

Media Release

Interview with Sebastian Nordmann

Sebastian, today you are presenting your inaugural summer program at Lucerne Festival. What changes can we expect? Is the Festival being completely restructured?

We are preserving many things, and many things are changing. The future is more sustainable when we know where we come from – while remaining open to new ideas at the same time. The Lucerne Festival Orchestra and the Lucerne Festival Academy will remain the central pillars of the Festival. At the same time, I will continue to develop and strengthen both institutions in a targeted way, because they are the unmistakable beacons of Lucerne Festival. There are very few professional orchestras worldwide that combine excellence and passion to the degree of the Lucerne Festival Orchestra. I am therefore all the more pleased that we were able to extend Riccardo Chailly's tenure as Music Director through the end of 2028. This is a major gain – for the orchestra as well as for the Festival. In addition, Jörg Widmann will take on the role of Artistic Director of the Lucerne Festival Academy and will shape the institution in the years ahead. He is one of the most exciting contemporary composers of our time, and I have greatly valued working with him for many years.

What will remain in the artistic program – and what will be new?

International stars are returning, alongside well-known young artists making their first appearances at Lucerne Festival – including Yo-Yo Ma, Hilary Hahn, and Hayato Sumino. At the same time, artists who have shaped the Festival's profile over many years will continue to be represented, such as Anne-Sophie Mutter and Cecilia Bartoli. Among the orchestras, this includes the Berlin and Vienna Philharmonics, as well as the Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra and the Mahler Chamber Orchestra. This summer, I am also particularly looking forward to the Met Orchestra, which will appear in Lucerne for the first time under the direction of Yannick Nézet-Séguin, as well as to the debut of the Konzerthausorchester Berlin with Joana Mallwitz.

New additions also include innovative concert formats such as "Mittendrin," while the popular "Classical Music for All: 40min" series will remain part of the programming. We are reimagining the In the Streets Festival and will share details in the spring. MEUTE, a marching band that defies categorization and attracts large audiences abroad, will also be appearing. They are an example of how the boundaries between genres are increasingly dissolving.

In addition, even after more than 85 years, there remain numerous works that have never been presented at the Festival – these will be heard here for the first time. In the field of contemporary music, there will be 12 world premieres this year, alongside important works of the modern era. These include, for example, the *Sinfonia N. 9* of Hans Werner Henze – who would have turned 100 in 2026 – as well as Samuel Barber's Piano Concerto and Alexander Scriabin's Third Symphony.

A key focus here is openness and reaching new audiences. What do you have in mind?

A central concern for me remains inspiring people to engage with classical music. What is new is that, at all symphony concerts and recitals in the KKL Concert Hall, one child or young person can attend for just CHF 10. In addition, we are significantly expanding rehearsal visits for school classes. With the "Fan Zone" initiative, we are launching a new subscription option for concerts by the Lucerne Festival Orchestra. For CHF 200, audiences can attend four concerts, seated in the organ loft, with a direct view of Riccardo Chailly, Klaus Mäkelä, Yannick Nézet-Séguin, and Jakub Hrůša on the podium.

I am particularly looking forward to the new kickoff events "Overture" and "Classical Music for All: Open Air" on the day before the official opening. This celebration marks the

start of the Festival and invites all residents of Lucerne to come together in front of and inside the KKL Lucerne – completely free of charge.

How political is the Festival's summer theme "American Dreams"?

I have always been fascinated by the diversity of American musical history. I am a great admirer, for example, of the distinctive sound of George Gershwin, of Steve Reich's minimalism, and of Frank Zappa's *The Yellow Shark*. The theme of "American Dreams" is intended to capture precisely this diversity and richness of expression. Many of these composers were able to realize their dreams without having to think in rigid categories. The idea of framing the Summer Festival around the theme of "American Dreams" arose in the context of the 250th anniversary of the independence of the United States (1776).

As a Festival, we stand for fundamental rights and for democratic and humanistic values. At the same time, it is not our role to comment on current American politics. The theme is intentionally cultural rather than partisan, focusing on building a cultural bridge and welcoming American artists – such as our "artiste étoile" Augustin Hadelich, orchestras like the Met Orchestra and the Pittsburgh Symphony, the inaugural poet and bestselling author Amanda Gorman, and the clarinetist Doreen Ketchens. I am very much looking forward to this.

What is your vision for Lucerne Festival in the coming years?

The Festival should remain a fascinating, open-minded, and unique cultural event that draws people from all over the world to Lucerne. Concerts in this magical setting, with its acoustically outstanding concert hall, offer an unmistakable experience. My goal is to further strengthen Lucerne Festival's international standing as a leading orchestral festival. At the same time, we want to introduce the next generation to classical music and, through the Lucerne Festival Academy, continue to play a lasting role in shaping the contemporary music scene.

Lucerne Festival continues to offer a very extensive program of contemporary music. Why does this area remain so important?

We want to be an innovative festival that opens up new perspectives and broadens horizons. At the Summer Festival, alongside repertoire from past centuries, we present both classics of modernism and world premieres by the most important composers of our time, as well as by young compositional talents. Six of these young composers are invited to our Composer Seminar for Orchestra, where they work on new pieces within the framework of the Academy, with audiences able to follow the creative process. With the Lucerne Festival Contemporary Orchestra, we bring together an ensemble of young professional musicians from all around the world, joined by young conductors. Together, they engage with the music of their own generation. The Lucerne Festival Contemporary Orchestra thus provides us with an outstanding in-house ensemble dedicated to contemporary music.

Taken together, these elements make the Lucerne Festival Academy a globally unique institution. As its new Artistic Director, Jörg Widmann succeeds Pierre Boulez and Wolfgang Rihm and will shape the Academy in his own distinctive way. As a clarinetist, conductor, composer, and communicator, he knows how to build bridges between tradition and modernity through his works and programs, without losing sight of the continued development of contemporary music. This is precisely what is essential to securing a sustainable future for contemporary music. Personally, Widmann's preparation and performance of Wolfgang Rihm's *Tutuguri* this summer ranks among the highlights for me.

The Spring Festival is now called Spring, the piano festival Pulse, and the Summer Festival Summer.

Why the new festival names?

Lucerne Festival has established itself as an English name. Consequently, we now want to give all of our festivals – including the satellite festivals – English names as well.

Classical music presenters today are often criticized for focusing too much on marketing, with artistic substance or top-level quality taking a back seat. How do you respond to that?

Compelling programs and artistic quality always come first for us – that is what Lucerne Festival stands for. Artists are at the center for me, and I see my role as Executive and Artistic director as that of an “enabler”: I create the conditions that allow them to realize their dreams, engage with audiences, and inspire through their music. At the same time, first-class marketing is indispensable today in order to position an organization in a highly competitive market and to be visible.

What does “orchestrating the moment” actually mean?

The new slogan captures what the Festival stands for. Magical concert moments arise when you lose track of time – when music, space, and people come together and a moment emerges that stays with you. We do everything we can to make such moments possible: in one of the world’s finest concert halls, with musical legends and outstanding talents, through the classics of the repertoire and entirely new sounds. All of this unfolds against the breathtaking backdrop of lake and mountains, the historic old town, and the KKL Lucerne as a modern architectural icon. The double meaning of the word “orchestrating” is, of course, intentional – and meant with a wink.

What is the financial situation at Lucerne Festival? Have there been any changes in sponsorship?

The Festival’s financial situation is currently solid and well secured. We are pleased about the extension of our partnerships with our Main Sponsors Roche and Zurich Insurance, as well as about our current collaboration with the Kühne-Foundation and UBS. We are also grateful to have the Family Schwöbel continue their long-standing and generous support as patrons of the Festival.

Enduring partnerships need to be carefully maintained, but it is equally important to engage new companies and reach new audiences. We are well aware of how essential sustainable partnerships are – particularly when it comes to generating new momentum and enabling long-term development. We are therefore always open to discussions with committed supporters and companies.

We are also grateful for public funding from the City and the Canton. Without private support and strong partnerships, however, our artistic ambition for excellence cannot be sustained over the long term. Cultural quality needs allies, today and tomorrow. While we are very thankful for public funding and ticket revenues, this alone is no longer sufficient to secure program quality, innovation, and support for emerging talent over time. We are therefore actively seeking partners who do not merely appreciate culture, but want to help shape it – who share our enthusiasm and want to grow together with us. Culture thrives on collaboration.

An impact study conducted by McKinsey in January 2025 showed that Lucerne Festival generates added value of CHF 45-50 million for Lucerne and the region – something we are extremely proud of. My goal is to further increase this value in the future, and I am in close dialogue with partners from politics, culture, and tourism to achieve it.

The interview was conducted by Nina Steinhart, Press Spokesperson at Lucerne Festival