

Sten Hanson: A Composer Balanced Between Language & Music

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Sten Hanson (Klövsjö, 1936) is one of the pioneers from that generation of poets who began using the tape recorder in their work. The reel-to-reel tape recorder was introduced commercially in the United States in 1948, and Europeans began to fully appreciate its value in the 1950s.

The technology continued to improve and, in circa 1960, four-track recording technology was introduced, which made the layering of recordings much easier. The technical possibilities of the tape recorder gave new stimulus to sound poetry that, since its introduction by the Futurists and Dadaists in the period 1910–1930, seemed to be dying a slow death.

In the later 1940s, Isidore Isou introduced a lexicon of bodily sounds that could be notated on a music score. In the years that followed, Paris would emerge as a sound poetry maelstrom with its diverse points of view varying from Pierre Schaeffer and Pierre Henry – the first to use tape recordings in their *musique concrète* work – to the creators of a new universal language, that handful of Lettrists who had followed in Isou's footsteps.

Hanson, according to his *Autobiography*, descends from a family of small farmers who endured the hardships encountered in the middle of Sweden, which is characterised by its forested hillsides. His father was active in the communist party. Hanson was born in the snow and was brought home swaddled in a wolf hide on an improvised bed made of frozen tree moss. But these tough survivors of the rough life were also plagued with plenty of sorrow and sickness. His grandfather went into a deep depression when Hanson was still young and his mother died of TB.

Hanson began writing poetry at an early age. In his voluminous *Poetical Works & Music Without Tears* (2008)¹ – which provides a chief source for this information – it is noted that he wrote his “traditional” poem “Kärlek” [Sweetheart] (1954) at age 18. In the 1960s, he created a series of visual poems that sometimes served as the basis for his later sound poetry.²

In 1961, he staged his first public performances, with, among others, his *Piano Sonata No. 1 for D.T.*, dedicated to John Cage's collaborator, pianist David Tudor whom he had met in 1960 in Stockholm. Tudor performed it himself in the renowned American Center in Paris. Hanson remained in Paris for some time and became friends with, among others, François Dufrêne and Gil J. Wolman. In 1964, they co-founded the Deuxième Internationale Lettriste, sometimes also called the “Ultralettrists”, who distinguished themselves from the Lettrisme founded by Isou in 1945.

“Dufrêne asked Hanson to partake in a manifestation against the Lettrists with some sort of composition. Dufrêne brought Hanson home and let him use two tape recorders, though Hanson was reluctant. He also offered him something to eat; so-called fruits de mer; a smorgasbord of various shellfish. Hanson used the names of the shellfish for his composition, which he recorded onto the two mono tapes, intended to be played back simultaneously. When Hanson discarded his earlier compositions in 1969, Fruits de mer was retained just because it happened to lay at the bottom of a cardboard box with clothes, and was discovered only much later. Because of this, Fruits de mer is Sten Hanson's first surviving textsound composition, but the term textsound had not yet been coined.”³

Hanson and Dufrêne first performed Fruits de mer in the Galerie G in Paris, apparently on 1 April 1962. Meanwhile, Dufrêne's associate Gil J. Wolman caused quite a sensation at the time with his live performance of his *Mégapneumie* (1950) – “a poem of great breath or vigour, a mega-breath”.⁴

A similarly robust approach was also noticeable in the other piece that Hanson performed, *Piano Sonata No. 1* (1961), which consists of no musical notes but does include the exaggerated pronunciation of the words CON TUTTA FORZA. In 1996, Hanson performed this composition again, this time in the Royal Academy of Music in Stockholm in the presence of Sweden's royal family, whom he treated to a (partial) striptease (see the DVD *Bats & Butterflies*).

Dufrêne was the first poet to make use of the tape recorder in France in 1953, followed two years later

by Henri Chopin. William Burroughs's friend and partner-in-crime, Brion Gysin, began using this medium in 1958, with Bernard Heidsieck following a year later.⁵

A number of other Swedish sound artists also saw the value in meeting their French colleagues. For instance, Bengt Emil Johnson visited Paris in 1965, where he met Chopin and Heidsieck, among others.

"During this period," Hanson noted, "I also came in contact with John Cage who was to have such a decisive influence, not so much through his works as through his attitude and artistic philosophy. Apart from more traditional writing, my own creative activity during the early sixties was directed towards the genres of happenings and instrumental theatre. At the same time I started experimenting with text-sound compositions – not a simple undertaking since I didn't have access to a studio. I experimented with an old Tandberg tape recorder which had three different speeds, thereby affording certain transposing possibilities. By placing a toothpick between the tape and the erasing head it was also possible to record several layers of voices on top of each other, a sort of polyphonic partwriting. Of course the technical quality left much to be desired and all these early experiments have since been discarded."⁶

Hanson's reference to "happenings" probably refers to the three Fluxus events he attended in Stockholm in 1963. These "happenings" were organised by Fluxus artist Bengt Emil Johnson and included performances by Dick Higgins and his partner Alison Knowles.⁷

At the end of 1963, Hanson, in an article for the Swedish magazine *Rondo*, wrote that the tape recorder could be used to investigate the roots of a lost linguistic source, oral poetry "and in consequence, I discovered that Bengt Emil Johnson and Lars-Gunnar Bodin were also each absorbed with ideas that were similar to mine. In 1965, the Electronic Music Studio was opened in Stockholm and a little later the Fylkingen language group was formed which provided opportunities for more qualified studio work and also a forum where text-sound compositions could be presented."⁸

In 1965, Hanson again performed in public, presenting his *Danse Figure (for EP)*, inspired by one line from an Ezra Pound poem about a dancer in a Stockholm theatre. This work was also produced "on very primitive home equipment", during the winter of 1964-65. "All the sounds in the piece come out from one reading of the sentence processed by filtering and transposition," Hanson explained. "Since it is made on analogue equipment, transpositions up and down can only be achieved if the material at the same time gets condensed or stretched out."

His *La destruction de votre code génétique par drogues, toxines et irradiation* (1969) is also produced on analogue equipment. Luckily his experience using the equipment while working at the EMS ([Elektroakustisk Musik i Sverige](#)) in Stockholm, had improved his techniques, that even as late as April 1968 he was still describing as "very limited". In 1969, he produced a new version of *Danse Figure*. The original version of *Che* (1968), *Coucher et souffler* (1968) and *How are you* (1969) were all saved from destruction.

Sound poetry has always been the domain of a small but international group. The poet-performers usually meet at one of the many sound poetry festivals, organised mostly in Europe. Fylkingen was a pioneer in this emerging genre. In 1968, the first of a series of ten annual "Text-Sound Compositions" was held and broadcast on the radio. This also precipitated the production of a number of LPs.⁹ In 1969, Hanson became the manager of Fylkingen, a position he filled until 1980. It proved to be a sizeable task that took up much of his time.

Dufrêne and Heidsieck were invited to participate in the first festival organised by Fylkingen in 1968. Dufrêne described the facilities in Stockholm as a "*laboratoire très impressionnant*" (very impressive laboratory) but added that in "one also finds hidden mice in such mountains". He praised Hanson's *Che* and *Coucher et souffler* for their biting humour and economical use of techniques, although he did not fully comprehend his interests in the rites, the body language and the insistence upon a return to original sources.¹⁰

But Hanson also expressed another ideal: "The sound poem is perhaps also a way back to contact with the larger public that bore the traditions of poetry in ancient times".¹¹ Henri Chopin and Bob

Cobbing also attended a number of these festivals and John Cage visited Fylkingen every year during the period 1963-1966. Chopin made the most drastic shift from real-time sound poetry to a virtual presentation when his performances began consisting solely of a lone tape recorder playing on stage. He distinguished “*poésie sonore*” from “*poésie phonétique*”. He began focusing on vocal “micro-pieces”; he dissected and unravelled the language but did not do this using a pre-written text or music score, instead he used a composition that was written or registered mechanically on the spot.

Hanson’s approach is best revealed in the statement: “My own underlying theory for the development of text-sound compositions during the experimental years can be summarized in the following points:

1. It was to be an intermedium between literature and music.
2. It should exploit the meaningful oral elements of the language, in other words the communicator inherent in the phoneme itself, the intonation, the expression and so on.
3. In contrast to written text several progressions could take place simultaneously, without necessarily running parallel.
4. The product should be presented in the form of a tape intended primarily for the media of radio and gramophone and not as a manuscript or score.”¹²

In Hanson’s larger works such as *How are you* (1969) and *La destruction de votre code génétique par drogues etc.* (1969), we see that permutations play a significant role. These organisational methods were used in the 1950s in concrete poetry and by cut-up writers like Brion Gysin. Hanson’s *Hommage à Jackson MacLow* (1977) is also based on these principles.

Hanson’s compositions appeared on the LPs produced by magazines like *OU* (no. 36/37, 1969 and no. 38/39, 1971) and *Axe* (no. 3, 1976), among others. Moreover, his work also appeared on various compilations such as *Klankteksten-Konkrete Poëzie-Visuele Teksten* (1970), *Poesia Sonora* (1975) and on Fylkingen’s Text-Sound-Compositions records (1969-1978). His work saw increased distribution when, in 2001, Firework Edition Records produced a series of CDs and DVDs of his work.

Of the many sound poetry festivals that were held in the 1970s, Hanson only participated in a couple of these including the 8th (1975) and 9th (1976) “International Sound Poetry Festival” in London, “Klank in geluid/text in sound” (Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam, 1977), the “11th International Festival of Sound Poetry” (St. Lawrence Centre Town Hall, Toronto, 1978) and “Rencontres Internationales 1980 de Poésie Sonore” (Centre Pompidou, Paris). After 1980 – after he stopped working for Fylkingen – he began to travel more extensively and, in 2002, he reported that he had participated in some 400 personal performances worldwide.

Rarely during this period did his participation in a festival lead to the creation of a new composition, however. a newspaper in Amsterdam reacted to the Stedelijk Museum festival in 1977, by stating that it was unconscionable for the museum to invite a bunch of foreign crazies to mock the good citizens of the Netherlands with this kind of incomprehensible nonsense. Hanson’s response was his *Hermetic back poem* (1977) that he assured one and all was “guaranteed incomprehensible” and was performed with his back to the audience.¹³

The more digital technology developed in the 1970s, the more his own analogue techniques began to annoy Hanson. About *La destruction etc.* he wrote: “I was never satisfied with that version since the analogue technique including a lot of tape cutting and splicing didn’t allow the necessary precision”.

In 2001, he produced a digital version of this composition. This was followed by the digitalisation of much of his work dating from the 1960s and 70s. One of the first pieces he produced with the help of a computer was his *A Living Man* (1972). It is primarily a musical piece but also consists of sections where he talks in a nearly unaltered voice about his favourite activities and what he likes the best about his own body, ending with the conviction: “I want to remain a living man”.¹⁴

Fylkingen’s growing professionalisation, in the eyes of some of the more purist sound poets, also had its disadvantages. Dufrière laments that in the work of his Swedish colleagues, the human voice is

almost unrecognisable.¹⁵ In a 1976 interview, artist Michael Gibbs, who had moved to the Netherlands in 1974, asked Hanson whether a composition that sounds more like music can still be called sound poetry. During their conversation Hanson explained his method:

[indented block of quoted text below does not need quotation marks]

Anyway, what you do is you decide what elements you want to build up your composition from, and then you try to extract them from the material, or to amplify them and make them more apparent.

There are different techniques: you use filtering, of course, so you can cut out very narrow bands of frequencies from the voice sound. You can use deeper kind of modulations, and you can superimpose different filters to get new kinds of frequency spectrums. You also use the change of speed: by playing tape of spoken language faster or slower, you move it up and down the frequencies, so you can get a rich representation of frequencies that are normally not so well presented. So there's practically no sound whatsoever that you can't get out of the human voice.¹⁶

But virtuosity in the use of technology and acoustics also has its downside. Even the inventor of "*poésie sonore*", Henri Chopin, had to admit that there was a certain exhaustion that arises upon hearing a number of concerts that consist solely of tape recordings, noting: "*C'était froid, trop mécanique*" (It felt cold, too mechanical).¹⁷

In a 2010 interview with mega-interviewer, Hans Ulrich Obrist, Hanson declared that he considered the work he produced in the first ten years of his career as his most important. He preferred his work with voice to his electronic music because these early works were fairly primitive.¹⁸ Hanson's sound poems from circa 1970 were original works that captured the revolutionary élan of the later 1960s. The most obvious example of this spirit is *Che* (1968), where the staccato calling of Che's name seamlessly segues with the sound of machinegun fire. Social criticism can be found in compositions like *Western Europe* (1969), a "satire about shallowness", wherein a woman declares that she is very pleased with her "sweet little car" and her "divine little contraceptive" but slowly we hear her voice – which is interrupted by threatening male voices – descending into despair. *Revolution* (1970) and *Don't hesitate do it, do it right now* (1970) encourage a transformation of the listener with texts like "I'm calling you", "Do something", "Very soon now" en "Don't hesitate to do it"....

Even though the political nature of his work after the 1970s is less obvious, Hanson continues to project his anti-authoritarian outlook. In, for instance, *Les martyrs* (1975) – in which the names of assassinated revolutionaries such as Karl Liebknecht and Che Guevara are interwoven with phrases like "*mach frei mein volk*" (free yourselves, people) and "*libérée*" (liberate). In one of his *Four unplayable games* (1967-72), the stockholders of Dow Chemical, the company that brought us napalm, which was used extensively in Vietnam, catch hell. On a warm day, they are instructed to stand at attention naked in a stadium while a band plays the national anthem until they faint. The last one standing wins all of the stock shares.

A second thematic red thread that can be found running through Hanson's work is human communication. *Coucher et souffler* (1968) is about the problems of communication as expressed, for instance, in how we slowly and uncertainly search in a foreign language for the right words to express such things as how much you like someone, or that this is no longer the case as in *Lettre d'un étranger - á C.* (1988).

A third theme involves fear and incantation. The theme of *L'Inferno de Strindberg* (1970) is the extreme psychic crisis that the alchemist-writer experiences in Paris. In *Les sabots du bouc* (1981) we face the devil and the various *Nightwoods* (1979-1990) are inhabited by monsters, spirits and dark, subconscious thoughts. Hanson is fascinated by extremes; by both light and dark, as is further indicated by the title of his DVD *Bats & Butterflies*.

When we observe Hanson's methods, we notice, in particular, the influence of *musique concrète*. His *Pierre Chemin de fer* (1996) is an homage to Pierre Schaeffer – the pioneer of this music genre – in which the real and imitation sounds of steam locomotives set the tone. Meanwhile, *Das grosse Kuckuckur-Pingpong Rondo* (1998) is dominated by the sounds of clocks and *Från koltrast till kaos*

(2002) and *Autobiography* (1998-2001) contain “soundscapes” that were inspired by sounds found in nature.

Of particular interest is his *Cuica* (1998), in which the sounds from this musical instrument are imitated vocally, creating a form of onomatopoeia. One method that Hanson has applied with particular verve is that of polyphony. *Au 187.0* (1976), *New York Lament* (1980) and *Skärp dich för fan* (1991), consist of continuous, multi-part vocal repetitions, where tempo differences create a situation where the words seem to be chasing each other or tumbling over one another. These last two pieces are perfect for additional live performances, which one can view on YouTube. Hanson called his *Hermetic back poem* (1977) and *New York Lament* (1980) shamanistic poems, probably because their repetitive monotony create an enchanting atmosphere.

In *Subface* (1970), the diverse abstract vocals still contain a red thread in the form of a “verbal” voice, whereas in *Ouhm* (1973), for instance, Hanson risks ending up in a virtuosic vocal collage with a certain high abstraction level that threatens to become almost sterile in its effect. In other words, music has gotten the upperhand and language has come to play a supporting role.

In the period 1975-1990, Hanson began focusing more and more on music. He still managed to perform a sound poem now and then, for instance, at a Sound Poetry Festival, to which he had been invited to participate. Examples of this include *Les Martyrs* (1975), *New York Lament* (1980), *Am strengsten verboten* (1981) and *Lettre d'un étranger* (1988). It is also possible to find a certain logic in his reduced interest in sound poetry during this period, which can be observed by his performances at the annual Synthese (Bourges) and Polyphonix (Paris) festivals. But it was probably mostly due to the fact that Hanson's priorities had simply shifted by then, as a result of, for example, his election to the position of president of Fylkingen and his serving as the President of the Society of Swedish Composers and from 1986 to 2002 as President of the International Confederation for Electro-acoustic Music.

In 1990, he again managed to produce some new sound poems, often influenced by current politics, such as ... *und so weiter* (1990), in which Hanson expresses his resistance to the unification of East and West Germany. A limited number of sound poems follow, such as his very successful *Skärp dig* (1991), *Finale* (1996), *Hommage à Jackson MacLow* (1997) and *Les sabots du bouc* (1997). Meanwhile, in *La lutte du siècle* (1999) Hanson looks back at the last century in a collage of ideologically militant songs from the 20th century. He acknowledges that it has eventually become “a rich man's world” after all.

In 2001, Hanson experienced severe heart palpitations and he survived thanks to an intervention involving cardioversion or an electric shock to the heart to regulate his heart beat. He used the audio from the videotapes of the ordeal and came up with the composition *My Galloping Heart* (2001). His anti-authoritarian approach has since been a little more tempered and focused. *Citizen, sit down* (2002) criticises the nanny state, which may be seen as debilitatingly over-protective of its citizens. In *The Health Fascists* (2004), the hardened smoker focuses on the “discrimination” that smokers experience and other prohibitions of “bad” behaviour.

In 2010, the Moderna Museet in Stockholm organised a Sten Hanson Festival. The museum did not seem particularly taken aback by his pointedly critical sound poem *Modus operandi på Moderna Museet* (1975) – with subtitles such as “average” and “meritocracy”. Instead they gave him the attention Sten Hanson deserves.

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¹ *Poetical Works & Music without Tears / Oeuvres Poétiques & Musique sans Larmes / Poetische Schriften & Musik ohne Tränen / Poetiska Arbeten & Musik utan Tårar*, Firework Edition, Stockholm / Tragus Förlag, Strängnäs / Gallery Niklas Belenius, Stockholm / Alga Marghen Books, Milano / Other Media, Stockholm / New York, 2008. The publication *Sten Hanson 1936-2006* (Stockholm, 2006), which includes a list of his works and a selection of his performances, was also very useful for this article.

² In 1973, Hanson probably published four booklets of which only three have been tracked down. They were published by his own Länsmansgårdens förlag in Rimbo and together make up his *Selected works 1961-75*. The second, third and fourth parts are entitled respectively: *A living man, IV unplayable games 1968-1972* and *Sound and normal middle-class life – event poem*.

As far as I know, Hanson's concrete and visual poems have seldom been published. But they have been the source of a lot of his audio works. Some examples include his *Dance Figure, Nightwoods, AU 197.0* and *Sound Images*.

Hanson has published very few articles of any substance on the subject of sound poetry, such as "Bob Cobbing – the sound poet", in: Peter Mayer, *Bob Cobbing and Writers Forum*, Sunderland, 1974; and "Henri Chopin", in: *Stereo headphones*, 8-10, 1982.

³ Ingvar Loco Nordin: <http://www.sonoloco.com/rev/fylkingen/forerunners1.html>. According to Nordin, the term was invented by Bengt Emil Johnson and Lars-Gunnar Bodin on 3 September 1967 while sitting on a park bench in Hilversum. They were staying there as representatives of the Swedish broadcasting network, attending a conference that had as one of its goals to come up with a general name to better encompass the new "radiophonic" art that utilised poetry, language and recording equipment. It may have been a meeting organised by the NCRV broadcasting network that in 1968 produced the program "Vers in het gehoor" (Fresh audition), where one could hear "sonische structuren" (sonic structures) followed a year later by the program "Verbosonika". Gust Gils was probably also present at the 1967 meeting (see also: Willem M. Roggeman, *Beroepsgeheim*, The Hague/Rotterdam 1975).

⁴ Frédéric Acquaviva, "Wolman in the Open": http://www.macba.cat/PDFs/acquaviva_eng.pdf.

⁵ Jacques Donguy, *Poésies expérimentales – Zone numérique (1953-2007)*, Dijon, 2007, p. 133.

⁶ <http://www.ubu.com/sound/hanson.html>. The EMS was founded by Swedish national radio and the Fylkingen Group for Linguistic Art in 1966. This was a branch of Fylkingen, which had been founded in 1933 to promote experimental music and art.

⁷ http://www.fylkingen.se/boken_summary.

⁸ See note 6.

⁹ The groundwork was laid for these festivals by the ideas of artist Öyvind Fahlström (since 1953) and the event "Visions of the Present" (1966), where 14 notable Swedish researchers signed an appeal in which they called for investments to foster cooperation between art and science and especially Fylkingen's activities. http://www.fylkingen.se/boken_summary. Hanson also considered radio to be a particularly important medium for his type of sound art.

¹⁰ François Dufrêne, "Le lettrisme est toujours pendant", in: *Opus 40/41*, January 1973, p. 61.

¹¹ Hanson citation from the liner notes to the LP *Text-sound-compositions 2, A Stockholm Festival*, 1968.

¹² See note 6.

¹³ This seems to be about the "live-video-exhibition" *Hotel Life*, organised by the Belgian director-choreographer Michael Laub in 1978 in the shuttered Hotel Ruimzicht in Amsterdam that was empty at the time, prior to its restoration.

¹⁴ http://archive.org/details/OTG_1975_07_02.

¹⁵ See note 10, p. 63.

¹⁶ Michael Gibbs, "Sten Hanson, 40. Composer, poet & sonosopher", in: *Kontextsound*, April/May

1977.

¹⁷ Henri Chopin, "Poésie sonore Internationale", Paris, 1997, p. 210.

¹⁸ This interview can be found in *Katalogus 2*, Hundorät Rare Books / Firework Edition, Stockholm, 2011.