

The Artvark Saxophone Quartet is perhaps one of the busiest and most innovative saxophone quartets in the business. Many readers may have heard of their collaboration with the Apollo Saxophone Quartet, featured in the autumn 2019 issue of *Clarinet & Saxophone*. Now, Artvark are back with their latest project, *Mother of Thousand*, recorded during lockdown and drawing on many varied influences. The project is named after the plant Mother of Thousands, a succulent plant that grows baby plantlets on the edge of its leaves. The plantlets are dropped on the ground, where they grow roots of their own and develop into adult plants. The compositional process Artvark used means that *Mother of Thousand* developed in much the same way as the plant grows, with new ideas springing from each previous idea.

Hailing from the Netherlands, Artvark comprises Bart Wirtz (alto), Rolf Delfos (alto), Mete Erker (tenor) and Peter Broekhuizen (baritone), and on *Mother of Thousand* they are joined by Leo van Oostrom for one track. Leo has one of the most significant collections of historical saxophones in the world, and has previously collaborated with Artvark. On the track *A Slide's Nest*, Artvark and Leo play three Swanee saxophones and two slide saxophones, which create a completely unique and magical soundworld. Now very rare, slide saxophones were surprisingly popular for a short period in the 1920s, produced by

ARTVARK SAXOPHONE QUARTET

Alastair Penman hears from Artvark members Mete Erker and Peter Broekhuizen about Mother of Thousand, a new project exploring historical instruments and modern recording techniques to create fresh soundworlds

around five different manufacturers. The Swanee saxophones (named after the Swanee whistle) were perhaps the most popular. All slide saxophones operated on the simple premise of using a slide to change the length of the instrument and hence the note produced; a simple concept but very challenging to play.

Artvark also play Leo van Oostrom's instruments on the track *Inner Circle*, using saxophones built in Adolphe Sax's workshop between 1861 and 1866, again creating a rather distinctive and special sound. Not content with just using historical instruments, the group also experimented with modern recording and production techniques; whether it be placing a snare drum between the baritone saxophone and the microphone, or using extreme panning of instruments to create the effect of the quartet in constant motion, there is always something innovative about Artvark's compositions and performances.

Over Zoom, I caught up with Artvark members Mete Erker and Peter Broekhuizen to find out more about the album and the quartet's compositional and collaborative processes.



Alastair Penman: Can you tell me a little about how the *Mother of Thousand* project came about?

Mete Erker: We've been together as a quartet for 17 years and have strong interests and influences from different art forms such as dance, poetry and classical music. We have always tried to alternate our albums between collaborative and Artvark-only projects, so after our last collaboration with the Apollo Saxophone Quartet it was time for an Artvark-only album. Then Covid happened. We were very fortunate, however, that Bart had just built a state-of-the-art studio, so everything came together; we had time and we had a place, so we spent a whole year working together in the studio. This made it a completely different experience to the usual recording process, where composers bring completed pieces to be performed. We would bring half a piece or a small idea to the studio, then we could record and listen to it and see what was needed to develop it. This meant we could explore

slide saxophones, not using them in their typical role as a comedic instrument, but reflecting the music of Arvo Pärt, creating a serious piece for the old instruments with polyphonic lines. So there are really many different influences on the album.

AP: Leo has a huge collection of instruments; how did you choose which ones to use?

ME: Aside from the slide saxophones, we wanted to go right back to the source. The instruments we chose were the closest we could get, made in Adolphe Sax's workshop between 1861 and 1866. Leo had the original wooden mouthpieces as well. You can't get any closer than that!

AP: Are the saxophones different to play?

ME: Completely – we're still learning to do it! If you listen closely, I only play about four different notes on *Inner Circle*. We are only

AP: And how about the slide saxophones?

ME: We fell in love with these straight away, so much so that we are now developing our own slide saxophone, working with Leo and Nico Bodewes, a top repairer from Amsterdam.

PB: Our respect for the slide saxophone continues to grow because it is so difficult to build an instrument. First, Leo and Nico are creating a copy of the old saxophones, and then they will try to develop something new, but we don't quite know what it will turn out to be yet.

AP: You mentioned that you explored lots of recording techniques on the album, and I see from the liner notes that Bart's solo on *STNKS* was recorded on an iPhone – tell me a little more about how that came about?



When we perform on these instruments live, there is a real sense of respect from the audience and an appreciation of their unique sound

different forms and textures, and the main thing we are interested in with Artvark – sound. We were looking for different sounds, both in recording and playing techniques as well as Leo van Oostrom's historic instruments. And because we were focusing on sound, much of the music that developed was minimalist. This was also influenced by the pandemic and the feeling of time being stretched out.

Peter Broekhuizen: It was time for introspection and looking back on what was important to us before the pandemic. One such experience was a set of concerts we performed in Amsterdam with Philip Glass. His music was very powerful to us, so that is another reason why one of the influences on *Mother of Thousand* became minimalist music. Another influence was working with Leo and his instruments. Some of the instruments that particularly attracted us were the slide saxophones from around 1926 to 1927. We also recently did a project with a string quartet from the Concertgebouw Orchestra and one of the pieces that struck us was an arrangement for string quartet and saxophone quartet of a work by Arvo Pärt. We wanted to write a piece for the

Bart Wirtz playing a slide saxophone



interested in the sound, not necessarily mastering the old instruments, and sound-wise this piece is completely different. When we perform on these instruments live, there is a real sense of respect from the audience and an appreciation of their unique sound.

PB: The sound is so warm, and the instruments are so beautifully built. The range is slightly smaller on the baritone I use, from low B to high D sharp so the bell is somewhat shorter and it's only half the weight of my usual instrument. There is no resistance at all when playing the instruments, but they produce such a beautiful, warm sound.

ME: He was just doodling around and recorded an idea on his iPhone. It turned out to be a brilliant solo and a completely different sound recorded through the phone, so we decided to keep it on the final track – it was never the intention.

AP: Did you find that having so much time in the studio made you use more production tools that you wouldn't otherwise have done?

ME: Yes, totally. But it still had to sound like a saxophone quartet, so many of the effects are very subtle or were added in post-production. For example, on *Inner Circle* the saxophones are constantly moving through the speakers. I only play four notes, but they are always shifting in a subtle way; it has to make sense for the music.

AP: How much of the production are you able to take into live performances?

PB: When the acoustics of the room aren't too challenging our sound engineer can reproduce everything. It's not exactly the same as the record because you can also hear us acoustically, but for example on *Inner Circle*, he can do the extreme panning of the saxophones that switches every note. Bart knows how all the effects on the album work and has worked with our fantastic ➡

sound engineer, Ted, who has been able to produce live effects that we never thought would be possible. When we did the launch concert, we had a couple of days to work on the live sound so we could get everything as close as possible.

AP: Tell me a little more about the collaborative writing process – are all the pieces worked on together from the beginning, or does someone take the lead on each piece?

ME: Someone takes the lead. Sometimes they bring a piece that's already very advanced and we just work on it a little, or sometimes we end up changing it completely. For example, on this disc Rolf brought the piece *Ubiquitous*, but when we were in the studio we ended up improvising on the final section. We then decided to use the improvised material for a new piece, so the piece was divided in two and that's where the pieces *Ubiquitous M81* and *M64* came from. Very occasionally there might be something that we can't do live, if we overdubbed an extra part for example, and then we might end up going back to the original version of the music for concerts, which sometimes feels like re-learning our own music. So there are a number of stages to the compositional process which are really interesting.

PB: *Ubiquitous M81* is also interesting because we wanted to create a muffled groove. We tried putting a cloth in the saxophone and we liked it so much we kept it in the final recording. We also do this when playing the piece live.

AP: There are some interesting track names on the album – can you tell me where they came from?

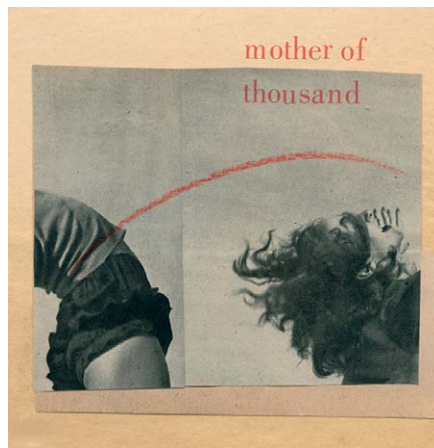
ME: M81 and M64 are galaxies – M81 contains The Great Bear and M64 is the Black Eye Galaxy, which rotates in two different directions at the same time, meaning new stars are still being formed at its centre. Like with the music, we discussed all the titles and artwork very carefully, because we wanted everything on the album to have the same feeling. The cover was designed by a fantastic Flemish artist, Katrien de Blauwer, and again it has this feeling of movement and repetition and the same feel as the music, so inspiration can come from all different places and art forms.

AP: Did the pandemic mean you spent more time together than usual?

PB: Totally. Everything was forbidden initially and we couldn't have the group in one room, so we felt completely lost, going from everything to nothing overnight. After three months we were able to be together

again and start writing new pieces, and we could take advantage of the time to work really hard on the album. We weren't just working on the album during this time though, but also on other new projects that will happen in the future. We were lucky to have a very productive time.

AP: You collaborate with lots of different people – how do you choose your collaborators?



There's no magic formula – you just have to be true to yourself as a performer and as a group, and really go for it

PB: The choice of who we work with is becoming more and more important. It's a huge amount of time, effort and money to bring a project to life, so it's very important who we work with. If we collaborate with someone, it's because we really want to.

ME: We've become very picky!

AP: Can you tell me about any future collaboration plans?

ME: In June, we developed a new programme with a poet in the north of Holland where they also speak a different language – Frisian. He writes poetry both in Dutch and Frisian, and we had a great opportunity to open the International Poetry Festival in Rotterdam, but this is project we're going to take to other stages as well. We're also collaborating with an organ player, and we want to revisit a past collaboration with Claron McFadden, who is an outrageously good classical soprano who can also really sing the blues.

PB: We've learnt to plan far ahead, so we've already got a project with Artvark, string orchestra and percussion planned for 2023, and we're really looking forward to it. We really want to play with the Apollo Saxophone Quartet again as well – we miss those guys! Maybe we'll even do another album together, but the current

situation is difficult, so we just have to be patient. However, we always keep in touch and I'm sure we'll be together again in the future.

AP: Do you have any advice for young players on how to forge a creative and successful career?

ME: There's no magic formula – you just have to be true to yourself as a performer and as a group, and really go for it! I'm inspired by a recent interview from Quentin Tarantino, when he was asked why he made the movies he did, and he said he just made the movies he wanted to see.

PB: Find your own voice. Be true to your own voice and what you really want. You never know what's going to happen; we never knew we'd end up here with Artvark. When we started we just made the best music we could, and then we found we wanted to write our own music. If you can write your own music, do it, and if not, find composers that you really like.

ME: Finding your own voice is really a case of finding what you like and what matters to you. It's not just musical either – one of the reasons Artvark works is we're all great friends. When you find people you can hang out with and make music with, that's an absolutely golden combination and you should invest in it. Those are the important things if you want a long-term relationship. It's the same for artistic and business partners. For example, we have a good long-term relationship with a festival director, because he is just like us; he wants to make a unique experience for the festival. If you're interested in other people and what they do, then they'll be more interested in you. Festival directors have so many people contacting them; if you want to play somewhere, at least go and check it out first.

PB: Don't be afraid of hard work. It takes a long time to practise and develop ideas – be patient, determined and stick to the plan. ■

Artvark's latest album, Mother of Thousand, is available on vinyl or CD directly from the quartet by emailing info@artvarksq.com. It is also available on all major download and streaming platforms. You can watch videos of the first three singles on the album, A Slide's Nest, Inner Circle and STNKS on YouTube and the quartet's website: www.artvarksq.com