

Soul at the tips of his fingers

Healer and musician, Severin Berz, from the French part of Switzerland, has developed an acute sensitivity for the art of touch. Biodynamic, craniosacral therapy, as well as his strange instrument, the Hang, call for a very special type of presence.

With a limitless enthusiasm for colourful, new sounds and rhythms, he took off to see the world at just 17 years old, going to Senegal, Cuba, Colombia, Peru, Bolivia, Chili, and Burkina Faso... Spending several months in each place, studying local percussion techniques, he learnt to recognize both their similarities and astonishing diversity. A journey lasting a full six years. Then in 2005, after three years of further musical study and practice on his return to Switzerland, Severin Berz abandoned the idea of becoming a professional musician. He discovered a strange and unusual instrument, called the Hang (pictured). Intuitively, he began to play and, immediately, it was a revelation.

In the absence of any cultural ties or known references, the instrument gave him a sense of total freedom. By December 2006, only a year after buying his first Hang, Severin Berz was already giving concerts. Very soon, he recorded two solo albums, followed by a third (with a double bass and recorder) at the end of 2007. A new album (with a double bass, flute, oud, balafon, saxophone and guitar) is set for release in October. "The Hang, which allows me to play with a very delicate touch, gives me the widest range of expression I have ever experienced with a musical instrument; you can use it for everything, from creating rhythms to playing melodies", he says. "A whole range of varied emotions can be derived from a single note", he adds, as though he was talking of his second activity as a cra-

niosacral therapist. "Playing with a different intention is enough to alter the note itself." As well as producing subtle differences in sounds, the Hang is an instrument of infinite nuances.

Choreographing the invisible

Inspired by cranio-sacral osteopathy (1940), and applied to the whole body, Severin Berz practices a more refined, or biodynamic, form of craniosacral therapy, which requires an exceptional ear, touch, and awareness. On the "important" link between his two spheres of activity, he says: "Both call for a special type of presence, a heightened bodily awareness and fluidity that focuses on the present mo-

ment. In both activities, I allow my body to take over and do what it has to do. I am like an active observer insofar as I discover my actions the instant my body performs them. I relax my mind completely, experiencing the instrument (and the body) to the full." As he talks, he performs an evocative dance, demonstrating both his Hang technique, and the internal, invisible choreography of bones, muscles and bodily fluids...

■ Jef Gianadda

Severin Berz and his Hang, a strange and unusual instrument: "It feels like when I play it, the Hang draws the music out of me."

A rare instrument

The Hang (which means "hand" in Bernese dialect) was invented in Berne, in 2000, by Felix Rohner and Sabina Schärer. Inundated by orders, they have now closed down their website and email account. Anyone interested in purchasing one of the hundred or so instruments made each year needs to send in a written application complete with cover letter. A reply is guaranteed within three years, to set up a possible meeting with applicants. However, the couple stops production for six months a year in order to devote more time to musical research.



The product of extensive study of instruments from around the world, the Hang is made up of two metal spheres, one with a resonance hole in the centre, and the other marked with eight indentations, or notes, capable of producing nine different sounds. Early versions were available in multiple scales ranging up to 42 models (Japanese, Indian, Diatonic, Arab, Blues, Ancient Greek, Pentatonic, etc.) Each model of the fourth generation Hang, made from a new metal alloy, is unique. Originally sold for 400 Swiss Francs, the instrument now costs 1,500. While rare, it can occasionally be found for sale second-hand on the Internet, for prices of up to 6,000 dollars!

Photo: Loid