

Nataša Benčič /Radio Koper/, photo: Mateja J Potočnik

# OFF PLAY ON!

MAJA KOJC, oboe soloist, teacher, soul of the international oboe and bassoon festival - OFF IZOLA

**For the fifth year running now, the second half of the month of August in Izola, a town by the sea in Slovenian Istria, has been the time when at every step you encounter young musicians with instruments in their hands, all dressed in the same recognisable T shirt, arriving here from all over Europe for the international oboe and bassoon festival, the short OFF festival. Each year more than 40 young musicians – and in five years around 150 – gather together at this biggest event for oboe and bassoon, truly the only event of its kind in Europe. They play several concerts for Izola, which is a treat both for the local people and tourists. They bring to the town a positive energy and a special kind of “OFF spirit”, which is infectious and also now indispensable. The story of OFF is inseparably tied to Maja Kojc. Maja is a musician. An oboist. Her love of the oboe and of music, in that specific order, has opened up numerous new chapters in her musical career.**

Maja Kojc, born in 1968, studied piano and oboe at lower and secondary music schools in Ljubljana, then she continued her education at the Ljubljana Academy of Music and decided to study at the “Mozarteum” University in Salzburg. Here she graduated and obtained her master’s degree under Professors Arthur Jensen and Lothar Koch. As a student she won several prizes at various competitions. In Salzburg she was also a regular member and soloist in the chamber orchestra Pro Musica, and she participated in various chamber groups and modern music ensembles. She has been an oboe soloist for the RTV Slovenija Symphony Orchestra since 1993, and since 1996 she has taught oboe and bassoon at the Secondary Music and Ballet School in Ljubljana. She has ap-

peared as a soloist, chamber and orchestra musician in Europe, Asia and America, and she was a founding member of the wind quintet Ariart, which she recently left. All this says a lot about Maja. The experience, knowledge and character she has acquired have over the years led her to a story that is one of the most important in her life. This is OFF, the festival of oboe and bassoon.

She encountered it in Austria, where it was born and where, in a very different form to the one in Slovenia, it is still going. But Maja moved it to Slovenia, choosing the sea and Izola, although the OFF festival, which is a successful and also protected trademark, now also draws large numbers elsewhere. Why did Maja even get involved with OFF, which in five years has done a great deal for the recognition of the oboe and bassoon?

“It was of course a desire to offer young oboists and bassoonists playing these lesser known and also expensive instruments an opportunity, which they would otherwise not always get, or which they could not afford. Once a year, during the holidays, they gather in one place – young people from different European countries, with different ages and levels of previous knowledge. At Izola they get everything; under various assistants they gain skills, give concerts and they learn to make the mouthpieces for these instruments. We also arrange an exhibition of sheet music, accessories and instruments. OFF is a story without boundaries in the geographical, musical and human senses

of the word. Its special quality lies in the fact that it is a mass event, international and accessible to all without pre-selection. Its aim is for young people to exploit all the opportunities offered by OFF, while at the same time OFF accepts their desires and initiatives. In this way the knowledge and experience of the assistants is enriched with the youthful freshness and desires of the participants.”

The assistants, teachers of oboe and bassoon, accompanist and conductor – there were 10 such staff this year – come from Slovenia, Austria, Germany, Croatia, Italy, Hungary and Israel. They differ from each other greatly, which is of course a factor of the way they work, play and teach, and this is tied to a particular environment. “This is precisely the aim of OFF,” says Maja Kojc, “so that various different approaches come together in one place, which is not possible in a regular music school. And especially not with instruments that do not have such mass appeal, and oboe and bassoon departments are small at music schools.”

Every year the OFF participants give several concerts in Izola, and they have also made guest appearances in Ljubljana, Celje and Postojna. Performing is of course a central part of them coming together. Their work – and they are together for 10 days – would be in vain if they could not present it to the public. After all, music comes alive when it has an audience. Through performances they get over stage fright. When you hear them and see them, it is hard to believe that





# people

they are nervous before performing. A single glance at them, when they are together in the **OFF Band**, which combines teachers and students and every year literally fills the magical Manzioli Square in Izola, offers a vision of optimism. It seems as though over the years a kind of special "OFF people" profile has been formed, and Maja Kojc describes it thus: "Of course these are exceptionally motivated young people. This is not necessarily tied to talent or their success rate, but to their interest. Among them there are also plenty who are deciding what they are going to devote themselves to professionally in life. And those who in fact with the help of OFF are preparing for important musical tests such as competitions, entrance exams and orchestra auditions. So they are interested in the different views of very different teachers. So in the most practical way, in one place they gain an insight into what is happening around the world. Very rarely could they afford to travel around getting to know foreign academies or afford private lessons with professors."

It is no surprise that OFF is linked to numerous human stories. Every year they also include some quite touching ones. A young person who is talented, but owing to social pressure is perhaps playing on a poor instrument and cannot really afford any additional

education, Maja recalls. And she adds: "Our instruments are expensive, and not every music school can offer them to students. Many people cannot afford an instrument, and they play on old, poorly maintained instruments, without even any money for a mouthpiece. At OFF, the teachers can offer them some minimal, of course merely human, and non-organised assistance for repairing instruments or for buying the basic essentials. This happens automatically, this is the spirit of OFF, which affirms that the right people are involved in it. It would of course be nice if we could help them in an organised way, with instrument purchasing, grants ... I hope that this too will be possible some time in the future."

The future of OFF. A chapter of its own. This year's fifth OFF was undoubtedly a milestone. It has brought the need for clear vision, since over the years it has become much more than a project. It has become a mission. And Maja's personal mission. This says a lot about her as a person. OFF generates energy in every pore, and this does not die when the festival is over. OFF is an event and a musical gathering, for which composers write and arrange compositions. Especially for it. The first to write for OFF was Bojan Glavina, Dušan Bavdek arranged his composition Hoquetus for OFF, Nenad

Fišr, who has now been the OFF Band conductor for two years, dedicated his composition Play Off to the festival, and this year for the first time Maja Kojc premiered in Slovenia a composition by the Serbian composer Ivan Jevtić, who also attended the festival. Last year OFF participants devoted a part of their concert to arrangements of the compositions of Mojmir Sepe, who was thrilled to hear them performed for the first time in such a way.

In five years, like a young tree, OFF has grown new branches – in Krško Maja Kojc has established the biennial competition "OFF BEAT" for oboe, bassoon and chamber groups. Meanwhile OFF and Friends is an emerging story of the coming together and concert-playing of the assistants who teach at OFF and want to perform together in various groups. And together with Maja Kojc and the other OFF people they want to continue writing the OFF story in Slovenia. Far-reaching and recognisable, as it has been, and also in other countries of Europe and the world. The music can of course easily do this, while the OFF FESTIVAL also offers a heart-warming quality, which is also in the music, a rare, wonderful and not entirely automatic phenomenon. OFF play on!

[www.off-play-on.si](http://www.off-play-on.si)

## NATURAL TRAILS

Jože Prešeren, photo: Darinka Mladenovič

# BEEKEEPING IN SLOVENIA

SLOVENIAN HONEY – A NEW EUROPEAN TRADEMARK



Slovenia is the only European Union Member State to have protected its native bee, the Carniolan bee (*Apis mellifera carnica*), which in other words means that in Slovenia only this breed of bee can be raised. The Carniolan bee is famed for its docility, hard work, humility and excellent sense of orientation; owing to the tiny grey hairs on its abdominal hoops, Slovenian beekeepers fondly call it the *kranjska sivka*, or Carniolan grey. So it is this bee that is

one of the rare internationally recognised and protected features of our country. This breed of bee has become established in the majority of the countries of former Yugoslavia and Central Europe, and it is regarded as the second most widespread bee breed in the world. For this reason special attention is devoted to preserving and cultivating the pure Carniolan bee, which is also regarded as part of the natural and cultural heritage of Slovenia.