

# Doing Good and Encouraging with Music

## Charity concerts by Christian Wenk, family doctor in Schenkon

On 24 February, Christian Wenk, a family doctor from Schenkon, will give a concert together with Elina Kaikova at the Swiss Paraplegic Centre in Nottwil. One day later they will repeat this at the Stadtcasino in Basel and on 3 March at the Tonhalle in Zurich. The two pianists will be accompanied by the Nota Bene Symphony Orchestra under the direction of Jascha von der Goltz. The proceeds of the concerts are intended for charitable purposes. KONTAKT talked to Christian Wenk about the concerts, his personal relationship to music and to his project of the heart, the hospital in Uganda.

**Question: It is a special concert evening in terms of the program and especially the performers. What can visitors expect musically on this evening?**

**Christian Wenk:** *We are two paraplegic pianists in wheelchairs and operate the pedals with mouth control. We will play works by Max Bruch (1838–1920, Concerto for Two Pianos and Orchestra, op. 88a) and Nikolai Rimsky Korsakov (1844–1908, «Scheherazade», Symphonic Suite op. 35). Max Bruch's Piano Concerto was lost for a long time.*

*It is therefore relatively unknown, while the "Scheherazade" is based on the "Tale of 1001 Nights" and should be well known to many music connoisseurs. The two highly romantic to impressionistic works get under your skin. It will be a very emotional concert evening for us and for the listeners.*



**Question: These are so-called charity concerts. Who will receive the net proceeds?**

**Christian Wenk:** *The proceeds of the concert in Nottwil are intended for the Swiss Paraplegic Foundation. As a sign of solidarity, but also to make pedal control known and to encourage those affected. The proceeds from the concerts on the big stage in Basel and Zurich are intended for the "Christian Wenk Foundation", which uses them to support a hospital in Uganda. 100% of every franc donated goes to the "Namutumba Community Hospital" (henceforth NCH) in Uganda.*

**Question: Can you describe the hospital in more detail? Who is behind it and what mission does it want to fulfill?**

**Christian Wenk:** *The hospital was opened by Job Zilaba in 2021. He grew up in Uganda and his goal was to improve the social and health problems in his own country. He wrote to the government - who promised to look into the matter. And what happened? Exactly nothing. Thanks to a donation from his own mother, he was able to buy land in 2008, about 80km from where he grew up in a very rural area. In 2010, he met and fell in love with a Swiss woman as part of a social project in Uganda and ultimately moved to Switzerland for her. Nevertheless, he did not lose sight of his goal. Since then, he has been working as a nursing assistant at the Inselspital in Bern and still invests part of his Swiss salary in the development of the hospital. Partly thanks to the generous help of his employer, the Inselspital Bern, the NHC was actually opened in 2021.*

**Question: You were recently in Uganda yourself, together with Job Zilaba. What is the situation from a medical and health policy point of view?**

**Christian Wenk:** *There are the state institutions, the so-called health centers, which are subsidized. However, the supply is far from adequate. In particular, maternal and child mortality as well as malaria are serious and potentially easily solvable problems that the NHC has set itself as its main task. The doctors and nurses are generally well trained and with a lot of commitment to their work, and the infrastructure, including the operating theatre, is also above average for the local conditions. The necessary foundation and know-how are therefore in place.*

*However, there is a lack of financial resources everywhere: only to pay wages or to buy medicines, but also to expand the hospital in stages, to implement the actual "master plan", starting with the installation of its own PV system for a secure energy supply.*

**Question: What are the feelings and thoughts that go through the mind of a Swiss doctor when he encounters the circumstances in Uganda?**

**Christian Wenk:** *First of all, gratitude for our health care in Switzerland, then humility and, with it, some sadness about our extremely high, often grotesque expectations. The significance of living and dying is strongly put into perspective. We could learn a lot from the people there if we were to accept life more gratefully ("Every day is a gift") and, on the other hand, deal with dying in a less tense way.*

*Furthermore, in rural Uganda it is immediately clear what huge potential there is for improving health and life expectancy. And as a doctor and social person, I want to help, with the Swiss norms in mind. At the same time, however, doubts of a philosophical nature also arise as to whether the "improvement" of life expectancy, almost equivalent to a fight against death, really improves happiness (humility, gratitude). In the end, it is not life expectancy that is decisive, but happiness. After all, hardly anyone has lived "well" (just) because they got old. And hardly anyone has been happy because of prosperity...*

*But back to reality: young people and children, whose lives may have barely begun, die unnecessarily in childbirth, from malaria or other infectious diseases such as HIV. Unnecessary because the prevention and the necessary treatment would be simple, but are not available on the ground. That's why I decided to support the hospital substantially and sustainably in exactly these areas. And not only as a private donor, but also institutionally with my "Christian Wenk Foundation", which is recognized as a non-profit organization, the latter, by the way, is also based in Schenkon.*



**Question: When it comes to aid for the Third World, it is sometimes doubted whether the donations really get to where they should. Who can guarantee that everything will be done in the right way in this project?**

**Christian Wenk:** *On the one hand, myself: I work for the foundation on a full-time basis and have never spent a single franc on personnel, expenses or services. In addition, I have done the entire fundraising myself so far, as I do now in the context of the benefit concerts. 100% of every franc donated goes to the NCH. On the other hand, I vouch for Job Zilaba: I got to know him personally about a year ago on my own initiative. His authenticity and honesty are as incredible as his dedication. Since my trip there, the impression has only intensified. There I got to know his family and his mother, all the staff, and I was given access to all the books of the hospital down to the smallest details of the day-to-day business, as well as to the bank statements of the hospital in Uganda and Switzerland. Account balance only a few Swiss francs. I can practically rule out embezzlement of any kind, which is also the basis for my personal great commitment.*

**Question: It's not the first big concert you've played. What does music, especially classical music and playing the piano, mean to you?**

**Christian Wenk:** *Music was my first great love. Many people know me as an athlete, but I grew up with music from an early age. My grandparents were musicians, and when I was six years old, I wanted to play the piano like my grandmother. For as long as I can remember, I've been passionate about what I did. I started performing in public at an early age and also participated in national and later international music competitions. After graduating from high school, I first studied music at the SMPV before I later enrolled in medical school. I quickly knew that I didn't want to pursue music professionally, so I never wanted to be dependent on it. But I guessed even then that she would probably be my last great love in my life...*

*Romanticism and Impressionism are the stylistic epochs of the 19th century that have always suited me best. They are strongly emotional and as fine as they are powerful. Frédéric Chopin, one of my favourite composers,*

*is at the beginning of this period, Sergei Rachmaninov at the end... The latter would have been 150 years old this year and has lived and worked for many years in Hertenstein on the shores of Lake Lucerne.*

*Music has always been a valuable emotional and meditative balance for me. Today to work as a family doctor. And at the same time it was a wonderful medium to touch people, to inspire them and to give them courage. If music becomes a means to a "good end" as it is now, then all the better.*

**Question: You are a family doctor, pianist and also do sports intensively. How do you manage to reconcile all of this?**

Christian Wenk: On the one hand, I do everything with a lot of passion, which basically gives back energy. On the other hand, the three fields complement each other perfectly: medicine = mind, sport = body and music = soul. With each one, you can relax or distance yourself from the others. It keeps me in balance. I certainly benefit from good comprehension and am often satisfied with "only" 90% perfection. This increases efficiency. I don't see myself as a "talent". Rather, I would like to thank my parents for the versatile and huge inspiration and love they have given me.

Not insignificant is also my attitude that the week has not 40, but 168 hours. Even though I need a lot of sleep, there are far more than 100 hours of active creative time. I try to avoid "dead" time, for example by riding my hand bike to work. Or, if I'm going to watch a bike or ski race, it's on the "Living Room-Bike". Or avoid these "small" timewasters in everyday life: I don't have to put on make-up and not shaving has also become socially acceptable... And last but not least, my partner Selma supports me ideally at home.

Even at the age of 50, sports, music and work are three immovable parts of my life and will probably always remain so.



## The Namutumba Community Hospital

The hospital is located in the middle of nowhere of the central African plateau at around 1500 meters above sea level and close to Lake Victoria, about 150 kilometers northeast of the capital Kampala and about 100 km west of the Kenyan border. The hospital is open to all, although it is privately organized and financed. So all people are treated without any advance pay, even if they can't pay. The hospital is newly built, architecturally strikingly beautiful and, thanks to the help from Bern, is above average in terms of infrastructure. Currently, in addition to the well-running outpatient clinic, the hospital has about 25 to 30 inpatient beds: around 4 men's, 10 women's and 6 children's beds, plus a postpartum ward with 6 beds. For this purpose, it has an operating room. In 2022, around 1100 outpatients and 540 inpatients were treated in the first year after opening, 2/3 of whom were women. In addition to internal medicine (especially malaria and blood transfusions), it also covers pregnancy and births including caesarean section as well as simple surgery (orthopaedics, hernias, etc.). According to Christian Wenk, due to the local health system, it is to be expected that the hospital will also be dependent on the support of donations (wages, buildings) and third parties (know-how, medical infrastructure) in the long term. Especially since the prices for services are in the usual range in the country and cannot be increased (daily flat rate inpatient 5 \$) and only four out of five patients can pay the bill. In any case, the implementation of the "master plan" with PV system, expansion of the wards, children's hospital, monitoring and intensive care unit, canteen, etc. is solely dependent on donations. After the selfless commitment of Job Zilaba and his family for more than 15 years and the decisive start-up help from his employer (Inselspital Bern), our Schenkön family doctor Christian Wenk is now also making a significant contribution to the further development of the hospital with his knowledge



and foundation. As he himself says, "A little like the example of Beat Richner, the music-making paediatrician (Beatocello) with the children's hospitals in Cambodia".

Everyone can help: with a donation or "just" by attending one of the concerts in Basel or Zurich, 100% of the proceeds of which go to the hospital project in Uganda (see flyer or website [www.nota-bene.ch/benefizkonzerte](http://www.nota-bene.ch/benefizkonzerte)).

Interview by Lukas Bucher with Christian Wenk in «Kontakt», the Schenkön village magazine

Photos: Quelle Christian Tip

Account of the «Christian Wenk Foundation», based in Schenkön



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