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Volume 30



## ISCM During a Year of Pandemic

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# The Corona Crisis, as seen from the point of view of a freelance musician in Switzerland

by Javier Hagen



*Photo by Priscilla Du Preez via Unsplash.com*

## **Let them work, then they can pay all their bills**

Let's not beat around the bush: with the corona-related lockdown, which was imposed in Switzerland on February 28, 2020 (ban on events with more than 1000 people) and March 16, 2020 (ban on all private and public events) respectively, a de facto professional ban has been in place for musicians in Switzerland to date; the cultural sector clearly speaks of a catastrophe.

On May 30, 2020, the ban on gatherings was relaxed (gatherings of up to 30 people were then permitted), and as of June 6, 2020, private and public

events with up to 300 people were permitted again (including family events, church services, concerts, theater performances or cinema). In June 2020, the borders to all states within the EU/EFTA area opened completely, and as of June 22, events with up to 1,000 people were again possible, provided that the required hygiene measures (distance, hand disinfection, contact tracing, etc.) were observed. However, the joy lasted only for a short time. Since the end of October, the Swiss music scene has once again been in lockdown. According to surveys by the Swiss Music Council and the Association of Swiss Freelance Musicians Sonart (both are active in the

Taskforce Culture at the Federal Assembly in Bern), the music sector expects losses of between 64 and 91% in income for 2020 alone, despite the end of the event ban and some of the restrictions. The reasons: missing, delayed or too-low compensation payments, a significant decline in orders, hesitant audience attendance and a lack of financial resources, as invested reserves have been used up in the meantime.

Even if the public sector - and this must be explicitly stated here - is extremely efficient and provides a respectable amount of aid by its standards, Swiss politicians and the public are not sufficiently aware of the precarious financial situation of freelance musicians in Switzerland: freelance musicians in Switzerland, like their peers abroad, are extraordinarily flexible, agile, and creative and thus escape the mills of social welfare, but they also live at - and many below - the minimum subsistence level. Or to put it another way: they work a lot, earn little, and their main income often comes from side jobs. But they manage without debt collection, without criminal records, without going to the social welfare office. They usually pay their taxes late, but still pay. In view of the meager income, there is no thought of building up a significant occupational pension plan. The categorical ban on events and its long-term consequences are thus the worst thing that can happen to them. The simplest, fastest, and best measure against it: Let them work - then they can pay all the bills.

Income replacement payments with a delay of several months in the amount of 80% of an income below the minimum subsistence level are certainly more than no support at all, but this only works for citizens with an income of more than 120% of the minimum subsistence level and minimal reserves to bridge the gap. Freelancers can only generate the subsistence minimum by working. Therefore, once again: The categorical ban on events and its long-term consequences are the worst thing that can happen to freelancers.

### **Going virtual**

In Switzerland, too, online offerings mushroomed during the lockdown: courses, individual and group lessons, choir rehearsals via Zoom, streaming concerts, and much more.

Swiss radio and television SRF broadcast living room concerts by well-known Swiss musicians to all parts of the country starting in late March. Fee? None. The musicians gave away their work to give us a bit of courage during this difficult time. The visibility was huge, the socio-political message catastrophic.

But SRF had already done better: Shortly before the lockdown, rock musician Nadja Zela sent an open letter to the program managers. She demanded more songs from Switzerland in the program. The pressure worked. SRF increased the proportion of Swiss music in all programs. Although the artists can hope for more royalties, only a few can live on it.

Going virtual also revealed other, more fundamental problems: computers, tablets, or cell phones were and are often not available for all family members, software is incompatible due to outdated and/or different operating systems, budgets for updates are not available, Internet performance was and is insufficient for an entire family due to overload or too little money for potent data subscriptions, sound quality during digital transmission is insufficient due to too poor microphones and speakers, data compression and lack of recording know-how. Moreover, latencies in digital transmission created and continue to create additional difficulties in communication and classroom behavior. Data protection? The protection of privacy is severely compromised in the home office: all data such as working time, work form and efficiency are traceable and can be evaluated with previously unimaginable accuracy in retrospect.

In short: Even if, in the summer and early fall of 2020, the opera houses in Zurich and Geneva stream the orchestra and opera choir in real time from a corona-compliant rehearsal room or transmit pre-recorded tapes to the flesh-and-blood soloists on stage - fortunately, most of the jobs can be kept - no one here will warm to online solutions.

### **An opportunity for the Saudis**

Festivals are now postponing their acts until next year. And some organizers are capitalizing on the anticipation: "We'll be back bigger and better next year," claims Openair

Frauenfeld, which has already sold 10,000 tickets for an extra day in 2021.

Since recorded music sales have brought in almost nothing, the music business has revolved around concerts. Thousands of festivals shot out of the ground and the fees skyrocketed. The big promoters vie for the same few headliners. For the fans, this means ever more expensive tickets and similar line-ups.

This has long since attracted international corporations to Switzerland as well: Multinationals like Live Nation or CTS Eventim swallow everything, from small agencies to lucrative ticketing. In 2017, Live Nation took over Openair Frauenfeld, and in early 2020, CTS Eventim got in on OpenAir St. Gallen. But the Corona crisis is now causing liquidity problems even for the multinationals. Live Nation's CEO says, "The glass is half full." And he has a new junior shareholder: the Saudi sovereign wealth fund. So stars from Madonna to U2 will soon be performing with the capital of a regime that executed more people last year than ever before, according to Amnesty International.

Next year, in addition to the postponed acts from this year, hundreds of additional bands will be on tour. Gigs are what they all need. The commercial promoters will have to make up for this year's losses - will that encourage them to experiment? Or will they be more likely to just play it safe? And how will all this affect ticket and drink prices? According to the promoters' association SMPA, the Swiss

concert industry has already been suffering for years: thousands of tickets are not sold; concert halls remain half empty; festivals lose millions. After Corona, the problem could get even worse.

### **Problematic reporting**

The inconsistent public reporting in the spring was not really helpful. Among other things, it did not consistently distinguish between people who actually had contracted the virus and those who simply tested positive for it. The increasing number of positive testers is not accompanied by a parallel increase in hospitalizations and intensive care treatments or deaths, which raised broad doubts about the usefulness of the tests and the daily reports of new positive tests. Further, incidences of SARS-CoV-2 were reported almost exclusively as absolute numbers without reference. Moreover, the disclosure of the total number of positive testers and deaths was cumulative, which contradicts the basic principles of presenting epidemiologic data - and perpetuates anxiety and stress.

What remains? Political activism and lobbying. In the second half of September, the Culture Task Force, in which all important Swiss music associations work together with the Swiss Music Council and Sonart, obtained nationwide measures from the parliament in Bern, such as an increase in the budget for compensation for loss of income from CHF 80 to 100 million, the continuation of important mechanisms such as Corona income

compensation or the short-time compensation for temporary employment contracts. Personal contacts between creative artists and the conservative politicians were in demand here and have been worth their weight in gold. However, major players such as orchestras, opera houses, the big festivals, clubs and cinemas also have an advantage over freelancers. They receive the lion's share of the cake, as they are strongly staffed administratively. Freelance artists, the special cases, are much harder to deal with. They receive little, too little, the little with delay, or nothing at all, on the one hand due to the system, or because they do not have the means or the organizational skills to get these funds in time.

On the other hand, the Swiss cultural foundation Pro Helvetia set a good example by opening special funding initiatives to support cultural projects in times of the Corona crisis. This was an important step, especially for the independent scene, since most notable Swiss foundations follow its mission statement.

### **Short-term, smaller, local**

And what else? The choral world began tentatively to rehearse in September, insofar as it had sufficiently large rehearsal rooms. In the churches people sang in small groups, but since the beginning of November people have largely been in lockdown here again, and rehearsals and performances are forbidden. Large events such as choir and brass band festivals will probably not be able to take place in 2021.

Theaters are putting small-scale pieces on the schedule, orchestras are stepping up chamber music activities. Bright prospects look different.

But there are also glimmers of hope—and new music should be mentioned here: The Swiss section of ISCM, for example, kept up its ISCM Collaborative Series project and sent the Hyper Duo on tour in Germany in September; the Valais section of ISCM - just in time before the reintroduction of travel restrictions - successfully held the Forum Valais with the participation of ensemble recherche from Germany and Klangforum Wien from Austria at Schloss Leuk in August, and Swiss ensembles such as Contrechamps, Vortex, Phoenix, ENMZ, UMS 'n JIP, proton, Le NEC resume their schedule as committed as ever, but now even more circumspect and cautious.

Short-term, smaller, more local - that seems to be the watchword at the moment, i.e. the new survival strategy.

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