

“WE DON’T HAVE TO PRODUCE THE SAME THING DAY AFTER DAY” – ENSEMBLE NAMES

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Ensemble NAMES (c) Fabian Schober

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There are enough of them to fill a lot of video conference windows; today, three pop into existence. The usual soundcheck: yes, everyone can hear everyone...and, yes, we can all see each other as well. That's good, because ANNA LINDENBAUM, MARCO DÖTTLINGER and MARCO SALA have a lot to talk about. They're members of the Salzburg contemporary Ensemble NAMES, winners of the Ernst von Siemens Music Prize. Actually, they say, they're a "band" – okay, primarily an ensemble, but definitely one with the characteristics of a band. So does this ensemble-band have to share? The annual impuls Festival Graz, happening in February, is one opportunity to find out.

NAMES consists of nine freelance musicians, and you've been around for over ten years. Explain it to me: how does an ensemble like that work?

Marco Döttlinger: We all met when we were studying at the Mozarteum in Salzburg. I wasn't initially a member, but I joined them from the second concert, as an electronic musician who handles all the technical aspects, mixing, and sound. It's important to emphasize that NAMES has no artistic director – everyone contributes their ideas.

Sort of a grass-roots democracy? Is that right?

Anna Lindenbaum: That's the idea. It doesn't always work, of course; things are different in practice than in theory – but the idea of NAMES is for everyone to have an equal voice.

That depends on everyone getting along with one another. NAMES has existed for over ten years, and you're still together.

Anna Lindenbaum: Yes. NAMES isn't just an ensemble name that different people play under; we pursue a band mentality. We try to structure programs, find pieces, and commission works in the common interest, in order to cultivate that collective performance idea.

Marco Sala: It's not always easy. You have to be able to maintain a certain dynamic, and to be able to stand it as well. Especially with major decisions, every opinion counts. The consensus decides. That approach distinguishes us from other ensembles.



Video: Bekah Simms – metamold – NAMES

Anna Lindenbaum: In almost eleven years, we've developed a common taste. That consensus was often harder to find at the beginning, but over time we've intuitively started to agree more and more.

Marco Döttlinger: Also, we all get along, and we can all talk about things with one another. That's also an issue of quantitative, of course: the more people involved in a project, the more difficult the democratic process becomes. Our size – ten people – is a good framework: it allows for differing positions, all of which we recognize and which strengthen the NAMES project.

Anna Lindenbaum: Exactly. The fact that no one is making top-down decisions creates a sense of collective responsibility. That works offstage, but it also gives us a great energy onstage.

Marco Döttlinger: We're working with our friends. That may seem exclusive or elitist, but it has a great quality, too. It also means that NAMES isn't forced to deal in quantity. We don't get tired of it, because each of us is involved in at least two other projects.

“WE HAVE CRITERIA, AND WE HAVE MORE CONFIDENCE TO COMMUNICATE THEM OPENLY THAN WE USED TO.”

Marco Sala: That's important, because most of our projects only work with our ensemble size. So we're limiting ourselves, setting our own borders.

Anna Lindenbaum: I couldn't play a NAMES project every week. But then again, I don't have to.

Marco Sala: Exactly – there's automatically no feeling of obligation. No one has to say it's too much, because we all know exactly how much the right amount is.

Anna Lindenbaum: That also has to do with the fact that we don't have to accept every project we're offered. We have criteria, and we have more confidence to communicate them openly than we used to.



Ensemble NAMES (c) Bernhard Mueller

Marco Döttlinger: Not to be misunderstood – we're aware of the pressures of freelance art-making in a capitalist society, of course – I much prefer to formulate it positively; our criteria allow us to take risks. And we don't have to produce the same thing day after day.

In 2023, you won the Ernst von Siemens Foundation's ensemble prize. What effect does €75,000 have on your decision-making?

Marco Döttlinger: The prize came at a really good time for us, but we can't buy villas with it. It's a structural grant, which means we can only use the money for specific, infrastructural things – like promotional support, a working space, our instruments...

Anna Lindenbaum: ...a new homepage...

Marco Döttlinger: ...so in that sense, the prize is enormously helpful. But you have to remember how quickly a sum like that gets used up.



Video: Patrik Lechner – That fireball on the Horizon looks like your Uncle Bob — NAMES Ensemble

Marco Sala: If you want to buy a vibraphone, that's a part of the money gone already.

Marco Döttlinger: And if we add a few microphones and a bass drum, that's it.

Anna Lindenbaum: At the same time, we can't use the money to commission works or plan concerts – it's supposed to be a sustainable grant.

Could you sustain Ensemble NAMES without that money?

Marco Döttlinger: Sure. We managed until we won the prize, after all – making certain compromises, of course. And also with the advantage that I work at the Mozarteum and have better access to equipment than a lot of other people.

Anna Lindenbaum: Still, our self-sufficiency is directly connected to the prize.

Marco Döttlinger: Very much so – and at some point you want to get out of academia, or work under better conditions. The prize is incredibly helpful in that respect.

Have you managed to get out of academia?

Marco Sala: I don't see it as an either/or situation: the support we received from the Mozarteum was also a cooperation; we played concerts that were part of composition students' final exams. That was important for a while. But the prize allowed us to develop further. The Mozarteum is still a link that we all share – but differently than when we were studying there.

Marco Döttlinger: I didn't mean it in an either/or sense, Marco: I meant that we've taken a leap forward as an ensemble. We're no longer seen as a "Mozarteum ensemble", but as a free ensemble working together with institutions.

At the upcoming impuls Festival Graz, you'll be performing several pieces...

Marco Sala: By [\[Clara\] Iannotta](#), [\[Rojin\] Sharafi](#), [\[Thomas\] Grill](#), and [\[Marco\] Döttlinger](#).

Exactly – pieces from, shall we say, less mainstream areas of contemporary composition.

Anna Lindenbaum: Definitely. We enjoy working with people from other artistic areas. We recently cooperated on a project with Peter [Kutin](#), who is definitely not a contemporary composer in the classical sense; it focused on the relationship between music and light. Working with people whose background isn't solely in music is particularly interesting.

“IT STRENGTHENS THE BAND CHARACTER.”

Marco Döttlinger: But sound is an important component of every project. In that sense, the colleagues we mentioned are all experts. One just has to free oneself from this notation fetish – how well music is notated has nothing to do with its quality, as long as the sound is interesting. That connection interests us.

Marco Sala: That's why we work with sound artists who don't write notated scores at all.

Marco Döttlinger: It's enriching to expand this little niche of contemporary music. For everyone involved, in every direction.

Anna Lindenbaum: And for us as a group, too. When we get a graphic score, or look for sounds, that implies an interpretive responsibility. It strengthens the band character. And that's also part of what NAMES is: a band.

by **Christoph Benkeser**

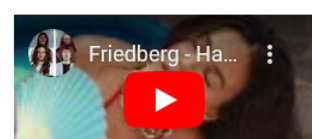
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Translated from the *German original* by Philip Yaeger.

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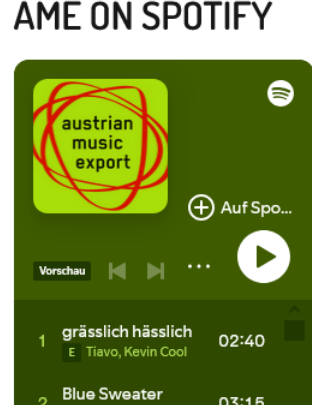
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