



When word leaked out in 2004 that *Medúlla* would be an exclusively vocal-driven affair, some fans and critics wondered whether Björk had taken her eccentric vision as a singer, composer, and producer a little too far. But the album proved to be one of the most compelling of her career, an unusual but easily accessible foray into extreme voice-processing, editing, and audio manipulation that featured guest performers Mike Patton (Faith No More, Fantômas), Rahzel (The Roots), Robert Wyatt (Soft Machine), and Inuit throat singer Tagaq.



Barely a year after the release of *Medúlla*, Björk is again demonstrating her willingness to take creative risks. *The Music from Drawing Restraint 9* is the haunting score to avant-garde artist and filmmaker Matthew Barney's lushly photographed tale of human metamorphosis, which features Björk and Barney in the key roles. Shot on location aboard the Japanese whaling ship Nisshin Maru, Barney's disturbing and otherworldly film absorbs and transforms rituals associated with Japan's ancient Noh theater and Shinto religious traditions — traditions that also guided the musical direction Björk pursued with the score.

"Matthew and I talked about [the score] a lot," says Björk, "and we spent a month in the south of Japan last November. But what I did most as a preparation was to read a lot of books on the Shinto religion. Probably the biggest influence from this was how I approached the spacing of the sounds on the CD. There are a lot of silences, and each sound gets a lot of space. That came from learning about the Shinto way, where each object is given its own respect and its own space."

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As it was with *Medúlla*, Pro Tools systems figured prominently in the making of *DR9* — only this time, Björk and recording engineer Valgeir Sigurdsson opted to mix the album entirely within Pro Tools|HD. The result is a dreamscape of alien orchestration where brass, woodwinds, harps, and exotic instruments, from the Japanese sho to the metallic, piano-like celeste, take center stage.

Björk's own voice is subjected to all manner of digitized chaos, while the voices of Tagaq, alt-folk singer Will Oldham, Noh performer Shiro Nomura, and other guests contribute to an overall mood of subtle

intensity. But *DR9* differs from anything Björk has done to date, primarily due to her choice to step back and let the music breathe with its own disquieting rhythm. Pristinely recorded and intimate in the extreme, this is a hypnotic and, at times, dark and compelling soundtrack.

Björk in Surround

DR9 was mixed in 5.1 surround using a Pro Tools|HD 3 Accel system with a 192 I/O audio interface and SYNC I/O and MIDI I/O peripherals. The Pro Tools system was sync'd directly to picture using imported QuickTime files. As Sigurdsson tells it, mixing in surround would have been difficult without a Pro Tools|HD system.

"The main benefit was being able to instantly recall everything," he says. "On an analog board, it becomes quite complicated to set up a 5.1 mix — it takes a lot of work to do automated panning and other things that it just takes a second to do in Pro Tools."

Instant recall was particularly helpful in modifying the music to accommodate changes in the film during the editing process. "That's kind of the nature of film editing," Sigurdsson explains. "Scenes are going back and forth, and their lengths are changing every day. We really wanted to be able to be flexible with the mixing. Before this, we were used to always hearing everything at the mixing stage — you know, just starting with a fresh mix going through the board — but this time, we came in with the mixes about 80 percent finished. Rather than recalling settings and having to do a mix and print it again and edit it, we could just edit the multi-track if we had to make things shorter or longer. That was a big advantage."

Where some artists new to the surround format might have seen daunting challenges, Björk saw only possibilities. This was especially true for the 16-piece brass and woodwind ensemble used on "Hunter Vessel" and its companion piece, "Vessel Shimenawa," both of which surge with a lush wave of wet, sustained tones and bright staccato bursts. Björk composed both pieces using Sibelius notation software, then imported the program's MIDI files into Pro Tools and gradually replaced the sounds generated in Sibelius with actual instruments and synthesized sounds.

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"For those two pieces, it was really liberating to have what was basically a 20-piece orchestra and be able to write five parts for each piece," Björk recalls with some amusement. "So in a way you've got 100 players on top of each other! I've worked for so long with Pro Tools now, I can hardly imagine doing that any other way, on reel-to-reel or something. I would have done the piece in a very different way if it weren't for Pro

Tools. It's really easy to work with."

Integrating sound and picture was also much easier using a Pro Tools system. "Most of the time we were looking at the picture while we were doing the music — especially the final touches. Sound and picture are on the same page in the computer, so you can rewind as many times as you want, move parts around, and use slo-mo and precisely place something. It's just easy to operate."

For now, most of us can only enjoy the stereo mix of *DR9* — the 5.1 mixes will be available in mid-2006. "It's kind of sad to have to do that," Björk admits, "but at the same time, if you only make records for people with 5.1 systems, you would just be making music for rich people!" She laughs. "And that's something I don't want to do."

Slice, Dice, and Splice



Björk and Sigurdsson found the editing capabilities of Pro Tools software to be invaluable when working with so many acoustically recorded sources. The eerie vocal sketch "Bath," for example, was constructed using only a single recording of Björk's voice with a CD of Akira Rabelais' piano treatments playing in the background. "I put the take in Pro Tools five times and edited the hell out of it!" she says. Björk's close-up, breathy phrasings—which at one point dissolve into a lo-fi harmonic distortion that resembles a synth tone—float in and out of the mix, making the song ebb and flow with a weirdly meditative mood.

The vocal edits are even more involved on "Storm." Based on a song called "Nameless," which Björk only performed live during her 2003 tour, the DR9 version was pieced together using multiple live takes selected from endless hours of raw stereo ADAT tape. Björk's voice is on the left channel and her live vocal effects, created onstage by touring musician Leila Arab with an Eventide H-3000 harmonizer, are on the right.

"The original performances were a pretty analog experience," Björk says, "but I worked on this a lot in Pro Tools. Whatever Leila was doing had also leaked into my microphone, so you had to basically do crossfades to blend the vocal and effects. I think there are ten edits in it, using maybe six or seven concerts. We could have gone back into the studio and recorded it again, but I wanted that live, urgent feeling, because the majority of the movie is very subdued. I thought the mood needed that kind of raw energy."

"Ambergris March" is another product of meticulous editing, this time with percussion as the sound source. As Sigurdsson explains, "Mark Bell and I sampled a lot of Japanese shakers, bells, and wood blocks that we picked up in Japan. So to start, I might record a track of me playing shakers, and then I would edit that in Pro Tools. I would try to keep longer regions, with movement in the sample — not just a single hit — so it sounds more organic. Then I would export the regions to [Native Instruments'] Kontakt and drag them across the keyboard icon. From there I just played them back into Pro Tools on a keyboard."

"Each song has its own needs, so you never really know until it's done. That's what I really love about music."

The ease of editing and adjusting the time of audio in Pro Tools also came into play when recording the brass and woodwinds. On "Hunter Vessel" and "Vessel Shimenawa," Sigurdsson used the Pro Tools Beat Detective tool to time-correct the staccato sections and added subtle low-end insertions to thicken the overall sound of the orchestra.

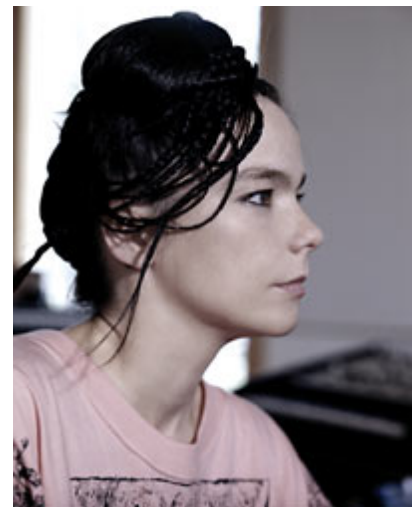
"I basically took the whole brass section and duplicated it," he says. "Then I pitch-shifted that down an octave and used Beat Detective to quantize everything. Then over that, I played a deep orchestra bass drum sound and a sampled prepared piano — a really low string — to give it more weight. I always try to use longer performances to keep it from sounding like it has been sampled. That way, things tend to sound more organic, even though they're manipulated quite a lot."

Respect the Past, Embrace the Future

Despite the frequent references to the soundtrack's Japanese musical traditions and instruments, Björk was careful not to cross the line into cultural thievery. "Overall, I felt really funny about just copying Japanese culture and putting my name on it," she says. "I think it's like what colonizers do — and coming from a place like Iceland, which was a colony of Denmark for 600 years, it's something that I'm really sensitive to."

In fact, throughout the soundtrack, Björk clearly demonstrates her respect for Japanese culture. She does so sometimes by stepping back from her own electronic sensibilities. The track "Holographic Entrypoint," for example, features the distinctive Noh singing of Shiro Nomura and the traditional woodblock percussion and chants of Shonosuke Okura, recorded in a completely dry setting.

Ultimately, though, the most unique quality of the soundtrack may be Björk's integration of traditional and modern elements. "I always find it really exciting, personally — the merging of sequenced, machine-driven things and real acoustic instruments," she says. "And what excites me most is that you never know beforehand at what point they will meet. When you start to introduce



acoustic instruments, sometimes it's after you've done five percent of it that you get that merged, magical moment, and sometimes it's not until after 95 percent. Each song has its own needs, so you never really know until it's done. That's what I really love about music."

Bill Murphy is a regular contributor to Remix, Future Music, and Guitar World's Bass Guitar magazines. He is researching an in-depth and unprecedented critique of the early '70s electronic music of Miles Davis.