



# Marc Vilanova

**A**ctive as a performer in many art forms, including electroacoustic music, free improvisation, contemporary repertoire and collaborations with dancers, saxophonist Marc Vilanova's work is focused on the exploration of the instrument, as well as ongoing research into new sounds, techniques and expressions connected with technology and other arts.

*His approach coherently encapsulates both performative feature and sound installation. His works have been presented in many festivals around the world including countries like Japan, USA, Canada, Brazil, Taiwan, Russia and many more within Europe.*

*He is also running several workshops of extended techniques and live electronics that had been performed at the Tokyo National University, MIT Saxophone Ensemble in Taipei, Federal University of Rio de Janeiro, Saxophone Academy in São Paulo and other universities within Europe like Sibellus Academy in Helsinki, Royal Academy of Music Aarhus or Hochschule für Musik Basel. Those experiences meant the first step for some musicians that keep exploring successfully their instrument up until now.*

# Marc Vilanova

An interview by **Josh Ryder**, curator

and **Barbara Scott**, curator

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*Saxophonist and crossdisciplinary artist Marc Villanova's work is centered on a multilayered investigation about the expressive potential of the instrument to trigger the viewers' perceptual parameters in order to rethink to the elusive notion of sound. In his **MUT\_Solo Saxophone** that we'll be discussing in the following pages he accomplishes an insightful musical experience marked out with a consistent unity. One of the most convincing aspect of Villanova's practice is the way it accomplishes the difficult task of opening new sound spaces that invite the audience on an inner voyage: we are very pleased to introduce our readers to his multifaceted artistic production.*

**Hello Marc and welcome to ARTICulation: to start this interview, would you like to tell us something about your background? You have a solid formal training and after having earned your Degree in Musicology and in Contemporary Saxophone, you nurtured your education with a Postgraduate Degree in Sound Art and a Master Degree in Free Improvisation at the Hochschule für Musik Basel. Besides your studies that you have carried in several countries, you also participated to several workshops: how do these experiences influence your evolution as an artist? And in particular, does your cultural substratum inform the way you relate yourself to the aesthetic problem?**



Yes, I have been always connected to the academy. For me universities are great in terms of network, facilities and opportunities. It's a good way to get a space to work, equipment to experiment with, people to collaborate and teachers that will support you.

In addition, I try to be as independent as I can from traditional educational structure. I find inspiration and creativity beyond the boundaries of university training. I prefer to think of the university as a tool to accomplish my work.

The workshops are less formal and they extend my network of fellow artists and opportunities, but the art itself comes from the experience of life, personal interactions and collaborations with fellow artists, and travels.

About the "cultural substratum" I would say that I come from a small village in Catalonia. Our history expresses a pride in innovative attitudes. I believe this history influences my relationship to music. The progressive, experimental, non-traditional dynamic of my music emerges from my cultural history.

**Using your instrument as a starting point for your creative journey, your approach coherently encapsulates both performative feature and sound installation and reveals an incessant search of an organic symbiosis between a variety of viewpoints. The results convey together a coherent and consistent sense of harmony and unity. Before starting to elaborate about your production, we would suggest to our readers to visit**

**<http://www.marcvilanova.com> in order to get a synoptic view of your multifaceted artistic production: while walking our readers through your process, we would like to ask you if you have ever happened to realize that a symbiosis between different approaches is the only**



**way to express and convey the idea you explore.**

I don't think of a concert as only something where you close your eyes and just listen. I think today people are used to stimuli from multiple sources, and to fully experience what I want to convey, I have to use a variety of sources that stimulate multiple senses. I would not be

communicating my ideas fully if my performance was one-dimensional.

**For this special edition of *ARTiculation* we have selected *MUT\_Solo Saxophone*, a recent work that our readers have already started to get to know in the introductory pages of this article. What has at once caught our attention of**

**your inquiry into the range of new sounds is the way it accomplishes the difficult task of establishing a channel of communication between the subconscious sphere and the conscious one, to unveil and challenge the manifold nature of human perceptual categories. So while asking you to walk us through the *genesis* of this work, we**





would take this occasion to ask you if in your opinion personal experience is an absolutely indispensable part of a creative process... Do you think that a creative process could be disconnected from direct experience?

Never. My experience directly impacts both what I create and how I perform it.

For example, I have lived in Helsinki and Basel, Switzerland, cities where I don't know the language. When you cannot understand a language, you are able to hear the sound of syllables as they are pronounced, but as soon as you understand the language, your focus shifts to decoding meaning. My musical decisions are also inspired by this early focus

on the sounds of the language. Experimentation with extended techniques emerges from this deep thinking about these sounds, some of which are not typically associated with the saxophone. The audience as well is not primarily focused on meaning, and therefore free to identify with the imaginative possibilities that nurture my music.

**As you have remarked once, by muting the instrument you are also muting the tradition, the heritage and the dichotomies between classical and jazz: how would you describe the relationship between Tradition and experimentation in Contemporary music? Do you think there's still a dichotomy between such apparently different aspects of producing and even conceiving music?**

I think that because of the way music is taught in schools, your foundation is in either classical or jazz performance. And then, you are committed to one tradition, because jazz and classical are kept very separate. One benefit of free improvisation is that it bridges the gap between these two schools.

Conservatories and music academies are very slow institutions in terms of including experimentation within their programmes. I think that experimentation and contemporary approaches can also be helpful in connecting music with other art forms and being part of bigger network.

**We have appreciated the way *MUT\_Solo Saxophone*, through an effective synergy between Art and Technology, condenses physical gestures and ethereal perspectives into a coherent unity. To process the sound of the saxophone in real time you have created an Arduino based pedal: it was no doubt that since the first years of Max MSP, the impetuous way modern technology has nowadays came out on the top has dramatically revolutionized the idea of making music and of Art in general. We are sort of convinced that new media will definitely fill the apparent dichotomy between art and technology and seemingly Art and Technology are going to assimilate one to each other... what's your opinion about this?**

I think nowadays there are many ways to approach art and technology, and media arts is one of them. My ideal to approach technology in my art comes in an organic and sort of humanized way, rather than something robotic or explicitly digital.

I choose to integrate the technology subtly with my music. Therefore, on my projects I avoid having the computer visible to the audience. Instead, I create devices that fit organically into the aesthetics of the performance. In my solo for example, I control everything by a handmade pedal which has buttons, faders and a cell phone, which provides a visual feedback of what is going on in the computer. With the pedal I can control both music and lights, but my design minimizes the gestures needed to create the desired effect. This allows me to keep the face-to-face connection with the audience, to allow them to focus on the sound and the movements, without any unnecessary distractions on the stage.

**Another interesting project of yours that has particularly impressed us and on which we would like to spend some words is entitled ANHEL and you have created it in collaboration dance performer Nella Turkki: your successful attempt to communicate without words unveils the flow of information through an effective non linear narrative, establishing direct relations with the viewers: German multidisciplinary artist Thomas Demand once stated that "nowadays art can no longer rely so much on symbolic strategies and has to probe psychological, narrative elements within the medium instead". What is your opinion about it? And in particular how do you conceive the narrative for your works?**

I agree with Demand's statement - I find it more interesting for the audience to bring their own interpretation, experiences, beliefs, feelings to the performance, as opposed to us dictating the



narrative with a heavy use of props and symbols. As far as the non-linear narrative, it is more art than science - literally - our decision in the order of the scenes, for example, come from the evolution of multiple performances, not from a rigid logistical decision. We decide together what feels right for us, and trust our instincts. This does not mean that each individual scene does not have a conscious narrative, but when

we assemble the scenes, we use our gut to decide the proper sequence.

**Your performance establishes direct relations with the viewers: how do you see the relationship between public sphere and the role of art in public space? In particular, how much do you consider the**

**immersive nature of the viewing experience?**

A connection with the audience is very important to me, in both live and recorded performances. When I am performing live I think about all aspects and details of the performance - the space has a very special





importance not only for its acoustics, but also for its aesthetics, energy, and atmosphere. Thinking about the performance as a whole experience is very important to create a connection, and from the audience's impression when they enter the space details like the arrangement of the seating and lighting can make a big impact.

I also think about the audiences for recorded performances, as by placing videos online they enter into a public space. These are a different type of performance that reach different people, and are not a documentation of a live performance simply captured on video and put online; my online performances are designed to be consumed individually, on demand.

*It's no doubt that interdisciplinary collaborations as the ones you have established with German electronic musician Peter Breitenbach for Tunnel Ensemble are today ever growing forces in Contemporary Art and that the most exciting things happen when creative minds from different fields of practice*

*meet and collaborate on a project... could you tell us something about this effective synergy? By the way, Peter Tabor once stated that "collaboration is working together with another to create something as a synthesis of two practices, that alone one could not": what's your point about this? Can you explain how your work demonstrates communication between two artists?*

It's exciting to collaborate because the other person is outside of your discipline and makes observations that you cannot because you are too close to it. They also impact your actual work style by bringing their own methodology. You can arrive in a different place when you collaborate, that is impossible to achieve alone. In addition, their influence extends beyond the time together, and stays with you for future projects.

With Peter, usually when an electronic musician plays with an instrumentalist, they are behind a computer. But for us, it was important to integrate his participation in a more organic way. We are very conscious of our respective movements during the performance and we employ technology that allows us more freedom of movement.

More fundamentally, I believe that collaboration is a vital skill to a performance artist, which must be practiced everyday. Because at some point, the magic just happens when you find the right person to partner with. Tunnel Ensemble is an example of this; we lucked out with chemistry just being right for both of us.

*Over your career you have exhibited around the world, showcasing your work in several occasions, including countries like Japan, USA, Canada, Brazil, Taiwan, Russia and many more within Europe . One of the*

*hallmarks of your practice is the capability to create a deep involvement with the viewers, who are urged to evolve from a condition of mere spectatorship. So before leaving this conversation we would like to pose a question about the nature of the relationship of your art with your audience. Do you consider the issue of audience reception as being a crucial component of your decision-making process, in terms of what type of language is used in a particular context?*

Yes, I'm very aware of the audience and I do my best to include them as an essential element of the performance. Each audience, each space, each country is different and I need to adapt my music for it - the time and place of a performance actually bring the meaning to the work. That's one of the reasons why I don't write down my solo pieces, because they are in constant transformation depending on each situation. I think it important to be able to adapt and sense the energy in order to create a unique experience where everyone is sharing in the silences as well as the sounds.

**Thanks a lot for your time and for sharing your thoughts, Marc. Finally, would you like to tell us readers something about your future projects? How do you see your work evolving?**

My work is divided into three main paths that are, of course, connected.

First of all I'm currently creating audiovisual performances while also working with electroacoustic compositions, improvisation, and interdisciplinary collaborations with dance, theatre and moving images.

A second part of my practice relates to teaching, where I'm continuing to investigate the instrument as a sound generator using extended techniques. The



goal is to create a teaching manual to make the techniques I have developed as widely available as possible.

The first seed for this manual came from the experience of teaching workshops and giving lectures in different universities around the world.

Finally I'm creating installations that aim to have a social impact on society. Working often with refugee and inequality issues, I was selected to join the Citizen Artists Incubator, the first European program developed for performing artists who aspire to develop new ways of using collaborative artistic innovation to positively impact

global social and environmental challenges. Two new interactive installations are emerging from this commitment.

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