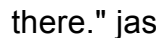



Tokafi

<http://tokafi.com>

Interviewed by Tobias Fischer

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Quite obviously, rules and stereotypes serve a purpose, or else they wouldn't be there. But how much richer would our perception of music be if we forgot all about them - and especially about all those concepts of "how things should be"! The work of Jason Kahn, who moved over from the States to Europe and now resides in Zürich, offers this new perspective, away from preconceived notions and dogmas. From the improvisational Jazz-scene of LA and experimental rock to the vibrant techno-infected pulse of the early-90s Berlin, Kahn has always been interested in drums and their ever-changing faces. In his latest pieces, drums are mainly providers of sound, not rhythm and a word like "development" takes on a new meaning - or loses meaning altogether. But all of this is academic stuff. Better let go of all stereotypes of how the overture to this interview should look like and give you a quote which may serve as a better introduction: "More and more I wonder what the point of organizing sound into music is. Just walking down the street sounds so great. Everywhere you go, it's already there."  

Hi! How are you?

Fine, thanks.

Where are you?

Zürich.

What's on your schedule right now?

Next week I will be going to Valencia for the Observatori Festival. I will perform solo there and exhibit a sound installation.

<http://www.observatori.com/>

“Sihl” has just been released on Sirr. I was intrigued by the fact that there seems to be hardly any movement in these twelve pieces and yet this is only increasing their intensity. Was it part of your intention to allow listeners to “look” at these aural objects, as they slowly change their perspective in the course of their duration?

What is important to me is the act of listening and attention to sound. I'm interested in having people "actively listen" to my work. This isn't to say I'm on some mission to get us all listening better, but my compositional approach places the listener in the position of having to really "look" at sound. The pieces on "Sihl" illustrate this, as with a cursory listen it might seem as if nothing is happening. This has to do with two things: the very idea of "what should happen" in a composition; and listening. In my compositions I'm not particularly interested in narrative, drama, even development. I want to create an environment the listener can enter into, where they will have to listen. Something is shimmering there, but if you don't really follow it you will lose sight of it.

You started out as a drummer. Was it hard restraining yourself with an almost a-rhythmical album? Or are you merely featuring a very different side of “rhythm” with “Sihl”?

What got me interested in playing the drums was their sound. Rhythm was also important, but first and foremost was the sound of the instrument. The way I've been working for nearly the last ten years now reflects my original interest in the sound of the instrument and using this as a starting point for composition and improvisation. I've approached this using various electronic means (sampler, computer, analogue synthesizer) but also acoustically. Therefore, Sihl doesn't represent a departure from my original interests in the drums, though it does perhaps raise some questions for people who might be confused with my reference to percussion being used on the recordings.

“Drones” have become almost a synonym for relaxation and warmth. With you, they are (at least in my experience) more estranging and very physical. Were you looking for something more direct and confronting?

In any case, I am interested in direct sound. I think Phill Niblock summed this up nicely in saying "no rhythm, no melody, no harmony, no bullshit." The listener is being confronted with sound which has little to distract from the sound itself. The sound is central for me and especially important are the physical aspects of sound: I want the listener to not only pay attention to the sound but also to "feel" it. I can accomplish this best live, it seems, though I hope this comes across in my recordings as well.

You mentioned that the title of the album relates to a small river which you crossed every day on your way to the studio – and which you later thought to be an appropriate title. Would you, looking back, say that you were subconsciously influenced by your surroundings while composing or that this is one of those amazing coincidences, when something outside of your music suddenly makes for a perfect description of your intentions?

Being inspired by this river in Zürich reflects a broader influence I feel from environmental sound on my compositional approach. I want my music to sound like a river flowing, or a walk in the woods, a refrigerator humming, or even like the way light looks dancing on the water. In a way, I feel like Sihl is a collection of environmental recordings, or maybe "imaginary" environmental recordings, as each piece represents an environment for me. These are compositions but I want them to sound like snippets cut from various audio topographies.

How would you describe or characterise your composing process?

It really depends. Sometimes I have a particular sound in mind, a starting point, if you will. Other times I am just trying things out and come across something great, which later blossoms out into a composition. As I answered in the last question, the basic premise for my compositions is to create an environment. I am interested in suspending time during the duration of a composition: it is the sense that sound is eternal, with no beginning or end.

How do you see the relationship between sound and composition?

Well, I guess the "classical" definition would be that composition is "organized sound." The big question is how one organizes the sound.

What constitutes a good live performance in your opinion?

There are many factors contributing to a good live performance. Most important for me is that I am able to work with the acoustic qualities of the performance space. I see the room I am performing in as my main "instrument." As in my installation work, the sound I am placing in the room is really there to bring the listener's attention to the sound of the room itself. Many times after concerts people have come to me and said they really realized how the room sounded when I was playing. Walking around the room one can discover different pockets of frequencies being accentuated by what I play. I don't do this in a scientific manner, but as any musician might, by listening. But I am really playing with the room.

What's your approach to performing on stage?

When performing solo I am mostly improvising. I often know where I will start and maybe even have a few regions in mind through which I will move during the performance; but outside of this skeletal framework many things can happen. I am mostly concentrating on the room and on finding out which frequencies work best in the space.

What's your view on the music scene at present? Is there a crisis?

I feel that at least in my small musical world there is a healthy development in swing: there are many many labels and therefore many musicians have the chance of publishing their work. I only have a personal crisis in that I don't have enough time to hear all the music I would like to hear.

Some feel there is no need to record albums any more, that there is no such thing as genuinely "new" music. What do you tell them? Is "new" an important aspect of what you want your pieces to be?

Creating something "new" is not one of my goals. I'm not even sure what "new" would be, so if I were to concentrate on this alone I would surely be lost. Most important for me is to find my voice as a composer and to communicate this to the listener. Just being able to accomplish this has been more than enough of a challenge for me without worrying in addition about whether my sound is "new" or not.

Do you feel an artist has a certain duty towards anyone but himself? Or to put it differently: Should art have a political/social or any other aspect apart from a personal sensation?

I don't feel that for a work of art to be valid it should have a political or social function. A work of great beauty can inspire us to acts of great beauty, which may be perhaps the greatest political statement of all. My work certainly reflects a certain dissatisfaction I harbor with the state of sound in our western societies. I constantly feel confronted with a kind of sonic pollution: everywhere I go, be it a bar, the train station, the super market there is music, or mobile phones ringing, or the blare of a television. I am not

surprised that people find it difficult to actively listen as much of our time is surely spent in subconsciously trying to deal with this fantastic surfeit of sound, of not listening.

You are given the position of artistic director of a festival. What would be on your program?

There are far too many artists whose work I admire for me to even begin of thinking about a "dream program" here. I would say, however, that the xxxxx festival where I recently had the pleasure of playing in London recently was probably the best program I've been on in a long time.

A lot of people feel that some of the radical experiments of modern compositions can no longer be qualified as "music". Would you draw a border – and if so, where?

I don't draw any borders between sound and music. I mean, for me any sound could be construed as music; and in fact much of my work addresses this fact as I often find myself composing music which often sounds like something I might have heard in a "non-musical environment" (like the buzz of a fluorescent light or a motor running). I don't feel sounds have to be organized into tones or rhythms for them to be music. I am not interested in changing peoples' notion of what music is. As Cage once said, "You don't have to call it music if the term offends you."

Many artists dream of a "magnum opus". Do you have a vision of what yours would sound like?

Without meaning to sound dramatic here, I guess my magnum opus will be when I feel like I've said all that I've had to say and step back to finally just listen without feeling the need to create and organize more sounds.