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GSTAAD LIFE

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CHRISTOPH MÜLLER

On Music, Menuhin & More





Christoph Müller shows off his air-violin skills in front of Saanen Church.

Two Strings to his Bow

Interview with Christoph Müller

INTERVIEW BY ALEXIS MUNIER

GSTAADLIFE had the pleasure of speaking with Christoph Müller, who is a familiar face in the Saanenland each summer. As artistic director and CEO of the Menuhin Festival Gstaad, the former professional cellist explains the rhyme and reason for his dedication to classical music.

GSTAADLIFE: You're a cellist by training. Why cello? What drew you to this instrument?

Christoph Müller: I used to be a professional cellist, and in my first professional years played in orchestras, chamber music groups, as well as teaching. It's the sound and body of this instrument that drew the attention to me already in my earliest year as kid.

GL: After performing with prestigious organisations like the Kammerorchester Basel and the Orchestre Philharmonique Suisse, you made the transition to music direction and management. Why?

CM: I organised my first concert when I was 16. It was Mozart's Requiem with my youth orchestra and choir in Basel, held in

the church where my father used to be a priest – in the Predigerkirche Basel. It was a crucial experience. It was fascinating to me to discover what was possible when vision and dreams inspire classical music. During all my studies in music I had the dream to organise musical projects, but it was one I kept alive only in my head. When I was 25, the Basel Chamber Orchestra (which used to be in these years a completely different and much smaller organisation) invited me to play in the orchestra and to set up organisational management. I jumped at this opportunity although my salary was only CHF 800 per month during the first years... but it was such a fruitful and adventurous atmosphere and an incomparable feeling of departure—Aufbruchstimmung in German—for me.

GL: Do you still perform on occasion?


CM: Until 2010 I played monthly in the Basel Chamber Orchestra and practised every day but I had to admit that the pressure was too high to combine management and playing. After a general break of three years, I started playing again last year at occasional opportunities and it's great fun to me!

GL: Artistic director and CEO of the Menuhin Festival since 2002, do you look forward to spending several months in the Saanenland each year?

CM: Oh yes! Nature and mountains are how I recharge my batteries and this is one of the reasons why I look forward each year to settling in Gstaad for two months. It's the only time I spend fixed in one place without travelling around the world, as I do all year long with my music management job. Jogging and bicycle tours belong to my daily activities, in as much as it's possible, as the festival schedule is very demanding. It's important to get enough sleep and do something outside in order to feel balanced. But I've only been doing sports for the past four or five year—when I was younger I didn't feel this desire for balance so strongly.

GL: You were behind the expansion of the Menuhin Festival that now includes vocal and conducting academies?

CM: Yes, the festival's growth is closely connected with our academic activities, particularly the Conducting Academy. This project is an exclusive and outstand-



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from one generation to the next.

Christoph Müller

ing training possibility for young conductors. Nowhere else in Europe can a young conductor work for five to six hours daily during three weeks with a professional orchestra, and under the direction of world-famous conductors. This is unique and it brings a lot of attention to the Gstaad Menuhin Festival.

GL: Why the emphasis on pedagogy?

CM: Because it's our duty to save artistic heritage from one generation to the next. Our festival is uniquely placed with the tradition and reputation to think ahead for the next generation of artists and audience, in the spirit of Menuhin. It's an organisation and an event like our festival that offers perfect conditions to develop artistic greatness—we invite young artists to participate in concerts and master classes that offer both extraordinary human and artistic values.

GL: Though there have no doubt been hundreds of fantastic concerts throughout the years, do any magic moments in particular stand out for you?

CM: It's often this "first time" which remains in my head: the first concert of Alfred Brendel in Saanen or Andras Schiff; the first concert of Cecilia Bartoli, Hélène Grimaud or the first concert of the London Symphony Orchestra as well as for example the concert of Maxim Vengerov playing Schostakowitsch Concerto with the LSO and Gergiev in 2006. These were all truly unforgettable moments.

GL: Are you responsible for creating the vision and theme each year or is it a team effort?

CM: It's me...but I am exchanging these ideas and talking about them all year with members of the team of course. But at the end I'm responsible for if something works or not, and for the success of the festival in general.

GL: What is the programming process like for such a long—7 weeks!—festival?

CM: It starts with the concerts in the churches, which are incomparable and unique; most of them are chamber music—recitals, chamber orchestras, vocal experiences, etc. Then the Academy begins with public lessons and final concerts of each master class. Only in the second half of the festival is the tent open. On 6 August this year we'll see a "Cello Night" featuring Sol Gabetta and her teacher, as well as their students. Then the first symphonic concert in the tent with orchestra will be Valery Gergiev and the Marinsky Orchestra St. Petersburg on 12 August.

GL: What are you most proud of having achieved at the Menuhin?

CM: We doubled audience numbers as well as sponsors and activities. Looking at our competitors in Switzerland in Lucerne, Verbier, Locarno, and Montreux, it's not at all self-evident that classical music event would see such a dramatic increase. We achieved an increase of about 100% in 12 years! The conditions were perfect and we have a great staff and very generous and loyal supporters. But I am proud about the success in transporting Menuhin's spirit into the 21st century without repeating Menuhin's ideas but a sort of "translating" them.

GL: Now that the festival has expanded to such a wide extent, where is there left to go?

CM: We have important goals to reach and we have very interesting plans in the digital sector. We are working intensely in new markets such as France, the UK, and German, and most of all in China, which will have some impact on the programme next

year. The aim of our education activities isn't fulfilled yet, and neither is the goal of building a concert hall such as Les Arts Gstaad.

GL: You helped create and/or develop several orchestras and classical music festivals in addition to the Menuhin, is that correct?

CM: It has been my luck in life to have created and developed some interesting projects around music that are still in operation. The Basel Chamber Orchestra, where I now sit on the board, is something that seems to be a life-long relationship. But in Basel I founded some other projects such as the Solsberg Festival together with Sol Gabetta, the Basel Composition Competition together with Paul-Sacher Foundation, and the Joseph Haydn Foundation. It's part of my business to sniff out new developments in music, and I'm incredibly motivated to do so.

GL: What other personal projects do you have in the pipeline?

CM: The Basel Composition Competition is my youngest project. It will happen the first time in February 2017 with four public concerts presenting contemporary music written only for orchestras that will revive Paul Sachers' activity as a patron during the 20th century. We have a very prominent jury with composer Wolfgang Rihm as president. And as of today more than 700 composers from all over the world have applied! We are intensely involved with schools in the Basel area and use new media to distribute the project worldwide. My own office in Basel consists of five staff members, and I am very happy for the strength and setup of my organisation today.

GL: Is there any news on Les Arts, which would be a new home for the Menuhin Festival tent concerts? How can you reassure critics that the controversial space would be a blessing for the region?

CM: The building couldn't be better for the festival. If something is indeed constructed for concerts, it has to be outstanding and not provincial. Les Arts gives an answer. With Les Arts I see a real way to compete with Lucerne and Salzburg! I hope that during this summer the dice will fall for this extraordinary chance!