



# Theme & Variations

BRUNO BORRALHINHO

Monthly column about the world of such music that people usually call *classical*. Subjects of abundant subjectivity and, at times, little free of controversy. Those that all musicians talk and discuss about, but never come to firm conclusions. Those that allow the enthusiastic public to satisfy its curiosity and, by the way, to build communicational bridges and viaducts between the stage and the audience. And so that no one dares to take the themes less seriously, the variations will be commented and discussed exclusively with some of the best musicians on the planet.

## Music for a great cause

After having addressed six substantially controversial and pertinent matters and having raised at least as many doubts and questions about them, and after having debated and discussed these same matters with six indisputably distinguished and prestigious personalities, I chose for the present issue of Theme & Variations a special and particularly important subject. To help me with it, I had the pleasure of talking to Elizabeth Njoroge, who is certainly not as famous as past and future special guests, but no less important. On the contrary, and with due apology to all my guests, she is probably the most important.

She founded the Art of Music Foundation in 2009, a project that started with free lessons for 14 children at a Catholic community college in Korogocho, one of the largest slums in Nairobi, and now reaches more than a thousand children in three Kenyan provinces. «I never set out to do anything great», she admits. «We didn't have a penny, just the passion and the feeling it was the right thing to do.» The essential purpose was to promote classical music in poverty-stricken communities, using it to foster

FEATUREDGUEST

## Elizabeth Njoroge



© Elizabeth Njoroge

Born in Kiambu, Kenya, where she lived for much of her youth before obtaining a degree in biochemistry in Canada and pharmacy in the Scotland. She lived and worked in England before returning to her home country. She learned to play the piano in her adolescence and later engaged in several amateur choirs, but never imagined that music, more than a hobby or a passion, would afterwards become her way of life.

teachings and social values. «My idea was, above all, to keep the kids off the streets, to keep them safe and give them a feeling of family», reveals Elizabeth, who also highlights the mentoring program which guides children from after finishing school until adulthood, with the aim of creating community leaders who can positively transform society and be examples in their neighbourhoods and surroundings, where poverty, violence and despair prevail. «We are trying to create good human beings.»

Elizabeth Njoroge therefore preferred the risks and difficulties of the country that saw her birth, to the comfort of a carefree life in Europe. Or was it these difficulties that made her return to her origins in a kind of life mission? Without hesitating, she claims she absolutely loves what she does. «People say that these children need me... but I also need them», confessing that the difficulties and her dedication are highly compensated by the happy feeling of accomplishment that the children and the project give her in return.

Art of Music Foundation includes several initiatives and projects to disseminate classical music in the country's most underprivileged populations: in addition to the Ghetto Classics program, which continues to provide musical learning to hundreds of children in Korogocho and other peripheral areas of Nairobi, Kiambu and Mombasa, the foundation also promotes the Orchestra for Schools Initiative program, bringing music to universal primary schools, and the Kenya National Youth Orchestra. Once a year, all these initiatives are brought together in a single event: a real music festival, or rather a life festival with music as an excuse. And it should be noted that 90% of the tutors of the different programs are already outputs of the programs themselves with training in orchestral instruments, piano, guitar or choral training. And as if that wasn't enough, the newly created dance course promises to be talked about in the future too!

«Music changes a person's DNA.»

ELISABETH NJOROGE

Since it is a fact that music, like arts in general, has the virtue of motivating and gathering people around it, often as an argument for great causes, it remains to be determined how music actually interferes in the transformation and evolution of an individual. Elizabeth Njoroge has followed this exact process for over a decade in hundreds of children, young people and even adults, and emphasizes that music is above all «a form of expression, of showing the world who we are». «We work with children who have no voice or no one listens to, who have no hope, who silently suffer harassment, aggression and violence of all kinds (...) when they make music, they are finally heard, they feel important and alive.»

While admitting that the main objective is not to train professional musicians, Elizabeth reveals that efforts are being made to improve the quality of teaching in their programs «so that very talented students have the opportunity to

learn properly and obtain a good foundation for an upcoming professional career». Anyway, the priority is that «those who do not have natural musical talent, feel welcome and always find their place in our program». About the importance of music in their lives, Elizabeth tells the children that she is just teaching them ABC: «Later, they shall decide by themselves the story they make up with those letters.»

Coming to the ever-delicate topic of support, Elizabeth reminds that the Art of Music Foundation started without any kind of funding and as of today it only survives based on a partnership started back in 2014 with an important telecommunications company settled in Nairobi, as well as with spontaneous help from private individuals or institutions. «Our first instruments were offered by the embassies of Germany and Poland and, right now, 18 cellos kindly offered by the Rotary Club of Bingen am Rhein (Germany) are on their way.» Kenyan state support has been limited to the patronage of the First Lady, which includes isolated logistical support but no monetary contribution.

About the future, Elizabeth hopes to continue the dream, above all by guaranteeing the foundation's existence in the long term: «we depend a lot on one partner, which is great, but I would like us to be more solid in the future». On the other hand, she would like to expand the project, for example by collaborating with more schools on a permanent basis or perhaps even cooperating with the Kenyan government, because «there are so many children out there to reach out and to help.»

[www.artofmusic.co.ke](http://www.artofmusic.co.ke)