performance artist, composer, producer and acrobat of vocal science.

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VerQuer. Upala Records 99022.

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Engineer: Anne La Berge and Joeri Saal

Digital mastering: Paul Zinman, SoundByte Productions Inc., NYC

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ANNE LA BERGE (b. 1955)

SPEAK

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1. *Drive* (2003–09) 25:11
2. *Brokenheart* (2007) 20:49
3. *ur_DU* (2006–09) 14:15
4. *away* (2008) 11:36
5. *800 speakers* (2001–10) 3:51

Anne La Berge, voice, flute and electronics (all tracks); Misha Myers, Josh Geffin, Amy Walker, Patrick Ozzard-Low, voices (track 1); Cor Fuhler, piano (track 2); Stephie Büttrich, vocals (track 3)

TT: 76:08

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