

North Sea Jazz Festival 2014

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Rotterdam, Netherlands

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Tony Roe

The festival's annual composition commission—which was actually funded by the Dutch Fund For The Performing Arts—was assigned to young pianist [Tony Roe](#) (pronounced Roo). Roe is an ambitious young musician who is very much into reinventing, restructuring and redefining modes of staging music via multimedia deployment and an interdisciplinary approach. His group, [Tin Men and the Telephone](#), has worked on and developed a series of multimedia applications in the past that, amongst other things, allowed audiences to intervene actively, by means of digital devices, into the performance of his piano trio. The group has also used devices to manipulate the matching of music and pictures, and piano keys and letters, or generate music from the sound of everyday surroundings. It was a game-oriented, audience-pleasing setup. The new commissioned work with a new lineup, however, was revealed as an audience-challenging work.

In the presented work, Roe's efforts were strictly confined to and focused on the manipulation of the musical material and form itself, its unfolding and the role of the musicians and a dancer in the performance process. The musical material and form was digitally manipulated by means of and in interaction with visuals and electronic sounds. Roe performed his multidimensional composition with three high calibre string players—cellist [Jorg Brinkmann](#), violinist [Jeffery Brunsma](#) and violist [Oene Van Geel](#)—plus well-known reed multi-instrumentalist [Joris Roelofs](#) on bass clarinet, [Marcel Wiercks](#) on electronics and dancer [Kenzo Kusuda](#).

Roe made use of visuals on both sides of the ensemble. Initially, the visuals were embellishments of the music, as is common these days. Later on, playful pointed disparity of music, musicians and visuals arose. The shadow of an individual musician or the dancer appeared onscreen like in Indonesian Wajang puppet theater, but the musicians' gestures onscreen and the real-time music played by the real musician onstage were not synchronized. This caused a sensation of conflict, disturbance and need of (mental) readjustment musically and visually. Ongoing variation of disparate mappings evoked an effect that could be compared to René Magritte's famous mirror-painting, *La Réproduction Interdite*, a playful failure of mirroring. The procedure opened up a lot of musical possibilities of improvisational "failing mirroring" and labyrinthine structure. For dancer [Kenzo Kusuda](#), it also provided lots of counteracting possibilities. Kusuda constantly acted as a mime and a dancer, (re)combining gaze and body movement in significant ways. All elements together evoked a higher level of awareness and a constructivist way of listening.

The work included some pre-structured parts to start with and to return to. In-between, it had parts that were executed by means of manipulation of and improvisation on matches of interacting visual and audio samples. Maybe due to the complexity of mirroring effects the scored parts of the music were more on the safe side. In Roe's work not only preconceived form or themes were reshaped as usual by means of improvisation; instead, the perception and reception of the audience was shaken up and scrambled, which was a way of emphatically inciting and turning the audience to their own recreations of the elements with which they were confronted. The excitement of such an approach depends on the aesthetic and dramaturgical qualities of the design and its execution. The musicians all played on a high, fine-tuned level, the performance had a good flow and remained stimulating throughout. Evidently the performance of a work like this requires facilities in terms of screens as well as sound and light design. What the festival provided in this respect, for a commissioned work of its own, alas, was clearly not up to the mark. It deserved more and better.

Roe made use of a series of challenging elements, such as the Wajang-like shadow-pictures (of musicians) or fragmented eye images. By showing the picture of an eye and manipulating it electronically, the visual element was, itself, commenting. It was additionally augmented or counterbalanced by a vocalized textual element referring to eyebrow makeup. This vocalized element was fabricated in cut-up technique ([Brion Gysin/William S. Burroughs](#)), resulting in fragmented speech flow. Thus the performance contained a cascade of self-referential devices made up to escape the aesthetic reality it produced. The eye image was reminiscent of the famous self-referential eye image of the short silent movie, *Le Chien Andalou* (1928), made by [Luis Buñuel](#) and [Salvador Dalí](#). It seemed that Roe feels a strong urge to go on with this work and lineup to exploit and refine its potentials. It can only be cheered!