

THE ADVENTURES OF ANNA KOCH

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Anna Koch (c) Sebastian Schmid

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Clarinetist **Anna Koch** is known for her playful approach to contemporary music, combining it with videography and improvisation and inviting listeners to step into her world. In September, she'll be embarking on a real adventure: with her new project **"Connecting the Dots"**, she aims to combine musical and cultural exchange with environmental consciousness. Recently, Anna spoke with Sylvia Wierzbick about her folk-music roots, intense concentration, and packing three people's lives into two suitcases.

What originally brought you to the clarinet, particularly to the bass clarinet?

Anna Koch: I had a lot of contact with [Alpine] folk music because my father was a folk dancer and often took us to folk music festivals in the summer. I wanted to play a wind instrument too and started with trumpet – but in folk music, no one plays just one instrument; they can all pick up five or more instruments and play them. Besides, the trumpet only had three buttons to push – as a child, all the buttons on the clarinet looked much more attractive. So, I started playing the clarinet fairly late, when I was 14, but it wasn't until I went to college that I finally gave up the trumpet for good. I studied Eb clarinet, bass and contrabass clarinet with **Heinz-Peter Linshalm**; I was one of his first three students at the music university in Vienna, so I got to specialize in bass clarinet.

And the bass clarinet is now your trademark.

Anna Koch: I love playing the clarinet, but I particularly like the low frequencies of the bass clarinet. The acoustic range is fascinating, and so are playing techniques like multiphonics and slap-tonguing, a percussive effect similar to clicking your tongue – it sounds amazing on the bass clarinet.

"THERE'S SO MUCH MUSIC, YOU CAN NEVER KNOW IT ALL."

You write music yourself, but you also have favorite composers.

Anna Koch: For my solo program "BASSticcio", I asked specific composers to contribute – like **Petra Stump-Linshalm**, because I love her tonal language. I've been able to make a lot of foreign contacts through the **Platyus Ensemble** as well. Of course, a lot of times someone else chooses the concert program, and I don't have a lot of choice in the matter. But I'm also thankful in those cases, because that way I get to know new music. There's so much music, you can never know it all.

"BASSticcio" is a reference to lasagne, and to a long piece of music Both combine elements drawn from different sources. So, your solo program is a mixture of original and commissioned works?

Anna Koch: The videos are original works; the solo program developed out of them, and then I asked certain composers to write for it. I wanted to avoid a 'clarinet recital' situation, just playing one piece after another. Instead, I played for an hour without a break, connecting, weaving them together. I hoped that way to provide the audience with both an introduction and a transition. The videos are an expression of my playful approach to music; they came about because of a friend of mine who couldn't deal with contemporary classical music. She's used to club and minimal music, and I wanted to show her that the concept of minimal music works equally well whether the music is electronic or acoustic. Each of my pieces contains a motive from an existing composition for bass clarinet, that I recontextualized with a loop station. Those pieces got me invited to the LAMES Festival in St. Pölten as well. The people came to see what DJ was performing...



Video: Anna Koch – "BASSticcio" Trailer

The bridge to club culture – an instrumental DJ. Studying bass clarinet probably automatically points you toward improvisation and contemporary music...are there classical pieces for bass clarinet as well?

Anna Koch: Giuseppe Verdi's *Aida* has some orchestral passages for bass clarinet, and Dmitri Shostakovich wrote some as well. But it's still a fairly young instrument – the clarinets as an instrument family weren't developed until the 19th century, and solo literature for bass clarinet didn't appear until the 20th. As a soloist, you end up with contemporary music very quickly.

The great thing about music is its universality – but what does it mean for you to play more contemporary music and less from the traditional canon?

Anna Koch: As an instrumentalist and performer, you kind of have the responsibility not simply to reproduce music. Which may sound strange, when I say my roots are in folk music – but part of the reason that I ended up in contemporary music was the playful approach to music that you find in folk. You're always allowed to vary things. Studying classical music, I learned to follow the very strict instructions on the page, and at some point I felt I had lost myself. If perfect recordings already exist, why should I recreate them? It's beautiful music, and it makes you feel wonderful, but I rediscovered that playful approach in contemporary music – in improvisation, of course, but also in the exchange with the composers. With the videos, I try to counter people's skepticism about contemporary music.

"MUSIC DOESN'T LIKE BEING PUSHED INTO THE BACKGROUND."

The argument that contemporary music requires too much prior knowledge and too much concentration collapses when you realize that a classical concert requires the same level of undivided concentration.

Anna Koch: Music generally doesn't like being pushed into the background. And I don't believe the accusation that contemporary music requires prior knowledge at all – you just have to be open. Children don't have a problem with it – in particular, small children make noise on all kinds of objects; that's how they learn how things sound. You could make a piece of contemporary music out of that...

Following the sound of things...

Anna Koch: ...and focusing on it. You can't perceive that kind of thing peripherally.

Julia Lacherstorfer has distilled contemporary sounds out of folk music – might that not have been another possible approach for you?

Anna Koch: I haven't dared to do that up till now; my respect for folk music is too great. It's always a functional music – it's played at seasonal festivals, weddings, and funerals; it's a part of people's lives. I am taking steps in that direction, though. And on my world tour, I want to play a composition for bass clarinet with recorded music for every land that we travel to. For Austria, I integrated folk music.

Anna Koch (c) Sebastian Schmid

What attitude will you be taking into the countries with you?

Anna Koch: I want to foster openness for other traditions. Of course, you can only experience a small part of a country in a month – there are 220 known indigenous cultures in Brazil alone. It's not my goal to understand every country; it's more that I pack my bag and collect impressions and experiences in order to communicate them to others.

It's almost a world tour, except Africa isn't on the agenda.

Anna Koch: Yes, I still don't have the contacts in Africa. You could ask, too, why I'm only traveling far away instead of doing something in Europe. That's due to a personal reason: longer journeys are easier to realize now, before our son starts school. Once he starts school, I intend to continue the project in Europe.

"IT'S AN ATTEMPT TO FIND OUT HOW LITTLE I CAN LIVE WITH."

Your concept also makes reference to current societal conditions and shifts.

Anna Koch: Certainly, every culture has its own perspective on the same situations, and each has its own strategies to deal with them. I intend to find out, for instance, how people deal with the problem of waste; I hope to stimulate a conversation and learn.

Environmental protection is also an element of the project.

Anna Koch: I'm looking forward to traveling for an entire school year and packing everything the three of us need into two suitcases. Our tent, sleeping bags, and the camping equipment take up the most room. It's an attempt to find out how little I can live with, to what extent I can reduce my own requirements.

Your partner and your child aren't just coming along on the trip; they're part of the project.

Anna Koch: My partner Sebastian Schmid will be documenting the project, as a photographer and on the [blog](#); people can follow our journey there. The personal moments, the encounters, the milieus and the backgrounds of how the individual pieces are created – there are going to be a lot of impressions that we're going to want to capture, both for ourselves and for the public. It's a gift that our son is going to be with us – he'll get to experience what we're passionate about.

Translated from the *Garrison* original by Philip Yeager

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