



Der Klang der Haut (The sound of skin)

By Andreas Bick

Sound composition for Studio Akustische Kunst, WDR 3

Production: Markus Heuger

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Our skin is the sounding resonating vessel of our soul, the membrane that separates us from the outside world, both a protective layer and a sensory organ. Without skin contact, human beings must die - it is only another's touch that gives us identity and makes us human. At the same time, skin in its ambivalent double role stands for the possible merging of two individuals and for the physical impossibility of true union. Now that humankind has been robbed of its spirituality, the sexual act as the ultimate form of touch is the last remaining experience of transcendence. In *Der Klang der Haut*, two people join together in search of this ultimate experience in mutual dissolution. The tentative sound of their touch is the language of the bodies whose borders they cannot cross. The topography of these bodies is mapped using a many-layered range of bowed sounds that invoke and celebrate the rituals of love and the pain of separation.

In the Western tradition, touch is considered the most primitive of the five senses. Unlike sight, which is associated with rationality, touch is linked with desire and eroticism, the irrational and the subconscious. At the same time, touch appears to form the basis for the other senses and to possess a certain objectivity. It is no coincidence that we speak of 'grasping' things intellectually, which can also refer to the act of touching something to gain an awareness of its reality. But touch also stands for a lack of distance, as the exact opposite of sight, which depends on distance from its object to be able to perceive anything at all. The development of cultures based on writing and the accompanying abstraction, away from reality as perceived via the senses, followed later by the introduction of film and television, ensured the cultural dominance of the visual over the tactile.

Der Klang der Haut shows the meeting of a man and a woman who reassure themselves of the other's presence by touch alone. Their relationship is based exclusively on tactile communication. They are so obsessed by the groping language of their bodies that the sound of their skin becomes the sound of their desire, but also the sound of doubt and fear. Their skin is the organ of their sensuality, but being as close to each other as they can get, they forget that our skin is also our natural border, keeping us alive and thus necessarily keeping us separate from each another. Their obsession with touch makes them lose their healthy balance between closeness and distance. Desperate, almost angry, they try to crawl into each other, to permeate one another. They both inhale life in deep breaths, each breath heralds a further step in a development, from the initial cautious approach to their physical union and on towards isolation. The sexual act forms the central point on this trajectory: although it is the most intensive form of physical encounter, it also marks the moment of their greatest vulnerability and carries in it the seed of their subsequent separation.

The concrete sounds of the skin are assigned to seven basic emotional patterns, each of which is introduced by an intake of breath. In order of appearance, they are: tenderness, playfulness, desire, passion, doubt, anger, fear. The corresponding skin sounds are: long, gentle stroking of hands across skin (tenderness); short rhythmic sounds of hands rubbing against each other and bodies stroking against each other (playfulness); biting, kissing and tight embrace with wet body (desire); violent rubbing, sticking, slapping and hitting with hair (passion); scratching and rubbing hair (doubt); struggling with fingers, hand to hand fighting, pushing and hitting (anger); shivering and startled jumping (fear). Sounds of the skin - mainly extremely quiet, microscopic body and skin sounds whose volume was amplified to unusual levels for this composition - are juxtaposed with a body of sound consisting entirely of bowed instruments, centred around a large string ensemble. The sound composition is flanked by two canon-like compositions for string ensemble whose evocative, incantatory character awakens the desire for physical union. Around the middle of the piece, another short canon marks the turning point in the development of the relationship. The string ensemble is accompanied by low volume bowed tones on waterphones, gongs, singing bowls, monochords, bowed psalteries and metal sheets. These are played together with the string ensemble, which sometimes contributes noise-like textures and atonal clusters. The bowed sounds form a counterpoint to the 'rough' sounds of the skin: the latter remain on the surface, denoting the exterior, while the sustained tonal sounds 'get under the listener's skin', denoting the interior and describing the inner world of the two characters. The skin sounds stand for intimacy, closeness and motion, while the bowed sounds give an impression of expansiveness, establishing more of a static space whose tone and pitch changes gradually. The extended range of bowed instruments transcends the bodies' acoustic topography, which shines through dimly in the sustained bowed sounds. The related mode of sound production - sounds are coaxed from an instrument by rubbing (or bowing) - points to the idea of various emotional qualities of touch resonating differently within us: the slow stroking of hands on skin merges imperceptibly with atonal noise from the violins; the rubbing sound of a tight embrace is continued in bowed and rubbed sheet metal. In such combinations, the bowed instruments seem more familiar than the isolated and amplified skin sounds, whose directness makes them seem strange and courser than we experience them in reality.

The third element of the composition consists of sounds from nature that place the piece against a backdrop of autumn. The slightest of breezes, migratory birds flying overhead, falling leaves, drops of water on skin and freezing rain remind us of the season associated with the idea of falling. Clothes slide down bodies, two people meet, exposed and naked, to go right to their own limits. Similarly, autumn can be seen to stand for nakedness and the revelation of hidden secrets - the leaves fall from the trees, nature puts off its finery and shows its dark side. The musical structures also refer to the idea of falling: the first two canon-like compositions descend from the higher to the lower registers. As the piece progresses, there is a struggle between falling and rising movements, with the last canon winding its way from the depths into the high registers, contrasting the pessimistic conclusion, as the encounter between the two people ends in isolation, with a gentle sign of hope.

Translated by Nick Grindell