



PIONEERING GERMAN electronic band Kraftwerk are bringing their multimedia extravaganza of clinical, repetitive rhythms and addictive pop melodies – synchronised with visual projections, robots and cutting-edge animation – to Hong Kong on May 4.

They are still revelling after rave reviews for eight sold-out 3-D concerts in London in February. Incredible demand for “Kraftwerk – The Catalogue 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8”, their retrospective performances at London’s Tate Modern art gallery, crashed the venue’s website within hours of the 10,000 tickets going on sale.

And little wonder. One of the most influential bands in contemporary music, Kraftwerk are lauded as the godfathers of synth-pop, techno, electro, even of house and hip hop.

Britain’s *Observer* newspaper wrote, “no other band since The Beatles has given so much to pop culture”.

“We will perform two hours of compositions from the Catalogue in Hong Kong,” Kraftwerk co-founder Ralf Hütter says speaking on the telephone from the band’s secretive Kling Klang Studio outside Düsseldorf. “And for the first time in the city [Kraftwerk last appeared here in 2008], everything has been transformed into 3-D.”

Kraftwerk had also hoped to take the tour to the Strawberry Music Festival in Shanghai at the end of this month, but the Ministry of Culture denied the German quartet visas because of their scheduled performance at a pro-Tibetan independence concert in 1999. That performance in Washington DC was ultimately cancelled because of a thunderstorm.

Hütter admits to still being on a high after the London shows, for which critical praise was near universal. “It was a fantastic environment,” Hütter says of the

London gigs. “There were a lot of artistic connections because Kraftwerk represents electronic energy, electric energy and the Tate Modern’s Turbine Hall is an old *kraftwerk* [the band’s name literally means ‘power station’]. It’s an old, turbine-driven power station.”

Kraftwerk’s 3-D performances – unveiled at New York’s Museum of Modern Art in 2012 – are the latest example of the band’s four-decade mission to push the limits of technology and perfect their distinctive stage shows. Among the earliest users of electronic instruments in popular music, the quartet’s signature sound has profoundly influenced a diverse range of bands and artists from The Human League, Joy Division and David Bowie to Bjork, Kanye West and Radiohead.

Of course, Kraftwerk’s distinctive man-machine aesthetic did not come about overnight. Hütter and original partner Florian Schneider, who met as art students

Men at

Kraftwerk are Germany's gift to contemporary music. **Gary Jones** speaks to the electronic pioneers ahead of their Hong Kong return

werk



in Düsseldorf in the late 1960s, were just two of many home-grown musicians searching at that time for a distinctively German musical voice that would provide them with distance from American rock music and the popular British beat groups.

Going by the name Organisation, Hütter and Schneider initially experimented by mixing traditional instruments (notably Schneider's flute, but also guitar, violin and others, that were processed via manipulated tapes and electronic effects) with primitive synthesisers and electronic keyboards. Kraftwerk, says Hütter, was formed in 1970 with the establishment of Kling Klang Studio. "We created a new electronic or contemporary, industrial, social musical language from zero," says Hütter. "We didn't have a language, so we created our own."

From the very beginning, Hütter says, the "Kraftwerk multimedia concept" was

about more than simply making orchestrated beeps, clangs and whirrs, and he frequently uses the word *gesamtkunstwerk*, which German composer Richard Wagner employed in the mid-19th century to describe the bringing together of sound and visual media to create a "total artwork".

"We played in galleries and arts centres more than in music [venues]," says Hütter, who has always been Kraftwerk's prime source of lyrics. "We made videos, graphics, photographs, created album artwork ... I am very much into words and tone poetry. Florian was into synthetic voices. Over the years we worked with many different musicians, drummers, sound engineers and technicians, and today we are in 3-D. It's been a constant progression."

Kraftwerk's big breakthrough came with the 1974 album *Autobahn*. "It was our

first electronic concept album – the beginning of what we call electro," says Hütter. "Before that we had three albums of transition from electro-acoustic music, with tapes and all kinds of experiments, but the first masterwork is *Autobahn*."

From *Autobahn* through the album *Trans-Europe Express* (1977) to the single *Tour De France* (1983) and album *Tour De France Soundtracks* (2003), travel appears to be a repeating concept in Kraftwerk's oeuvre. "It's not so much about travel, which means going from here to there," says Hütter, who is an obsessive cyclist. "We are more interested in movement, continual movement, without any goals. Dynamics is a better description ... social dynamics and changes in society. I think that's the main theme of Kraftwerk music."

Despite Kraftwerk's cold, robotic, man-

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and appreciation for the absurd to be found in the band's work.

Hütter claims Kraftwerk's roots in Germany's Rhine area, with tribal-Germanic, French, Roman and other European cultural influences competing and cross-fertilising through the centuries, is the reason. "Humour is part of our cultural cosmos," he says.

To many ears, the name Kling Klang - which actually can be translated from German as "sounding sound" - may sound slightly ridiculous, but Kraftwerk's private studio is something that Hütter speaks of extremely seriously, almost with reverence.

"Kling Klang is a music machine,"

says the self-proclaimed *musikarbeiter*, or music worker. "It's not a building - buildings don't make music. It's changing all the time, incorporating and connecting all our instruments, our synthesisers, our computers, our visuals, our graphics and animations.

"In the second part of the '70s and all the way through the '80s we couldn't do concerts because we couldn't bring Kling Klang Studio with us. Everything was so complex. In the '90s, with the digital age, we transformed Kraftwerk on to laptops. Now we can travel to cities like Hong Kong, with the Kling Klang Studio going with us."

Being ahead of their time, says Hütter, who is the last surviving member of Kraftwerk's classic *Autobahn* line-up (Schneider left the band in 2009), frequently proved a logistical nightmare whenever they did attempt to take their music on the road, suggesting Kraftwerk's '70s vision of the future is finally popular music's present.

"We would bring out the Kling Klang

Studio to play live and there was always failure," he recalls. "Cables would break, knobs and switches would always fall off ... but we just kept going. Technology developed and now, with digital music machines and computer programs, it is at the level where the Kraftwerk concept works. The machines have finally caught up with us."

Finally, at the age of 66, Kraftwerk's longest-running man-machine says he is encouraged by being considered the elder statesman of electronic music. "It's a source of energy," Hütter says. "The feedback from all generations of electronic musicians is so encouraging - it keeps me going. It's like what I wrote in the lyrics for [1983 single] *The Robots* ['We're charging our battery/ And now we're full of energy']. The feedback is doing exactly that."

Kraftwerk, May 3, 8pm, Star Hall, Kitec, 1 Trademart Drive, Kowloon Bay, HK\$580, HK\$780, HK Ticketing. Inquiries: 2989 9239

