



Travel and project report Cape Town from 01.03. to 22.03.2025

It's hard to believe that our last visit to South Africa was two years ago - when we celebrated the 10th anniversary of our project in 2023. Returning is always impressive, but also shocking. The development of the country in recent years is worrying. Crime in the townships continues to rise, and the increase in gang activity in particular is putting a strain on the local people, the country as a whole and our project. This is precisely why it is all the more important that we don't give up and remain committed.

Joining me this time were Annette Goeres - one of my most important singing teachers and a close friend - her wonderful husband Wolfgang Merz, Nikolas Szczeponik, who has been actively supporting our project on the German side for two years, and of course my dear husband Matthijs Hölscher.

Everything was a little different this time

Rebekka Sandmeier, who usually looked after us at the South African College of Music (SACM), was on sabbatical in nearby Stellenbosch during our stay. She had helped prepare our trip and was of course our contact person from a distance. At the college, however, we were accompanied by Paulina Malefane, a vocal coach at the SACM, who attended to after us with incredible commitment and great warmth.

There is also a significant change at iThemba Labantu. Otto Kohlstock, who founded the centre in 2003, is retiring and Sophia Zittel is currently taking over as director. Sophia has been the youth coordinator and deputy director for as long as I can remember and is therefore surely the best person to take over from Otto. However, this also marks the start of a new chapter, as Otto was the face of iThemba Labantu for decades and an outstanding fundraiser.

Musically, this trip was also different, as Erik Dippenaar was unfortunately not in South Africa during our time there - he is the director of the Cape Town Baroque Orchestra and I have had numerous concert projects with him in South Africa since 2015. In exchange, new contacts were made and previous encounters were deepened. Antoinette and Hans Huyssen and Luise Howlett in particular provided me with great support during the planning phase, so that a successful concert in Cape Town with great radiance was possible - also thanks to the collaboration with Fine Music Radio.

But of course there were also constants. Some of the scholarship holders, such as Kofi and Tshepo, have now been in the project for three years. Paul Rommelaere continues to coordinate the project days as an experienced educator, and also Paulina remains with us. She links the project to the township of Khayelitsha and takes care of the packed lunches for the children. The tried and tested triad of music, medicine and social commitment remains - as on previous trips - a mainstay of our project.

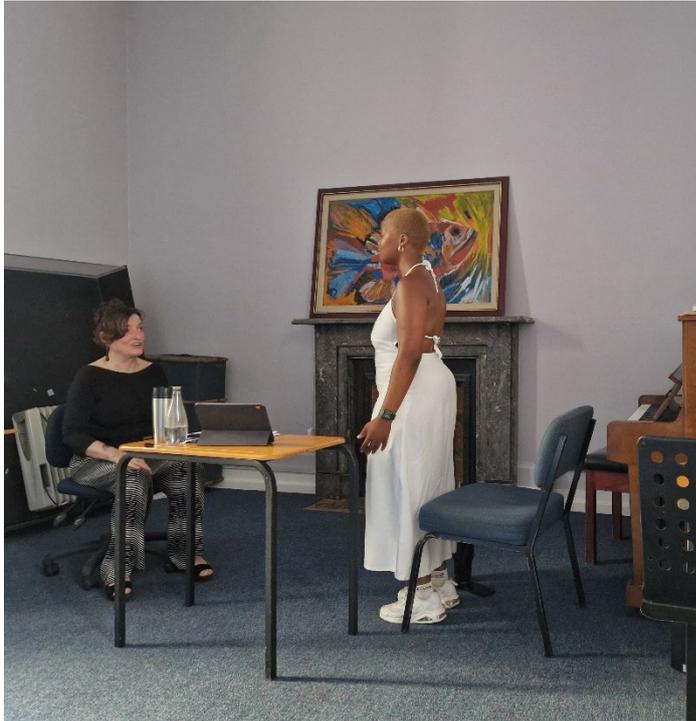
At the South African College of

This year, we were guests of the vocal department and the opera school, which are led by Prof. Sindile Patrick Tikolo and Prof. Jeremy Silver respectively. Paulina Malefane also works as a Senior Lecturer in the Vocal Department and took care of all organizational matters on site with great commitment. In addition to my lectures on vocal health and the connection between the psyche and voice, Especially Annette Goeres has given numerous masterclasses, i.e. individual lessons for vocal



students. I myself performed laryngoscopies on around 80 people at the university - in other words, I examined their vocal folds with an endoscope. Such a health check-up costs around 8,000 South African rand (approx. €400) in South Africa - a considerable sum that most students can hardly afford. Unfortunately, it is not uncommon for vocal problems to arise during the course of a singing degree, which require medical or speech therapy support.

It was great to be able to cover both areas together with Annette and offer the students real value in this way. The great gratitude was particularly evident in the enormous popularity of our free offers. Thanks in particular to the close cooperation with Annette, we were able to address many difficulties during our stay.



Nikolas Szczeponik, who has been working with me on the German side of the project for around two and a half years, combined his active support with travel preparations, coordination and logging on site with an internship in the emergency department of the trauma department at Groote Schuur Hospital. As a young medical student, he took the opportunity to get to know the South African healthcare system and emergency medicine there. It was his and Annette's first time working in South Africa - both were deeply moved by their experiences.

Important impulses were also discussed in meetings with teaching staff, the Department of Alumni and Development (DAD) and Prof. Andrew

Lilley from the SACM. The focus was on medical care and music-medical training for vocal students. In this context, I also established contact with the ENT clinic at Groote Schuur Hospital (Prof. Shazia Peer), which showed great interest in cooperating in the field of voice physiology - an important step towards a stronger network locally as well as with German clinics and the European specialist society.

The work in the project

The Saturdays themselves are an absolute must, when two buses with 60 children arrive at the music academy and they enthusiastically sing a choir piece that they have only learned a week before - a moving moment. Paul Rommelaere has greatly developed the project. Children are registered by name with a photo, participation rates are recorded and groups are systematically subdivided (guitar, piano, singing, dance, music theory, rhythm, traditional music). The rooms change every half hour and lunch is eaten together in the main hall. The students are committed as well, have organized fixed substitutes, and only Saturdays that are actually taught are paid for - this leaves money in the pot that can be used for the substitutes.



The collaboration with the iThemba Labantu Community Centre has been extended to four townships. There are Community Centres with so-called Arts Coordinators in all of them - musically motivated amateurs with a great deal of commitment. In future, they will be involved in the Saturday work at the SACM and systematically trained so that the children can also be supported during the week and holidays. Paul also proposed an orchestra for traditional South African music - with more instruments such as nyungwes, uhadis and panpipes. The equal value of all cultures should always be emphasized, especially of African music.

The main goals remain the safety of the children, a warm lunch and their personal development. Paulina reported how the children dream of studying at SACM and are beginning to imagine a future - an important step, as there is often no hope for change in the townships. Many consider a cashier position at the supermarket to be the highest achievable goal in their lives, although there is so much more potential in them - which our project can awaken.



Visit to iThemba Labantu



Of course, a visit to Philippi is also part of the program. In previous years, the recommended route changed regularly, as earlier routes were considered unsafe. This year, we were no longer allowed to drive into the township on our own - the visit to iThemba LABANTU was only possible with an escort. We met the driver at a petrol station and drove to the centre together. On the side of the road, the misery only got worse until suddenly a door opened and we were standing in the yard of iThemba Labantu - an oasis of colour, hope and children's laughter. Sophia Zittel greeted us warmly and said that it had become rare (due to the dangerous situation) for visitors to come to the centre in person. iThemba Labantu is also facing a major upheaval with the retirement of Otto Kohlstock mentioned above. Sophia, who has been with the centre for 20 years, has been his deputy and youth coordinator. It is a great stroke of luck that she is ready to take over the management. She knows the centre with its schools, training facilities, music and art programs down to the last detail.

Despite the limited space, the centre is constantly growing. This time it was a large covered sports area for games and exercise in the rain. After the tour, we went into the small church - the heart of the centre - where Mfuneko's choir welcomed us, accompanied by the electric piano that was donated by the Rotary Club Münster-Rüschhaus after our last visit. It is in constant use, as are

the other instruments and the computer lab, which were also part of this generous donation. The gratitude is tangible. The centre pulsates with life. Music, education and training give people prospects. The enthusiasm is so infectious that it's barely possible to avoid tears. Kofi and Unathi, two of our scholarship holders, also accompanied us. Playing music together with the children was a particularly touching moment.



The subsequent discussion with Sophia focused on the future of the project. She is in favour of training the Arts Coordinators from the townships in order to ensure quality and continuity all year round. However, she is very concerned about the increasing crime around the centre. Deadly shootings in broad daylight in the immediate vicinity of the centre every week, gangs giving weapons to children on their way to school in order to recruit them, and massive extortion of protection money are now part of the depressing reality of

everyday life. Even older women who sell corn on the cob for a few cents on the roadside are extorted for protection money of up to 80 percent of their earnings, making life impossible. Recently, two men in suits tried to demand "taxes" from the school management in the centre of iThemba Labantu - they were escorted out, but the fear of a second, better-prepared attempt to extort protection money even from the community centre and its elementary school remains. So far, the centre has been able to fend everything off as a strong institution, but the aggressiveness of the gangs is steadily increasing.

The construction of a bullet-proof wall around the sports field is particularly urgent. So far, it has only been secured with a fence - children experience the shootings on the street first hand and bullets sometimes make their way onto the sports field. It is only a matter of time before a child playing there is hit by a bullet. The construction of the wall will cost around one million rand (approx. 50,000 €) - an offer has been submitted. It is a fair and realistic sum, but one that iThemba Labantu is currently unable to raise. The crucial question remains: How can the children's safety be guaranteed without supporting criminal structures and giving in to illegal demands?

Visit to Khayelitsha

In the twelve years that I have been to South Africa, I have often visited the iThemba Labantu Community Centre in the township of Philippi - but never the township itself. Paulina, who grew up in Khayelitsha, said that this experience was something we urgently needed to make up for and invited us along. Together we visited her relatives, got to know her mother and learned how the townships were created during apartheid as state-organized ghettos through forced relocation so that the whites could have the most beautiful places in South Africa for themselves. The tiny housing units provided by the state were never sufficient for the number of people resettled - one reason for the current situation. Previously, all citizens of the country lived in mixed settlements and ordinary neighbourhoods. Apart from racism, there was no reason to change this good and established situation. The result is the unbelievable number of robberies, murders and rapes, the existence of regions that are completely avoided by the police and horrific societal condition that people in Germany really cannot imagine. We should all look to remember where



hatred and racism have taken us in the past, where it has taken South Africa and other countries and where it is threatening to take us again in many places around the world at the moment.

A special highlight was eating together at a so-called street braai, where a party was being prepared for the long weekend. Paulina vividly described how hundreds of people dance, sing and celebrate together in the evenings. Despite the visible poverty, it was noticeable how much laughter there is here. People live closely together, help each other and share not only joy, but also the suffering caused by the high crime rate - which, however, is not caused by the majority. We were deeply moved and grateful to be able to have this experience.

Music

In addition to making music with the children at iThemba Labantu and of course playing music together in various master classes, I also had the opportunity to play a concert with the baroque specialists from Cape Town. Under the direction of Hans Huysen and together with the soprano Antoinette Huysen, we played a concert with works by Bach, Pergolesi and Vivaldi. The concert was well attended and an important contribution to supporting the local baroque music scene. Antoinette is also the director of the choir at the Cape Town Opera and invited me to a workshop in her opera choir, which I was happy to give. Luise Howlett, a soprano from Cape Town who also specializes in early music, unfortunately had to cancel the originally planned concert for personal reasons, but she helped a lot with the organization and promotion of this concert and put me in touch with the "People of Note" program of *Fine Music Radio*, a classical music station in Cape Town, where I was able to give an extensive interview about the many aspects of our trip, but also the strong political connotation of these activities. Especially now and at this time, when the political situation in the world is so fragile and depressing, it is important that we hold on to our humanity and our unity in projects and contacts like ours in order to guide each other safely through this phase of history.



New challenges

Rising crime, particularly in Philippi, repeatedly raises the question of whether the children can be picked up by bus at all. The company is still driving, but is sending its oldest and most rickety buses in order to attract as little attention as possible. But what will happen in Philippi if there really are further attempts at blackmail? What will happen to the 300 pupils and 400 other

children in after-school care if the workers there are threatened? All these questions remained unanswered during our stay and were depressingly present.

I have received so many thanks from South Africa for the work in this project over the last twelve years. **Thanks that I have to pass on you at this point.** Namely for the fact that the project has been able to stand and grow continuously for so many years. But one thing is also certain: the hardest part of this project is not the work we can do on the German side to support it, but the actual work on the ground under sometimes the most adverse conditions. It is good to know that we have always found a way to continue developing our project. I hope that this will continue. Everyone involved - the children, the students, the teachers at the college, the university, the community centres in the four townships and of course us - want exactly this initiative. As a strong unit, we have to continue on this path together and develop in such a way that we have an increasingly stable foothold even in more difficult times.



Fenced sports field in Philippi

Our new NGO - Crossroads e.V.

In Germany, as we wrote in our last letter, after careful consideration we have parted company with the Berlin Mission Society and founded our own non-profit organization, *Crossroads e.V.*, in order to save administrative costs and have greater flexibility in self-administration and for further funding applications. In addition to the new grants for the Arts Coordinators in the townships, the expansion of the range of African instruments and, above all, the security costs we will be incurring at the SACM in the coming semester, our efforts must not only continue, but also be expanded. In particular, the running costs must be covered by permanent donations, which is currently not guaranteed due to the already increased costs, resulting in our reserve being reduced to almost zero.

My urgent plea to You

Think about whether you could increase your support a little or tell other interested people about this project and inspire them. It would be a huge help, and through *Crossroads e.V.* we can continue to guarantee that every euro reaches the project.

Thanks and conclusion

Special thanks to Paulina and Rebekka, without whose extraordinary efforts this trip would not have been possible. I would also like to thank the Goethe-Institut for their support with the travel costs and the Karin and Uwe Hollweg Foundation for sponsoring the concerts and music projects with the children in Philippi.

I am now sitting at the airport on my way back to Germany with a lot of hope, but also a heavy heart, wondering what challenges, changes and developments I will encounter in the 2027 travel

report. Every time I spend time with these wonderful people in South Africa - an open, warm and joyful nation that is also deeply divided between rich and poor - I am deeply moved.

A big thank you to you for your support, which has made the incredible commitment on the ground possible for twelve years - it connects people, builds bridges and gives young people hope. Let's continue to be strong together.

Yours sincerely

Your Philipp



At a street barbecue in the township of Khayelitsha



At the Cape of Good Hope

(from left me, Benedicta , Nik, Wolfgang, Annette, Matthijs & Paulina)