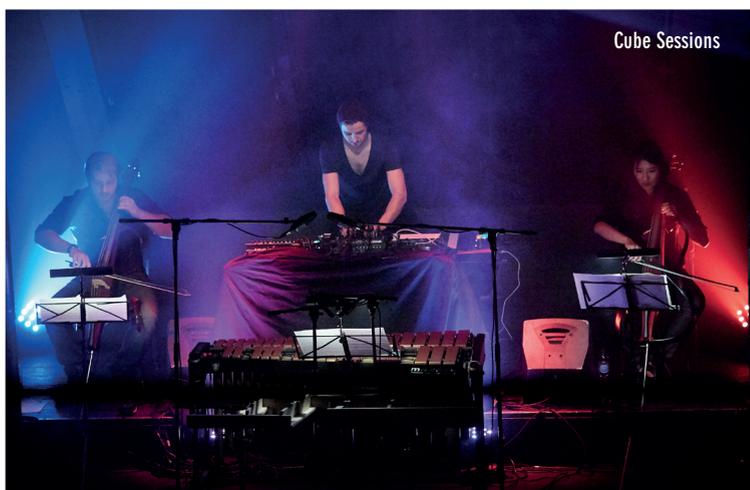


Finding the positives in problems



Cristina Steinle



Cube Sessions

In just four years Symphony Orchestra Basel has become independent, switched chief conductors and is now moving home. Can it turn this change into an opportunity? **Andrew Anderson** spoke to PR and marketing assistant Cristina Steinle to find out

The last few years have been a time of great change for Symphony Orchestra Basel (SOB). In 2012 it became independent from the General Music Society of Basel, which until then had coordinated all its concerts – a huge upheaval for both the artistic and administrative teams. Then this year Dennis Russell Davies, chief conductor since 2009, decided to move on and was replaced by Ivor Bolton; two conductors with very different styles. Now its base – Basel's Stadtcasino – is being refurbished, so the orchestra is effectively homeless for the next three years.

But whereas some institutions might have been overwhelmed by all this change, SOB has thrived. It has opted to focus on the potential, rather than the problem. As a result, the ensemble has a number of new and exciting programmes that will push the boundaries of what it can achieve musically over the next few years.

'Symphony Orchestra Basel is a really old orchestra – its history goes back 300 years – but only took full control of the artistic and commercial affairs ourselves in 2012,' says PR and marketing manager Cristina Steinle. Has it affected the atmosphere at the orchestra? 'As you can imagine, it was a big change – as is the move from Stadtcasino.'

In fact, Steinle says this transitional period goes back even further – back to when Davies first joined the orchestra: 'When Davies joined it was important to him that we became better known internationally and play more contemporary music.'

But now Davies is moving on, with Bolton announced as his successor in 2015. The English-born conductor also enormously popular, and is known for his love for ancient instruments and the baroque – Bolton is of course an acclaimed harpsichordist as well as well as a conductor.

'It will certainly keep things interesting for the musicians and the audience,' says Steinle when I ask about Bolton's appointment. 'We're all very excited to be working with someone who is as well-liked and who has such a huge international reputation.'

But don't expect Bolton's appointment to mean it will be all harpsichord and hunting horns going forward for SOB. Because, as Steinle tells me, the group has big plans to make more experimental music than ever before.

'It all started with our Cube Sessions, which are concerts with two musicians of ours who play with one or two DJs and producers,' says Steinle. 'They try not just to mix electronic and classical but to create something new – to find a new path.'

The project proved an enormous success, with musicians and audiences alike enjoying the shows. 'The idea was to bring together different people in the city, people who were not going to classical concerts,' continues Steinle. 'We wanted to bring them in so they can see what classical music can be, and that it can be something relevant and exciting.'

'Many people in the audience came back to more than one concert – some people came to every single one in the series. They liked the ambience, as the concerts were set in a club where usually you have concerts or disco nights. It was very open. It was also inexpensive, which helped attract a crowd.'

Unfortunately, the club that held the concerts has since closed and now SOB is looking for a new avenue for its experimental streak, as Steinle explains: 'We will find a new way, a new forum. It might be that we expand it into something like a mini music festival where a lot of different music experiments can take place – not just a mixture of classical and electronic but maybe classical and jazz, classical and hip-hop – who knows.'

'We want to encourage musicians to leave their path and try something new. Maybe we could work directly with clubs...but right now it is just an idea, and we're not sure what direction we will go in just yet.'

This gets to the heart of SOB's attitude to change: whereas some orchestras would simply move the Cube Sessions to a new venue, instead SOB see this as an opportunity to push the model even further.

A contributing factor is the orchestra's musicians, who have also gone through a period of adjustment. Says Steinle: 'For a long time the average age of our orchestra was quite high, but in the last few years it has changed dramatically – a lot of young and motivated musicians have joined who are very open to things like this, and who work on projects like this in their private time. It is beautiful to see how the enthusiasm and passion of the young players has inspired the other members of the orchestra – it is contagious.'

One young musician they will be working with soon is David Garrett, the 35-year-old rock star violinist who has been vaunted and vilified in equal measure by the classical music world.

An artist interested in taking classical music to new places and new audiences, it is little wonder that a forward-thinking institution such as SOB is keen to work with him.

'He first played with us in 2013,' Steinle says energetically. 'Some people loved it – not all people, naturally – but it brought new people into our concerts. We will tour with him next year and he returns to play in the Musical Theatre here in Basel.'

Which brings us to the Stadtcasino renovation. While SOB's home is being redeveloped the orchestra will play in venues across the city – nothing unusual in that. But what is curious is the way the orchestra has tailored its programme to suit each venue, as Steinle explains: 'For example we will play chamber music in museums and libraries, Bruckner in Basel Minister, Stewart Copeland's *Ben Hur* in an old Roman theatre, and David Garrett at the Musical Theatre,' says Steinle. 'Like with Cube Sessions it brings the possibility of new people hearing us play. It will be a really special season with lots to try out.'

I've got one last question for Steinle: is there room for Ivor Bolton, electronic music crossovers, David Garrett and site-specific projects all under one institutional roof? 'We certainly hope so,' says the PR manager, a smile in her voice. 'Of course we don't know for sure if the audience will come along or not – but it will be exciting to find out.'

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