

# THE WHEELS INVENTED AND FORTRESSES CONQUERED

ANETE AŠMANE

SINGER INGA BĒRZIŅA ON JAZZ EDUCATION



FIFTEEN YEARS AGO THE JAZZ SINGER INGA BĒRZIŅA ACCEPTED A CHALLENGE FROM HER COLLEAGUES AND TRIED HER HAND AT TEACHING, THEREBY BECOMING ONE OF THE PIONEERS OF LATVIA'S SYSTEM OF JAZZ MUSIC EDUCATION. OVER THE YEARS SHE HAS HELPED SEVERAL STUDENTS DEVELOP INTO ARTISTICALLY ACCOMPLISHED AND PROFESSIONAL SOLOISTS RECOGNISED BOTH LOGALLY AND INTERNATIONALLY. BUT MAYBE MORE IMPORTANTLY, SHE HAS ALSO CAREFULLY FOSTERED AND PROMOTED THE DEVELOPMENT OF LATVIA'S JAZZ ENVIRONMENT AND MADE IT A STABLE COMPONENT OF THE COUNTRY'S CULTURAL LIFE. BĒRZIŅA CURRENTLY TEACHES YOUNG SINGERS AT THE RIGA CATHEDRAL CHOIR SCHOOL, THE RIGA TEACHER TRAINING AND EDUCATIONAL MANAGEMENT ACADEMY AND THE JĀZEPS VĪTOLS LATVIAN ACADEMY OF MUSIC. FROM TIME TO TIME SHE CAN ALSO BE SEEN ON STAGE.

**Anete Ašmane:** It seems that you have been working as a jazz vocals pedagogue since the very beginning of jazz music education in Latvia. When exactly did it begin?

**Inga Bērziņa:** That was in 2002, when I was first offered a job in pedagogy. Fifteen years ago, when professional jazz music education began to develop in Latvia, we had to get by with local resources.

Today, jazz education enjoys a stable and serious position in Latvia's general music education system. People can count on it and decide for themselves whether to continue at the next level right here in Latvia or to go abroad. It has all developed quite naturally and logically, because, as we know, nothing is created in an empty space, and pedagogues also require time to understand priorities and methods of working. One needs to understand oneself not only as a performer but also as a teacher. At the beginning I, too, needed to develop my own system, invent my own personal wheel. Now I can tell a student in ten minutes some of the main things that actually took me a long time to discover.

I want to stress that all of the festivals and master classes that regularly take place here play an important role in jazz education. Also, the contribution made by the Riga Jazz Stage international jazz vocalist competition should not be underestimated. At first it was a local competition that tried to assess the local situation. Although the first year was largely experimental, the competition nevertheless discovered a few stars, such as Intars Busulis and Ieva Kerēvica. It was obvious that there were people in Latvia who knew how to sing jazz.

Over time, the competition has grown larger and more professional and has gained international visibility. So it brings even greater pleasure that our own musicians are able to

compete against strong talent from abroad and manage to take some prizes almost every year. In my work with young musicians, I've become convinced that Latvians as a people have been blessed with musical potential. That means we have to work, search and develop.

**AA: Do many young people wish to see themselves as jazz vocalists and study jazz?**

**IB:** Yes, the successes of our musicians create interest and a desire to learn and develop oneself in the jazz genre. Sometimes I'm asked whether our country needs so many jazz vocalists. Education does not guarantee an illustrious career, but it is a good professional foundation for further musical activity, whatever genre a musician eventually chooses to work in. As a teacher, I can offer students several happy years during which they can develop themselves and do what they enjoy most – sing.

As artists, we all sometimes make mistakes, make the wrong choices, fail to develop due to our personal traits or unexpected circumstances. But that's why you need to be convinced that this is the main and most important thing that you want to do in your life. It's not always easy to show oneself vividly on stage, to sing excellently, to feel free and creative. But each time we feel fear is a step backwards. You need to forge ahead, and that happens through stress, fear and mistakes.

I'm glad that I've met a lot of talented people precisely because they've decided to study jazz and hear my pedagogical advice. I consider it an honour and a great fortune to later be able to follow their development, their careers and their professional lives. I'm proud to say that my students have strong personalities, are professionally capable, and that they have surpassed their teacher. I'm glad that I've been able to inspire them, to motivate them, to help them. I try to discover that spark and different drumbeat in each person so that they can present themselves as individuals. Each of them has something special, but they don't always realise it or know how to accentuate it. They need a little help.

**AA: Which Latvian jazz singers have enjoyed international success?**

**IB:** Among the winners of Riga Jazz Stage over the years are Jūlija Zakirova, Kristīne Prauliņa and Daumants Kalniņš. Beāte Zviedre and Rūta Dūduma have also enjoyed success. Evilena Protektore placed in the competition, and so did Līva Dumpe last year. After graduating from the jazz department at a music high school, many of our singers have gone abroad to study, for example, Ronja Burve in the Netherlands, Jekaterina Šarigina in London, Kristīna Trezune in Austria, Arta Jēkabsons in the United States and Kristīne Liede in Finland. It's useful to become acquainted with other cultures, other environments, other

methods and experience what's happening on the jazz scene in a global context. I'm happy for every musician who is able to be accepted at a distinguished educational institution abroad with a wonderful reputation and long-standing traditions, and there are more and more such musicians.

And it's nice to see the fruits of the young Latvian jazz generation's labours right here, in Latvia. It's good to go abroad, study, gain experience...but Latvia is where they're from. The people here wait for them to return, they want to see the growth, the discoveries and the new projects.

**AA: Do you feel that a new generation of jazz pedagogues is also developing?**

**IB:** For a long time I had the feeling that I was preparing singers but wasn't meeting any new colleagues. But now the time has finally come that I can recommend my former students as good jazz pedagogues. The first master's degree students in jazz vocals will graduate from the Jāzeps Vītols Latvian Academy of Music this year, and the first musicians who have earned master's degrees abroad will be returning home. It's a good feeling to know that I've lived to see the echoes of, the responses to, my work.