

"In a World of Sounds – A Chat/in conversation with Jochen Fassbender

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translated by Lisa Ewert

Just sitting next to Jochen Fassbender is enough to widen the soul and bring about a hush. We were sitting in an idyllic spot behind the small disused train station Waldbröl-Hermesdorf, which is home to numerous sound objects developed by Fassbender, as well as himself and his wife. Between the tracks at our feet, I saw fresh spring flowers sprouting in the most marvellous sunlight. The questions I had brought with me lost their significance. Biography and career were not the focus. The response to my question in this regard was sparse: "I've always been interested in sounds." This was followed by an art study at the University of Applied Sciences in Cologne, as a classical music degree was not an option without a background in music. But then back to music. "Since 1987 in Waldbröl. Sold my first instrument in 1989." I didn't feel like asking for more details.

We talked about listening, which allows you to go completely inward as well as outward. It can lead to a sharp rejection of some sounds or to euphoria. What matters, however, is "listening through." What does the sound tell us? The material is important, but so is the form and the way in which the sound is produced, which determines whether a vibration occurs transversely or longitudinally. "It always starts with playing and experimenting. I hit a coffee cup or snap my fingers in the bathroom of a hotel room. What begins so mundanely can gradually develop into spiritual experiences or a new instrument." I gradually understand that Fassbender is not about "making ordinary music" and I summarize my realisation in words: "So, a single sound is actually enough." "Yes, a single tone is enough, as Arvo Pärt also says." That was the cue to go inside and listen to his instruments.

First, I was shown an impressive discovery. I learned what an overtone series is. I already knew that with every naturally produced tone, overtones resonate, playing a crucial role in the specific sound experience. The mathematical description is: the frequency of the fundamental tone is added each time. If the fundamental tone is 50Hz for example, it is followed by 100Hz, 150Hz, etc., up to infinity. Considering that the sequence of octaves consists of a doubling of the number of vibrations each time, you understand why the intervals between the overtones become smaller for perception. A wonderful instrument worked with this phenomenon: quartz glass chimes suspended in rubber bands, arranged like a glockenspiel and tuned to an overtone series over the range of five octaves. From Reinhild Brass' Hörraum („listening space“), I knew how challenging it could be to elicit a sound from such an instrument.

However, under Fassbender's hands, the sounds immediately swelled powerfully, starting at 100Hz, and then in 50Hz intervals. The vibration of the fundamental tone was not 100Hz but 50Hz. It was missing but could still be heard – deep, like a low organ tone, so deep that it could be felt as a vibration – a tremendous experience! This phenomenon had been noticed before him, without attaching further significance to it. It's called "residual tone." "If you were to blow ten blaring trombones simultaneously in pure overtones, what would happen? Could it possibly bring buildings to collapse? Did the trumpets of Jericho work in a similar way?"

While this experience may be considered an astonishing acoustic feat, it is quite different to focus on the sound of the glass chimes themselves. You feel the hollow space of the chimes as an inner fullness, something gentle yet penetrating. How to describe it? It would take a long time of reflection to find the right words if Fassbender didn't put you on the right track with a few remarks. He speaks of a caressing sound, which corresponds to the way the chimes want to be stroked with wet hands. Quite different, yet equally fascinating, is a lithophone made of chlorite slate, i.e., greenish-dark gray plates, about one to two centimeters thick, shimmering in fine irregular waves. When you play them, they can produce a great variety of different sounds. Rub them with a wooden mallet and you hear bright, almost hissing tones, telling of the hardness of the surface. Struck, they produce an outwardly directed, I would like to say, uplifting-fresh sound.

However, you can also coax a deep humming tone from them that takes you into the interior of their mountainous origin – the Central Alps, where layers originating from great depths stand on the Italian side near the Swiss border. The sound possesses an independence unaffected by anything, while a lithophone made of travertine has something sweet about it – corresponding to freshwater limestone.

Quite different from the bright but quickly fading sound of stones is that of metals. With them, you won't experience externality. The contrast between inside and outside seems to be cancelled out and their wonderful ability to resonate seems to open up spaces. Here, the form becomes important. The sound of a glockenspiel made of square bronze plates seems to possess inner friction, appears solid and resonates much less than triangular plates, which, although tuned to the same tone, seem much brighter and reminiscent of star twinkling. And finally, round plates – what do they tell us? I was particularly fond of a glockenspiel with twelve such hanging round bronze plates. Their sound is truly round and touches the heart! Fassbender recounted that once he greeted the sun in the Sinai Desert with a group of players using such plates. In the twilight, they set everything up and played quietly until the first sunbeam emerged, at which point they increased the sound to fortissimo. He had never experienced a sunrise like that before. The sun god himself seemed to appear on the horizon!

Fassbender refers to his instruments as interpreters because they have the ability to connect with the beings of nature – provided you find the right ones. He likes to visit specific places, which he first explores alone to find out which sounds might fit there. Later, with several people, he organises a "concert" for nature while listening for an echo. When we think about perception beyond the sensory limit, we primarily refer to sight and therefore say "clairvoyant." „I am not clairvoyant," says Fassbender, "but after the experiences we have, we can no longer doubt the presence of beings on the other side!"

It's about a clairaudience that accesses entirely different layers than those of the visual. The places he visits can be quite diverse. It could be a quiet valley in the Bergisches Land or a basalt cave in the Eifel that has never seen a ray of sunlight, or a marshy lake in Estonia where he rows out in small boats with his group, gathering the fish around him with the subsequent concert. 'It can be delightful, but also eerie, requiring you to overcome your fear.'

Finally, another way of using his instruments is therapeutically, as their sounds reach layers that are inaccessible to words. His copper chime glockenspiel is his first instrument. It has a

wonderfully full - "room-filling" - sound. His metal harp also consists of copper chimes, but now of thin, long ones that are not supported at their ends, but are clamped firmly in a vertical position in their centre, so that they project upwards and downwards like organ pipes. They are not struck or bowed across, but lengthwise, producing very bright and delicate tones according to the longitudinal vibration they generate. This instrument is used in the hospice area, helping the dying to relax and let go.

Why? Because these sounds herald the world into which their journey leads. Fassbender enjoys doing listening exercises with school classes, where third-graders often provide the most wonderful characterisations. When it comes to the metal harp, they speak of light, the light that the dying person is about to reach soon.

On the other hand, those who have lost a loved one, or people who have suffered a loss, need something different.

For them, the glass chime glockenspiel with its gentle sounds helps alleviate their pain and heal their wounds. It can even help with trauma. In the Waldorf School of Gummersbach, a truck collided with a school bus at full speed, fortunately without anyone being killed, but with severe physical and emotional injuries. It was students from the lower classes whom he, together with the class teacher, bedded gently and warmly in the middle of the classroom and instructed the students from the parallel class to play on the glass chime glockenspiels all around them. You can imagine how soon the tears welled up and what had been held tightly in the underground could be released!

More and more, I grasped the meaning of a word that I had merely taken note of while reading his book in the Flensburger Hefte Verlag: "Klangkunst und die Kunst des Hörens" ("Sound Art and the Art of Listening").

It is the word "resonance." This begins with the resonators, which I have so far left completely unmentioned. Many instruments have each individual tone equipped with a precisely tuned resonator. It is a hollow body made of wood or sometimes a plastic tube of a specific length that hangs down over each vibrating plate. These bodies amplify the sound and sometimes bring it to life altogether. However, the perception of the character of a sound is also a resonance phenomenon in which it is the listener's own soul that resonates and responds.

But even more so, it is playing in nature. How does the bubbling of this stream sound or the echo of that cave, and how can we relate to it so that what speaks through nature is reinforced by our own response? In the therapeutic field, too, it is about the resonance of layers that are not readily accessible to language. Sounding and resonating together is Jochen Fassbender's theme, and as a participant, you sense that there is a world whose existence you may not even have noticed before.