

A good idea is always worth sharing.

An essay by Daniel Spicer

Over the last few years, *Take Five* has emerged as a major force in helping to boost the careers of some of the UK's most talented young jazz musicians. Since its first edition in 2004, the initiative has done wonders for the fortunes of a stellar roll call of young Brit-jazz stars. Matthew Bourne, Seb Rochford, Pete Wareham, Jules Buckley, Chris Sharkey, Gwilym Simcock and Soweto Kinch are just a few of the artists who have stepped more boldly into the spotlight since taking part in this unique career development programme. And that, in turn, has helped to energise the UK jazz community as a whole, contributing to the rise of the most vibrant jazz scene witnessed on these shores for decades.

Yet, in this age of global travel and wireless, roam-anywhere communications, the UK is not as isolated as some rabid Euro-sceptics might have you believe. And, by the same token, neither does the UK jazz scene exist in a lonely bubble. Rather, it's part of a febrile, pan-European network of inter-connected artistic communities. Which is precisely why, in 2011, London-based international music producers Serious (the brains behind the ongoing success of *Take Five*) announced the launch of the very first *Take Five: Europe*. With financial support from the European Commission, the Jerwood Charitable Foundation and the PRS for Music Foundation and other international producing and funding partners, *Take Five: Europe* extends the same simple yet effective idea that has invigorated British jazz and reaches out to make Continental connections.

John Cumming, a director of Serious and the London Jazz Festival explains it like this: "We realised in the first couple of years of *Take Five* in the UK that this project would also benefit creative jazz musicians in other territories, so we invited colleagues from across Europe to come and see it in action, and to participate in the panel sessions involving industry professionals that form an essential part of the scheme. It was a good plan – they told us and the *Take Five* artists about their work (and programmed many of them in their festivals) and in turn, we all saw how we could work together to create a version that would help the careers and mobility of this emerging generation of European talent. At this point we are about half way through the first edition, and it has been a fascinating and invigorating process, partly because the musicians involved have proved to be a dynamic and motivated group, but also because of the engagement and generosity of all of our partners and funders."

The ten musicians selected by an international panel of music industry experts to take part in this inaugural edition represent two major players from each of the five participating countries: from France, saxophonist Céline Bonacina and vibraphonist/percussionist Benjamin Flament; from the Netherlands, guitarist Bram Stadhouders and viola player Oene van Geel; from Norway, drummer Gard Nilssen and bassist Ole Morten Vågan; from Poland, bassist Maciej Garbowski and saxophonist Maciej Obara; and from the UK, trumpeter Tom Arthurs and saxophonist/piper Fraser Fifield. Just one glance at this list serves as a powerful indication of the robust health of European jazz. From Edinburgh to Amsterdam, Oslo to Paris, London to Wrocław, new creative musicians are making themselves heard.

Yet, according to the participants of *Take Five: Europe*, this profusion of talent can actually be a major barrier to professional progress for the emerging musician. It's a situation that Maciej Garbowski summarises as: "an imbalance between the increasing number of great young improvisers and the decreasing amount of opportunities to perform." Certainly, that's a situation that Bram Stadhouders recognises – citing the decline of clubs and small venues across Europe combined with an explosion in jazz education of recent years as contributory factors. "Conservatories produce so many musicians and there are not that many places to play," he says, "which makes a lot of competition in the business. You really have to be smart to get an audience or get a gig." It's an issue that particularly affects musicians from Norway, home of the famed Conservatory of Music in Trondheim, an institution that has educated an astonishing number of instrumentalists who have subsequently gone on to achieve world-class stature in jazz – as Ole Morten Vågan explains: "There are five times as many musicians graduating every year, compared to 10 years ago when I graduated myself. I consider myself luckier than the kids coming to the scene now."

As Vågan's comment suggests, to a greater or lesser degree, all of the musicians taking part in *Take Five: Europe* have already progressed a fair way down the path to building successful careers and earning a living

from their art. Whereas the original UK versions of *Take Five* were invaluable resources of information on how to balance creativity with the more mundane concerns of making ends meet, *Take Five: Europe* is helping the current crop of participants to address a slightly different issue. For these artists who are already established at home but keen to reach wider audiences, surely the next step is to cross national boundaries, touch down in other countries and play for international audiences. Thus, the big challenge for artists with trans-European aspirations is simply this: how to stand out from the crowd of talented up-and-coming musicians and seize those overseas opportunities.

And that's precisely where *Take Five: Europe* comes in. Participants have the chance to benefit from a series of in-depth one-to-one sessions with key industry professionals, culminating in an inspirational, week-long residency at Bore Place, an organic farm in the Kent countryside, deep in the Garden of England, where they can escape day-to-day demands and truly 'take five.' While there, the musicians have the opportunity to explore central topics such as funding, recording and publishing, communications and new media, and agency and management with some of the most respected names in the business. It's the perfect environment in which to ask questions, and get the answers that will help raise their profiles and secure those coveted international gigs. At the same time, participants have the chance to enjoy intensive practical workshops with veteran UK saxophonist and composer, John Surman, in which they receive invaluable tips and advice on how to hone their improvisatory and compositional skills. It's a role that Surman has filled with aplomb several times already for the UK version of *Take Five* and it's clear that he is continually delighted and surprised by the calibre and variety of the young musicians he meets. His experiences with *Take Five: Europe* have been no exception. "It's not just the diversity of the music that is surprising, but its radical nature," he claims. "Each one of the performers was embarked on a voyage of discovery that was really challenging and I think that this was the feature of the week's work that left the biggest impression on me. Here were players who were pushing at the frontiers of the music – exciting stuff!"

For all the artists involved, then, *Take Five: Europe* adds up to a much-needed opportunity to assess their strengths, identify their goals and make concrete plans for the future. With so much at stake, it's unsurprising that the participants of *Take Five: Europe* have already given a lot of thought to what they hope to achieve by taking part – and exactly what the initiative can do for them. Scotland's Fraser Fifield sees it as a pivotal moment: "I feel it is an important step providing insight and openings in the right direction to get my music out there, helping with the confidence to approach the right people and companies to assist me in growing my career. In a sense, as the name suggests, *Take Five* is a chance to take stock of my progression to date and plan forward in the hope of building a sustainable career, working more throughout Europe as leader and collaborator." Moreover, Fifield recognises that many of the contacts made during *Take Five: Europe* – both among fellow musicians and with high-profile music industry professionals – will prove invaluable for future progress. "It will be a gradual thing," he says, "but the networking side is perhaps the most obviously useful in the short term, hopefully leading to increased opportunities to take my music to new markets throughout Europe." Stadhouders, too, is fully aware of the value of making new personal connections. "It's a great networking opportunity," he says, clarifying that the main thing he hopes to take away from *Take Five: Europe* is "a good network that gives more direct links to programmers, managers and things like this." As far as Oene van Geel is concerned, the lessons he's learned and the contacts he's made have started to take effect: "It's working already! It made me focus on the character of my bands and my musical personality. Now step two is creating a plan on how to promote that and create lasting musical possibilities. My enthusiasm has helped fellow band members at home to increase activity on all fields. That is an inspiring feeling."

But no one's forgetting the fact that these are, at heart, artists, not businessmen. Which is why, for many, the definitive element of *Take Five: Europe* is the chance to simply play. In this instance, participants will be able to transcend national boundaries and take their art to international audiences by performing at major festivals and venues across Europe, including Jazz sous les Pommiers, Banlieues Bleues and La Dynamo in France; North Sea Jazz Festival in the Netherlands; Molde International Jazz Festival in Norway, Poland's Jazztopad; and London Jazz Festival. It's an arrangement that sits well with these forward thinking festivals, as Piotr Turkiewicz, artistic director of Jazztopad, explains: "One of the most important features of Jazztopad Festival is to support up-and-coming artists. *Take Five: Europe* perfectly suits the philosophy of the festival: to be active all year long, to build platforms to help young artists to step out of their local scene and help them to understand the business side of music industry, to create special projects just for the festival (which is a real celebration of music), and to strengthen international collaborations and co-productions. It is a great

pleasure and also fun to work with such important partners and musicians. It is also a great way to discover talents from five European countries!" Moreover, there's no denying that, for rising stars like Maciej Garbowski, the chance to play at these festivals represents a truly breathtaking opportunity. "*Take Five: Europe* is a fantastic start for musicians like me," he says. "Performing on these prestigious jazz stages is simply not possible for other young artists who haven't joined *Take Five: Europe*. What happens next depends on me, on how much I make use of all these opportunities."

With a little help from *Take Five: Europe*, these ten artists could soon be among the next wave of European stars, regularly gracing the big stages of Europe's most important festivals. Saxophonist Céline Bonacina certainly anticipates a lot of positive impact from her participation: "It is not easy to project where I will be in five years but I can already see that people talk about *Take Five: Europe* and about my participation in this project. It is a good focus." For all of them, the future looks full of excitement. And, for artists like Ole Morten Vågan, the future starts now: "Already there's stuff happening that wouldn't be happening without the *Take Five* experience."

Daniel Spicer, 2012