

“Every day I am looking forward to our university!”

A conversation with rector Ulrike Sych
by Renate Publig



What does the University of Music and Performing Arts in Vienna (mdw) have in common with Doblinger? Both celebrate their 200th anniversaries in 2017! The bond between the two institutions is reflected by common activities: the co-operation concert on 6 April 2017 is one of the highlights, as is the continuing co-operation in the Joseph Haydn Chamber Music Competition, whose previous winners, Tomasz Skweres and Linus Köhring, were able to become established and successful composers. We took this anniversary as an opportunity to ask Rector Ulrike Sych for an interview.

Creative and analytic thinking

Ulrike Sych studied music pedagogy, voice and piano – and Latin. That language asks for both creative and analytical thinking abilities; a combination that fits her personality very well. ‘Latin is like a game of chess, where one has to think analytically, to be able to plan and to draw conclusions – challenges very similar to managing a university.’

Singer and teacher

At first Sych pursued a singing career, she deepened her voice studies in New York and added further studies in Italy. She then returned to Vienna and began her pedagogical activities at the mdw in 1989. From 2007 through 2015 she additionally worked as an instructor at the Anton Bruckner Private University at Linz, where Sych later was the dean of the Voice and Opera institute. The direct contact to the students is important to her and she regrets very much no longer to have any time for teaching now as a rector.

mdw international

The approximately 100 different courses of study average almost 50% students from abroad coming from a total of about 75 nations. Many musicians decide on studying at the mdw because of its location as Vienna continues to enjoy its reputation as a musical capital.

But the high popularity of the mdw is also explained by Sych not without some pride: ‘In the QS World University Ranking/ division Performing Arts, we are number two worldwide! Only the Juilliard School of Manhattan is some points ahead of us.’ Also, the entry examinations at the mdw are internationally regarded as very strict. The support of highly-gifted young musicians is another special focus, and of course mdw is highly attractive for learning instruments in whose history Viennese tradition played an important part.

Equal opportunities and other umbrella themes

According to § 42 UG installed Working Committee for Equal Opportunity Issues is responsible for anti-discrimination at the mdw, therefore the field of women equality is one of the topics. ‘The mdw strives to satisfy the law of a women’s quota of 50%. This means, women are specially promoted if institutes have less than 50 % women. E. g., composition was a male domain for a long time. During the past two years, half of the students successful in being admitted to the course have been female. And I was able to win, in Iris ter Schiphorst, a female instructor for composition. I am confident to increase the women’s quota in composition within the next years’

A further umbrella theme already resulting in many research projects is the focus on transculturality. ‘Creating a Vice-Rectorate for Organizational Development, Gender and Diversity reflects the university’s comprehensive anti-discrimination policy. Artists are increasingly becoming ambassadors of peace; this is, to my mind, one of the social missions of a university.’

Additional umbrella themes are the fields of “Green mdw” and “Art and Health”, and: ‘The senate founded a task group “Operational Challenges – Sexual Identities”, which has in turn established a “Queer Task Group” whose goal is to explore these subjects at the mdw.’

Possibilities of a rector

How does one succeed in managing such a large university? ‘I believe in an appreciative communication culture and in transparent work processes. In this sense I include both subject matter experts and students closely in my strategic considerations. As rector one can move a great deal with the support of colleagues and students!’

And much is happening at the mdw: the recent foundation of units of organization such as an extensive research service area, a unit for Organizational Law and Academic Integrity, an institute for Music Therapy, an orchestra office and the mdw Chamber Orchestra. 'I also initiated the foundation of the exil.arte research centre managed by Gernot Gruber, who had already been president of the association of the same name.'



Music of our time

Encouraging the music of our time is important to Sych both as a singer and as a teacher: 'Contemporary music provides us with the opportunity to make the "instrument voice" sound differently than in a conventional classical piece, where, after all, it still should sound more like in belcanto. To me singing lieder means to paint a poem with the voice – and as a performer of contemporary music I can do it much more "colourfully"! Interdisciplinary co-operations confirm the commitment to the music of our times: the collaboration of the institutes for composition and for instrumental performance resulted in the project "wood-brass-percussion" – Doblinger is involved in this project by publishing the newly composed works. We have written about our involvement in the "wood" subarea, in which the composers dealt with the clarinet, in our edition no. 40, Spring 2015.

Children are our future

And there is much need for action in this highly complex subject on several different planes: 'On the one hand music and art must be reintroduced as core elements of the syllabi of general education. If we do not succeed in familiarizing the children with our musical culture, we will lose the Austrian audience in our concert halls.' Also, children from backgrounds in which cultural education is not of high importance most especially have to be provided with access to music and creativity. 'Our course for the highly gifted trains children and young people from 6 to 16. But

Foto: Webern-Symphonie-Orchester © mdw – molllom

the first task is to recognize the outstanding talents in time. It is not enough to diagnose that a child is highly gifted, but one has to know how to treat this child. With the support of both ministries, the Federal Ministry of Science, Research and Economy as well as the Federal Ministry of Education, this university now has succeeded not to join networks with institutions that provide no music pedagogy, but rather to collaborate in this special field with the relevant colleges of education in Vienna, Baden and at the KPH Vienna/Krems.'

The development of all-day schooling needs to become a subject: 'In order to guarantee high-quality instruction for young artists there are already very good talks to have instrumental lessons in the afternoons in the all-day schools, in co-operation with the music schools.'

200 years mdw

The anniversary festivities are going to be inaugurated on 8 December 2016 with a concert of the Webern Symphony Orchestra conducted by Zubin Mehta. The gala week in June 2017 is opened by the gala concert on 6 June in the Musikverein's Golden Hall, the grand finale is a series of events in Lothringerstraße on 15 June: 'The "Aufspiel" event sees the entire Konzerthaus being stage for the mdw.'

But there are celebrations the entire year; every Thursday offers 200-year events; this is also going to be the setting for the co-operation concert mdw-Doblinger on April 6, 2017.

Full of energy

It is evident that the capacity of rector requires a great deal of energy. And so Sych replies to the question what makes her relax: 'I am the type whom stillness makes nervous ... I am very active and like to work! I'm at the mdw almost 27 years now and, as corny as it may sound, I am in love with this university. Because here we help each other and everybody – students, teachers and administrative staff – close ranks.

One needs both professional and private support, and I can trust in both.' <https://www.mdw.ac.at/>

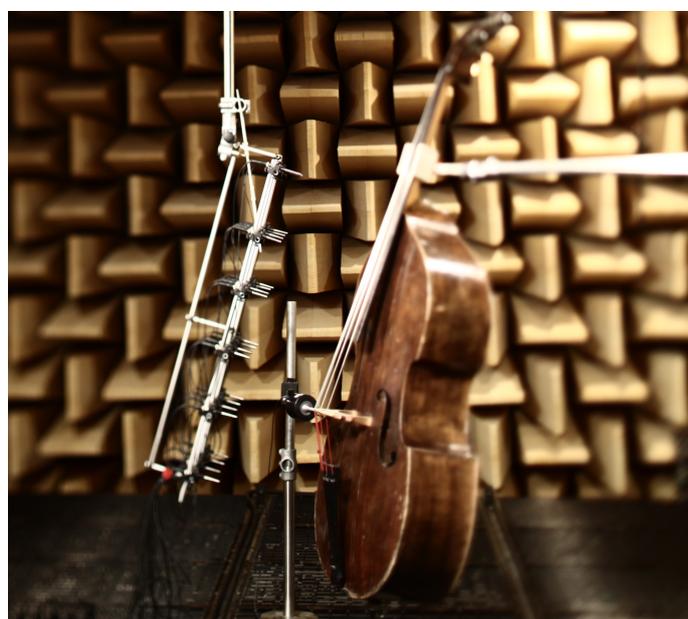


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