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HEAR THE WORLD

THE MAGAZINE FOR THE CULTURE OF HEARING

ISSUE TWELVE



*CARL FREDERICKSEN
CREATED BY PIXAR
ANIMATION STUDIOS*

**The sounds of surgery
Cave of sound in the Oslo Fjord
Hearing and forensics
Extraordinary Records
The voice of Joni Mitchell**



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EDITORIAL
Dear Readers,

We experience a universe of sounds and noises virtually every second of the day. Some of them we enjoy consciously, for example, when listening to our favorite music or the voice of a loved one. However, we remain unaware of many of them – the elevator music of our everyday life so to speak, the blanket of sound of traffic noise, snatches of conversations, ring tones and so on. And then there are the sounds we would prefer not to hear and to block out of our “soundscape.” In almost all cultures, these include some of the noises made by the body, both our own and others’. I’m sure you can imagine what I am getting at... In Japan, a civilization with a highly developed sense of etiquette and barriers to intimacy, a very peculiar toilet culture has emerged combining maximum discretion, hygiene and comfort. This also includes special “sound management.” You will find out how it works in this new issue of HEAR THE WORLD. After this rather delicate start, I would like to draw your attention to sound management of a very different kind. Using the example of the new Opera House in Oslo, Sandra Hofmeister highlights the extent to which architecture can influence the acoustics of an opera house and take them in the desired direction. It becomes clear that essentially no two opera houses are the same; cultural preferences play an important role. For instance, do you prefer to experience a performance in all its orchestral richness or do you attach greater value to precision of the sound of the singing voices? Read this exciting piece of cultural history and you will listen to the singers and orchestra from an entirely different perspective during your next visit to the opera!

Let us stay a little longer with the opera, the “powerhouse of emotions,” as it is also fittingly called. A spectacular anniversary event took place at the Opéra Bastille in Paris, which is now 20 years old. Renowned German artist Anselm Kiefer turned the entire building into a “stage setting” of a special kind and also directed the anniversary opera *Am Anfang*, specially composed for the occasion by Jörg Widman. The idea of a “gesamtkunstwerk” or synthesis of the arts, as created by Richard Wagner to refer to opera, lives on – and the music is the uniting force, bringing drama, painting and architecture together.

In order to be able to enjoy opera and the whole remaining universe of music, you need a well-functioning sense of hearing. For an increasing number of people, this has not been a given for a long time. Their hearing is restricted, often due to an insidious process of hearing loss. Many people deny or, out of a false sense of shame, hide this gradual hearing loss as if it were a personal shortcoming. And still many of those concerned do not know that nowadays there are highly sophisticated acoustic aids and tailored solutions for hearing difficulties. Heinz Spitzmüller, former manager at SAP, has experienced this process first hand. Based on his experience, he has developed a special service providing assistance in the form of an acoustics studio. Particularly for people who depend on their hearing as a fundamental ability in their working life.

As in every issue of HEAR THE WORLD, you will also find a wide range of informative and entertaining topics from the fields of culture, music, lifestyle and science. Marcel Krenz, for example, takes you to Manhattan, where a unique park has been developed on the site of the closed High Line rail track. Take a look at the heart of New York from a completely new angle! Staying in America, we visit Joni Mitchell. Uli Rüdener offers a portrait of the singer who, with her breathtaking soprano voice, set new standards for pop music in the 1960s and whom today younger stars worship like a saint.

I hope you enjoy reading this issue and find it a source of inspiration.

Best wishes,

Alexander Zschokke



ABOUT THE COVER
Carl Fredericksen from Disney•Pixar's movie "UP", poses for HEAR THE WORLD.

“It’s about quality of life”

Having first-hand experience of how hearing loss can interfere with life and put a professional career at risk, a former senior manager has founded an acoustics studio of a special kind: myWORLDofHEARING.

Did the partner just say “future packages” or “feature packages”? Those who have to ask themselves questions like this in important business meetings easily fall behind during discussions and can only make a delayed contribution. Then there is the fear of misunderstanding something on top. In a multilingual business world, in which communication skills are of paramount importance, unpleasant information deficits such as these often have far-reaching consequences. Heinz Spitzmüller is all too familiar with these difficult situations. He sits in the elegantly furnished acoustics studio on the first floor of his house and tells us about his personal experiences, which today are his most important capital.

Like many people with hearing damage, for a long time the former IT manager did not want to admit his difficulty. Initially he tried to get by with typical “hearing tactics” such as lipreading, guessing and interpolating. However, these attempts to compensate are very tiring and require permanent, extreme vigilance. “For a long time,” says Spitzmüller, “I didn’t know why I was always so exhausted in the evenings.” Talking to him, you soon realize that he is familiar with fear of the new and unknown, misunderstandings, compensation strategies and is also aware of the social consequences this disability can have. Those who react more slowly or have to listen harder than everyone else are swiftly considered dozy or tense. Those who do not respond when addressed might sometimes come across as arrogant. The risk of misinterpretation permanently accompanies this disability which, unlike others, is invisible to the person you are talking to. Heinz Spitzmüller nods indulgently when I ask. “Would it be possible for us to listen to it?” he asks his technical director Markus Andrae, who is operating the audiovisual simulation technology during our conversation. The sound of an arriving train and the echoing acoustics of a station building boom from the Dolby Surround system; you can hear a couple having a conversation in the foreground and announcements in the background. Then the recording ends and Markus Andrae starts playing a new one which gives me the impression of suddenly sitting behind a wall: You can hardly hear the train anymore; at best you can only guess that it is arriving. The same is true of the couple’s dialog; you merely hear snatches of words and I can almost only make sense of what they are saying from what I remember. What we have just heard is a simulation of Heinz Spitzmüller’s hearing.

When, in late 2005, several ENT specialists predicted that his hearing would continue to deteriorate gradually, Spitzmüller resigned from his job at the company where he had worked for 18 years and ended an until then very promising career. At that time, he had already been working in a leading position, both on a national and international level, for more

than a decade. He had regularly been wearing hearing devices since 1995, but by this time Spitzmüller had lost 85% of his natural hearing ability. Considering the fact that his hearing loss would continue, he doubted his chances of success as an executive in an international company. For his work primarily consisted of communication – a series of conferences, meetings, telephone calls. It was all about listening as carefully and speaking as clearly as possible, about understanding and being understood.

For Spitzmüller, this blow to his career was the trigger for new professional fulfillment. His business idea was to offer a special kind of assistance to clients with hearing loss who pursue a professional career. Without question, the innovative business instinct of a top manager combined with his experiences of his own hearing loss played a key role here. He knows how strong one’s inner resistance to admitting hearing difficulties can be, he knows the sense of shame which often prevents those concerned from seeking professional help, and he himself has already experienced how important it is to receive optimum advice. It is for precisely these reasons that he now wants to cater in a particularly sensitive way to the needs of a growing group of people. Therefore – he points out – his consultation concept is in every respect tailored to the special needs of executives as well as people from other professions where communication plays a major role. “We target the strongest-growing customer segment. In the age group of 50 to 59-year-olds, as many as one in four people needs a hearing device,” Spitzmüller states. He considers hearing a “key qualification for professional success” in general. As every person has his or her own individual world of hearing, it is necessary to cater to the individual needs of each client, Spitzmüller explains. Therefore, his service and advice center is based on the idea of “getting to know [the client] as a competent partner” and focusing on his or her particular personal and professional needs.

In order to attend these kind of consultation sessions, you have to make your way to the idyllic village of Wiesenbach. It is located near Heidelberg, Germany, far from the urban hustle and bustle. House number 14 in a quiet residential area has flowers on the balconies and is nestled among a number of family homes. On arrival, most clients probably feel like I do: As I enter the stylishly designed foyer on the ground floor and Mr. and Mrs. Spitzmüller welcome me, I do not have the impression that I am about to have an acoustics check-up. In order to be able to offer his clients an extraordinary service, Spitzmüller has invested approximately € 350,000 in the sophisticated technical equipment and the kitting out of the acoustics studio in his home. Living and working under the same roof enables him to also welcome clients in the evenings and at weekends. At the same time, Spitzmüller attaches great importance to creating a particularly pleasant atmosphere which can help put his clients at ease. “Regarding the design of the business rooms, I really have to thank my wife,” Spitzmüller adds. In his team, the former first-class flight attendant is

also in charge when it comes to questions of aesthetics. However, here you will not only find a pleasantly private atmosphere and the intensive use of state-of-the-art diagnostic equipment, but also and most importantly you will be offered a lengthy and comprehensive consultation session. Even before the first appointment, Spitzmüller sends his clients a need assessment form of several pages. This is a first step in establishing an individual profile which is carefully drawn up for the subsequent sessions. Those who then come for a first consultation have to allow at least two hours for it. After all, this is about the chance to recover a considerable amount of quality of life.

Using cutting-edge technology, the masters of hearing device acoustics Markus Andrae and Anja Beck visualize the test results on a screen, so that the client can see a map of the human acoustic range, so to speak, and can see the strengths and weaknesses of their own hearing. Based on audiometry, Spitzmüller and his team aim to find the ideal settings for the hearing device for situations defined by the client. Generally, they specialize in meticulous diagnosis and simulations of all kinds of different work and communication situations, which are as authentic as possible. Starting from the key questions “What does the client hear?” and “What should the client hear?”, they work on finding the perfect sound and fine-tuning the hearing device to give optimum results, including and especially for the daily routine at work. To this end, the acoustics studio is not only equipped with a BOSE Professional Systems Dolby Surround system that can create an authentic soundscape of certain situations over high-performance loudspeakers (shopping in the supermarket, a meeting in a conference room or sophisticated business dinner at a restaurant). In addition, in order to establish a hearing situation that is as authentic as possible, swivel arms with mouth simulators can be activated, which come out of the walls. “This occurred to me at the hairdresser’s,” Spitzmüller smiles, and explains that the swivel arms are actually arms from a hood hairdryer, used to simulate the positions of dialog partners. The mouth simulators come from the field of telecommunications research. Their spectral radiance pattern corresponds to that of the human vocal organ. In addition to this high-tech support, it is also important to practice dealing with your own hearing loss as well as the efficient use of hearing technology. To this end, audio therapist Judith Keydel is part of the team. She complements the use of technology with empowerment, i.e. helping clients to help themselves. When it comes to accepting and dealing with one’s own hearing loss, there is still a lot that can be done, Spitzmüller sums up.

To this day, there is still a stigma attached to hearing loss. Many people, especially men, associate it with weakness and a loss of power. However, Spitzmüller considers an incorrect approach to the disability one of the main problems. Two and a half hours with the man from the Black Forest show that this is about more than just a good business idea – it is about “enlightenment and quality of life.” According to

Spitzmüller, above all the technological quantum leaps of recent years can contribute to significantly improving the situation of people with hearing loss. We have had the technological basis for acting flexibly since as far back as 1996, he says, when digital technology was first applied to hearing devices. The software-operated technology enables the programming of hearing devices to adjust to every situation and achieve the desired acoustic effect. What is most important for the client, however, is an efficient combination of making the most of the state-of-the-art technology and providing support that devotes sufficient time to each client and is tailored to his or her individual needs. Which is why Spitzmüller’s plans for the future are not extravagant: “We are thinking about expanding but not on a grand scale. We want to maintain this special mix of technological innovation, established expertise and individual support which is the core principle of our company,” Spitzmüller explains.

The increasing number of clients alone shows that the business model is proving popular. They particularly appreciate the great flexibility and attentive support. “One evening during a barbecue I said to my family that it was a pity that there were no crickets in the area where we live any more. But it turned out I was the only one who couldn’t hear them anymore,” a doctor aged only 46 told me. He is a client of myWORLDofHEARING. “I mentioned this jokingly at a consultation and they told me something could be done about it. Now, I can enjoy the chirping of the crickets again.”

Martin Ernst