

Jean-Michel Jarre

The prince of synths talks high-end hi-fi while premiering his new album

RIGHT: French electronic music pioneer Jean-Michel Jarre explains the concept behind his new album, *Equinoxe Infinity*, before playing it to invited journalists and guests at the 2018 Audio Video show in Warsaw, Poland



ABOVE: One of the two covers of *Equinoxe Infinity*, this version reflecting man at peace with technology (left). The record label shows the alternative album artwork illustrating a dystopian future in which machines rule the world. The LP comes on 180g vinyl and is also available on CD

Jean-Michel Jarre likes what he hears. And it's not only the sound of his new album, which he is playing to an eager audience packed into the Audiofast room at the Audio Video show in Warsaw, but the very audio system on which it is being played. 'My new album is a good test for loudspeakers,' he says smiling, 'because I know that it has lots of different frequencies. This means that it's hard to hear the whole effect on some hi-fi systems, but this one is highly capable.'

He motions to the system itself: a pair of Wilson Audio Alexx loudspeakers, Dan D'Agostino Progression preamp and Relentless monoblocks, with a DCS digital front-

end comprising a Vivaldi DAC, Upsampler, Clock and CD/SACD Transport. 'It's a system I really enjoy listening to,' he says, 'and that's rare.'

A pioneer of popular synthesised music, Jarre sprung into public consciousness in late 1976 with the release of his third studio album, *Oxygene*. 'It was turned down by all the record companies,' he would later confess. 'It was made in the middle of the disco and punk eras and the record labels said, "What is it? No singer, no proper song titles? And, on top of that, it's French!". Even my mum asked, "Why are you giving your music the name of a gas?"'

STRANGE CREATURES
Recorded in a makeshift recording studio in his home, *Oxygene* would go on to sell some 12 million copies worldwide. It was followed in 1978 by *Equinoxe*, released on the Disques Dreyfus label and licensed to Polydor. Again no slouch when it

came to sales, peaking at No 11 in the UK album charts, the LP has now provided the springboard for Jarre's latest venture – *Equinoxe Infinity* – his 20th studio album to date.

'I was always intrigued by the cover of the *Equinoxe* LP,' he explains, 'with its strange creatures – I call them the "watchers" – staring out at us from the sleeve. In fact I think it's one of the most striking and intriguing covers in the history of vinyl. So I decided that 40 years later it would be a good idea to pay tribute to those "watchers" and ask what has happened to them now that four decades have passed, and what will happen to them in the future. It's not a sequel, but a new project, and for me symbolises the evolution of technology since I first began making music.'

The sleeve artwork for both *Oxygene* and *Equinoxe* was by the celebrated French visual artist Michel Granger and selected by Jarre because it reflected his music. This

"In the studio a good speaker is a loudspeaker that you know"

time around, Jarre says, he wanted the cover artwork to inspire the sounds he was to make.

'I decided that I would ask a young artist from Prague called Filip Hodas, whom I met on Instagram, to do two covers for the new album, one in green and blue to symbolise a peaceful, harmonious future, the other reflecting a world that was more apocalyptic and dystopian. The album is the soundtrack to both these futures, with some parts sounding more uplifting and poppy and others more dark.'

As such, on its release on November the 16th – 40 years to the day that *Equinoxe* hit the shelves – the new album will be available in one of these two sleeves. Only they are to be shipped out at random, so buyers are unable to choose which one. A comment that our future lies in the hands of fate rather than our power to change it?

PICK 'N' MIX
When it came to the recording of *Equinoxe Infinity*, Jarre says the project was special in that he used a mixture of analogue and digital instruments. 'I think it was 50/50. When I started recording I thought it would be cool just to use the analogue instruments that I had employed for the first *Equinoxe* album. But then I reconsidered and thought no, because if I was once again the young guy I was when I began that LP 40 years ago, I would use the instruments available today. 'So I mixed some of the old analogue equipment I have in my



TOP: Jarre lines up the source files before the premiere of *Equinoxe Infinity*

ABOVE: Ableton Live on a laptop in a typical small home studio

RIGHT: The delay plug-in Echo Farm from Line 6

BELOW: The *Equinoxe* Project box set contains both the original and new album on LP and CD

studio with some up-to-date software and I even used instruments during the recording process that didn't even exist when I started it. One example is a small instrument called the GR-1 Granular Synthesiser made by a company called Tasty Chips Electronics, which I discovered on Kickstarter. I was really lucky to be sent the prototype and have included this on the album.

'I also use a lot of native instruments as well as software plug-ins and also own some quite obscure instruments, such as a Hollow Sun sampler that I inherited from a brilliant guy who used to work a lot with Peter Gabriel. Otherwise I'm using the Ableton Live digital audio workstation along with many

of that company's other products. For those who want me to get really geeky about the process, I'm also using a plug-in for delay called Echo Farm from Line 6, which until very recently was available only for the Pro Tools digital audio workstation. But now you can use it in older units, so I take advantage of that. I use many others too.'

HI-DEF SOUND
Jarre points out that this mix of analogue and digital is reflected in the make-up of the hi-fi system used to play his new album. 'I have a laptop as my source and am running it through all this gear, which is





been convinced, from the start, that electronic music would become a major genre in the 21st century. And here we now are, and you have so many interesting things going on.

“You know, I know a lot of people say “Ah yes, but you know we have so many things that we are actually losing something”, but I don’t agree with that at all. The great thing with technology and the Internet is that it’s allowing us to democratise music and the means of making it. These days, even if you don’t have lots of money or if you live in a remote country, you can compose, record and distribute your album or music on the web. This is a big change, of course.”

BEYOND NATURE

Does he create and craft his own sounds from scratch these days or take them from a sound library? “Basically, I steal everything I can,” he replies with a huge grin, followed by laughter from the crowd. “But seriously, you have so many sounds around that using a sound bank, for instance, is well... What I mean is that if you like the sound of a violin, you use the sound of the violin and then you can process it.

“Or you can think about a sound that maybe exists somewhere, but you don’t know where, so you make that. But I don’t have any kind of system. What I can say, talking about sounds, is that on the original *Equinoxe* album I used quite a lot of natural sounds for storm and wind whereas on the new album I thought it would be quite fun to recreate some of these sounds using software and hardware. Some of the sounds are natural ones while I had already made others, such as thunder, wind and sea. “I found it was quite interesting to use technology to recreate nature. I met the Italian film

made up of analogue and digital components. It’s quite a sign of the times we are in when it comes to audio replay. I started in the analogue world and, if I’m honest, going through the dark age of digital was quite painful.

“At the beginning we all knew that digital was not very sophisticated and at times was quite harsh in terms of sound quality. It’s really cool that now, even though this has only happened in the past seven or eight years, we are at last once more entering a world of high-definition sound. I am really happy about that.”

“We’re entering a world of high-definition sound once more”

ACOUSTIC CHALLENGE

What kind of equipment does he use to listen to music when working?

“In my studio I listen on Genelec loudspeakers. They are very good, though some people will prefer speakers from other manufacturers, of course. But at the end of the day a good speaker is a speaker that you know. In the studio, the speaker itself is not the only factor. You also have the acoustics of the walls and different designs will interact with these in different ways.

“Every studio has its own acoustics and we know that acoustics is not a perfect science. The best thing is to get used to a speaker. Even if it’s not a speaker as expensive as the Wilson Alexx

we have here in this room, the important thing is to get to know it.”

Some say the story of electronic music is the story of Jarre himself. Yes, Tangerine Dream enjoyed Top 20 album success with *Phaedra* in 1974 while Kraftwerk even had a hit back in ’75 with the single ‘Autobahn’. But when Jarre was wrestling to marshal sounds from an

ARP 2600 modular synth in his home studio back in the early ’70s, he was essentially working in isolation. This is one of the reasons why he has cited the soundtracks to

sci-fi movies, like Stanley Kubrick’s *2001 Space Odyssey* from 1968, as being an early inspiration.

How he does he regard the state of electronic music today?

“I feel much better now because I am much more in phase with my time than when I started. When I began, I, and a few other people, were considered the weirdos and crazy guys working on instruments – machines – that were not even thought to be musical instruments. And I’ve always

ABOVE: Jarre ups the volume on the D’Agostino preamp during the album’s playback and (inset) fielding questions from the audience

BELOW: On stage in 2009 with a Roland AX synth at the Manchester MEN Arena





Jarre is no stranger to the world of high-end audio, co-founding Music Life & Jarre Technologies in 2005. The AeroSystem One loudspeaker was launched five years later and the company now markets a range of speaker-based systems, such as the AeroSkull series, which puts in regular appearances at audio shows around the globe.

It now has plans to offer an 'Audiophile product collection' dedicated to 'the most exigent music-lover', which will bear Jarre's name only. He is also writing a book

director Federico Fellini quite a while ago and he told me something that I really loved. He said: "You know, I hate filming the sea for real. I much prefer to recreate my idea of the sea in the studio with cloth, with fans. A fake sea, but actually this is my idea of the sea and more interesting than the natural one."

'And I think the beauty of electronic music is that you can do that too; you can recreate the sound of the rain but it is your own rain. Perhaps it's quite different from the natural one, but it's yours. Like a painter recreating nature, it's not necessarily the real one, but it's interesting as it's not the one you see every day.'

How does he feel when other artists recreate *his* music?

'First of all, when I finish my music I don't feel that it belongs to me anymore. I know that my music

has been played with a symphonic orchestra and that there have even been heavy metal versions and you know, that's great. I always love that, though it depends on the result of course,' he laughs.

THE X-FILES

Attention returns to the hardware Jarre has just used to replay his

new album and in particular the resolution of the source files on his laptop. Were they ripped CD files or hi-res versions?

'They were high-resolution files,'

he explains, 'because if you are to match this kind of replay equipment you have to be very careful and not use a CD. Though I shouldn't say this to my record company, CD is not the best format in the world, even if for years they tried to convince us that it was the Holy Grail of quality.'

“They tried to convince us that CD was the Holy Grail”



TOP LEFT: The dCS, D'Agostino, Wilson Audio playback system

ABOVE: Poster for the 2018 leg of Jarre's Electronic tour

RIGHT: The album *Rendez-Vous*, which Jarre played live to an audience of 1.5m

BELOW: Jarre's AeroSkull Nano loudspeakers



'a kind of an autobiography I'm hoping will be released next year.'

Still one of the giants in the 'big gig' league, once playing live to an audience of 3.5 million in Moscow, Jarre remains revered in the world of dance music, his live shows earning him a whole new generation of fans. Is he planning a tour to promote *Equinoxe Infinity*?

'Not now,' he says. 'Except for the album *Rendez-Vous*, which I knew I would be performing outdoors in Houston, I never think about performance when in the studio. But maybe in a year from now I might perform *Equinoxe Infinity*.

'As you know, I have just finished a world tour – Electronic. It consisted of almost 1250 concerts.' He then adds, with a chuckle: 'I have to take a *bit* of a break!'. ☺

