Interviews with Collaborators of Jóhann Jóhannsson

Collected and transcribed by Francesca Guccione

Contributors:

- Neil Leiter & Margaret Hermant (Echo Collective)
- Francesco Donadello
- Viktor Orri Árnason
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Introduction

This document gathers a series of interviews with some of the closest collaborators of the Icelandic composer Jóhann Jóhannsson (1969–2018).

The conversations were carried out between 2023 and 2024, with the intention of preserving first-hand testimonies about his creative process, his collaborative practices, and the unique sound world that characterized his music.

The interviews are presented here in their integral form, in order to retain the authenticity of the voices of the musicians and producers who worked with him. Each collaborator provides a different perspective, ranging from concert tours to film scoring, from orchestration to recording techniques.

Taken together, these accounts offer a multifaceted portrait of Jóhann Jóhannsson's artistic universe and his way of working within a network of trust, experimentation, and shared creativity.

Table of Contents

1. Echo Collective – Neil Leiter & Margaret Hermant

Question: Can you tell me about yourselves and your artistic background?

Neil: My name is Neil, I am American but I moved to Belgium in 2003 to study and play the viola. The first ten years of my career were entirely devoted to classical music: orchestra, chamber music, concerts. That is where I met Margaret, while working together. Later, thanks to my childhood friend Caroline Shaw, we were introduced to Adam Wiltzie of *A Winged Victory for the Sullen*. From there we met Jóhann Jóhannsson, Christina Vantzou, Dustin O'Halloran, and decided to found Echo Collective, which today collaborates both with artists and on its own projects. It has been ten years now of very fruitful work together.

Margaret: I started studying music very early: violin at the age of four, then piano and harp. I have a classical training but I have always been curious about other languages: I played rock, traditional music, improvisation, and wrote for theater and dance. I enjoy entering different contexts to learn and meet people. I met Neil in Belgium, and then through *A Winged Victory* we became part of this international artistic community that led us to Jóhann. With him we had an intense relationship: he was happy with the way we worked and with how we understood his music. Collaborating with him was at once natural and magical.

Question: How did you meet Jóhann and what projects did you do together?

Neil: We met him thanks to the "musical family" born around *A Winged Victory*. The first project together was the *Orphée* tour. The debut was at the Funkhaus in Berlin, and the concert was published on DVD by Deutsche Grammophon. For about three years we accompanied him on tour, adapting his music to live performance. It was not about writing new music, but about transforming his pieces into a continuous show.

After that period, he proposed we work together on *12 Conversations with Thilo Heinzmann*. We accepted with enthusiasm, but unfortunately he died before the process could truly begin. Together with Tim Husom, Richard Thomas, and Deutsche Grammophon, we decided to record the materials he had left us. This became our interpretation of *12 Conversations*, which is his music but realized through our perspective.

Margaret: Jóhann liked to surround himself with ensembles that understood his language. In America he worked with ACME, in Europe with us. He wanted a group capable of immediately entering into resonance with him, without long explanations. I remember that at the end of the *Orphée* tour he was very moved: he felt there was an immediate understanding with us, almost a fusion. That is why he wanted to reimagine *12 Conversations* together with us, but unfortunately he did not have the time. In the end we

recorded the score as it was: essential, without dynamics or detailed annotations, only notes.

Question: Can you tell me about the recording experience of *12 Conversations with Thilo Heinmann*?

Neil: The scores were very sparse: few tempo indications, almost no dynamics. We chose to record at Teldex Studio in Berlin, a very large hall, in order to use the space as an instrument. We wanted the room to become an integral part of the sound. With us was Francesco Donadello, sound engineer and long-time collaborator of Jóhann: keeping his team meant carrying his voice into the process. We used different microphone setups—close miking, decca tree, distant microphones—to capture spatiality. The recording was very "classical" and post-production was minimal: almost nothing, only a light reverb. The idea was to keep the acoustic sound as authentic as possible.

Margaret: It was a work of listening more than of execution: we tried to let Jóhann's energy emerge through our sound, recording space and silence as much as the notes themselves. Francesco is very creative: he even uses unconventional microphones, such as those placed inside plastic bottles, to explore new timbral nuances. We had at our disposal a huge variety of microphones, many more than normal in a classical context. Some were used, others not, but it was important to have as many options as possible for the final mix. The choice of room was fundamental: recording in a church, a theater, or at Teldex means obtaining different sound colors. Francesco always works creatively with the acoustics of space, placing microphones according to the type of reflection he wants to achieve. His work is an integral part of the sound itself, never casual.

Question: When he sent you material, what did you receive?

Neil: Generally scores and audio recordings. For the *Orphée* tour, for example, we already had the album as a reference, in addition to the scores.

Margaret: But the really interesting part was not so much reading the score as connecting the pieces together. Jóhann did not want concerts "in blocks": he wanted a continuous flow, like a Mahler symphony, without applause between pieces. So between works he created improvised transitions: single notes, graphics, textures. It was a work of atmosphere, of maintaining the audience's emotional attention on a single trajectory.

Question: What was his approach with strings? Did he write the arrangements himself?

Neil: I think it depended on the project. He had a wide team of orchestrators and arrangers. What interested him above all was color, timbral quality. He was not a conductor in the academic sense, but he knew perfectly how he wanted the music to sound.

Margaret: He was a very respectful and shy man. He did not give big instructions during rehearsals, he listened a lot. Often he simply said: “can we repeat this point?” Or after concerts he would re-listen to everything with the sound engineer to focus on details. He was always kind, open to everyone’s ideas, but if you made a proposal you had to be ready to defend it well: he took every suggestion seriously.

Question: Do you have any anecdotes from concerts with him?

Neil: In live performances he used a tape machine with different loops. During concerts he had to change the loops manually, a kind of scenic ritual. Sometimes he made mistakes, mounted them backwards, or a tape would break. Then we improvised on the spot, creating pieces that existed only in that moment with the strings. Some of those moments later entered into *12 Conversations*.

Margaret: Playing with him meant always being in the present. Every concert could have surprises, but they were part of the magic.

Question: How would you describe his approach to sound?

Neil: Francesco Donadello told us that sometimes Jóhann would book weeks of studio time just to experiment with tape, to search for sounds and colors. His process started from there: building a timbral palette, from which the compositions were then born.

Margaret: I believe it was guided by the heart. He did not seek compromises, he did not care about external opinion: he wanted to explore sound. His music was born from there.

2. Francesco Donadello

Question: How did the creative process work when you collaborated with Jóhann Jóhannsson?

Francesco Donadello: Many of Jóhann's ideas remained in his head, compositional decisions known only to him. I could intuit some aspects, but it was not always clear which direction he was following: he was very reserved and, at the same time, precise.

With him, I worked in "blocks." Once a project arrived – often a film – Jóhann started from the script, formed an idea of atmospheres and environments, and discussed it with the director. Some directors had very clear ideas, others used a more abstract language, but in any case, they gave a guiding line.

Over the years, especially working with Hildur Guðnadóttir (who was involved in almost all projects), Jóhann developed a precise method: he wanted to start working before the film was shot. He disliked arriving at an already-edited montage. He preferred to be involved when the film was still in the planning stage, perhaps with the budget approved but no images. This gave him more time and space to experiment and influence the film from the very beginning.

Question: Why was it so important for him to work before the shooting?

Francesco Donadello: Because it avoided the problem of temp music. Normally, when a film is shot and enters the editing room, the editor or music supervisor begins to insert provisional tracks (temp tracks) to see how the film "works." These tracks are not original: they can be repertoire pieces, works by other composers, or even from previous projects.

The problem is that directors become accustomed to those temp tracks, fall in love with their sound, and then ask the composer to imitate them. This happens often and leads to a vicious circle of copies.

A concrete example: after *Sicario*, the piece *The Beast* with glissando double basses was copied everywhere.

Jóhann hated this dynamic. He was very conflicted about the use of references: sometimes he accepted them, but only if they were truly functional. For this reason, he tried to "play ahead": if his material entered the film before the shooting, the director would become accustomed to his music, and not to someone else's.

Question: What were the advantages of this anticipatory approach?

Francesco Donadello: First of all, it avoided imitation. But above all, it gave more freedom to experiment. When you arrive at a finished and edited film, the music must fit

perfectly to the timing of the images, and sometimes you are forced to rewrite an entire piece because an edit has changed. It happened to me often.
Working before shooting, on the other hand, allowed us to create free sound material, which would later be adapted, edited, manipulated. This opened many possibilities: we organized sessions of 2–3 days, recording sounds, instruments, improvisations. Jóhann took everything home and used it as the basis for composing. In some cases the sounds remained in the soundtrack, in others they served only as inspiration.

Question: Can you give a concrete example of this method?
Francesco Donadello: Yes, for instance in *Prisoners*. When Jóhann came to the studio we already had the footage, but we still organized an experimental session. I brought out various instruments: gongs, prepared piano, strings, organ, a bowhead piano made with bow hair, and we invited guests to generate sounds. There was no precise score: it was about exploring sonorities—drones, percussions, simple melodies with particular timbres.
Jóhann took all that material home and used it as a "sound bank." He then composed orchestral parts referring to those sonorities. Sometimes he kept them in the final mix, other times he removed them, but they were always fundamental to inspiring orchestral writing.
We used this method many times: in *Sicario*, in *Arrival*, and in other films. It was a way of building the soundtrack from the inside, not from the outside.

Question: Can you tell me in detail the genesis of the sound of *Arrival*?
Francesco Donadello: For *Arrival* we started working long before shooting. We did three sessions of two days each, with different guests. In the last one there was Robert Aiki Aubrey Lowe. On the second day, we found ourselves with little new material to try. I then proposed an experiment: using a 16-track 2-inch recorder to create a multitrack tape loop.
Normally tape loops are made on a stereo recorder, but I wanted to layer more tracks simultaneously. We recorded piano chords without attack—removing the hammer's impact and recording only the sustain, doing a manual fade-in—and layered them into loops. Each time we added a new layer, at different speeds: half, double, or transposed by a fifth or a third using tape speed variations.
Thus was born a large stratified drone. On top, Robert recorded a very simple vocal line, which we then pitched down, further slowing the tape. In an hour and a half we had a complete piece: a dense, suspended, alien sound.
We sent it to Denis Villeneuve with a quick rough mix. He was enthusiastic and

immediately called Jóhann saying: “This is the sound of the film, everything must be like this.” During the shooting of the scenes inside the spaceship, Denis even played that loop on set, so the actors performed immersed in that atmosphere. That track became the true signature sound of the film.

Question: How many projects did you work on with Jóhann, and how did your collaboration begin?

Francesco Donadello: Our collaboration developed mostly in Berlin, but the connections go further back. I lived in Bologna, where I had a recording studio. At that time I met Dustin O’Halloran, who became one of my closest friends and collaborators. Dustin was already working for cinema (*Marie Antoinette* by Sofia Coppola) and from there other projects followed. His manager was Tim Husom, who later became also Jóhann’s manager.

I met Jóhann in 2004, when he came to Milan on tour with *Englabörn*. In those years, Berlin already had a strong Icelandic community: Hildur Guðnadóttir, other musicians, mutual friends. Jóhann was living in Copenhagen, but he often came to Berlin. Around 2012 he moved to Berlin permanently. We already knew each other, so we immediately started working together. We did several films: *Prisoners*, *Sicario*, *Arrival*, *The Theory of Everything*, *Mandy*.

Question: What was his relationship with Hildur Guðnadóttir?

Francesco Donadello: Hildur was a constant presence. She was involved in almost all of Jóhann’s projects, and with him she shared the search for a new sound language. She had unique instruments, like the Halldorophone, a sort of electric viola da gamba with eight strings, each with an independent pick-up connected to wooden resonators.

With this instrument she could generate controlled feedback: a hybrid sound, between cello and organ, with natural but manipulated resonances. We also connected it to pianos, timpani, bass drums: the resonators made these instruments vibrate, creating an effect impossible to trace back to a precise source. It was impossible to say if it was electronic or acoustic.

This research—creating indefinable sounds, suspended between two worlds—was central in Jóhann’s aesthetics.

Question: So experimentation was an integral part of his process?

Francesco Donadello: Absolutely. Even though it changed from project to project. In *The Theory of Everything* the approach was classical, based on orchestra, melody and

luminosity, with almost no experimentation. In *Sicario* and *Arrival*, on the other hand, everything originated from sound research: drones, tape loops, manipulations and voices. Jóhann did not always start with a fixed idea; often the sessions served to “extract” the right sound. If something didn’t work for one film, he archived it and reused it elsewhere, as Morricone used to say: “put it in a box, and maybe one day it will be useful.”

Question: In *The Theory of Everything* the soundtrack appears very different from works like *Sicario* or *Arrival*. What was the approach in that case?

Francesco Donadello: Yes, there the approach was completely different. The soundtrack of *The Theory of Everything* is more traditional, orchestral and melodic. There were no drones, strange loops, or indefinable sounds: it was all based on the orchestra. Jóhann immediately understood that the film required a more “luminous” and classical musical language, in line with the story of Stephen Hawking.

I participated in the recordings in London, at Abbey Road Studios, and also mixed some tracks. I remember that Jóhann often spoke of the search for a brightness of sound, linked to the protagonist: a clarity that conveyed his intellectual and spiritual energy. Even in a traditional context, he always sought a precise color, a detail that made the music special.

Question: And what about *Mandy*?

Francesco Donadello: *Mandy* was a very particular project. For some time I had suggested to Jóhann to record in the studio of a friend in Bolzano, Sven, who is a collector of rare synthesizers. That studio is a true paradise: instruments like the CS-80, Memorymoog, two Fairlights, two Synclaviers, the Synthi 100 (of which only very few exist worldwide), the MS vocoder, vintage organs, Oberheim polysynths, and much more. Some of these instruments are literally worth as much as a house.

For *Mandy* we spent several days there recording material, especially analog synths. In reality, Jóhann never physically came to the studio: it was me and other collaborators recording and sending him the sounds. He listened, gave feedback, asked us to redo or change things. It was a perfect studio for that film, dark and visionary, where synths had a central role.

Question: You also worked with Jóhann on the soundtrack of *Blade Runner 2049*. Can you tell me about that experience?

Francesco Donadello: Yes, we recorded part of the material at the Funkhaus in Berlin, built in East Germany as a huge radio complex. It is an incredible structure: there are

many small and medium studios, but also four large main halls, each designed for different categories of music.

Hall 1 was intended for large symphony orchestras with choir; Hall 2 for medium-sized orchestras; Hall 3 for chamber music; Hall 4 for jazz and pop. The acoustics are extraordinary: the Funkhaus was designed specifically for recording. Hall 1, in particular, has a ceiling of 30–35 meters: it is the space with the most perfect acoustics I have ever worked in.

We rented Halls 1 and 2 for those sessions. We invited Hildur Guðnadóttir and Robert Aiki Aubrey Lowe. We brought an arsenal of instruments and percussion: bass and guitar amps, a Leslie, concert bass drum, tubular bells, drum kits, timpani. The idea was to create a powerful, physical, yet manipulated sound world.

I experimented with a particular technique using four tape recorders connected to a modular synthesizer. Instead of using analog oscillators, I recorded drones or acoustic fragments (voices, cello, piano) on tape, and the tape itself became the sound source. Through a voltage-controlled interface (volt/octave) I could transpose the tape in real time, connecting sequencers or keyboards. In this way it was possible to play melodic lines or even polyphony with the four recorders.

Each recorder introduced a natural glide when changing note, different depending on the model (Studer, Revox, etc.). It was an organic, unpredictable behavior, which made everything extremely interesting on a compositional level.

From these sessions ideas were born that later flowed elsewhere: in the pieces *Odi et Amo* and *BIS* of *Englabörn Variations*, and especially in the track *Watching My Armor Melt* (later published on the album *Goldust*), which was originally intended for the soundtrack of *Blade Runner 2049*.

Question: Why was that soundtrack never released?

Francesco Donadello: The reason was not Denis Villeneuve, who was actually a great fan of Jóhann. The problem was the producers. After audience tests they were disappointed: the film had cost enormous sums, and they decided they could not take further risks. Jóhann’s music was very different from Vangelis’s original, and this scared them.

Jóhann did not want in any way to “imitate Vangelis”: he was seeking a new, poetic, and radical language. But for the producers it was too distant. So they chose to call Hans Zimmer.

It is a real pity, because that soundtrack would have been beautiful. In my opinion, one of his most original works, but unfortunately it remained unreleased.

Question: In general, did Jóhann prefer analog or digital instruments?

Francesco Donadello: It depended on the project. In recent years he increasingly tended to start from acoustic sources—instruments, voices, field recordings—then manipulate them. He did not want the sound to be "directly electronic"; he preferred to transform something real into something else.

That said, he had a great passion for polyphonic synths: he often used the Oberheim Matrix, and had a weakness for organs, both acoustic and electronic. His father, among other things, built an organ that was also played on some occasions. So his palette was broad: manipulated acoustics, pure electronics, traditional orchestral instruments.

Question: How did you manage recording and microphone placement?

Francesco Donadello: This part was more my responsibility or that of whoever was in the studio with me. Jóhann never said "put this mic here": he preferred to speak in terms of the sound to achieve—for example "I want a closer sound," "more ambient," or "pass it through an amplifier."

In the studio we used condenser microphones, sometimes ribbon mics, but almost never clip mics. The approach was quite classical, unless it was a particular instrument, like Hildur's Halldorophone, for which we experimented with new solutions.

As for tapes: we did not use them as the main recording medium (it would have been impractical for the speed required in a film), but as a creative instrument. We used them to make tape loops, layering, sound-on-sound effects. For the rest, we recorded to console and DAW, sometimes passing through tape as processing.

Question: Did Jóhann use digital tape emulators or similar plug-ins?

Francesco Donadello: I don't think he used tape emulators. He used VST plug-ins for other things: vocoders, distortions, various manipulations, orchestral mock-ups. But for tape he preferred to work directly with the physical medium. He was very fascinated by the real sound of tape, by its imperfection.

Question: Who were the most important collaborators for Jóhann, and how did he work with them?

Francesco Donadello: Jóhann was very loyal to his collaborators, and for him it was

never just a matter of technical competence but rather of trust and artistic affinity. At the center was Hildur Guðnadóttir, who, with her Halldorophone, brought a unique sound halfway between acoustic and electronic that became a hallmark of many soundtracks. Alongside her, Robert Aiki Aubrey Lowe often contributed vocal and electronic ideas, while Clarice Jensen, cellist and director of the ACME ensemble, played a fundamental role in recording both orchestral and experimental material. Chris Watson, one of the world's leading masters of field recording, also collaborated on several projects. I myself was part of this core: I brought ideas, recorded sessions, and took care of the technical and sonic aspects. We shared a strong collective attitude, improvising and experimenting together, and then Jóhann would take everything and transform it into his music.

Question: What was it like working in his Berlin studio?

Francesco Donadello: His studio was in a former industrial building in Berlin, divided into various rooms used by musicians. There were Hildur, Dustin O'Halloran, other composers, and often we worked three or four at the same time. It was a lively environment, full of exchange. Sometimes I went to them, other times they came to me. A simple idea or a guest touring in Berlin was enough to decide to record something, even without a precise project. Jóhann loved to always have "material in motion," ideas to put aside and reuse in the future.

Question: How would you describe his working method?

Francesco Donadello: I would say it was a stratified method. Often it started from improvisational or experimental sessions: everything was recorded, from the simplest things (a drone, a chord, a percussive noise) to the more elaborate ones. Then Jóhann took those materials, brought them to his studio, and transformed them: cutting, moving, manipulating, orchestrating over them.

In this way the soundtrack was never born as "music added afterwards," but as an integral part of the film's creative process. For him it was fundamental to enter early in the project precisely for this reason: he wanted the music to be structure and not decoration.

Question: What was his sonic philosophy?

Francesco Donadello: I think his hallmark was the ability to transform the real into something other. He often started from acoustic, concrete sounds—instruments, voices, field recordings—and altered them until they became suspended, indefinable. The result was never a "special effect," but a poetic language.

In *Sicario*, for example, the glissando double basses become a sound mass embodying border tension and latent violence. In *Arrival*, a simple piano chord layered on tape becomes the aliens' voice, a sound never heard before. In *The Theory of Everything*, instead, he limited himself to the orchestra, seeking a timbral brightness that reflected the protagonist's soul.
Jóhann always managed to link sound to the film's deep dramaturgy. I believe this is what made him unique: his music was not just accompaniment, it was true sonic narration.

Question: If you had to summarize in a few words what made him different from other film composers?
Francesco Donadello: I would say that three aspects were essential to understanding his uniqueness. He wanted to work before shooting in order to create a sound that would become the very root of the film; he started from acoustic materials and transformed them into something else, always with a poetic purpose; and he loved to surround himself with trusted collaborators, creating music collectively rather than in solitude. He was a composer who constantly sought depth, never an easy solution or a cliché. For him, every project was about building a unique sonic universe.

3. Viktor Orri Árnason

Question: Can you tell me about yourself and your artistic background?

Viktor Orri Árnason: My name is Viktor Orri Árnason. I started studying music as a child, beginning the violin at the age of seven. At eleven I founded my first rock-punk band, with which I recorded two albums before turning fifteen. At seventeen I joined the band Hjaltalín, touring in Europe and the United States. In 2009 I met Ólafur Arnalds by chance, and he immediately invited me to join him on tour in China. Since then we worked together for about ten years. In parallel I studied violin and viola at the Iceland University of the Arts and later composition at the Hanns Eisler School in Berlin, graduating in 2014.

Question: How did you meet Jóhann Jóhannsson and start collaborating with him?

Viktor: After my studies I began working extensively in studios, and that is where I met Jóhann. He invited me into a studio community in Berlin that also included Hildur Guðnadóttir and other artists. We were about nine people. Jóhann was very interested in my way of playing and often asked me for recordings, sometimes almost daily. In fact, it was Hildur who first involved me, asking me to orchestrate and conduct *Sicario: Day of the Soldado* (Sicario II). The work went so well that Jóhann also began to involve me as orchestrator and conductor, a role I continued until his death in 2018.

Question: Which projects did you work on with him?

Viktor: The first was *Last and First Men*, where I recorded violins and violas and proposed orchestration ideas. Then came *Blade Runner 2049*, *Mother!*, and *Mary Magdalene*. Some projects were never completed or published, so much music remained unreleased. *Mary Magdalene* was the last one: Jóhann died while working on it.

Question: Did you work together in Berlin or in Iceland?

Viktor: Mainly in Berlin.

Question: Strings play a central role in Jóhann's music. Did he handle the arrangements himself or delegate them?

Viktor: It depended. In his solo works he often managed the arrangements himself. In films, however, time is short and many ideas are needed, so collaboration is essential. Jóhann would take the contributions of the team, decide what to develop and what to discard, and sometimes fused multiple materials together.

Question: How did the arranging process take place?

Viktor: There were two main modes: sometimes he worked with written scores in Sibelius or Dorico, other times directly in Cubase, his DAW of reference. Everyone in the team had to learn it, and it is still my favorite today.

Question: What was your contribution?

Viktor: I often started from one of his melodies or harmonic progressions and developed variations, added instruments, or explored new combinations. Much of my work was improvisation on violin and viola: I recorded raw material which he then reworked in his language.

Question: Do you think the Icelandic landscape influences composers?

Viktor: Yes, I believe it influences all Icelanders, even if it is sometimes considered a cliché. But it is true: vast horizons, mountains, open spaces enter inside you. If you compare living in Iceland with living in Berlin or Copenhagen, there is an enormous difference in the perception of space, and this certainly has a subconscious effect on creativity.

Question: What was Jóhann's relationship with images and cinema?

Viktor: He was a great film enthusiast, especially of European and more abstract cinema. When working on a soundtrack, he did not limit himself to reacting to single scenes but always sought an overall form. The image influenced his work, but it was always the general structure that guided him.

Question: During recording sessions, did he give space to the musicians' sensitivity?

Viktor: Absolutely. He loved improvisation and spontaneous ideas. He often organized jam sessions with different instruments, recorded everything, and then selected what worked best to develop further.

Question: Was there a specific method for recording strings?

Viktor: I recorded many string parts for him, for example in *Last and First Men*. I had a particular approach: very close miking, which requires a different sensitivity from classical playing. Jóhann trusted me completely: often he was not even present at the recordings, but he knew I would deliver exactly the material he needed.

Question: Did Jóhann begin with a clear sound in mind, or was it more of a research process?

Viktor: I would say both, but his exploratory side was always dominant. He might start from an idea, but then he allowed himself to be guided by experimentation and the search for new timbres.

Question: How much freedom did he have with directors?

Viktor: It depended on the director. But Jóhann always sought very open collaborators, because he never followed temp scores (the provisional music used in editing). He did not want to listen to them; he preferred to create something completely new. This, however, cost him dearly: for *Blade Runner 2049* he decided to create an acoustic world without synthesizers, in sharp contrast with Vangelis's original. In the end the production did not accept his vision and the film passed to Hans Zimmer. But this choice demonstrates how much he cared about his sonic identity.

Question: Do you have a personal memory of working with him?

Viktor: For me he was a great source of inspiration. I came from both academic and pop/studio backgrounds. With Jóhann I encountered a completely different approach: he did not start from theory but from sound itself. He could take a fragment from a film, manipulate it and transform it into something new. It was a way of thinking that changed my perspective, and for that I will always be grateful.

Question: Do you think there are resonances between his music and that of Hildur Guðnadóttir?

Viktor: Yes, certainly. Hildur worked with Jóhann for twenty years, often improvising for him. Some of Jóhann's melodies may have been inspired by those moments. They were very close and their musical dialogue is evident.

Question: You also collaborate a lot with other Icelandic artists. Can you tell me more?

Viktor: I love working across genres: rock, pop, classical. Already at fourteen I had arranged a string quintet together with my band, and from there many collaborations began. Often an arrangement led to new requests from other musicians. I have also had

many opportunities to write for the Iceland Symphony Orchestra together with local bands: an always enriching experience.

4. Yair Elazar Glotman

Question: Can you tell me about yourself and your artistic background?

Yair: I am a musician, mainly a double bassist with a classical training. I also studied electroacoustic composition in Berlin. I first met Jóhann when he invited me to record for a rework of Ryuichi Sakamoto. We spent an entire day in the studio and then talked about music and life for five hours: that was how our friendship and collaboration began.

Question: Which projects did you work on with him?

Yair: After that first meeting, Jóhann showed me *Last and First Men*. At that time it had been presented as an audiovisual performance at the Manchester International Festival, and he wanted to transform it into a real film. That was where we started working together. The second project was *Mandy*. Jóhann put *Last and First Men* on hold until we had finished *Mandy*. Unfortunately, he died a month later, before we could resume work on the film.

Question: Jóhann was a pianist, yet strings always play a central role in his compositions. Did he handle the arrangements himself?

Yair: It depended on the project. Sometimes he worked with orchestrators or arrangers, other times he did everything himself. Orchestration could be simple transcription or, in other cases, a more creative process. In general, though, his method was always profoundly collaborative: he surrounded himself with trusted collaborators, almost like a curator.

Question: How did he manage the sharing of material?

Yair: He often started from source materials: recordings, fragments, found sounds. He manipulated and transformed them into something new. Each project was different, but the underlying idea was always the same: a layered process, with different collaborators intervening at different moments.

Question: Did you also bring your own instrumental approach into *Last and First Men*?

Yair: Yes. I work a lot with the double bass as a “sound source” rather than as a traditional instrument. I use close miking, special recording techniques, and I explore areas outside the usual dynamic range to generate fragile, tactile textures. I brought this approach into *Last and First Men*: Jóhann wanted to reduce the orchestral writing and achieve a more

intimate, personal sound. Many of my experiments with close mic techniques and studio layering became the sonic map of the film.

Question: Was he more interested in sound or melody?

Yair: Both. He was very sound-driven, but he also had a strong melodic sense. He used simple, diatonic harmonic structures to make even very complex sounds accessible. This combination allowed him to introduce abstract elements without losing communicativity.

Question: Can you tell us more about your recording techniques?

Yair: I deliberately try to escape the total control one learns as a classical instrumentalist. Instead of avoiding surprises, I try to let myself be surprised by the instrument. By recording at very low volumes, hidden details emerge: the friction of the bow, the vibration of the metal, the contact of the wood. With multiple microphones you can deconstruct the sound and obtain material layers that are physical and textural. It is also a very different approach from traditional sound engineering, which tends toward the “pure” and the objective.

Question: So you worked a lot on textures?

Yair: Yes, very much so. Texture is a fundamental dimension, halfway between melody and harmony. With digital and analog processes the possibilities of acoustic sound can be enormously extended. Jóhann also loved analog tape processes: the material, distortions, and artifacts became an integral part of the sound. On this point we shared a strong sensibility. In particular he worked a lot with Francesco Donadello, who developed with him many of the tape techniques that today we associate with his sound.

Question: Did Jóhann already have the sound in mind, or was it more research-based?

Yair: It was almost always research and experimentation. He looked for happy accidents, unexpected treasures. He did not start from a fixed idea, but explored.

Question: Did he start from the score or the DAW?

Yair: When I met him, he worked mainly from recorded material, improvisations, layered textures. It was not a traditional flow of “writing – orchestrating – recording.” Rather, it was improvisation → layering → orchestration → transcription → new orchestration. It was a modular process, made of decisions and collaborations.

Question: Did he use synthesizers?

Yair: He was not really a “synth guy.” His studio was very minimal. More than synthesizers, he worked with organic sounds (instruments, voices) which he processed. In *Last and First Men* there is a lot of Ondes Martenot, a historic analog instrument. In *Mandy*, instead, the director wanted many analog synths: Jóhann rented several and worked together with Randall Dunn, the film’s producer, also in specialized studios in Italy (Bolzano).

Question: How did he handle heterogeneous elements (acoustic, electronic, voices)?

Yair: It depended on the project. In *Last and First Men* much of the material was incomplete, and I worked a lot in the DAW to recompose and structure it. Only later was everything transcribed and orchestrated. Notation came at a later stage.

Question: Tell us about *Mandy*.

Yair: It was a complex and chaotic project, with many people involved. I wrote additional music. In that case, the director wanted a sound strongly tied to analog synthesizers, so we worked with specific instruments and with Randall Dunn as producer.

Question: How did you experience the completion of *Last and First Men* after his death?

Yair: It was a very hard but important project. Tim Husom and the family asked me to complete it. I felt responsible, because I knew Jóhann’s vision and we had talked about the project extensively. I worked for a year to reconstruct a cohesive sound world, filling in the gaps. It was also a way for all the collaborators to process their grief. I always made it clear that it was a posthumous project, completed by us: a collective homage.

Question: And what about the mixing?

Yair: Mixing was an integral part of the composition. With music so textural even the smallest variation completely changed the result. For *Last and First Men* I worked with Francesco Donadello on the 5.1 mix using an analog desk. I was present every day, because it was not about “mixing well” but about composing through the mix. Jóhann himself often did the final refinements of his soundtracks directly in the cinema, in order to have the real perception of sound.

Question: What personal memory do you have of him?

Yair: It is still difficult for me to talk about it. I worked with him for two and a half years without pause, and only afterwards did I realize how heavy it had also been on an emotional level. His way of composing, based on recordings and source materials, was unique. I remember long sessions at the Funkhaus in Berlin, from which much material later used in *Last and First Men* emerged. It was a special period: we shared the studio in Kreuzberg with Hildur Guðnadóttir, Dustin O'Halloran and other composers. It was a vibrant community.