

Floating Points Biography

It was the arrival of a Studer A80 master recorder at the front door of **Sam Shepherd** - otherwise known as **Floating Points** - that caused him to begin building the studio that led to the creation of his debut album, ***Elaenia*** (due out via **Pluto** in the UK and **Luaka Bop** in the US on 6 November). After a slight miscalculation meant that he could not physically get the thing inside his home, what happened next can only be described as a beautiful example of the butterfly effect. Breaking away from making electronic music on his laptop, the DJ, producer and composer spent the next five years engineering *Elaenia*, all the while deejaying in cities across the globe and working towards his PhD in neuroscience. An incredibly special album that draws inspiration from classical, jazz, electronic music, soul and even Brazilian popular music, *Elaenia* - named after the bird of the same name - is the epitome of the forward-thinking Floating Points vision in 2015.

From an early age, Shepherd's mind has always been musically inclined. As a chorister at Manchester Cathedral, he developed his musicianship through performing up to six services a week whilst at the same time studying piano and composition at Chetham's School of Music. There, he undertook lessons which not only improved his technical knowledge but developed his love of electronic and jazz music too. "That time was crazy - I was listening to **Bill Evans** and **Morton Subotnick**, **Kenny Wheeler** and **Toru Takemitsu** amongst many others all on the same day," Shepherd recalls. "These inspirations have stuck with me all the way through to making this record."

Growing up in Manchester, Shepherd was constantly upheaving his parents' house, turning it into a makeshift studio that allowed his highly curious mind to do as it pleased. There would be a drum kit in the living room - a cello in the kitchen - wires trailing every nook and cranny all the way up to his bedroom. When he eventually moved to London to attend university, he lost that creative freedom, yet refused to let the ensuing years of limitation affect his work by making idiosyncratic electronic music on his computer - a move that put him firmly on the radar with records like 'Vacuum' and 'Shadows'. "The first stuff I put out was around that time," he explains. "All this time, I wanted to be sharing my other, live music - but recording was prohibitively expensive."

It was these prohibitions (and a lack of space for his ever-growing collection of equipment) that led Shepherd to relocate to a London-based studio. Having more room allowed Shepherd's music to reach much grander and ambitious heights, his work with the Floating Points Ensemble paving the way for things to come. Shepherd's collection of equipment continued to bloom, and on *Elaenia*, the range of

instruments he played himself is astounding: the Oberheim OB8, Arp Odyssey, piano, Fender Rhodes, vibraphone, marimba, Rhodes Chroma, Buchla 101, 200e and 100 series modular synthesizers were all performed by him, resulting in a distinct and personable sound that echoes throughout the whole record. "I was lucky enough to spend some time in Vancouver with **Richard Smith**, who has the most formidable early origin Buchla setup," he says, 'For Marmish' came from there, but a lot of the noises that came out of the sessions ultimately bent my mind and served to refresh my use of electronics. The Mood Hut guys introduced us - spending a few days at his recording studio was a dream."

The more time he spent in London and DJing around the world, the more friends Shepherd made and recruited for the current incarnation of his band. On *Elaenia*, **Tom Skinner** and **Leo Taylor** contributed drums (Skinner playing on 'Silhouettes I', 'II' & 'III'), with **Susumu Mukai** taking up bass, **Qian Wu** and **Edward Benton** sporting violins, **Matthew Kettle** on the viola and **Joe Zeitlin** on the cello. Help was also on hand for vocals, with **Rahel Debebe-Dessaegne** and **Layla Rutherford** both lending their voices alongside Shepherd's own. Every moment on *Elaenia* is intricately and meticulously executed - every noise finely tweaked and tuned to perfection. "I got the Rhodes Chroma in the middle of recording," he remembers. "It's a funny machine, since it only works properly for thirty minutes every six months. When it's working though, it's phenomenal! I had bits on the record I was waiting months to record just because there was a particular sound I wanted from the Chroma."

Like his contemporaries and good friends **Caribou** and **Four Tet**, Shepherd has nurtured the Floating Points name into one renowned for ambitious and forward-thinking DJ sets, having performed all over the world at events and clubs such as **Output NYC**, **Trouw**, **Sonar**, **Unit Tokyo**, **Panorama Bar** and, of course, **Nuits Sonores** (which lent its name to his seminal track from summer 2014); as well as the much-missed **Plastic People**, where he held his monthly residency for five years. His love for digging through recordings from around the world is just as huge as the venues themselves - Shepherd has an ear for everything from Brazilian legends such as **Jose Mauro**, **Gal Costa** and **Hareton Salvagnini** right through to the 1970's Embryo Records band **Air**. Overall, influences on *Elaenia* run wide and deep and are charmingly eclectic - Shepherd names *Laughing Stock* by **Talk Talk** as a critical influence in the making of the record, for example, as well as the leftfield leanings of *Circles* by **William S. Fischer**.

For the past ten years, all roads Shepherd has followed have slowly been leading to *Elaenia* - an album with roots deep in his formative

years that draw upon everything Shepherd has done to date. His debut album proper, *Elaenia* is the culmination of all things Sam Shepherd: the Eglo label boss, the ensemblist, the producer, scientist and visual artist - and that's only scraping the surface. He created the artwork for *Elaenia* himself by making a harmonograph from scratch, and set it to various light sources that responded to the album track 'For Marmish'. "I saw a harmonograph on display at the science museum in London a few years ago, as well as a couple of drawings produced by the machine," he explains. "The shame of it though was that you didn't get to see it actually in action. So I built one" Like much of *Elaenia* itself, the artwork is meticulously crafted - Shepherd used fibre optic cables, photograph paper, even a modular synthesizer to generate light pulses. He gave the same attention to detail to the artwork as he did every moment *Elaenia*, an album that is almost a hundred percent hand-crafted from compositions right down to its instruments.

The mesmerising ebbs and flows of *Elaenia* span moments of light and dark; rigidity and freedom; elegance and chaos. There is the lush, euphoric enlightenment of 'Silhouettes', a three-part composition that acts as a testament to those early days Shepherd spent playing in various ensembles - complete with an immensely tight rhythm section that ends up providing a cathartic, blissful release. Elsewhere, Shepherd's knack for masterful late night sets bare fruition to the hypnotic, electronic pulse of 'Argenté', a welcome change of pace. "I certainly like pauses in DJing," he explains. "Especially in all night sets where I assume dancers would welcome moments of calm... why not! Plastic People taught me that. When I think of the forty or so minutes of this album, there are moments of dance, and moments of utter stillness. I've found that with my dancefloor productions, patience with build ups can make that release all the sweeter." *Elaenia* draws upon the many parts of Sam's life, from DJ to artist to inventor, and provides the clearest context of his musical skills to date - it's the end result of the direction he has always been moving in.

By the time the final track 'Peroration Six' comes around, that release is sweet indeed. Building euphoria upon layers of driving basslines, untamed drums and soaring electronics, the result is one of the biggest tension-and-release moments in music this year - a skyrocketing end to a mammoth five-year journey that sees Shepherd play all of his cards at once; eschewing spiritual 3am electronics with the jubilation of his previous dancefloor-ready singles and the intricate and highly ambitious essence of his DJ sets. *Elaenia* is a series of suites designed to be devoured in one sitting that has its own unique voice, with only one track - the title track - speaking a direct and tangible story, relating to a dream Shepherd had about a migrating elaenia's life being absorbed by a forest.

Ultimately, *Elaenia* packs performances that are at times delicate and intense - the first full-bodied, complete Floating Points work so far, and provides context to the music that Shepherd has been making to date. Every DJ set he's performed, every talent he has produced, every composition he has written are thought of as precursors to *Elaenia* - a dazzling score which puts Shepherd in the spotlight as a composer who has produced an album that bridges the gap between his rapturous dance music and formative classical roots.