



This quartet is the culmination of Glen Steenkiste's long fascination with the harmonium, expanding beautifully upon the themes laid out by Helvette's sprawling *Droomharmonium* (2018). That said, this album feels like a bit of a different animal altogether, as this league of Belgian drone artists takes the kernel of Steenkiste's vision to a considerably transformed place. In fact, Het Interstedelijk Harmoniumverbond feels like an inspired continuation of the grand tradition of La Monte Young-style minimalism, weaving complexly harmonic and gorgeously undulating dronescapes that favorably call to mind masterpieces like *The Electric Harpsichord*

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The earliest origins of Steenkiste's long love affair with the harmonium remain unknown to me, but it was the band Pelt that first opened his eyes to the possibilities of making it the foundation for his own work. It was more of a slowly gestating philosophical evolution than a radical, immediate transformation, however. Though Steenkiste had played similar instruments before, it was not until he was touring through England in 2010 (as part of Sylvester Anfang II) that he finally got to spend time with the real deal. It is quite fitting that it was an Anfang tour that ultimately (if indirectly) lit the fuse for this endeavor, as it seems like nearly every experimental musician in Belgium has done time in one of Anfang's incarnations. In the case of the Harmoniumverbond, Steenkiste shares that history with Steve Marreyt (Edgar Wappenhalter), though I am delighted to report that they were also both involved with something called Chainsaw Gutsfuck. The quartet is rounded out by David Edren, who previously collaborated with Steenkiste in Brahmen Raag, as well as Brecht Ameel of Razen. All four artists live in different cities, so it was not until Steenkiste was approached by Kraak about creating an ensemble for the Eastern Daze festival in 2017 that a project of this scope became a viable possibility. Prior to that, Steenkiste had experimented quite a bit with multitracking himself to achieve a similar effect, but the fixed nature of that approach fundamentally undercut the organic, flowing vision that he was trying to achieve.

The album is divided into two side-long pieces, "Balg" (Bellows) and "Reit" (Reeds). In a general sense, the two pieces are quite similar, as each is essentially a single rich chord that endlessly waxes, wanes, and subtly transforms over the course of roughly twenty minutes. The

Brainwashed - Het Interstedelijk Harmoniumverbond

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two pieces have somewhat divergent trajectories though, as "Balg" opens with a dense, dissonant chord teeming with murky, ugly harmonies, while "Riet" opens with a single, quavering tone and steadily builds from there. The starting point is almost irrelevant, however, as it is the blossoming and gently hallucinatory evolution of each piece that is the real show: pulses and oscillations cohere, clouds of overtones swirl, shades of darkness and light flicker and vanish, and new chord shapes endlessly converge and dissipate. If I had to choose, "Balg" is probably the stronger of the two pieces, as it achieves a kind of majestic, transcendent heaviness right from the start, seamlessly blurring the lines between immersive, hypnotic reverie and a menacingly shivering and shimmering haze of uneasy harmonies. "Reit," on the other hand, is more of a slow-burning affair, gradually amassing density and complex harmonies as it quietly moves towards a quivering and elegiac crescendo. Both pieces are wonderful and unfold in a very satisfying and absorbing dynamic arc.

It is not exactly fair to compare this album to *Droomharmonium*, as the latter was a solo release and Het Interstedelijk Harmoniumverbond is very much a collaborative endeavor, but it does feel like Steenkiste's vision became much more focused over the last couple of years. However, it is equally possible that his vision did not change at all and he merely benefited greatly from recording in an actual studio and having three other artists to help shape these pieces into their optimal forms. I would be curious to know if these pieces were performed completely "live" and how much overdubbing or editing might have taken place, as Steenkiste took quite a purist approach when he was on his own. This album feels considerably more edited and is the better for it. Rather than suffering from "too many cooks" syndrome, Het Interstedelijk Harmoniumverbond have chiseled that vision to taut, uncluttered, and fluidly unfolding perfection. While it might be a stretch to call these drone pieces "compositions," these loosely structured channelings feel thoughtfully condensed and distilled, unhurriedly yet ceaselessly moving forward at all times and never wasting a single note or lapsing into stasis. Moreover, the spell this album casts is a beautifully timeless one, deftly dissolving the delineations that separate the medieval, the ritualistic, and the contemporary experimental music scene. Het Interstedelijk Harmoniumverbond is the rarest of jewels: a four-way collaboration that can easily stand with any of the individual artists' strongest work.

Samples can be found [here](#) .