

Marc Unternährer

By Aaron Hynds

Photo by Ralph Kuehne



Please give the readers a little description of your day-to-day musical work.

Most important to me are the several bands I have been playing in for the last few years. I like this kind of continuous exploration with people who I got to know really well, not only musically. The groove-based jazz band Le Rex is very close to my heart and we play several tours a year in Switzerland and abroad. A band like this is a lucky find; the music is fun and exciting every time we play and we are also very close friends. We also play with a Swiss German singer called King Pepe, which is more song-oriented. I love working with singers—another one I am playing with on a regular basis is the amazing Erika Stucky, in a trio with the drummer Lucas Niggli called Bubbles & Bangs or as a duo. With the saxophonist and schyzerörgeli (a small Swiss accordion) player Albin Brun I have been playing for over 20 years in different projects. On top of this, there are other more spontaneous groups, like if some of my Chicagoan

friends come to town or I go to Berlin to play with Silke Eberhard for instance. Improvising gives you a great chance to get in contact and collaborate with people very quickly. I like theatre work too, which usually is a three month period of very intense work. And every now and then, I have an orchestra job, but it gets rarer and rarer.

Almost ten years ago I started a small club with some friends in my hometown Luzern for free improvised music. That was the beginning of the promoter part of my life. We still work pro bono at Mullbau, but a lot of contacts came out of it and it is very close to my heart. Right now I organize a jazz series as well at a small theatre and since last year I am program director of the Stanser Musiktage, a festival which takes place in April. The program there is rather diverse, with jazz, pop and world music, so this gives me chance to find and present a lot of new music.

I also teach some improvising classes at the Hochschule Luzern–Musik, as well as one private tuba student right now.

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What initially inspired you to get involved with improvisation?

I guess it was quite natural, since a lot of the music I listened to from early on included improvisation. When I started playing professionally, I just said yes to every gig I could find and very often found myself in unknown grounds. I just had to go for it. For instance I was asked by Albin Brun to substitute for the tubist in his jazz band when I was 21 and had no idea about jazz harmony or bass lines. For half a year I had no idea what the drummer next to me was doing or where the “one” was, until I realized that he was following me! I learned a lot like this. Always a bit over my head, trying to keep up. Twenty years later I know much more about playing in the rhythm section and in Le Rex with Rico Baumann; there’s a real unique understanding, which is surprising to ourselves sometimes. I love playing with him.

I was always interested in the outer fringes of music and was lucky that with Simon Styles I had a teacher who is not only an amazing tuba player, but he also realized that I needed to go my own way and do other things as well, and he let me do it. When I was playing new composed music, he hooked me up with other teachers. He was very demanding of course, but he also trusted that I would find my own way.

My first major musician’s crisis came (thankfully) pretty early, in my first year as a tuba student, during my first orchestra gig at the Hochschule. When I got the music for Bruckner 7th I thought it was easy, since it said *Langsam* and *Noch langsamer* and I was used to playing much more “virtuosic” music. I had no idea. During one of the first rehearsals, listening to what was happening around me, it hit me like a brick. I realized that a new world was opening up and that I really had to jump in it completely to do it right or quit right away and do something else. So that’s how I started to check out classical music. But I never gave up the other worlds I was in. And I started looking for great original music for tuba, which was hard to come by.

In 2002 I was granted a stay in an artist’s studio in Chicago and met musicians whose records I knew and loved. The scene was very open and curious and so people like Jeb Bishop (at that time he played trombone in the Vandermark 5) asked me to come over to his place and play improvised duets. I was terrified but as usual just said yes. When I was

there I thought, “Ok let’s do it, go for it, PLAY!” During that stay in Chicago I got to play with some amazing improvisers and I learned a lot. It gave me a chance to redefine myself. Also through my friends there I learned much more about the AACM, Sun Ra, Louis Armstrong Hot 5, etc., which opened up quite a few doors for me.

When you were first getting involved with the improv scenes in Switzerland and elsewhere, what musicians did you look up to?

Evan Parker said, “My roots are in my record player” and I would totally agree to this. Only I would add that my roots are also the thousands of concerts I have seen live over the years. As a kid I wanted to be a trumpet player because my aunt gave me Miles Davis records. My parents had some great records at home, mostly ‘60s, ‘70s, ‘80s pop and rock, but also some jazz and classical music. We had a Lester Bowie record which I loved. So later when I switched to tuba, I already knew who Bob Stewart was. My parents also took me to see the Brass Fantasy and Miles Davis. Because I was putting up posters for the jazz club in Luzern as a teenager, I could go to all the shows there and I saw Dizzy Gillespie, for example. Another very important thing to me and a lot of musicians around here was the Jazz Festival Willisau, where I heard Peter Brötzmann, Anthony Braxton and Cecil Taylor for the first time, to name but a few who left a lasting impression. Then my first tuba teacher played in the orchestra, so I could get free tickets for a lot of classical concerts too. I remember talking to Penderecki, who was conducting, with my copy of the *Capriccio* for him to sign, which at that time was the craziest piece of music I could imagine.

My parents also took me to an Erika Stucky concert when I was 15 or so. At that time, she played with Art Baron and Earl McIntyre on trombone and tuba. I remember thinking that I would love to play music like this and 15 years later I started playing with her!

Of course I was checking out the tuba players (Howard Johnson, Bob Stewart, Earl McIntyre, Joe Daley, Ray Draper, Dave Barger, Michel Godard, Pinguin Moschner) and I remember picking up a solo tuba record in a store in Germany by Carl Ludwig Hübsch. And it was the first solo tuba record that I listened to more than a couple of times!

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It was exciting, something else! By now, there are even more and younger players around. But the tuba world is still small and there is so much exciting music out there, so I never restricted myself to the instrument. To hear people like the saxophonist Urs Leimgruber, who lives in Luzern, was equally inspiring, or to go to punk shows.

Do you have any suggestions for readers that wish to get involved with non-notated musics?

Be aware that notated music is only a very small part of all the music that is around in the world. Stay curious. Check out as many concerts as you can and talk to people—most of them are friendly. If you have a real question, ask. Listen. Challenge your aesthetics and listening habits. Put yourself in unusual situations. Be open and learn.

The tuba is a great instrument which works in many different contexts, if you dare to think out of the cliché. It has a proud history but if you compare it to the history of the saxophone or the repertoire for the violin for example, there are still many places to go where nobody went before. Maybe it's easier to find your own voice on the tuba than it is on a saxophone, just because there are less (non-classical) role models. It's an opportunity!

After my decision to keep studying classical music and do it for real, it took me some years to get comfortable with combining all these different worlds. I asked myself, where am I authentic? What is my music? Today I still enjoy doing a lot of very different things and I enjoy all of it. I also enjoy the diversity of it. I hope that I am authentic whatever I do, whatever context I am in—that I sound like myself whether I play completely free improvised noise music or songs or bass lines or composed music. At least, that's my goal.

The musical landscape is changing every day, with a lot of the stable, traditional jobs of the past equally changing or outright disappearing. With that being said, what do you believe is important for the young tubist and euphoniumist to learn as a musician in order to navigate this landscape?

During my times as a student and in the years after that, I took every job that I could somehow fit in my time schedule. So I played a lot of different kinds of music, sometimes—not really knowing what I was doing—very badly. But those years were really important, even if I choose more carefully now. There is a new generation of musicians around who don't think in boxes and there's also an audience that is equally open. There are jazz musicians playing in pop bands, interested in let's say, Japanese Gagaku and Karlheinz Stockhausen. Some of my friends are artists and their view is very interesting. Can you think of an artist who isn't aware of what's going on in the art world and can't put his or her work into context? It's shocking to me sometimes how narrow minded some people are, especially in the brass world.

I look up to people who have found “thing” and keep doing it. If it works out for you, that's fine. But I think a modern musician has to be open for everything, not only to survive but to keep being interested and interesting.

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In your musical work, you have strongly expressed your political and social beliefs, often with a satirical viewpoint. In your view, what is it about music that allows for such free expression?

I don't think I have, actually. I have strong opinions about things and I have no problem articulating or defending them. But I'd rather write an article or a Facebook post than a piece of music in order to do express this. That doesn't mean that I don't want to challenge an audience with a performance. I guess you could say that my way of living as an artist in itself is a political statement. ■