

Fluid



Dynamics

Over a 40 year career, composer **Andrew Poppy** stretches wordplay and genre in ways both viscous and fluid. By **Leah Kardos**. Photography by **Jack Symes**

“There are four pieces on *The Beating Of Wings*, each in a different world, with completely different types of production. Nearly 40 years later it feels like an album, but actually back then I was frustrated it didn’t feel like an album enough. I haven’t ever been able to get away from that.” Andrew Poppy is reflecting on the diversity of his catalogue, evident since his album debut on Trevor Horn and Paul Morley’s Zang Tumb Tuum label (ZTT) in 1985. He chalks it up to “composers want[ing] to explore different textures, different voices”.

Different textures puts it rather mildly. We’re talking about a body of work that includes symphonic and chamber works, concertos, operas, oratorios and musical theatre, dance and film soundtracks, experimental pop production, remixes and notable collaborations with bands like Erasure, Nitzer Ebb and Psychic TV.

On his new album *JELLY*, we hear the composer performing a set of songs on his own for the first time. It’s an intriguing project: five tracks, each roughly 12 minutes long, with an electronic sound with nods towards minimal techno, claustrophobic triphop and drone. Poppy’s unique, lucid-poetic delivery is a style that has developed from tracks like “XY Song” from 2019’s *Hoarse Songs* and before that, “Do The Flip” from 2012’s *Shiny Floor Shiny Ceiling*. At the same time, he is releasing a four volume archive of live recordings from throughout his career – *Ark Hive Of A Live* covers a wide range of one-off and commissioned pieces that have not been accessible in audio form until now.

The coincident releases were not planned that way. “We were trying to keep them apart, but they’ve ended up synchronising,” says Poppy. “A version of *Ark Hive* happened when I released those recordings in lockdown on my Bandcamp. It was a way of saying, I’ve been working for four decades, where are we now, the world’s about to end.”

Yet the proximity of these projects calls attention to the composer’s legacy, moving between styles and modes of engagement. “It’s about being a composer or a performer, but more crucially how they interface with record production. It’s been a theme for me.”

When I ask where the *JELLY* title comes from, he turns the question back to me. The word makes me think about something that’s solid, but also fluid and perhaps a gloopy state in between the two. “Yeah, it’s in some kind of transitional state so you can form it into something. In some ways it’s what creativity is. Seeing things as material, malleable and potential for becoming something new.”

The idea reminds him of a recent concert he attended, the GBSR duo performing Stockhausen’s *Kontakte* at the multi-storey carpark venue in Peckham, London. “It sent me right back to the late 60s. I remember being inspired by the way [Stockhausen] handled materials: recording sine tone, noises, splicing it all together. That it could be music. Amazing. Now it seems that he was struggling with the relationship between recorded sound to the performance space and the playing of instruments. A piece like *Kontakte* manages to hold those various ideas together very successfully. It’s a fragile balancing act.”

One can sense a similar balancing act happening across the *Ark Hive* set, which draws attention to music in various states – scores, performances, recorded documents that, in some places, have been further tweaked in post-production. “Sometimes the recording of live performance can be quite disappointing as a listening experience. Even though they might be quite good performances. And there’s lots of reasons for that. But as every sound engineer and producer knows, there are ways you can focus the experience for the listener. So why wouldn’t you?”

Another recurring theme in Poppy’s work has been his penchant for word play, from the alternate title options for *The Beating Of Wings* (1985) suggested in the cover artwork (*The Seating Of Kings/The Cheating Of Things*) and 1987’s text-driven *Alphabed (A Mystery Dance)*, his second ZTT release, to pieces like 1997’s *Mouthing The Words* (included on *Ark Hive*) and the recent run of albums focusing more on song forms. “I started to mess with words and sounds back then in the late 60s and it hasn’t stopped,” he says, adding, “Dave Meehan who mixed *Alphabed* also mixed *JELLY*. There’s a logic there. So “Goodbye Mr G” [from *Alphabed*] is some kind of pre-echo.”

“Language has always been a big part of things,” he continues. “There’s a level of abstraction that is possible in language that is very exciting when it’s on the cusp of something.” On *JELLY*, the texts sometimes draw from poetic forms. For instance, “A General Choosing” borrows repetitions from sestina verse form, “a rigorous patterning of six repeated words. There is a rhythmic play, with a whole word as some kind of object. Like ‘the grandmother’ and ‘the child’ that circle each other in Elizabeth Bishop’s *Sestina*.” The final track “On The Back Of The Seat In Front Of Me” plays with ekphrasis, a poetic technique where one text reflectively narrates another. Here, Poppy plays with the images and words that feature on the sleeve of *The Beating Of Wings*.

The way Poppy’s work engages with itself across practices, formats and across time suggests that these releases have more qualities in common than there might seem to be on the surface. “Yes, probably we’ve identified a theme here. They muse on the relationship of recording to performance, and the performer to the audience.” Or the transitional movements between all of these things? “Yes, like being in or moving through a landscape.” □ Andrew Poppy’s *JELLY* is released by Field Radio. *Ark Hive Of A Live* is released by False Walls