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# THE UNDERGROUND

THE HAGUE

## 'Composing the improvised: an interview with Michiel Borstlap'

By Daniel Taylor

*Having started playing the piano at the age of five, pianist and composer Michiel Borstlap took his first steps into the world of music at a very early age. Countless albums, awards and even an Arabian opera later, and the pianist is focused more than ever on perfecting his musical craft. The Underground sat down with him in the comfort of his home to talk about music, The Hague, piano-wrecking, certain farm animals, and much more.*

**Having been born in The Hague, are there any aspects of those surroundings that have had an impact on your musical endeavors?**

'I was born in The Hague's Schilderswijk, but as I left there when I was just four years old, my memories of that time are pretty vague. What I do know is that, if you're making jazz music, The Hague is certainly a great place to be; the city's jazz and rock scenes are pretty big. When I'm driving to a gig in The Hague, I'm always just that little bit extra motivated to put on a good show... so though I no longer call the city home, intuitively, it might just still be.'

**After leaving The Hague, you enrolled in the Hilversum Conservatory's piano program,**

**eventually graduating with highest honors...**

'At the time, Hilversum Conservatory's piano department was said to be the best in the country. Wreckers... that's what they were.'

**Wreckers? That doesn't sound like good news for the pianos of this world...**

'Those guys could *really* play: when they showed up somewhere, you could bet your bottom dollar they would absolutely wreck the piano. When I walked in there as a youngster to take lessons, I was just blown away by all of that.'

**You've played music in a wide variety of different settings, from solo performances all the way through to performing as a sextet. Which do you enjoy more, the freedom of playing alone, or the harmony of playing together?**

'Of course, playing together is the most fun, but when you're improvising, the bigger the band, the harder it generally gets. You could be on stage wanting to switch things up a little, to play something else, but to do that, you first need to catch the attention of the other players in the band. That's why over the years, the line-up has gradually become smaller and smaller; to make those kind of switches a little easier. The beauty of playing solo is that there are virtually no restrictions whatsoever, and all you have to do, is listen to your heart.'

**What role does improvisation play in your musical compositions?**

'In a way, improvising is very much the same as composing. Nobody can convince me that Bach, who wrote huge amounts of material, didn't at least partly come up with some of his musical ideas simply by playing around. Whenever I find something worth exploring, I quickly record the idea with the press of a button. Then, when it's time to record an album, I play back all those little snippets, and to me, they're compositions.'

**Your newest album 'Frames' was recorded entirely in your own private chicken-shed/studio, 'De Kippenshuur'. What would you say is the creative force behind the new album? Will the chickens ever get a rest?**

'After releasing *Reflective* last year, I got the opportunity to record at 'De Kippenschuur', which included playing the grand piano that had been standing in the Concertgebouw for the past fifteen years, and I just had to give it a go. As far as the chickens are concerned, it's funny you should mention that... we spent the whole month of August recording during the night as we can't really record anything before 11PM. The building isn't isolated; it sounds beautiful on the inside, but there are times you can hear the outside noise coming in. You could be in the middle of a really great take and suddenly be interrupted by a loud 'cuckalakoo!', and all I can think to reply is: 'Darn Harry, shut up will you!'.

**Michiel Borstlap's new album 'Frames' is available now through the Gramercy Park Music webshop:**

[http://www.gpmusic.nl/index.php?route=product/product&product\\_id=99](http://www.gpmusic.nl/index.php?route=product/product&product_id=99)

