

## ***Sounds that touch the soul***

***Gerd J. Pohl in conversation with the Waldbröl sound artist Jochen Fassbender***

*translated by Lisa Ewert*

A pervasive yet completely underestimated danger of our time is the so-called acoustic smog. Countless people suffer from it, but only a few realise the cause: the pollution of our audible environment. There is no time of day or night when we are not surrounded by disruptive noises, often only perceptible in the background, such as the constant hum of a distant motorway, but incessant nonetheless.

In the cities, the problem is much more evident in the face of continuous street and construction noise, as well as the constant exposure to advertising announcements and canned music. However, even rural and quieter spaces are increasingly affected. Many people literally cannot find peace anymore, becoming so desensitized that they no longer even notice the constant sound barrage in their daily lives. Real places of silence and conscious listening have become rare—a trend that sound artist and instrument inventor Jochen Fassbender aims to counter with his research and work.

Jochen Fassbender's instruments are in use in numerous establishments, including Mary Bauermeister's studio in Forsbach and the House of Human Support Pütz-Roth. There, Gerd J. Pohl works with them as part of meditative play activities for children. His theatre in the puppet pavilion in Bensberg has predominantly used Fassbender's instruments to musically shape the staging of Antoine de Saint-Exupéry's "The Little Prince" (2017, directed by P. Willi Beine). This led him to the idea of speaking with the sound artist for the Rheinisch-Bergischer Calendar.

### **How and when did you get into music and how and when into sound art?**

Even as a child, I always experimented and played with anything that made a sound. I also received lessons in playing the flute and violin. However, I wasn't really interested in playing by sheet music. From my current perspective, I see it like this: I didn't want to replicate the music of past times; instead, I always had the desire to discover my own music. In my youth, I also took trumpet lessons. Yet, to my parent's annoyance, I didn't like playing my etudes but preferred to retreat to the cellar where we had an old piano. I opened the lid, pressed the pedal, and played the trumpet. The long reverberation created by the resonating piano strings was a real treat for me. Fortunately, as an adult, I was able to maintain my passion for playing with sounds. And from the 'misplaced' actions of my childhood, my profession eventually emerged. I began to systematically explore various sound phenomena, develop innovative sound objects made of metal, stone, glass, and other materials, and discover 'unheard-of' soundscapes.

### **How would you define the difference between music and sound art?**

In traditional music, at least in Europe, there are chosen composers who have precisely notated their music. To perform their works, musicians must first spend many years learning a musical instrument as perfectly as possible and practise a lot.

In my sound art, I aim to develop instruments that allow anyone to create beautiful and impressive sounds immediately, based on their imagination and emotion. What I do might be related to jazz.

Here, too, it is mainly about improvisation. You let the music emerge from the moment and from listening to each other.

### **What is the role of sound art in an increasingly noisy world?**

Silence is a precious asset that we are losing more and more. As it is increasingly replaced by everyday noise, we find ourselves under stress and become ill. Hearing impairment, ADHD syndrome, tinnitus and sudden hearing loss are becoming widespread health issues.

In my work, a central concern is to bring silence back into focus. I create instruments that can lead back to silence through a very long resonance. Every sound and every piece of music has a specific impact on our emotions and our soul. It is only in the subsequent silence that we can become aware of this effect. This is what I always try to convey in my courses.

### **You also work a lot with young people and refugees. What social opportunities does sound art offer, particularly in the areas of integration and communication between nations and cultures?**

When people make music together—especially improvising and on an equal footing—they can engage in dialogue with each other. That's been my experience. It is something anyone can do, even if they've never held an instrument before, because everyone has a feeling for musical correlations. Music is a universal language. Anyone—whether young or old, rich or poor, healthy or ill, from any country—can understand it.

A few years ago, when many refugees arrived in Germany, I had the idea to start a music project with refugees and locals. There were hardly any professional musicians at our music gatherings, but mostly amateurs. Our performances were not flawless, but perhaps that imperfection contributed to the creation of a heartwarming atmosphere. The refugee musicians revealed aspects of themselves and their cultural backgrounds, and the interaction with locals resulted in a harmonious yet entirely new musical experience. It became evident that immigration could be a tremendous cultural enrichment for us.

For me, one of the greatest things is when art and music have a healing effect on society. Our experience showed us what music is capable of. It can be summed up in this simple formula: The opposite of a weapon is a musical instrument. With weapons, you destroy; with music, you can heal.

### **Please tell us about your travels to more distant regions, such as the Sinai.**

During the sound and listening journey in the Sinai, we ride through the desert with the participants, making music at impressive places in the landscape. I organise this journey together with the German ethnologist Katrin Biallas. What makes it special is that she was adopted by a Bedouin family in Sinai during her student years. Her family provides the camels for the participants. She feeds us three times a day at the campfire and guides us through deserts of sand and stone. The focus of the journey is the attentive perception of the breathtaking desert landscapes, listening to the sounds, and experiencing nomadic culture. The Bedouins also participate in our sound meditations. On such a journey, time slows down. Walks through a quiet landscape, where only the earth carries you and the sky opens up above you, leave a lasting impression. You will never forget them.

My trips to the noisy megacities of China are quite the opposite. But even here, a few sounds are enough, and I have everyone on my side. Due to the Cultural Revolution, the Chinese have been

robbed of their own cultural traditions and spiritual values. Many suffer from the sheer materialism in their country. And they are infinitely grateful when someone comes and makes music with them.

### **How do you find these special places to which you invite your audience? What does a place have to have to be a 'special place'?**

Before venturing into nature with a group of people, I always explore the place alone first and then consider which instruments we should use to enter into dialogue with the natural forces. Each place has its own uniqueness and distinctive acoustics, and it's crucial to discover these characteristics.

Everyone is familiar with the phenomenon of resonance. In a hallway, for instance, deep male voices may resonate particularly powerfully at a specific frequency. In other rooms, high frequencies may resonate stronger. The word 'resonance' comes from Latin and means 'to resound.' Sometimes, however, it's much more than that. It's not just the sum of two parts; rather, it's an potentiation. When we enter landscapes and seek resonance, another, much deeper, soul-spiritual level is added to this acoustic, scientifically explainable dimension.

This might sound a bit grandiose, but it's not. In everyday life, we often don't notice materials such as wood; we simply use it for burning or making furniture. However, when it is made to resonate, it tells of its inner nature, of the immense strength of the trunks that bear tons and can withstand violent storms. And when wooden instruments resonate in the forest, we can deeply empathise. We gain respect and reverence and eventually the certainty that the nature surrounding us is alive and animated.

### **How did you come to Waldbröl, and how to the train station?**

In the 1970s, the SSK (Socialist Self-Help Cologne) bought the Hermesdorf train station. The SSK brought together homeless people, people who had escaped from institutions and psychiatric wards, and a few idealistic students to lead a self-determined life and address societal issues. I was enthusiastic about this work, lived and worked in this self-help group for several years, and thus moved from Cologne to the Oberberg region. When I started a family, the SSK was in search of a larger house. So they sold the train station to a friendly family and us. Today, my sound art studio is located in the entrance hall and the former third-class waiting room.

Originally, people came to our house to be transported by train to other places. However, even afterwards, it did not lose its station-like character. People came because they longed for a place where a decent life was possible. And today, many people come to embark on journeys into new soundscapes and to enter into dialogue with whoever through sound.

### **Who are your customers? Where can your instruments be found?**

There are therapists, musicians, priests, as well as teachers and educators, even theatre or museum employees. But, in reality, anyone with a preference for beautiful sounds will get their money's worth from me. As I am also active in other countries, I now sell more frequently abroad. I interact with a wide variety of people, which is an aspect of my work that I thoroughly enjoy.

## **Which of your self-developed instruments is your favorite one?**

The instruments are like my children. I love them all and wouldn't want to be without any of them. Each one has its own unique quality. The more diverse sound objects, the greater the range of possibilities. Stone sounds can ground you, glass sounds have a more atmospheric quality. Wood makes you alert and active, and metal brings you back to dreaming. I can only touch the surface here, as there is an infinite wealth of sound possibilities, caused by the shape, the material, the movement that generates the sound, and the space that resonates. Typically, an instrument maker specialises in the production of a specific type of instrument. But that's not for me. What I love most is diversity.

## **PROFILE: JOCHEN FASSBENDER**

Jochen Fassbender (born 1957 in Cologne) studied fine art at the University of Applied Sciences for Art and Design. Since 1989, he has been intensively invested in sound art, exploring sound phenomena across various materials, forms, resonances, and methods of sound generation. He designs and builds innovative musical instruments, organises sound seminars, concerts, and exhibitions worldwide.

In 2005, Fassbender co-founded the Institute for Audiology in Witten/Ruhr, and since 2008, he has been a sound consultant for the playground equipment company Richter. His book "Sound Art and the Art of Listening" was published by Flensburger Hefte-Verlag, and since 2018, he has been offering training in sound dialogue. Together with his wife, Walli, he resides in the old Hermesdorf train station in Waldbröl, where his instruments can be viewed and tried out in a permanent exhibition by appointment.