

Dynamic Vibrations

Sven-Åke Johansson

Dynamic Vibrations

– Played with Hands and Feet –

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First Things First – A Personal Portrait

Matthias Osterwold

SÅJ for short: who is this ageless, eternally young yet eternally “Old Swede” who left the small town of Mariestad on Lake Vänern for Paris in 1965 as a jazz drummer and, after intervals in Wuppertal and Cologne, immigrated to Berlin in 1968, where he developed into a key figure in free music and the city’s art scene? Who is this distinguished gentleman with the bald, high forehead, always slightly old-fashioned, but stylish and tastefully dressed in brown and green suits with an ironed shirt, suspenders, tie, hat, and well-maintained leather shoes, who is so ingenious behind the ears and so sensitive in his hands?

The Percussionist

SÅJ is a brilliant self-trained drummer, having taught himself the craft at first by playing bass drum in a central Swedish brass band. He then became acquainted with subtleties, jazz and dance music. And the plethora of styles. And immersed himself in the effervescent wave of radical European free jazz with musicians such as Alexander von Schlippenbach, Peter Brötzmann, Peter Kowald, and Manfred Schoof.

For longer than anyone knows he has played on a Slingerland combo set, the drum cylinders coated with chamois-brownish-black streaks that sparkle in the light. He released his first solo LP “Schlingerland / Dynamic Vibrations” on his own label with the catalogue number SÅJ01 in an edition of a few hundred copies with a hand-printed cover: a subtle, hesitating, then accelerating, explosive “staggering” interrogation of the pure drum set – with no instrumental ingredients or extravagances in sight, merely snare drum, tom, cymbals, and hi-hat in infinitely differentiated dynamic and rhythmic gradations.

As time went on, everyday objects get incorporated into the percussive battery as musicalized “ready-mades”. Yogurt lids dance atop the drum skins. With both hands, SÅJ lets the lids and bottoms of colourful plastic tubs of butter circle revolve around drum skins, cymbals and nearby walls and windowpanes, creating unheard-of rubbing, screeching, then almost inaudible sounds. The usual metal cymbals get momentarily swapped out for dull-sounding “anti”-cymbals made of pressed cardboard, wood and foam. A mighty blow on the half-limp foam cymbal remains silent, but it resounds just as vehemently in our imagination as air flogged with a violent gesture. In solo performances, he draws bows across the edges of various-sized cardboard boxes. From there he went on

to create the large-scale forty-minute *Symphony for Cardboard Boxes – Harding Greens* for twenty-two players and conductor from 2010 – an imposing landscape on stage with twenty-two boxes of different sizes, which, when drawn across with bows, produce an extremely nuanced palette, from bass to treble.

In *Cucumber Piece*, Johansson handles two fresh green cucumbers as sticks on drums and cymbals, not without ultimately preparing a cucumber salad from thin slices shorn by the edges of the cymbals. A thin blowpipe is used to hurl dried peas accurately and sharply at the drums, cymbals, the windowpanes, and sound-producing surrounding objects and surfaces. A highlight: *The Telephone Book Piece – for Two Copies of the Yellow Pages*: two thick copies of the yellow pages are placed next to each other on a wobbly, graceful, foldable metal music stand and drummed on with wooden sticks. A rich melodic life unfolds as the pages are turned.

The Performer

Even if Johansson has a strong penchant for musical slapstick à la Leroy Anderson (*The Typewriter*) or Spike Jones and his City Slickers, the undeniable comedy and hilarity that ensues from his handling of trivial everyday objects as “sounding things” is different. Far removed from musical comedy of any sort, Johansson does not produce any musical gags. He takes the materiality of simple objects seriously, with an almost libidinous devotion, almost like fetishes. His cool, highly concentrated handling of these “found” object-instruments resembles playing on the most valuable “professional” instruments.

This performative, somewhat antithetical practice takes up threads set down by Dada and Fluxus. Notable, too, are impulses from absurdist theatre, surrealism and Arte Povera (the last one rightly pointed out by Peter Ablinger). These traits include the absolute rigour and clarity of the execution and economy of artistic means, leaving nothing that is arbitrary, vague or baroquely superfluous. With stoic calmness, with a fixed gaze, with an almost motionless but highly tense mien on the face, often with a protruding lower jaw and a half-open mouth, yet without any expressive gesture, the charismatic “anti”-performer brings the materiality and “sounding out” of his instruments to the fore. His actions are eventful and therefore particularly memorable. Experiencing Johansson as a performer lingers indelibly in the memory. Through reduction, economy, through understatement, through lapidary, laconic “coolness” he attains performative presence: performance as the highest art.

Anecdote:

In the Kreuzberg artists’ loft Institut Unzeit, headquarters of the *Freunde Guter Musik Berlin*, Johansson gave an improvised concert in duo with Richard Teitelbaum, the ingenious pioneer of live electronic music, on piano and synthesizer. Teitelbaum found a soft ending for himself with

gentle, ethereal sounds in a slow fadeout. Johansson could not leave it like that. Too pretty, too kitschy. Physically frozen, he sustained the tension – breathless silence for perhaps a minute, the air crackled. Then he resumed a fade-in with the gentlest sounds from his small, ancient ship’s piano. The image of these two musicians in a “battle over the ending” is burned into my mind.

The Conceptualist

Many of Johansson’s compositions are, at their core, art as ideas. Some of them are lying unrealised in the well-organised archive drawers of his studio. Alongside the *Symphony for Cardboard Boxes* and other comparable works, the *Concerto for Twelve Tractors*, first performed in 1996, offers a convincing example of the conceptual expansion of an acoustic “objet trouvé” into the orchestral and scenic realm. The score of the *Concerto for Twelve Tractors*, which Sven-Åke Johansson first performed under his own direction at the *Denkmalschmiede Kaditzsch* in the countryside near Leipzig in 1996, requires “one-, two- or three-cylinder old tractors from the ‘50s and ‘60s, played by their peasant owners”. Whether Deutz, Famulus, Porsche, Steyr, or Puch – it always depends on having direct contact with the farmers on site and seeking out the best-sounding veterans in their faded, typical colours.

The ensemble piece for two choirs, with solo passages and antiphonal back-and-forth calls restores to the old machines a sonic and material presence in which the landscape of their location and the history of their use as well as that of their users are poetically revived. The farmers who keep and lovingly preserve their old tractors and thus keep the memory of traditional production methods alive, experience a surprising new self-confidence as artists. As Sven-Åke Johansson’s producer partner, I was able to bring the tractor concerto to light three times: in 2004 at the *Kontraste – Strange Music* festival in front of the Minoritenkirche in mediaeval Stein near Krems in the Wachau, as the opening concert of *Klangspuren* in 2013 in Schwaz near Innsbruck in front of the city’s parish church and in 2017 in front of the Stiftskirche in Polling in Upper Bavaria to launch Culture Day. The encounter with the tractor-driving farmers beforehand is critical: overcoming the “foreign tension”, the acts of persuasion on both sides, the “casting” of the tractors, the “dry run” with explanations of the parts for each individual tractor-driver, the run-through and dress rehearsal, the parade of the tractors at the venue. Afterwards: an extended and enjoyable snack with everyone involved and their families – social sculpture *at its best*.

The ten-minute piece *Rolls and Single Beats on a Snare Drum* is a strict minimalist study, almost an étude in perseverance for a single percussionist. As played by Johansson, it turns into a performance sculpture. The 2010 work was expanded and elaborated in 2016 into *Mono for Twelve Drums*, a concentrated stage-sculptural layout of the twelve

players in which all nuances and degrees of density of rolls on snare drums, tom-toms and bass drums are explored.

The 2014 project *Sven-Åke Johansson's Marching Orchestra* with twelve international musicians from Berlin's free music scene – as “special guest” was his old sidekick and buddy, the saxophonist and accordionist Rüdiger Carl – drove the rigid martial and reactionary spirit right out of popular classical marches in Prenzelberg's *Ausland* with quirky arrangements, interspersed with virtuoso “cadenzas” by the individual musicians, while at the same time leaving the beauty of this music and its drive unscathed.

The Spoken Word Artist, the Singer

“The poet speaks”: spontaneous poems, absurd word inventions, poetic speech images were and are part of some of Sven-Åke Johansson's performances and staged actions. I am reminded of the final piece from Schumann's *Kinderszenen* with its brief recitative rhapsody when SÅJ creates poetry in real time, poetry of the here and now. Not infrequently accompanying himself on his accordion, to which a car's rear-view mirror is mounted to control the position of his hands. The non-intentional, unfiltered springing-to-mind of these freely associated word sequences is, to some extent, the application of the surrealist method of *écriture automatique* to the performative act of speech. The imaginative fund of this “instant poetry” is derived primarily from the everyday world with its handles, activities, tools, devices, materials, animals, and foods. Expressions and word combinations act as poeticised “objets trouvés”. This is comparable to SÅJ's typical adaptation of everyday objects as musical instruments, for example when he uses shoe trees or cucumbers as drumsticks.

As a native speaker of Swedish, he dives headfirst into the semantic complexity of German root words and sentence structures. While speaking almost without an accent, with a slightly damp articulation that swells up from the back of the palate, he sometimes makes minimal grammatical errors of immense charm. But SÅJ writes literary texts, too, some of which are included in this book.

The music-theatre work *Dillquist* revolves around the suffix –qvist or –kvist (–zweig in German, or Branch in English), which thousands of Swedes have in their family names. *Dillquist*, however, does not exist. SÅJ is a genius at finding succinct titles for works. Four of my favourite titles are *Konsumdelikatessware* (a portmanteau with parts of the words for consumer, delicate/delicatessen, food, and goods), *Songs of the Screw*, *Middle Suite for Packing Materials*, and *Rake and Spade – On the Love Life of Garden Tools*.

SÅJ can also be experienced as a singer. In the band Hudson Riv with Rüdiger Carl on piano (!) and Joe Williamson on double bass, he sings famous, melancholic songs from

the swing era in the style of a karaoke singer at a party most of whose guests have long since left.

The Visual Artist

Sven-Åke Johansson, rather atypically for a musician, moves in the circles of visual artists. He has maintained, and still maintains, close friendships and collaborations with several artists, including Albert Oehlen, Werner Büttner, Günther Förg, Karl Horst Hödicke, Martin Kippenberger, and Thomas Kapielski. Some have designed album covers for him. SÅJ has made countless appearances in collections, galleries, studios, and exhibitions.

Anecdote:

On *Advent Music* in Martin Kippenberger's office in 1978, SÅJ reports: "Kippenberger took an interest in the art of performance, not in music, but only: how do you do it?"

Johansson is a talented draftsman: in formats small and large, in series of images, he draws his real and imaginary musical instruments, foam cymbals, record players, shoe trees, kitchen appliances, fans, helicopters, and such things. His scores, with the text instructions and symbols they contain, can be read as graphic notations. His handwriting is calligraphic. The style of his drawings and his handwriting are unmistakable. Short, exactly sharpened soft pencils are his preferred implement for writing and drawing. He extends the pencil stubs with slender metal caps that are fixed to the pencil with a small tension ring. Nothing is left over.

The studio in a backyard of Fichtestraße in Kreuzberg, which Johansson has been using for several decades, is a work-in-progress and a special sort of *Gesamtkunstwerk*: an installation for working and living, elaborated with the utmost care and the highest sense of orderliness, which meticulously measures, preserves and spurs on the cosmos of his life's work.

The Firestarter

Although Sven-Åke Johansson was one of the pioneers of free jazz in Germany and internationally from the late '60s onward, he soon made himself independent of the hermetic tendencies of the free jazz community and set off on an autonomous, individual path beyond group formations, institutions and milieus. He thus occupies an in-between position between free music, classic swing jazz, experimentation, composition, music performance, musical theatrics, language/spoken word/singing art, and visual art.

When I arrived in Berlin in 1978, I quickly learned of him by hearing (at concerts) and word of mouth (he was spoken of positively and with curious interest). It must have been in 1983, in *gelbe Musik*, the gallery/store for new music and artists' records that Ursula Block had founded on Schaperstraße in Wilmersdorf in 1981, that I met Johansson in the flesh. In the spring, the *Friends of Good Music Berlin* (with the participation of Ursula Block and other "activists") had been established to mount the *New York Explosion* festival in Monika Döhring's "loft" on Nollendorfplatz. SÅJ had experienced the festival firsthand; he encouraged the *Friends* and me to keep going and go farther. I was positively won over by his personality, his demure charm, right away. He immediately proposed a series of ideas. The impulses he brought forth have to this day not lost their inspiring effect on me. They continue to drive me onward and motivate me. A certain dry, sometimes stubborn edginess is gently balanced out by the refreshing freedom, the visionary anarchy, the twisted, unhinged richness of his thinking – and his boundless capacity for enjoyment. I owe a lot to SÅJ. He has become a close friend of mine.

We have collaborated on a long series of projects big and small. It began with the third *Music on Sunday Afternoon* at the Institut Unzeit in February 1984: *Improvisations on a Sleigh Ride*. The meteoric, lurching ride was undertaken by Shelley Hirsch, the incomparably original, quick-reacting New York vocalist and performer, Wolfgang Fuchs, the gnarled, high-energy sopranino player (he is unfortunately no longer among us) and SÅJ himself on drums. There followed an excursion to the Ku'damm milieu. In June 1984, the newly founded conceptual swing band Night and Day performed in the rather disreputable, chic nightclub *First* on Joachimstaler Straße, which had previously belonged to the legendary Greek lady 'Fofi' and which entertained elegant guests. They played American dance music from the '30s and '40s. The audience, which would rather have been listening to lecherous party disco and drinking bad champagne, reached with a wait-and-see approach if not outright bewilderment. Alongside SÅJ in the band were Rüdiger Carl on saxophone, Alexander von Schlippenbach on piano and the wonderful, warm-hearted, unforgettable black American Jay Oliver on double bass.

Anecdote:

For the *Friends of Good Music*, the breakthrough success was the performance by Night and Day in February 1988 at the Ballhaus Naunynstraße with a wild dance party. The legendary London saxophonist Lol Coxhill was invited to be the guest singer. The Berlinale was taking place at the same time. When Coxhill arrived at Tegel Airport, hordes of journalists and photographers were waiting at the gate of the London flight for the famous British film actor Donald Pleasence. Both had distinctive, clean-shaven pates. They shared more than a slight resemblance. Lol Coxhill, who liked to wear sunglasses even in the dark, was mistaken and ended up as Donald Pleasence with a prominent photo in the *Berliner Morgenpost*. Pleasence arrived in Berlin on the next flight. There was no one there.

Our collaboration has by now seen countless adventurous detours. Long may this path continue. With a solo set in the stylishly furnished former bar and company canteen of the *Fahrbereitschaft* (a driving school from DDR times) in Lichtenberg, SÅJ (together with Audrey Chen, who gave the second performance solo with cello and voice) brought to a close the last edition of MaerzMusik under my direction in 2014. A toy car circled on the skin of the snare drum, an ambush of dried peas was shot from behind. The last collaboration to date was in 2019 at the Ruhrtriennale. Under the motto *Duo*², I had invited Johansson to Bochum's Turbinenhalle for two duo constellations that performatively complemented the architectural sound installation *Bergama Stereo* by Cevdet Erek. In the first part, SÅJ played his fluxoid object-percussion in the "free style" with Rüdiger Carl on accordion, with whom he has enjoyed a close artistic friendship for over fifty years (!). The second part that followed had the duo *puls plus puls* with Jan Jelinek, a generation younger and an expert in the digital-electronic transformation of pop music elements into abstract textures. Jelinek with his electronically-processed sounds and Johansson with rhythmic grooves on his venerable Slingerland combo set-up drove each other on towards pulsating, iridescent, drifting waves of sound – an exhilarating blend of heterogeneous modes.

Sven-Åke Johansson has worked on and in an incalculable number of small and large formations and projects. No jams – his eagerness to collaborate is always based on a clear concept, a defined idea of aesthetics, style and context. Many of these formations have thereby left lasting traces and have become definitive. SÅJ distinguishes himself with his wide-awake, unquenchable curiosity that stands open to the paths, playing styles, typologies, formats, and original, unused venues that a much younger generation of musicians finds. Therein lies his fountain of youth. But Sven-Åke Johansson subjects each new constellation, each new concept, each new freedom to meticulous precision and discipline – the contradiction inherent in control and anarchy is set ablaze and unlocks wide, inexhaustible space for him.

Matthias Osterwold
Berlin, February 2021

About this Book

Although countless artists are not limited to a single medium in their creative practice, and the vital modernism of the early twentieth century catalysed tendencies towards development and expansion in the arts, to this day the cultural sector remains in essence strictly divided into categories. Even today, culture focuses on the institutions offered to the masses in the age of the bourgeoisie: theatres, concert halls and museums, as well as houses of literature and art associations.

But beyond a fear of losing one's orientation explicable in terms of social and individual psychology, August Strindberg, E. T. A. Hoffmann, Kurt Schwitters, and Erik Satie, to cite a few, have produced astonishing works not only in their customary medium.

Sociopolitical factors that cause genuine or handed-down modes of artistic expression to explode and expand in waves must be considered. The second half of the 1960s is momentous for the self-image of the musician and composer, but also draftsman and author, Sven-Åke Johansson, as he emerged to prominence as western industrial societies were questioning existing conditions.

The present book is to date the most comprehensive compilation not only of the compositions and the realized as well as unrealized concepts, but also of the explanatory drawings, sketches and wide-ranging texts of the musician, who was born in Mariestad, Sweden in 1943.

As the boundaries between the individual categories are fluid in his artistic practice, no special attention has been placed on different types of text. While Johansson's music spans from acoustic ready-mades, *bruitisme*, solo pieces, free formations, and jazz combos to music-theatre works, assigning a circumscribed identity to a large part of his texts is tough; work texts that explain compositions and concepts are at the same time consciously linguistic-poetic formulations. Poetry and aphorisms have developed into song lyrics, but also vice versa: vocal declamations that crop up in instrumental *instant composing* find a fixed form as stand-alone poetry. The lively mixture of different material that this book offers is not presented in a disorderly manner, but rather as a rule in thematic brackets.

As a result, the book is not a historical-critical edition with extensive machinery and explanations, but rather an artist's book and a curated volume of material, a comprehensive documentation of Sven-Åke Johansson, his compositions and musical concepts, as well as relevant texts. A series of interviews is here, too, reflecting not only Johansson's way of thinking and speaking, but also supplying a variety of explanations for the vast majority of the compositions and pieces included in the book.

The book's title, *Dynamic Vibrations*, refers not only to a fundamental concept that was practiced and formulated early on and which, in a narrower sense, winds its way back to

drumming, but also identifies an essential trait of Sven-Åke Johansson's creative dynamic: a continuous and simultaneous expansion of artistic and media modes of articulation that constantly uncovers new horizons.

Thomas Groetz and Bastian Zimmermann
Berlin, May 2020

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