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Our Stories



Nils is not only the president of the jazz club but also a musician and composer

Festivals, special operas, music workshops and all that jazz Steering Trier's Jazz Club

by Miriam Tessens, CEND
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Nils Thoma is a member of Eurostat's Regional Accounts Team, but he's also a true jazz aficionado and saxophone player who has been keeping the Jazz Club in Trier running for over 15 years. Commission en Direct was all ears to find out more about 'saxy Nils' and his musical achievements.

How did you get into jazz?

Although I started playing the recorder as a six year old boy, it took a while before I was exposed to jazz. When jazz double bass and piano player Eberhard Feucht – also known as 'Efeu' and now one of my best friends – started working at my school as a music teacher, he made me look behind the strict and old-fashioned classical music rituals. He spoke about improvisation and rhythm, and showed me how it worked; he showed me the way to a kind of freedom I had always felt in music, but never got to catch.

I then bought a clarinet but was not happy with it because I had a clear idea of my 'sound'... Around that time, a friend had also asked me to replace an ill saxophonist of his rock band. I borrowed a sax, and from the first tone, I knew it's what I had been looking for.

My saxophone family now consists of a soprano, tenor and baritone and some altos — all instruments that make me talk to my audience in my own way.

Rock and Jazz have a lot in common, like the improvisation, but I quickly realised that jazz was my thing, so I have been playing it ever since, although I also still play rock, soul, blues and sometimes singer-songwriter music.

Tell us about the Jazz Club and your role as chairman?

The Club was founded in 1978 and it has about 400 members now. Since 2000 we've organised around 1,700 musical and other events, but organising concerts is not our only mission. We run the record label PORTABLE MUSIC TRIER, we founded a jazz & rock school and we wrote the book 'Jazz in Trier', resuming the club's history. There's also networking between musicians, bands, organisers, our audience and the town of Trier, which often supports our work.

“ From the first tone on the saxophone, I knew it's what I had been looking for

I have been chairman since 2003 and my role is to keep the overview, give direction, and talk to key people, such as sponsors, town administrators or mayors. I also watch out for new streams in the jazz world and come up with fresh ideas, like installing a Blues festival in my home town Saarburg. Speaking at events is one of my tasks as well. Besides that, I programmed our website and I am the communication contact for our activities. Every year, I receive about 3,000 emails from bands eager to play for us, and for the upcoming Easter workshop, I have to deal with about 2,000 emails.

The Easter workshop has been one of the Club's longest-running recurring activities...

Yes, it's going into its 27th edition this year, and it's open to anybody who can read notes and master their instrument, or voice. Our students are usually between 7 and 77, they come to us on their own initiative, from schools, from town bands and so on. Some are locals, others come from far away, like Berlin or even abroad. On average, between 50 and 80 people take part.

We kick off on Thursday evening, with a concert by the teachers but Easter Friday, Saturday and Sunday is workshop time. Participants learn about their instruments, improvisation, jazz structures, styles and the history of playing and performing and many tricks and details. The first afternoon, we make combos of equal level musicians. They study two or three jazz standards and everyone has a solo part, the result of which is presented at Sunday's evening student concert. It's always a joyful moment. For many it's the first time on stage, playing a solo in front of a friendly audience... and it's often the start of a musical career.

What other Jazz Club or personal highlights were there?

The runner-up in our list of most organised activities, is 'Jazz im Brunnenhof', which will be celebrated for the 26th time this year. In an old convent near Trier's famous Roman city gate Porta Nigra, we organise concerts every Thursday in July and August, featuring national and international jazz stars. My own jazz band Nils Wills will perform on 29 August.

'Fronleichnams-Frühshoppen', 'Jazzgipfel' and 'Jazzfest am Dom' are some of the Club's other events that have been in the local jazz lover's agenda for nearly 20 years. The first one is all about old time jazz, the *gipfel* brings together local and regional bands presenting themselves during 20-minute performances, while the Jazzfest is a two-day festival for the region's big bands. During the main act, one of them performs together with an international jazz star, sometimes in front of more than 15,000 visitors at some of Trier's most beautiful places.

A personal highlight was a jazz opera (!) I wrote in 2015. I wanted to combine – or reunite – the musical styles that influenced me. It was performed many times in a big hall in Trier, with big success: 2,5 hours of 'my' music, with two big bands, singers, dancers, actors — all in all almost 180 people!

In the future, I would like to work on another jazz opera like this, or on a similar project.

- **Jazz Club Trier**
- **Nils Toma – personal website**

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