

A tone deaf Patroness of the arts

A dramalet has unfolded around Roche's billionaire heiress Beatrice Oeri. At the center of the controversy is the jazz club Bird's Eye in Basel.

The Bird's Eye was founded and opened in 1994 by bassist Stephan Kurmann, who ran the iconic hangout in a factory space near the French border as musician, booker and operations and general manager in personal union.

Kurmann invents the club's name, designs the corresponding logo and arranges for performances by illustrious names from the national and international jazz scene. In no time, he establishes his club as a prestigious meeting place for jazz musicians from all over the world.

In 1998, multi-billionaire Beatrice Oeri joins the Bird's Eye as president of the supporting association Jazz-Live Basel. After the Bird's Eye's relocation to Basel's city center, the Oeri Foundation Levedo carries the club's annual deficit.

Kurmann and Oeri jointly manage the Bird's Eye. Kurmann holds the host's license, books the concerts, takes care of marketing and performs as a musician at the Bird's Eye. Oeri manages the club's catering operations. That works out well for a good while.

But during a personal dispute about ten years ago, which is never fully resolved even after a mediation, Oeri realizes that Kurmann, a free spirit who isn't always easy to manage and to whom she had moreover confided a dark family secret, had not become obedient, despite all her billions.

Oeri dreads to lose the club that over the years has become her life's purpose. At this stage, she does not have the confidence to run the Bird's Eye without Kurmann.

From this point on, she continuously implements measures and makes personnel decisions in order to be able to replace the headstrong founder of the club, who is the only one who stands up to her.

Assisted by instigators such as Levedo managing director Georg Hasler (the *WOZ* calls him the «phantom») and Bernhard Ley, then head of the Oeri-financed Jazzcampus, she replaces the old Jazz-Live Basel board with servile minions.

Backed by Klaus Hubmann, managing director of Oeri's Habitat Foundation - known for his authoritarian leadership style - and state artist Sarah Chaksad, Oeri gears up for Kurmann's ouster.

Then the pandemic strikes. Despite their occasional differences, Oeri and Kurmann share a strong skepticism about the state's Corona policy. When mandatory certification is introduced, funder Oeri orders it not to be implemented at the Bird's Eye.

On September 17, 2021, the local health department shuts down the club. Oeri instructs her lawyer to file an appeal against the closure order, in the name of the association

Jazz-Live Basel. This resistance to state power at the height of the Covid crisis provokes a huge outrage.

For the regional press, the influential billionaire is too hot to handle as a scapegoat. Instead, they focus on Kurmann.

The club founder and vocal opponent of the Corona measures was allegedly behind the Corona revolt and had single-handedly implemented the disregard for the certificate requirement.

This narrative suits Oeri perfectly. At the weekly management meeting on November 15, 2021, Kurmann is suspended without notice and given a strict speaking ban.

One day later, the Bird's Eye team learns of Kurmann's dismissal. Nobody is allowed to communicate with him anymore. The staff, all hired by Kurmann, is in a state of shock.

Kurmann's Bird's Eye email address is shut down immediately after the meeting.

On February 2, 2022, Beatrice Oeri resigns as president of Jazz-Live Basel after 25 years and steps down from the board, but remains financial backer and club director. Sarah Chaksad and Klaus Hubmann take over the presidency of the association.

On February 11, 2022, Kurmann receives his notice of dismissal, signed by Chaksad and Hubmann.

After Kurmann, who had previously relied on cooperation, talks to a club member, Oeri accuses him of «division». She cuts all ties with her longtime confidant by e-mail: «As of today, I'm ending any form of support to you. It's definitely over. You can expect nothing more from me».

To date, neither Oeri nor the club's board of directors have given any concrete reasons for Kurmann's release and termination. Inquiries concerning the matter have not been answered.

The billionaire, who as an exponent of Basel's high society («Daig») is used to getting what she wants, has achieved her goal: In Stephan Kurmann's Bird's Eye, only one word will henceforth be the law: that of Beatrice Oeri.