



Sunday, June 12, 2022 | 10:00am
Libbey Bowl

The Book of Sounds

Hans OTTE

The Book of Sounds
Conor Hanick *piano*

The concert is dedicated
to the memory of Olin Barrett
with the generous support of
Michele Brustin

There is no intermission
during the concert.

Hans OTTE (1926-2007)

The Book of Sounds (Das Buch der Klänge): Parts I-XII (1979-82)

On the piano, the distance between C major (c-e-g) and E minor (e-g-b) is a matter of the keyboard's smallest incremental distance: a half step, the movement of one note (c) to its closest lower note (b). In our ears, however — to say nothing of our hearts — the distance between C major and E minor is infinite; defined only by the depth of our ability, our need, to hear what worlds might exist when the space between notes is freed.

—CONOR HANICK

The Sound Behind the Sounds

As Hans Otte was coming of age in postwar Germany, the musical avant-garde, whose epicenter was in U.S.-occupied Darmstadt, declared a new beginning. Sometimes known as *Stunde null*, or the “zero hour,” this turning point was intended to mark an abrupt break from history and its burdens. A radical alienation from the basic familiarity of tonal language resulted, and this is part of the context against which Otte emerged with his own musical philosophy. In his introduction to *The Book of Sounds*, for example, he clarifies one of the work's aims thus: “It rediscovers a world of consonant experience which could only now be written because of a totally changed consciousness of sounds on earth.” In other words, that context of “zero hour” alienation is what paved the way toward Otte's “rediscovery” of a musical language in which far more than choices of style seems to be at stake.

“It's no wonder that this was coming out of the explosive changes in postwar music and hyper-controlled serialism and the like,” explains AMOC's Conor

Hanick. *The Book of Sounds* “takes all of those shackles and strictures of form and says no to them but lets the music do a completely different thing.”

Otte, who began as a prodigy on piano and organ, keenly followed American developments. He won a grant to Yale (where he studied composition under Paul Hindemith, as well as organ) and, when he was back in Germany, helped disseminate the ideas of John Cage and the early exponents of American Minimalism, including Terry Riley and La Monte Young, as well as the young Steve Reich. His position at Radio Bremen, where he served as music director from 1959 to 1984, gave Otte an influential platform to introduce these new trends from the United States. He also founded two important festivals, one devoted to early music and the other to contemporary composers, including such leading German avant-gardists as Karlheinz Stockhausen. Otte meanwhile composed prolifically, producing a catalogue that includes more than 100 compositions, from works for solo piano to orchestral and choral scores. He also

created numerous multimedia installations and was active in projects involving theater and the visual arts.

The Book of Sounds from 1979-82 might be seen as taking an alternative “zero hour” approach. It invites fresh questioning of what kind of exchange actually happens when we interact with music. While traces of Otte's deep knowledge of the piano repertoire as a performer abound — echoes ranging from Chopin, Debussy, and Satie to Messiaen — these dozen pieces foreground the sensory experience of sound color from an astonishingly original perspective, reveling in the piano's wondrous timbral palette and resonance. At the same time, the materiality of sound is transformed into a vehicle for liberation from the material world. Otte articulates this quasi-mystical aspect, in his introduction to *The Book of Sounds*, when he asserts that the work “rediscovers the listener as a partner of sound and silence, who in the quest for his or her world, wishes for once to be totally at one with sound.”

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THE SOUND BEHIND THE SOUNDS

Otte's interest in American composers who looked to the spiritual traditions of the East for inspiration — particularly John Cage — left a mark on his own quest for musical truth. Indeed, the cover of the first edition of *The Book of Sounds* reinforces Otte's fascination with Zen Buddhism (which became even more pronounced in his *Book of Hours* from the 1990s): a stylized, pseudo-Japanese calligraphy illustrates the numbers 1-12. The scoring of the 12-part cycle even dispenses with bar lines, further indicating a music that seeks to remove itself from the everyday divisions of temporality. The Zen-like paradoxes this involves are conducive to meditation; many listeners have even found Otte's music, through its

re-sensitization of the process of listening itself, to have a healing power.

The deceptive simplicity of Otte's language — with its use of repetition and intense focus on harmonies and gestures that seem, as we first hear them, "obvious" — sets us up for startling revelations along the arc of the entire cycle. Each of the 12 pieces inhabits a world unto itself. At the same time, explains Hanick, the cycle seems to become "more and more chromatic as it moves toward the center, and then the chromaticism dissipates as it proceeds toward the conclusion." At the center, in Part VI, the harmonies become implicit: Otte presents an almost entirely single line of chromatic melody

that unfolds in close intervals in the treble. Part VIII, by contrast, comprises a parade of dense chords, juxtaposing extremes of volume. By the conclusion, each harmony radiates with the beauty of a rare gem. Both spareness and lush color, silence and dramatic exclamation, coexist as essential coordinates of the universe mapped out by *The Book of Sounds*. As Otte writes: "*The Book of Sounds* rediscovers playing as the possibility of experiencing oneself in sound, of becoming at one in time and space with all the sounds around one."

—THOMAS MAY

This concert is approximately 65 minutes.