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# The Big Wig: The Lucerne Festival Academy meets Hildegard Lernt Fliegen

BY [PETER BACON](#) on [13 SEPTEMBER 2015](#) · ( [0](#) )



*Hildegard lernt fliegen with the Lucerne Festival Academy Orchestra, Lucerne 5  
September 2015 (Photo © Lucerne Festival/ Priska Ketterer)*

**Review by Debra Richards**

**Lucerne KKL, Lucerne, Switzerland**

**05-09-2015**

**Hildegard Lernt Fliegen** are a happy sextet of rhythm and brass led by vocalist **Andreas Schaerer**. I say, “vocalist”, but I mean, stick of dynamite, for under his leadership and literally ground-breaking musical visions, this band has won the BMW World Jazz Award, whilst Andreas followed it with the ECHO Jazz Award for International Vocalist of the Year (won by Gregory Porter in 2014). Not one to rest on his laurels he took up the challenge to compose for the band with the **Lucerne Festival Academy Orchestra**, set up by Pierre Boulez. A first for all involved.

The concert hall of Lucerne’s KKL was full, as about 65 musicians took to the stage last Saturday, along with the hugely-respected conductor, **Mariano Chiacchiarini**. But any formality was disposed of as Schaerer began in his inimitable style – with a chat. He uses his penchant for humour to fine effect (I’ve seen him crack audiences up in Swiss German, French and English) and his openness became mirrored by the audience as we prepared for whatever mayhem might ensue.

It was immediately clear that a huge amount of thought had gone into avoiding a sextet with an orchestra tacked on, Schaerer had composed new parts for HLF’s songs so the theatrical opener, *Seven Oaks*, with two typewriters and Schaerer as a part-speaking/singing narrator, was delicately inflated and laced with what seemed like a small army of violins. At other times the orchestra’s brass section took on Hildegard’s recognisable themes, but HLF had their moments too, with **Andreas Tschopp** nailing a trombone solo in one of three premieres, *Preludium*.

Sometimes the orchestra provided landscapes with interesting harmonic developments for a solo to ride through but at other times had their own spotlight such as a vignette with two harpists. Importantly the night avoided what journalist, Nick Hasted, described as an orchestra playing with Wayne Shorter getting in the way of him hearing the best bit: Shorter’s quartet.

One of Hildegard’s strengths is their rhythmical joy as if the heart of the African drum beats within and this wasn’t watered down. In fact unique elements of HLF’s sound such as their marimba were amplified. The story is that the band bought their drummer, **Christoph Steiner**, a set of marimbas one Christmas and by the first week of January he was ready to incorporate it into their music. Steiner and the percussionists had a field day in the premier of *Wig Alert*, an exuberant idea with beatboxing, double basses, cellos, a vibraphone, timpani and four musicians sharing two marimbas, moving around and almost dancing with the instruments.

The manoeuvring of musicians was one of several key factors that shifted the energy of the evening. Another was hearing – and seeing – an orchestra improvise. In the epilogue of *Two Colossus*, Andreas took over the conductor's podium and used a sound-painting technique where hand symbols meant, for instance, no intonation. The speed was fast to keep this big boat afloat and there were moments when I thought steam was literally going to start pushing out of Schaerer's ears as he conducted the whole caboodle, whilst singing. The orchestra's young musicians gave the best they had. There was a superior level of musicianship as some revelled in this new means of expression, some also couldn't help giggling a little.

Combined with the brass and Schaerer's wild MC, Hildegard pull you into a dive bar thick with smoke and oddballs who only come out at night to sip brandy and tell their strange tales. In the final rendition of *Don Clemezza* the whole orchestra began to resemble these bar-dwellers – it had been a long day, but showed not only a new way for an orchestra to *be*, but how that impacted an audience.

A few days after the gig I spoke to a musicologist about Nattiez's semiology; ideas that a musical work has a non-hierarchical relationship between composition (composer), interpretation (performers) and perception (audience). This gig seemed to have such an alchemy as the energy whipped up by risk-taking, improvisation and the spirit of fun not only infected us in the audience, but seemed to draw on our reactions. The standing ovation was only up-staged by the huge smiles I saw everywhere as I left.

- **Schaerer's new projects include: Tripped Tychon with drummer, Lucas Niggli, Luciano Biondini on accordion and guitarist, Kalle Kalima which will debut in December 2015 whilst next summer sees a him performing with Raul Midón.**
- **Debra Richards also writes for [Swiss Vibes](#) and is part of [Ma](#)**
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