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THE POWER OF MUSIC – BRINGING PEOPLE TOGETHER AND BUILDING BRIDGES.

INTERVIEW WITH CHRISTIAN BENDER AND SAUL ZAKS (SUMMA CUM LAUDE INTERNATIONAL YOUTH MUSIC FESTIVAL)

This summer the Golden Hall of the Wiener Musikverein was filled with an unlikely, beautiful sound: a South African choir performing lullaby in Ukrainian. Capping off the 14th edition of Vienna's Summa Cum Laude International Youth Music Festival, the moving performance exemplified the power of music as a medium for international solidarity and cross-cultural exchange. Sitting down to chat the following day in Vienna, Saul Zaks and Christian Bender—Summa Cum Laude's Music and Managing Directors, respectively—cite this moment as a prime example of “building bridges”, the festival's motto, in action. “It

was just fabulous—a South African choir singing in Ukrainian” effuses Zaks. “I mean, that doesn't happen every day for breakfast!”

The connections that led a Ukrainian lullaby to reach the gilded stage in Vienna are rooted in the welcoming artistic and organizational vision the duo brings to each iteration of the festival. The lullaby, *Khodyt Zaychyk* or “The Bunny Walks”, then debuted on the Musikverein stage as a collaboration between the Kearsney College Choir from South Africa and solo soprano Khrystyna Swyshch of the Shchedryk Children's Choir. Phonetic lyrics were passed out to audience members to sing along, and a portion of the Gala concert's proceeds were donated as humanitarian aid. “You get so emotional in situations like these because it gives so much meaning to music, you know?”, reflects Zaks.



In unforeseen ways, the lullaby performance perfectly symbolizes this year's festival theme, “so far away, yet so close”. Envisaged by the directors as a coming-together statement after two years of Covid-19 isolation and cancellations. In his view, the late decision to perform the Ukrainian lullaby is “a living example of how we try to involve youth with important topics during the festival. As we can see with this very moving concert, this year it went really well.”

Summa Cum Laude builds intercultural bridges not only through its repertoire, but also by physically bringing together thousands of diverse young musicians to the Austrian capital each summer. As Bender notes, “Vienna is an important meeting point for music. The festival has grown very, very international, and we're incredibly happy about that.” Past editions have welcomed ensembles hailing from Italy, Israel, Spain, Bulgaria, Japan, and the US, among other countries. The young musicians stay together in the same hotels and share meals between ensembles. Yet, both directors also quick to underline that the intercultural connections made at Summa Cum Laude each July don't always end with the festival. “After

meeting here in Vienna, a Ukrainian choir went to the United States two years later to visit a choir there. Despite their diverse backgrounds, the youth at Summa Cum Laude speak one language through music. “When we have, for example, a choir from Australia together with a choir from China or Taiwan in the same workshop, they can communicate through music, which is a global language, in a way they normally couldn’t” explains Bender. And if music is a global language, then instruments themselves are another uniting tool—a fact Yamaha knows well and champions in their global outreach. “The kids play on Yamaha instruments because they are very good: there is a sound, there is a quality, there is a function,” explains Zaks. “It’s a tool that helps children have a better life musically.” Reflecting on the company’s global reach, Zaks is grateful for Yamaha’s active support of youth music education. “Yamaha has a footprint in music culture, and I like that it’s not just to sell the instrument, but to tell a story.”



The directors like to cite one story to illustrate the connective power of instruments. A few years ago, a Japanese ensemble arrived in Vienna for the festival without their instruments after flight issues. “I’m on the organizing side, travel and logistics, but in this crazy case there was nothing we could do to rent that many instruments before showtime” recounts Bender. In this moment of crisis, an American band offered to loan their own instruments to the Japanese ensemble, despite competing in the same category. “This was a very touching moment for me. And it was not only violins they shared, but also flutes— wind instruments! Normally as a musician, you don’t do that—especially in a competition.”

To Zaks, this story illustrates how Summa Cum Laude fosters community spirit as much as competition among the ensembles. “This experience is about you and your sound and your music. Bring it on – whoever you are - and don’t worry about other things.” From technical workshops to excursions in the city, the festival aims for personal growth among young musicians. In line with Yamaha’s dedication to music education, the directors believe deeply in developing young people’s self-expression through

music. “You see these kids playing—and they play in like lions! You see their whole bodies in it,” observes Zaks. “I don’t even think that they are speculating about winning in moments like these. They are just one with the music.” As the festival’s website proclaims: “Competition or Celebration? It’s up to you!”.



Zaks’ and Bender’s collaborative leadership of Summa Cum Laude also showcases how creative and organizational perspectives can unite to make international music exchange possible. The duo met in 2012 when Zaks first came to the festival as a guest conductor. While Bender doesn’t play an instrument, and Zaks plays many, the two immediately bonded over their love of classical music and shared pedagogical vision. “For us it was important to find a global person like Saul for a global festival” reflects Bender. “He’s someone who speaks many languages and is so intercultural. His presence has been important for the success of the festival.” In many ways, Zaks’ own biography reflects the “building bridges” motto. Born in Argentina, he left during tough times to live and work on a Kibbutz, a collective farm community, in Israel. Later, studies in conducting around Europe, he settled with his family in Denmark where he currently holds appointments with the University of Southern Denmark Chamber Choir and Symphony Orchestra, and The Musicology Students Choir at the University of Aarhus. He’s proud to say that both of his children are now electronic music producers, raised on Yamaha instruments.



Saul Zaks and Christian Bender—Summa Cum Laude’s Music and Managing Directors

While many conductors approach their role with ego and singular vision, Zaks strives to be a facilitator who inspires and challenges ensembles at the festival to play their personal best. He compares his approach to making food: “some conductors say ‘today we will eat this!’, and then open the fridge to see that there's nothing but milk and a little caviar. I like the opposite process: I open the fridge first and say, ‘okay, what do we have?’, and with that, I cook.” Above all, Zaks names “teamwork” as the keyword which encapsulates his approach to conducting. “Everyone has their own musical truth. A collaborative process is about give-and-take! That’s what music is about. It's enriching because you get inspiration, you get to know other people's truth.” This radical openness extends to how Zaks and Bender work with guest conductors, judges, and ensemble leaders, as well as the musicians themselves. As an international festival drawing together diverse groups for a short time, flexibility and sensitivity to various experiences and artistic approaches is paramount. “My approach to ensembles is that they are self-regulating, living systems based on responsiveness” explains Zaks. “I believe in music as a fertile and organic power facilitating the creative interpersonal exchange of emotions and ideas.”



Founded in 2007, the Summa Cum Laude International Youth Music Festival has grown from a small affair with 300 regional musicians its first year, to a large global meeting of thousands. According to Bender, “in these 14 years we had about 360 ensembles with about 18,000 musicians from 52 countries on all continents.” In recent years, the directors have intentionally expanded the festival to incorporate more ensemble types and musical genres. Starting with a traditional slate of classical and chamber groupings, the festival has added new categories for symphonic band, jazz band, and in 2023, will feature marching bands for the first time. “The idea is to open up and find new ways for engagement” explains Bender. “In the end, the more young musicians and singers who come to Vienna, the better is for Vienna as a music destination.” For example, Kearsney College Choir, the South African choir which performed the Ukrainian lullaby, is far from the typical vocal ensemble in attendance at Summa Cum Laude. The group is known for their vibrant, energetic performances that feature movement and generally eschew classical repertoire. In hindsight, Zaks views the choir’s participation as indicative of the overall diversification of the festival, from the ensembles participating to the music selection itself. “While we are primarily a classical music festival, we now include film music, world music, a folk music from different countries” explains Zaks. Asked where he would like to push the music programming in the future, Zaks reemphasizes his responsive, open-minded approach to conducting: “Artistically I would like to go with the flow, seeing what the moment brings, and building up from there.”

With dates already set for 2023 and 2024, Zaks and Bender are looking to keep up the positive momentum around the Summa Cum Laude International Youth Music Festival. Bender puts it succinctly, “Our mission is very clear, written on our banners and flags: building bridges!” As a theme that resonates with Yamaha and countless music lovers around the world, the festival is proof of the power of music to be a medium for cross-cultural dialogue.

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