

Media conference, 21 August 2014

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The Basel Jazzcampus: a vision becomes reality

In the midst of the old town of Kleinbasel on the northern banks of the Rhine, between the river promenade and the shopping mile at Claraplatz; in the same neighbourhood as the Volkshaus, the Studio Cinema and many trendy eateries; next to the retirement home 'Zum Lamm' and the Basel Music School for Boys and Girls; just a stone's throw from the oldest mosque in Basel, the Catholic Church of St Clara – and let us not forget the red-light district either; and diagonally opposite the City Office for Economy and Labour. Here, on the plot of land where until 2008 the workers of the Willy A. Bachofen machine factory manufactured high-performance mill systems and industrial mixers – here, where the first digging work revealed the oldest settlement in Basel, 3300 years old – here, during the past three years, an extraordinary music centre has been built. Here, the most modern sound technology systems have been integrated in a historic building structure. Here, in the middle of a neighbourhood where people from all walks of life and all the continents meet each day, here, a space for jazz has been created: the Jazzcampus.

What place could have been better suited to serve as the bedrock for a new beacon on the cultural, musical and educational landscape of Basel? Where else, if not here, could we better open the doors of the Jazzcampus of the Musik-Akademie Basel and the University of Applied Sciences and Arts Northwestern Switzerland?

The Habitat and Levedo Foundations, both financed in large part by Beatrice Oeri, have not just contributed the necessary financial means but have also displayed the love of jazz and the expertise that are prerequisites for such an ambitious project. The Habitat Foundation is the owner of the building; the Levedo Foundation took on the task of fitting out the building for the Jazz Department.

The architects Buol & Zünd have understood how to unite the modern core of this building – whose acoustic and atmosphere are so incomparable – with its historical substance. Thanks to them the Jazz Campus fits harmoniously into the architectural context of the surrounding neighbourhood.

The University of Applied Sciences and Arts Northwestern Switzerland and the Musik-Akademie Basel are committed to the long-term maintenance of this unique educational establishment. Dozens of experts, designers and craftsmen and innumerable workers, both men and women, have played their part in bringing to completion this unparalleled building for jazz and jazz education.

And from this autumn semester onwards, these atmospheric rooms will fill with music, light and life; with students of the Academy, with children and young people. Here, jazz enthusiasts from the surrounding region and from many other nations will come together – students from Switzerland and students from abroad, young people of many different nationalities and jazz greats from all over the world.

When the International Jazz Day was declared in November 2011, Irina Bokova, the Bulgarian Director-General of UNESCO, uttered the following words that have repeatedly been an inspiration and a guiding light to us during our work on this unique project here in Basel:

“Jazz makes the most of the world’s diversity, effortlessly crossing borders and bringing people together. From its roots in slavery, this music has raised a passionate voice against all forms of oppression. It speaks a language of freedom that is meaningful to all cultures”.

This unique place will help us to give jazz education a real presence in Basel and let it resonate beyond it. By uniting teaching, broad-based education and performance – just as is also practised at the Musik-Akademie – people here will be able to learn, teach, experiment, improvise, develop and “jam” together.

Behind all this is a vision that is founded on a unique opportunity to construct an open system. This open system allows us to think out of the box, to contemplate what is being developed in this dynamic genre and to ponder how we can comprehend, shape and follow up on these developments. To be sure, musicians will here first of all learn to master their instrument, to write music, to compose and to improvise. But above and beyond this, at a time when the music labels are in retreat, they will also learn to put their ideas into practice, to produce their music and to market it. This needs an awareness of what quality is all about, and what it means to design a fine-sounding product, how the whole process runs and how you can steer it. This type of creative knowledge and ability will be indispensable in the music world of the future, and the infrastructure of the Basel Jazzcampus has taken this consistently into consideration.

The unique infrastructure here, which meets the very highest standards, will not just draw ambitious students from all over Switzerland and abroad. This ensemble of buildings will also be a place where internationally renowned jazz musicians will gladly come to teach and perform. Here, in the midst of Kleinbasel, experienced musicians and music pedagogues will come together with aspiring students to work on innovative music projects. Here, a place has been created for musical encounters that is without parallel in all Europe. Or, to quote the words of the Director-General of UNESCO: “Jazz, effortlessly crossing borders, bringing people together, with a language that is meaningful to all cultures”. We look forward to these encounters. And to everything new that can now emerge from here.